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Fethullah Gülen

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Fethullah Gülen

Spiritual Leader in a Global Islamic Context

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Abstract

Fethullah Gülen is one of the most influential Muslim scholars in the world. His philosophy of combining Islam and modernity, together with religious tolerance, has attracted millions of followers who have established hundreds of educational and cultural institutions all over the world. Influenced by Sufi masters and contemporary Turkish Muslim scholar, Said Nursi, Gülen puts spirituality in the center of everything. While he is a prominent advocate of interreligious dialogue and an admired religious leader, he has been accused by some secularists of being a fundamentalist with a hidden agenda to apply sharia law to Turkey and by religious fundamentalists for compromising religion. Gülen rejects these claims pointing to his past and current activities.

Introduction

[1] According to *The Economist*, Fethullah Gülen is the most influential Muslim scholar in the world. *Foreign Policy* places Gülen on the list of “Top 100 Public Intellectuals.” An advocate of interreligious dialogue and educational opportunity, Gülen is the author of 60 books and has inspired millions. His admirers can be found in more than a hundred countries where they have established hundreds of educational institutions. While intellectuals have named this “the Gülen Movement,” the advocates call their activities *hizmet*, the Turkish word for “service.” It can be described as a “faith-inspired collectivity” with millions of followers and sympathizers who draw on Islamic spirituality and teaching, constituting one of the largest civil movements (Yavuz and Esposito: xiii; Yilmaz: 394).

[2] While respected by a significant part of Turkish society for his humanitarian views and activism, his influence has raised the suspicions of secularists, including politicians, intellectuals, and military persons, who see Gülen's growing influence as a threat to the current secular system in Turkey. Radical religious groups also accused Gülen of compromising the Muslim faith by interacting with non-Muslims. Amidst such suspicion, it is necessary to understand who Fethullah Gülen is and what he stands for. This article will review the (1) the spiritual lifestyle of Gülen, (2) the major differences between Gülen and other contemporary Islamic scholars, and (3) the critiques of Gülen's spiritual views and movement and Gülen's responses to these critiques.

Who is Fethullah Gülen?

[3] Gülen is a spiritual leader, religious scholar, intellectual, peace activist, author, poet, and mentor whose life is spent in pursuit of the solution for society's spiritual needs (Yilmaz, cited in Kraus: 165). Many of Gülen's ideas are influenced by the works of Said Nursi (1876-1960), who authored several volumes of Qur'anic exegesis known as "*Risale-i Nur Kulliyatı*" or "The Epistles of Light." Other major figures of influence were Alvarlı Muhammad Lutfi, a Sufi sheikh, Mehmet Akif, the national poet, Necip Fazıl, a Turkish Muslim intellectual and poet, and Muhammed Hamdi Yazır (1878-1942), a commentator of the Qur'an (Kraus: 165). Özdalga argues that orthodox Sunni Islam, the Naqshbandi Sufi tradition, and the *Nurculuk* (the Nur movement) has shaped the thought of Fethullah Gülen (2000: 91).

[4] Gülen's education and training was comprehensive. Muhammad Lutfi guided him in matters of spirituality, Gnostic knowledge, and religious practice. Meanwhile, Gülen was also learning Arabic from Sadi Efendi, and proper Qur'anic recitation from Al-Qari Hacı Sidqi Efendi. By the age of seven, he had memorized the entire Qur'an. During the 1950s, he also studied the theories of modern social and physical sciences. Later, Gülen studied hadith methodology and memorized all six authentic hadith books (Bukhari, Muslim, Nasai, Ibn Majeh, Tirmidhi, and Abu Dawud). In addition, he studied rhetoric, philosophy, Islamic history, theology, and *fiqh* (jurisprudence) (Erdogan: 14). While gaining a deep comprehension of the main principles of modern science, he also studied the works of classical and modern philosophers such as Aristotle, Marcus, Descartes, Kant, Camus, and Sartre (Unal and Williams: 16).

[5] In order to better understand Gülen and his spiritual practices, the author spent eight days by his side as an observer. During this period, I had a chance to observe his daily life and meet some of his students and close friends, including Professor Suat Yildirim, former Dean of the School of Divinity in Sakarya. Professor Yildirim provided the following information about Gülen's life:

I have known Gülen since he was an imam in Edirne at the beginning of 1959. He is very intellectual and devoted to education. He read Eastern and Western classics. This is Gülen's defining characteristic that set him apart from the contemporary imams and religious leaders. With a greater part of his salary, he would buy books and journals, read them, and then give them to others to read.

He would spend a portion of his time daily in Edirne's library, where he would read old history books. He had and still has an ascetic life; he would eat little, sleep only a few hours, and spent a great part of his day in worship.

One of the turning points in his life was meeting with one of Said Nursi's (1877-1960) disciples who guided him to read *Risal-i Nur*. Gülen was inspired by the deep spiritual life of Nursi and golden rules of serving humanity and then he would apply them as principles of *bizmet*, serving the community. His greatest goal and achievement was to educate the younger generation in both secular and religious sciences, in order to solve their problems of ignorance, and prevent them from spiritual diseases (personal communication, April 4, 2006).

Yildirim added that Gülen has been strongly committed to this goal as one of the major purpose of his life.

[6] Dr. Ismail Buyukcelebi, one of the close companions of Gülen for almost forty years, observed:

I have been with Gülen since middle school. He used to preach in Izmir and teach my peers and I at Kestane Pazari Qur'anic boarding school. He would not only teach us, but also mentored us. He himself would live in a closet-sized room next the school building. He lived a very simple life and spent most of his salary providing for the poor students. He would spend his efforts in worship and education and avoid meaningless or fruitless activities and politics.

Gülen would not only speak at mosques, but he would also speak at coffee houses, universities, and other institutions. Unlike other preachers, Gülen would focus on science and religion, social problems, and intellectualism. His inspirational speeches and intellectual approach attracted many university students, the middle class business community, and congregations in the mosques. He used his influence to encourage individuals to open dormitories, college preparation courses, open schools, start media and publishing companies, and build community centers (personal communication, August 5, 2007).

[7] In March 1972, soon after a military coup, Gülen was arrested and detained for four months. It was later revealed that the military had imprisoned specific religious figures alongside many communists and leftists to demonstrate to the public that the military leaders were not only against communism. After Gülen was released, he continued preaching until the second military coup in 1980, at which time he retired. Those who loved him and his teachings started the Gülen Movement (as liberals call it), named "Fethullahcilar" (Fethullah's followers) by Turkish leftists, and "Nurcu" (the Light movement) by traditionalists and conservatives. Gülen never approved of the movement using his name and viewed it as a sign of disrespect to those who contributed to the movement.

[8] Despite pressure from his mother and close friends, Gülen never married. When asked about marriage, he answered as Said Nursi (1878-1960) answered, "The suffering of the

Islamic community is more than enough. I haven't found time to think of myself" (Gülen 1995a: 140).

Observing Gülen's Spiritual Practices

[9] Gülen's schedule is based on daily *salat* (obligatory prayer), which is always performed in congregation on time. He would divide his day into the following activities: an hour before *imsak* (dawn), he would get up, pray *tahajjud*, read the Qur'an, supplicate in the way of the prophet Muhammad, and make *awrad* or *dhikr* (remembrance of God), which includes reciting the Names of God. After every obligatory prayer, he would make supplication for those who requested that he pray for them. Then, he would perform *fajr* (morning prayer) in congregation. After prayer, he would again make *awrad* and *dhikr* for fifteen to twenty minutes, followed by recitation of the end of chapter Al-Hashr. He would converse with visitors for a few minutes before his teaching session would begin. He would ask his students to read from Said Nursi's *Risale-i-Nur* collection and expound on the specific reading.

[10] The study period would last approximately an hour. Following that, he would breakfast with those around him. After breakfast, he would return to his room to rest until mid-day. I asked those around him what does he do during his free time. I was told that Gülen spent his time taking a short nap, performing *isbraq* supererogatory prayer, reading different books, writing essays about portions of his books or poetry, and contemplating the activities of his movement. About two hours before *zühr* prayer, he teaches *tafsir* (commentary of Qur'an), hadiths, *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *aqidah* (theology and history of Islam) to selected students who graduated from divinity schools. The study circle is similar to the traditionalists' way, during which students would sit on the ground, but using modern technology such as computers and projector.

[11] Around noon, he would leave his room and watch the news for fifteen to twenty minutes. He would converse with those around him for half an hour. He would prepare for *zühr* (noon prayer) and pray in congregation. After performing *zühr*, Gülen would make *awrad* and *dhikr* for at least twenty minutes. While having lunch with others, he would answer questions from his audience about religion, history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, economics, and education. I noticed that he would hesitate to respond to political questions. Sometimes, he would ask those around him about their family or profession and, occasionally, make comments. He would give special attention to the elderly and young children.

[12] After conversation, he would return to his room to read books or prepare his future own publications; at times, he would invite individuals to discuss their requests further with him. He would then pray *asr* (afternoon prayer) in congregation and make *awrad* and *dhikr*. There would be another short question and answer session, lasting about half an hour. He would then walk on the treadmill in his room for forty minutes. While on the treadmill, he would make *dhikr*.

[13] After the congregational *maghrib* (dusk prayer), he might or might not eat with others. After the congregational *isha* (night prayer), he would return to his room and continue his

usual activities of reading, writing, supplicating, and *dhikr* until 11:00 p.m. Sometimes, he would speak privately with visitors after *isha* prayer.

[14] In his religious study circles, Gülen would focus more on the love and attributes of God, the wisdom of the pillars of Islam, faith, and the *Sunnah* (practices and sayings) of the prophet Muhammad. In addition, Gülen would explain the details of inner purification, education, and criteria and core principles for the *hizmet* serving the community. Key concepts of Sufism, such as love, *taqwa* (piety), *qalb* (heart), *tawba* (repentance) *zuhd* (asceticism), *muraqaba* (self-supervision), *ikhlas* (sincerity), *istiqama* (straightforwardness), *ibadah* (worship), *tawakkul* (reliance upon God), *tawadu* (humility), *shukr* (thankfulness), *sabr* (patience), *ihسان* (perfect goodness), and *ma'rifa* (gnosis-knowledge of God) are studied within the group. These deeply spiritual talks could be intensely emotional and there were many times when Gülen would weep, greatly impacting his audience and causing them to weep with him.

[15] Gülen leads a life of seclusion. He has three illnesses: hypertension, diabetes, and heart disease. Because of this, he has dietary restrictions and is under a doctor's supervision all day. In the last nine years, he has left his relative's residence, located in a small town in Pennsylvania, only to go to the hospital. In an interview with a reporter from Turkey, Gülen said that in the last five years, (now ten years) he had only stepped out onto his balcony a few times. If the weather was nice, he would sometimes go out to the trellis and have a cup of coffee or tea there. (Gudem).

[16] Gülen's decade of seclusion is not like that of a mystic in the mountains. He follows the paths of Imam Ghazzali (1058-1111), Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207-1273), and Said Nursi (1887-1960), who used their withdrawal as an opportunity to be intellectually productive and spiritually proactive. Gülen chooses to place his full focus and energy on his inner life through increased worship and scholarship. Other factors, such as a large number of visitors and Gülen's health, necessitate seclusion. His withdrawal from worldly affairs, however, is not withdrawal from the world. He discourages complete withdrawal from the world, which he views as *dar al-hizmet* (the country of service to humanity) (Demir: 226). He continues to author books and articles, and provides requested guidance and consultation to his visitors, keeping in mind the current spiritual, sociopolitical, and economic conditions.

Gülen's View on Sufism

[17] The basic sources of Gülen's Sufism are the Qur'an, the prophet's words, and various Sufi texts – in particular, Said Nursi's seminal work entitled the *Risale-i Nur* (the Epistles of Light). Gülen defines Sufism in the following manner:

Sufism is the path followed by an individual who, having been able to free himself or herself from human vices and weaknesses in order to acquire angelic qualities and conduct pleasing to God, lives in accordance with the requirements of God's knowledge and love, and in the resulting spiritual delight that ensues (1999: xiv).

In his definition, Gülen focuses on a path by which a person can overcome his weaknesses without the help of a guide. In my talks with Gülen, he stated that "Sufism is a spiritual

journey from one's self to God, by the feet of the heart." In his book, *Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism*, he elaborates further:

Sufism is based on observing even the most "trivial" rules of the *sharia*, Islamic law, in order to penetrate their inner meaning and initiate or travel on the path (*salik*) that never separates the outer observance of the *sharia* from its inner dimension, and therefore, observes all of the requirements of both the outer and the inner dimension of Islam (1999: xiv).

[18] Gülen explains the spiritual journey as follows: "That spiritual journey has different stations to reach *haqiqa* (the truth). A person will continue on this path until death. Persistence and effort are necessary to reach each station. During this journey, every time an individual rises to a higher station, he/she must be even more humble." Gülen quotes the verse: "The servants of the All-Merciful are those who walk on the earth in modesty, and if the impudent offend them, they continue their way, saying, 'peace'" (Qur'an: 25:63) (personal communication).

[19] *Silsila*, the mystical chain that reaches to the prophet Muhammad, is a principle of Sufism. In Sufism, in order for a person to mature (*al-insaan al-kamil*) and feel Divine Presence, he or she must imitate a spiritual master. In order for this transformation to take place, "there must be a traditional link with the origin or a spiritual chain" (Saritoprak: 114). However, Gülen has argued, "A person can be a Sufi without a master or by becoming a member of a Sufi order." Gülen gives the example of Al-Ghazzali: "Although he was a great Shariah scholar and a great Sufi, he did not belong to any Sufi order" (Saritoprak: 115).

[20] Like al-Hujwiri (d.1073), a great Sufi master and author of *Kashf al-Mahjub*, Gülen says that the first step or key concept of Sufism is *tawba* (repentance). In order to achieve maturity, a person must purify himself or herself of all sins. After that, like many other Sufis, Gülen expresses a desire to gain the knowledge of sharia. He states:

Sharia and Sufism are like two departments of a university, each seeking to teach their students the two dimensions of Islam so that the students can practice them in their lives. These two departments are not in opposition; rather they complement each other. One teaches how to pray, how to fast, and how to give charity, while the other concentrates on what these actions really mean (1999: xx).

[21] Although Gülen never proclaimed himself a sheikh or Sufi leader, the methodology he uses is similar to the methods used by individuals traveling along the Sufi path. Many great Sufis were trained in the *tekke*, the Sufi centers, by serving others, cleaning latrines, and cooking (Shimmel: 101). During my visit, I observed Gülen's students doing the same acts as Sufi students.

[22] Immitating the great Sufi leaders in the past, Gülen often critiques his *nafs* (carnal soul) like Qushayri (d.1074), weeps like al-Bistami (804-874), has tolerance towards others like Rumi (1207-1273), abandons the world by heart like Naqshi, and asks his followers to serve their community till death, like Al-Hujwiri (d.1077) and Nursi (1887-1960).

[23] Gülen's criteria for accepting students are unlike those of the Sufi practice. He expects that his students will demonstrate a curiosity to learn, a desire to serve people, a degree of patience, and will practice basic Islamic principles. In order to join the study circle, a person must also know advanced Arabic; but this is not essential for being one of his followers. He does not practice a master-student relationship with his students. Yet he does ask his followers to live an ascetic lifestyle, *zuhd*, by fasting twice a week, eating less, sleeping fewer hours, praying supererogatory prayers, reading Qur'an, making *dua* (supplication), following a rigorous course of study, and making special *dhikr* (invocation of the names of God).

[24] Gülen also places emphasis on the heart, *qalb*. By this term, he does not mean the physical organ, but the spiritual one: "The heart that is the place of faith and the mirror of God" (1999: 69). He quotes from the hadiths of the prophet Muhammad: "God does not look at your appearance, but he looks at your heart" (Muslim). "There is a part in the body that when it becomes good, the whole body becomes good, and when it becomes bad, the whole body becomes bad. That part is the heart" (Bukhari). As found in other Sufi teachings, it is said that if a person's heart is not clean, that person cannot live an ascetic lifestyle. He quotes from one of the great Sufis, Ibrahim Haqqi (1703-1780): "The heart is the home of God; purify it from whatever is other than Him, so that the All-Merciful may descend into His palace at night" (1999: 22). Gülen further states, "A heart full of love of God cannot harbor enmity or hatred towards others" (2004a: 36).

[25] While Gülen is far from establishing a Sufi order, his aim is to revive and combine the activism of the prophet Muhammad and his companions, the asceticism of the first generation Sufis, and the Sufi terminological knowledge and consciousness of the later Sufi scholars. At a time when the gap between Sufis and their major critique *salafis* increase, Gülen's main goal is to reestablish Sufism on the basis of the Qur'an and Sunna.

Defining Characteristics of Gülen and the Gülen Movement

[26] Gülen's works create a marriage between religion and science, tradition and modernity, by combining spirituality with intellectual training, reason with revelation, and mind with heart (Yavuz 2003b: 20). Gülen wanted to take the traditional form of Muslim educational discourse, as practiced in the madrasah, and take it to the university format (Yilmaz, cited in Atay: 466). The principles of the movement attempt not to recreate a golden past, but to revitalize modernity with traditional values. Gülen's aim is to educate a generation bred on spiritual wisdom, engaged in intellectual pursuits, and committed to serve the whole of humanity. For Gülen, "serving people is serving God" (Aslandogan: 672).

[27] While other Muslim scholars have aimed to open more madrasahs, Gülen has inspired and encouraged his followers to open modern schools and universities, with focus on the sciences and languages. As a result, in Turkey and around the world, his followers have established many educational projects such as child-care centers, college preparation courses, and dormitories for students as well as hundreds of schools and colleges.

[28] There are two main priorities in the educational sector in the Gülen Movement: to instruct and lead students to be successful in secular subjects, and ensure that students' moral character reaches high standards. While these moral values are based in both Islamic and humanitarian values, there are no major conflicts with modern values. In these

institutions, the curriculum is secular, but the majority of teachers are chosen for their noble character. The moral aspects of education are conveyed through teachers' behavior, rather than proselytizing. Due to the unique combination of secular education and an emphasis on moral values, these institutions are thriving and gaining prestige.

[29] Describing the achievements of schools established by Gülen's followers, *Le Monde Diplomatique* claimed that the schools could be taken as examples, stating, "From the Balkans to China, he [Gülen] wants to see elites formed with Turkey as their model" (Kristianasen). *Le Monde de L'Education* wrote that these schools could be taken as a model by other German schools for ethnic communities (Borne). *New York Times* wrote about Gülen's follower's schools as a gentler vision of Islam and an alternative approach to education that could help reduce radicalism (Tavernise). That these schools can gain approval with the conservative people of Pakistan by offering a different perspective from the fundamentalist madrasahs speaks volumes.

[30] Followers of the Gülen Movement contribute anywhere between 5-20% of their income to the movement's activities in the sectors of education, media, and community gatherings. Among these are people who contribute beyond that amount, following the examples set by the prophet Muhammad and his companions. In the movement circles, this is called *himmət* (on the movement's funding, see Ebaugh and Koe; Michel 2008; Kirk). The followers convene annually for *himmət* during Ramadan, review local, national, or international projects of the movement, and pledge chosen amounts to sponsor those good works. A second *himmət* gathering is held solely for scholarship funds.

[31] Most importantly, Gülen leads this funding through example. According to Ismail Buyukcelebi, from the over 60 best-selling books Gülen has written, Gülen has donated almost 90% of his earnings from book sales to scholarship funds for the institutions established by his followers or for humanitarian aid. Gülen himself focuses on generosity and so often encourages his followers to be more generous like companions of the prophet.

[32] Gülen strongly opposes and condemns any form of violence and terrorism. To him, "A Muslim cannot be a terrorist and a terrorist cannot be a true Muslim because Islam forbids the killing of civilians, children, elders, women, and religious figures, even if your cause is justifiable" (2002: 95). Gülen's influence can be seen in the fact that none of his followers or supporters has committed acts of terror or condoned terrorism in any form, despite oppression and provocation from opposite groups.

[33] When extremists, whether they are left wing, right wing, religious or secularist, in Turkey generate conflict, Gülen acts to decrease tension by expressing his respect for every law-abiding or kind-hearted person, regardless of religious and political views and their non-violent ideas. For example, when the issue of banning the wearing of a headscarf in educational institutions and public sectors created tension, Gülen encouraged opposing sides to come to a mutual agreement by insisting that the headscarf should not be a cause of conflict and division and advising people to seek their rights within the boundaries of the law. He also asks that this chronic problem not be exploited for political purposes; rather, it should be considered a human rights issue and solved accordingly. Gülen warns that protests and any action taken to the streets will not help this cause. Protests only raise tension, especially in Turkey where democracy is still in its developing stages.

[34] Being open to all faiths and traditions through dialogue is another characteristic that sets Gülen apart from some spiritual leaders. Since 1991, despite criticism from some religious, political, and media figures, Gülen initiated and participated in interfaith dialogue with Jewish rabbis as well as Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Assyrian patriarchs, and he has encouraged his followers to do the same. In 1998, he met with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican. In Turkey at that time, it was taboo for Muslim religious leaders to openly dialogue with other religious leaders and minority groups. Yet, once inspired by Gülen's acts of building bridges towards other faiths, Gülen's followers established interfaith and intercultural organizations throughout the world, with the U.S. being home to 42 of these organizations.

[35] Unlike some religious leaders, Gülen has never opposed Turkey's entrance into the European Union (EU). He believes that Turkey's membership in the EU will contribute to world peace and help to prevent a "clash of civilizations." He perceives the West as a rival to compete with, not as an enemy to confront. He suggests that Turkey needs to increase its economic powers by incorporating Western economic and political systems (Yavuz and Esposito: xxxii). Gülen's views regarding EU membership have influenced mainstream Turkish Muslims' views on this matter. According to European Union survey published *Hürriyet* (July 11, 2007), more than 54% of Turks are in favor of an EU membership.

[36] Since Gülen is a well-respected and admired spiritual leader, political parties seek his support, especially during elections. A majority of religious leaders and spiritual leaders directly or indirectly support political groups. Gülen, however, is an exception. He has never supported a specific party. However, he has praised the beneficial acts of political leaders or parties.

[37] Gülen's important distinction as a leader is that he tries to maintain peaceful relations with the state or government, the military, the media, and political, religious, and social groups. Sociologist Berna Turam, who studied the Gülen Movement for ten years, mentions the principle of Gülen's followers, "We are not going to fight, and we don't want conflict," citing it as a reason for the movement's success (Cakir). Gülen encourages his followers to respect and accept the differing opinions and beliefs of organizations and individuals. He said, "Differences are a beautiful part of human nature and developed communities" (personal communication).

Gülen and His Movement in a Global Islamic Context

[38] Gülen is a major figure in defining the contemporary global Islamic experience. He is a spiritual leader, philosopher, poet, and a thinker, not solely a preacher. His interpretation of Islam has attracted many religious leaders, intellectuals, and politicians in Turkey (Ozkok). Although he is not as well known as some Muslim leaders or intellectuals in the West, his community is one of the most influential, revivalist Islamic groups in modern Turkey (Özdalga: 85). His influence is not limited to religion. Indeed, he has had an impact on diverse fields including education, the media, business, and the financial sector.

[39] By establishing moral, educational, secular, and humanitarian institutions in Turkey and in other parts of the world, Gülen exemplifies how Islam and modernity can coexist. These institutions have attracted Muslim and non-Muslim, as well as secular and liberal religious

groups. The chief characteristic of Gülen's followers is that they do not seek to subvert modern secular states; rather, they encourage Muslims to use the opportunities offered (Oxford Analytica). Gülen sees science and faith as not only compatible but also complementary. He, therefore, encourages scientific research and technological advancement for the good of all humanity (1995b: 160).

[40] His spiritual movement is a combination of modernity and traditional values and has contributed to a "vernacularization of modernity," redefining modernity in Islamic terms. Gülen's ideas and actions introduce the possibility of being both modern and Muslim at the same time (Yavuz 2000: 7).

[41] In the last two decades, a new idea has emerged among some intellectuals in Turkey. John Voll observes that these intellectuals are neither fundamentalist nor secularist. For this group, Islam includes secularism and religion, two faces of the same coin (243). The increasing integration of the secular and religious in the world, in a way parallel to the process of "glocalization" (globalization and localization), is creating a significant frame that is useful to recognize the picture of Fethullah Gülen in the arenas of religion, faith, and life at the beginning of twenty-first century (244). To Gülen, modernity and the *sirat al-mustaqim* (the path followed by mainstream Muslims) are not two rivals, but the middle way of interpreting Islam, providing a balance between materialism and spirituality.

[42] According to anthropologist Nulifer Gole, Gülen shakes the dichotomist perception of modernity and Islam. He tries to end the Western monopoly of modernity, and aims to add an Islamic set of meanings to it. Gole emphasized that Gülen works to domesticate excessive rationalism with Sufism and love, and to reconcile individualism and humbleness (cited in Kuru: 117).

[43] Gülen has emerged as one of the most persuasive and influential voices in the Muslim community calling for dialogue as a step toward peace. Indeed, he offers "a way to live out Islamic values amidst the complex demands of modern societies and to engage in ongoing dialogue and cooperation with people of other religions" (Pratt). In his message at the Parliament of World's Religion, Gülen wrote that dialogue with adherents of other religious traditions is an integral part of an Islamic ethic that has been long neglected (2001).

[44] Gülen believes that dialogue is among the duties of Muslims in order to make the world a more peaceful place (1998: 17). Michel states that Gülen promotes a cooperation of civilizations through dialogue, mutual understanding, and gathering around shared values (2004). Gülen's response to the clash of civilizations thesis consists of three parts encapsulated in the words: tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and compassionate love (Penaskovic).

Criticisms

[45] Most of Gülen's critics include radical politico-religious groups, some secularists, and *ulusalcilar*, ultra-nationalists. Though few in numbers, liberal and social democrats occasionally criticize Gülen as well. Radical religious groups claim that he compromises religion. Some secularists believe that Gülen intends to gain control secretly of the Turkish state. Nationalists view Gülen, not as a patriot, but rather an as engineer behind the schemes of superpowers. In the following sections, we will examine these claims.

Criticisms of Politico-Religious Groups

[46] Politico-religious groups criticize Gülen on three fronts: (1) Gülen's not being against Turkey's EU membership, (2) Gülen's denunciation of Muslim suicide bombers, and (3) Gülen's interfaith activities as compromising Islam. Necmettin Erbakan, a leading religious-political figure in Turkey since 1969, criticizes Gülen for not supporting his political party. Erbakan's perspectives were published and supported by a media group including Channel 5 TV, and the *Milli Gazete* and *Vakit* newspapers. After meeting with Pope John Paul II in February 1998, Gülen was harshly criticized by a group of Islamists who viewed his travel to the Vatican and meeting as humiliating. Furthermore, Gülen was not a chosen representative of Islam or Turkey to engage in such dialogue (Eygi).

[47] Gülen responded to critics by stating that humility was an attribute of Muslims. Hard-line secularists rebuked him, contending that authorization from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Turkish government was necessary (Hablemitoglu). He has also been criticized by radical Muslims for talking less about an "Islamic State" than he does about a fly. Referring to this criticism, Ali Unal, one of Gülen's associates, says, "Yes, the Qur'an speaks of a fly, spider, and ant as evidences of His existence by their very creation, and names its chapters after them. Yet, it does not speak of an Islamic state" (Eygi).

[48] Gülen was accused of being pro-American for not condemning America's biased Middle East policy. They also criticize him for condemning suicide bombings and not openly condemning Israeli occupation and infringement of human rights. Haydar Bas, a Turkish academic, leader of a small religious community and politician heading the Independent Turkey Party (BTP), a small party which attracted 0.51% votes of the election in 2007, insinuated that Gülen and his followers are "bad representatives" of Islam who "cater" to Jews and Christians (Ashton and Balci: 105).

[49] Radical religious groups who are strongly anti-secular and some Sufi leaders claim that Gülen does not really oppose the secular state with his ideas and actions. This means that he is compromising religion with the secular and anti-religious groups. Some radical groups even accuse him of blasphemy. They view his interfaith activities as compromising instead of promoting religion.

[50] Some Sufi leaders find fault with Gülen because he is not part of the *silsila* (a spiritual chain or Sufi order) and, therefore, he cannot be a Sufi leader. According to the great Sufi leaders, *silsila* is one of the most important pillars of Sufism (Nasr: 17). In response to this criticism, Gülen clearly stated through media groups that he is not the leader of a Sufi order, nor is he trying to form a Sufi order. As for not supporting religious parties, such as the Welfare Party (RP), and later on, the Saadet Party (SP), he states that in all parties, there are people who practice or respect their religion, and that partisanship would undermine Islam, especially in the politicized climate of Turkey. Gülen says: "Religion is the relationship between people and their Creator. The feeling of religion lives in the heart's depths and on the inner world's emerald hills. If you turn it into a display of forms, you'll kill it. Politicizing religion will harm religion before it harms a government's life" (Ünal and Williams: 36). As a result of his open arm political views, he and his movement gained followers and support from a range of political, social, and religious groups.

[51] As for not strongly opposing the secular state or regime, Gülen says that he follows Said Nursi's approach. According to Nursi, since we are living in the modern age, a modern method of persuasion should be used to convince people (102). Rebellious against the secular regime would cause the death of innocent people, especially Muslims. Nursi asserts that the worst state is better than the lack of any state because the lack of government brings about anarchy (Vahide: 78).

[52] After the establishment of the Fethullah Gülen Chair in the Study of Islam and Muslim-Catholic Relations at the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne in 2007, Paul Stenhouse, editor of *Annals Australia*, suggested in the *Quadrant Magazine* that Gülen was using the chair and interreligious dialogue as a Trojan horse to achieve his goal of Islamic supremacy. Monash University professor Greg Barton, who has also made a special study of Gülen, dismissed Stenhouse's objections, saying that the article was poorly written and "not particularly well-argued." He argued against Stenhouse's emphasis on militant behavior of Sufi Muslims, noting that "for the most part, Sufis are accommodationists rather than confrontational" (Rowbotham). In the face of these criticisms, Gülen continues to promote interreligious and intercultural dialogue, asserting, "Civilized people solve their problems through dialogue" (personal communication)

Criticisms of Ulusalcilar (Ultrationalists)

[53] Like some politico-religious groups, the *ulusalcilar* accuse Gülen of being unpatriotic and disloyal to Turkey due to his views regarding Turkey's application for EU membership and lack of support towards national parties, such as the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Moreover, Gülen does not give his Turkish identity priority in his public and private speeches, sermons, and books, and his openness towards minorities in Turkey is met by skepticism by ultrationalists. There were also claims from both politico-religious groups and *ulusalcilar* that the Gülen Movement was receiving funding from foreign agencies, such as the CIA, Saudi Arabia, Mossad, and the Vatican, and that Gülen was the mastermind behind a project designed by the U.S. to destroy the Kemalist ideology of nationalism and independence of Turkey (Webb: 46-49).

[54] Just as some nationalists praise Gülen for his promotion of education, others criticize his followers for the use of English as an academic language, even though most of the Movement's schools incorporate a Turkish as a second language (TSL) program and hire Turkish-speaking teachers.

[55] In response to these views, Gülen says that globalization has made the world into a village. Turkey is either a part of the global village or an isolated country like the communist nations. Therefore, acquiring the language of the global village is essential. As for the political claims, Gülen states that a specific party cannot claim to be the sole representative of a nation and religiousness and that there are patriots and religious individuals in every party (Ünal and Williams: 36). As for his tolerance and dialogue with minorities, Gülen says that these minorities are citizens of Turkey and that the majority needs to respect the rights of minorities.

[56] In terms of funding educational institutions, Gülen states that the Movement's financial resources stem from the generosity of the people of Turkey and not any foreign sources.

Fuller delves into the topic of funding for the Gülen Movement's schools and other projects, pointing out the extensive network formed through the hundreds of schools of the Movement, and states that "funding comes from within the community, and wealthy businessman for whom building a school has become a modern pious equivalent of building a mosque" (Fuller: 57).

Criticisms of Leftists

[57] Those who are most critical and noticeable of Gülen's actions are those of the far left-wing, a mix of ex-communists, Maoists, and atheists. The strength of this group comes from their active presence in the field of print and broadcast media and advertising. Representing this group in the mainstream media is the *Cumhuriyet* newspaper (right-wing groups in Turkey call it the Turkish *Pravda*). Hikmet Cetinkaya, who has compiled and published his newspaper columns in a book, has been criticizing Gülen since the 1970s.

[58] Radical leftists claim that Gülen is a leader of a religious cult, something forbidden in Turkey since the establishment of the Turkish Republic. They accuse Gülen of secretly trying to control the state and abolish the secular regime and establish a theocracy instead. They claim that Gülen establishes schools, dormitories, college preparation courses, and other educational institutions all over the world and gets positive coverage in the Turkish media to achieve this goal. In addition, they claim that he is secretly encouraging his followers to penetrate the military, the judicial system, law enforcement, and the business world. Secularists claim that by opening schools in Russia, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Balkans, Gülen is attempting to build a "Green Belt" around secular Turkey (Michel 2003: 78).

[59] On numerous occasions, Gülen has publicly asked his closest friends to be non-partisans and not to join the government or any parties. In his last interview with Mehmet Gundem for the secular newspaper *Milliyet*, Gülen advised his followers:

As for the movement; neither now, nor in the future should our friends have any ambition for government; they should not be engaged in politics, even if all the power and pomp of the world is laid at their feet; my friends who love me and heed my advice should not show a moment's hesitation to push all this away with the back of their hand.

In 2000, state prosecutors sued Gülen for establishing an illegal organization whose objective was to overthrow the secular government and replace it with one based on religious law. The case was finally dismissed in 2006, and the General Council of the Supreme Court of Appeals dismissed further appeals on January 24, 2008 (Ashton and Balci: 113).

[60] Furthermore, the leftists maintain that America wants to establish a soft Islamic regime in Turkey through the Gülen Movement. In response to these accusations, Gülen notes that the schools established by his followers employ the program and the curriculum of the Turkish Ministry of Education. He notes further that the schools are inspected continually, not only by the ministry, but also by intelligence agencies in foreign countries where the schools have been established (Michel 2003: 69). From time to time, officials in all sectors of the state, government, law enforcement, and possibly the military, have been known to

praise the schools and the perspectives of Gülen. Despite these accusations, former Prime Minister and leader of the Democratic Left Party (DSP), Bulent Ecevit, rejected the leftist claims and defended Gülen, his movement, and his educational institutions, openly in public. Furthermore, the educational institutions, media groups, businesses, and financial organizations do not belong to Gülen as it is claimed; rather they have been established by those who respect his ideas and philosophy.

Conclusion

[61] In the last three decades, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, religion and religious and spiritual leaders have been the focus of a great deal of public scrutiny. Gülen and his followers are among the most discussed and debated because they are becoming stronger and more influential in Turkey. According to Yavuz, this gradual strengthening will continue (Yavuz 2003a: 3). Despite the criticism and attempts by the opposition to reduce Gülen's influence and his followers' activities, many support and appreciate the activities of Gülen and his followers. By marrying secular educational institutions with religious ethics, Gülen has developed a model of being modern and religious at the same time (Yavuz 2003b: 20).

[62] According to the principles of Sufism, Gülen has not formed a Sufi order. Although the spiritual network has many of the characteristics of a Sufi order, Sufism for Gülen is not a way of rejecting the world, but rather a way of empowering the believer with spiritual tools and good character to help him or her shape and influence the world (Yavuz 2003b: 34). From a spiritual point of view, Gülen is a Sufi, but he is unlike other Sufi leaders. As Zeki Saritoprak states: "He is a Sufi in his own way" (Saritoprak: 169).

[63] Gülen's way is rooted in traditional Islam with Sufi interpretation in combination with modernity and contemporary intellectualism, which includes Western philosophy that is compatible with Islamic thought. Scholars are still asking two important questions: How is Gülen going to use his power and influence in the future, and what kind of transformation will happen after his death? Although there are various predictions, and often his critics express their fears, only time will give us the answers. Gülen may follow the destiny of al-Ghazzali (1056-1111), Rumi (1207-1273), or Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), three of Islam's greatest and influential scholars or spiritual leaders, who had also been criticized in their respective times, but are now well recognized and praised for their ideas, philosophy, and works.

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