

Fethullah Gulen: Interfaith Dialogue through Science

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Abstract

This article discusses Fethullah Gulen's thought which states that science can be a medium for an interfaith dialogue in which the different religious groups reach a common interest and build a single global community. For Gulen, there are several mediums for the dialogue. One of which is through science. This article assumes that Gulen uses several steps in the process of dialogue. Firstly, he turns the science toward God, by which he gets rid of philosophy of materialism and the Darwin's evolution theory from the sciences. As it is the case, both leads to atheism and goes against the basic teaching of religions, in particular that of the existence of God. Secondly, Gülen establishes schools in which the integration, multiculturalism and dialogue are put into action. Thus, his success in spreading pluralism through the dialogue using science deserves to be evaluated and studied. And this paper elaborates it further.

1. INTRODUCTION

In retrospect, in the wake of the September 11 attack on World Trade Center (WTC), the relation between Islam and the West tensed to an unprecedented level. The effects of the attack look worrisome: Muslim community had been deemed as a common enemy to the West, and Islam seemed to be a radical, cruel, terrorist, unfits for pluralism, etc. (Sam Harris, 2005). The tensed relation of the two civilizations came to escalate even higher as if the Samuel Huntington's theory of "clash of civilization" gets grounds. The West looks upon Islam as posing a danger to Western civilization (Thomas Michel, 2004). In response to the negative standing of Islam, some Muslim scholars stated that Islam is not the source of the afore-mentioned problems, otherwise Islam is a problem-solver for humanity. One of the very scholars is Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish Islamic preacher whom gains highly respect prior the Turkish coup of 2016.

Gülen (2004a) is of the view that a method to put an end the clash of civilization is through a dialogue. The dialogue itself would be impossible without collaborative works. It is worthy to ask as to by which medium he uses in the dialogue. And how far does it work? Gülen answers the question by turning science toward God.

2. THEORITICAL REVIEW

2.1 *Turning Science toward God*

Science is Gülen's main concern. This very concern comes to surface due materialism and Darwinism to dominate science and to create a secular one. Ian Barbour (2002) points out that materialism and Darwinism are source of conflict in an attempt to integrate science and religion. Materialists use science as a denial tool to the existence of God. Their hatred toward religion obviously expressed through their writings (see, Richard Dawkins, 2000). Since the materialists and the Darwinists attack religion, the religious beliefs are weakening in gradual way. Both accelerates to the spreading of atheism and undermines the beliefs and morals of religion. Due in part to lack of belief in immaterial things –God in particular— materialism is a source of a conflict between religion and science, whereas Islamic philosophy of science states that such things do exist. Therefore, Gülen intends to "Islamize" the science (Gülen, 2004: 91; Arslan, 2007; Gulay, 2007).

Gülen goes against the philosophy of materialism. He opposes to its methodological and epistemological implication to knowledge. Gülen challenges the basics construction of the secular science. Therefore, he constructs a metaphysical framework to support Islamic scientific viewpoint that oppose to a truth claim of materialism. Further more Gülen states that Muslim have not yet developed a concept of science in its true meaning that derived from the Qur'an (Unal & Williams, 2000: 356). Gülen states that separation between reason and revelation as propounded by materialism is based on a false assumption. Religious viewpoint on science contradicts to the secular one. Gülen later propounds that the secular viewpoint can be incorporated into the religious worldview as long as materialists would admit their incapability to decipher the essential facts about universe, the afterlife, and supranatural realm.

Gülen is of the view that there are differences between the Islamic and the materialist methodological viewpoints. One of which is observation (Unal & Williams, 2000: 357). While Islamic scientists acknowledge to the existence of physical and metaphysical realm, as well as believes that God creates and regulates the creatures, the materialists conduct his inquiry from physical matters. In oppose to materialism, Gülen points out that in order to reach a sound conclusion about the reality of the existence, a Muslim needs a methodological tool to decipher the relationship with God. This methodology is known as Islamic reasoning. It is a human reason which works under the guidance of the Qur'an (Gülen, 2005: 12).

The methodology of Islamic reasoning denotes the usage of a rationality in scientific observation which presupposes the nature of the existence, the unity of God, the immanence, eternally regenerative Will and power of God, the *harfi* ontological foundation of Creation, and the harmonious interrelation of particulars (Gulay, 2007: 70). This methodology is a concomitant of Gülen's understanding on Islamic metaphysics and empirical world through which Qur'anic teaching can take part in the scientific discourse and research.

Gülen seeks to build Islamic science which gets rid of the monopolistic grip of materialists whom neglect moral and ethical principles. As a staunch critic to materialism, Gülen tries to undermine methodology of scientific materialism. His critique goes that secular science has no ability to produce truth. It obviously cannot produce its certainty in its own propositions. Any truths claimed by materialists are merely

hypotheses and theories which unable to reach the validity of the Qur'an (Gülen, 1998: 32). Sensory faculty of empirist and reason cannot possible come close to the truth as the Qur'an because the epistemological tools used by scientists is subjective and relative. Scientist cannot produce knowledge in corresponding to objective reality, nor an accurate to it. Say it in sum, scientific truth is only produced in mind, deduced from sensory observation, and induced from speculative hypotheses (Gulay, 2007: 77).

Gülen says that human reason should be used to search for God and to know His creations. The human reason should go in line with Islamic teaching. The Qur'an is inherently rational as its verses are confirmed by reason and scientific findings. The revelation could be read in accordance with natural theology and principles of rationalism, as well as in line with modern circumstances and intellectual standards (Unal & Williams, 2000: 104). Gülen further says that there is no clash between reason and the Qur'an, nor science and Islam (Gülen, 2004 b: 11). Islam and modern science work complementarily. Scientific findings ensure our belief on God and strengthen our understanding on Islam. The Qur'an provides signs to comprehend the true nature of the universe, the Creator, the nature of miracle, afterlife, and the mystery of creation.

The second opponent to religion, as Barbour put it, is Darwin's theory of Evolution. Gülen goes against it. He emphasizes that it has propaganda of materialism (Arslan, 2009: 328). Gülen's critique toward Darwinism is Gülen's novel contribution which contains a systemic refutation to the evolution (Gulay, 2007: 78-79). Interestingly, Gülen's critique uses scientific methodology, rather than ethical or religious approach. His rejection toward Darwinism is based on assumption that Darwinism is a bad science since it is unable to meet the standards of its intellectual evidence and based much more on conjecture and speculation instead. In response to Darwin's attacks on religion, Gülen uses the methodologies of science.

While he critiques to Darwinism, he offers a theory of creationism. Gülen argues that the nature is created by an intelligent Creator. This argument is known as the argument of creationism. Gülen's refutation goes that Darwinism reduces all living organism to material nature, and deny any role of divine agency. While Islam considers human beings as a respected creature, Darwinism says that human beings are no more than animals. The main critique of Gülen is that there is no place for a Creator in Darwinism, and the creation bears no meaning at all. On the contrary, he argues, each creature is created with a purpose.

Interestingly, despite he encourages the theory of creationism, however he supports research in genetics and cells. Gülen (2004a) states that Muslim should not ignore modern institutions so as to take part in redefining modernity through the lens of Islamic perspective. He is of the view that Islam should be incorporated into modern life. Gülen's engagement with science is to advance Muslim society. Gülen aims at articulating piety into the project of modernity, and working on building religious modernity for the coming generations in particular. He challenges the secular science and seeks to integrate Islam with science and modernity. However, there is a shift in paradigm on the Gülen's engagement with science, from modernizing Islam to Islamization of science. This effort is through schools. He removes the evolution theory, and introduces creationism into the curriculum in schools related to him.

2.2 *School: Where the Multiculturalism Workings*

Gülen pays attention on educating young generation whom should be protected from negative impacts of materialism. In doing so, he builds hundreds of schools accross the world that focus on teaching on science. In fact, Gülen opens up secular education, and adopts rationality and scientific thinking. In the schools, Gülen intends to integrate Islam with modern science. He is to challenge a claim which said science merely belongs to secular scientists.

The Gülen schools focus on educating generations through moral training and science. The generations are called as "golden generation". It is said that process of changing on individual basis is more effective than on a larger society. The process for the change is possible if it runs through an intense ideological injection. From this point of view, it can be concluded that Gülen represents new Muslim thinkers which work on cultural arena rather than political arena. He works on articulating values, modernism, civilization, and science. He changes the way how to teach Islam to the younger generation by practicing Islam in daily based and to make the Islamic morality as parts of their public and personal life (Arslan, 2009: 215).

Gülen changes community through the school. The process commences from an individual member of society. It is indeed in tune with the Nursi's idea that the faith should strengthen on individual level (Mardin, 1989). Gülen asserts that this is the main purpose of current Islamic resurgence in which major

problem facing Muslim today is a weakened faith due in part to the cultural attack from materialism which comes along with science. Putting science in its proper place will get rid of materialism and Darwinism, and end the prolonged conflict within human beings. Gülen (2004a: 242) states that religion could protect the world from destruction caused by scientific materialism.

Gülen is of the view that education is the most important medium in creating multiculturalism and preparing for the best generation. The future of a country rests on its young generations. Those who want to create better future should put all their energies on educating their children. And Gülen said that those who educate young generation today are preparing for those who will take responsibility for bad and good values in the coming 25 years (Unal & Williams, 2000: 309-315).

Gülen is of the view that knowledge is the answer to the problems facing society in the modern era. As of the 2016 coup, no less than 1000s educational institutions of the Gülen Movement spread from Indonesia to America. Since 1980's Gülen and his followers began a project to build educational institutions all over the world (Çetin, 2008; Nelson, 2005). The funds for the institution are provided by those who follow Gülen's messages which declares that he prefers to see the founding of the school in addition to the mosque (Gülen, 2004a: 325-326).

These schools are of no different with other schools in terms of curriculum, modern equipment, sophisticated laboratory and computers. The quality of the education is excelled. The students show their success and win the competition of olympiads. Kocabas (2006: 51) explains that these olympiads successes would function in three ways: to break the widespread false assumption about the compability of Islam and science; to answers to critiques which attributed these schools only to religious education role and belittled their scientific side of the education; and as the advertise for the schools.

Involving community within the schools is Gülen's strategy in achieving the excellence of the schools. The participation of the parents and the communities in the education are one of the major components of the Gülen schools. Not only for the schools does their involvement play a collective effort to improve quality of the society. Aslandogan (2007) states that Gülen encourages parents to pay fully attention on educating their children, to implement discipline, to help them develop good manners, to treat them in fair and equal among siblings, to protect the children from all kinds of harm, and to provide them a security. The good values should be implanted since early age. In order to achieve a better and more peaceful society, the community and various social stakeholders should provide an example to the children what types of communities they will establish in the future.

Achievement in mathematics and science is a main success in the Gülen's schools. Gülen states that success in these fields leads to success in other arena. Their performance in academic competitions in sciences, mathematics, and languages shows outstanding. They are among the most dynamic educational institutions in the world (Michel, 2003: 70). As Nelson and Michel put it, The Filipino-Turkish Tolerance School which runs in a city where 50% consists of Christian population and 40% of Muslim, for an instance, set to be an example of such pluralism. This school provides positive environments to interact with different groups of religions. It paves a way into tolerance in an religiously polarized area of the Philippines (Nelson, 2005: 7). Gülen is of the view that when a country is already suffering from various forms of division and conflicts, school should remain as an island of peace and of unity (Unal & Williams, 2000).

While focusing on science and mathematics, this school also cultivates the moral and ethical values. The schools emphasize on the importance of character building through controlling and educating students for almost twenty-four hours a day. Staffs and teachers show their better moral character and become a role model for pluralism. Gülen pays more attentions to knowledge and moral. Providing a secular education along with cultivating moral and ethical values would turn the world how to runs in the future. In doing so, Gülen emphasizes teaching through "example" (*temsil*) in which teachers' behaviours show the best morals to be copied by students. *Temsil* is better than *teblig* (inform). And surely, *temsil* will impact much stronger if it works through love. So will knowledge. And Knowledge will benefit much more for humanity if it is combined with love. Gülen (2004b: 208) states that not all teachers are educators, and education is of different from teaching. Everyone can teach, but only a few can educate. While teaching solely conveys information, educating offers moral guidance.

The most important role of teacher is to be an exemplar how love and knowledge work, and be a role model for students in moral. Interaction of students in an environment full of love and sound moral is the most important aspect in creating 'golden generation'. Agai (2002: 36) points out that the characteristics of

this generation are faith, love, idealism and selflessness. This concept would usher in a world of tolerance, peace and harmony. Gülen urges everyone to change the world full of hatred, violence and evil into a world full of tolerance. Gülen is of the view that it is through education that extremism will be curbed, and tolerance promoted (Osman, 2007). It is in the hand of educators that dialogue and tolerance could work properly. Gülen views that intolerance and conflicts between different religious group are due to lack of education.

It is noteworthy that teachers' pure intention (*ikhlas*) to be involved in education process as serving to God is a key factor to the effectiveness of teaching process in classroom. This internal state drives to high achievement. The driving force of the teachers is altruism (*hizmet*) and the lack of profit-seeking (Aslandoğan & Çetin, 2006). The altruism (*hizmet*) as a basic teaching of Gülen is derived from the Qur'an. Gülen shows himself lives in simple life, ascetic and altruistic paths.

Profession of teaching previously is lack of appreciation and low social status, but in the hand of Gülen this profession turns into a honorable profession. Gülen emphasizes that the greatest service for humanity is through education. Either teachers or students are in state of the most honorable position in the society. Gülen's message goes as follow: serving your fellow citizens and humanity in general through education is the responsibility of being a human and it fulfills the purpose of one's own creation (Aslandoğan & Çetin, 2006; cited in Aydın, 2011: 79).

Strikingly enough, this Gülen's teaching of altruism sways people in broader sphere, either within the profession of teaching or people outside the profession. Everybody wants to participate in building a better future, to create peaceful, harmonious and prosperous community. And it is worthy to note that Gülen's schools has spread extensively throughout Turkey and around the world. Students of the schools reflect remarkably high achievement in mathematics, science, languages, and strong moral and character who willingly help others (*hizmet*), and create peace and harmony through tolerance.

3. RESEARCH RESULT

Science, Dialogue and Pluralism

Gülen asserts that science and faith can be a complementary. In interfaith dialogue, there is a 'single language' that could unite and be a medium of dialogue, that is science. He integrates these concepts into his discourse, and states that tolerance could be the most effective medium to solve conflicts and disharmony. This concepts of tolerance and dialogue work around the common values of human, that is multiculturalism and science. Indeed, this concept has universal connotations. Human has some shared values. The dialogue should refer to the shared values. If a difference comes out among the humankind, they have to resort to tolerance (Kocabas, 2006: 40).

Gülen states that tolerance and dialogue are an antidote to the clash of civilization; dialogue and tolerance must be promoted to be representation of Islam whose image was wounded the activities of Islamist fundamentalism. The concepts of dialogue and tolerance is a way of expressing Islam, and his school is 'peace Islands' aiming to prevent people whom want to create the clash of civilizations, cultures and different religious companions (Kocabas, 2006: 41).

Gülen is an important figure in determining the direction of the Islamic world in dealing with pluralism in the contemporary world. His thought influences millions of people. Gülen is an example of how Islam can survive in multicultural world. He opposes and condemns violence and terrorism. For him, "A Muslim is not a terrorist and a terrorist cannot be a true Muslim because Islam forbids killing civilians, children, old people, women and religious leaders". In response to the September 11 attacks in the United States, Gülen issued press-released which condemns the barbarous act: "...terror can never be used in the name of Islam or for the sake of any Islamic ends. A terrorist cannot be a Muslim and a Muslim cannot be a terrorist. A Muslim can only be the representative and symbol of peace, welfare, and prosperity" (Gülen, 2004: xxii).

Through his movement does Gülen carry out humanitarian mission to the global community. This movement comes to be one of the largest civil movements in the world in which his followers and followings counted in millions. As religious leader his influences go beyond religious sphere, sipping into education, business, financial and media. He is indeed an important figure in Turkey before the coup took place in 2016. Ozdalga (2000: 85) put it that thank to bear his name, Gülen Movement, or *hizmet* are very influential. He is an influential profile in determining the direction of Islam toward contemporary world in the mid of unavoidable pluralism and cosmopolitanism. A prestigious journal of Islamic studies and Christian-Muslim

relations, The Muslim World published a special issue entitled "Islam in Contemporary Turkey: the Contributions of Fethullah Gülen" in honor for him (volume 95, No. 3, July 2005).

In order to create a better world to live in, he urged Muslims to serve other humans, through which Muslim contribute financial support to religious and humanitarian activity. Gülen encourages his followings and his students to actively involve in worldly affairs, to trade, to work and to help others. In doing so they should be in accordance with the moral values of Islam. In this sense, his teaching is of different from some mystical paths which stay away from worldly life (Ozdalga, 2000: 85). He states that piety is to do, to work and to serve humanity. He declares that personal faith should be transformed into an action. His basic message is to serve (*hizmet*).

Since early 1991s Gülen holds interfaith dialogue with leaders of the Jewish and Eastern Orthodox Church. He encourages his students to follow suit. Gülen calls for the dialogue as a step toward reconciliation. He establishes a dialogue and collaboration with other religions. He explains that such dialogue is an integral part of Islamic ethic that has long been forgotten. In order to create a peace, Gülen believes that dialogue is one of the obligations of a Muslim. Acceptance to dialogue with other religions is Gülen's distinguished character. Michel (2004) put it in sum that Gülen promotes peace through dialogue, mutual understanding, and common values.

The common value of which Gülen emphasizes much more is that of the two largest religions: Christianity and Islam (Unal & Williams, 2000: 243). Islam and Christianity emerged from the same cultural region, that is of the Middle East; both claim to be follower of Abrahamic traditions; monotheistic religions; and religions of revelation.

In putting his teachings into practises did Gülen meet Pope John Paul II at the Vatican in 1998. A letter sent to Pope John Paul II in the Vatican contains Gülen's message to work together and to conduct a joint effort (Gülen, 2004: xxi): "Humankind from time to time has denied religion in the name of science and denied science in the name of religion, arguing that the two present conflicting views. All knowledge belongs to God and religion is from God. How then can the two be in conflict? To this end, our joint efforts directed at inter-religious dialogue can do much to improve understanding and tolerance among people." It is due to science attacking religions in the hand of materialists that drives the two largest religions (Christianity and Islam) to hold a joint effort in order to wrest a pure science from the materialists and to get rid of the philosophy of materialism. This joint effort is one of various forms in inter-religious and interfaith dialogue. This very joint effort is undeniable through science.

4. CONCLUSION

People hardly realizes that social harmony and peace can be resolved through reconciliation between the material and spiritual. Problem facing religions—Islam in particular—is rooted in a worldview of materialism which limits the role of religion in contemporary age. In this age it should come spiritual dynamics that revive moral values, and become age of tolerance, of mutual understanding, and of international cooperation. The intercultural dialogue will bring peace to human. It is indeed science that can play such medium as the common values. The other side, science can be an effective tool to fight back the materialism. Thus, schools are in the very center of this project. To educate a generation that has spiritual depth, take part in creating peace, and serves humanity are the main goal of Gülen. His basic teachings are summarized in three words: tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and mutual love. Working together in science, either research or Olympiads, is a way to elevate the dialogue and to find the common values.

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