

IDENTIFYING OUR PARTNERS IN DIALOGUE

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1. Finding Partners for Dialogue

Many people see the need for interreligious and intercultural dialogue but are not sure where to begin. I have often been asked, “How do you go about starting up dialogue with others?” Especially because I am a Christian who has lived and shared life with Muslims for many years, they ask, “How do you go about beginning a dialogue with Muslims? Where do you start?”

It’s a good question, and it’s one that I found myself asking back in 1978 in Indonesia. I had just finished my graduate studies in Islamic thought and was back in Indonesia and wondering where to begin to meet Muslims and enter into dialogue with them. On one occasion, I asked a prominent Muslim scholar how to go about this. The wisdom of his answer is one that has stayed with me and proven itself true over the years, so that by now it has also become my answer.

He told me that the first thing we have to do is to look around at the society in which we live to try to identify those who are our logical partners in dialogue. Who are the individuals and groups with whom we find ourselves sharing ideals, whose vision of the future is at least compatible with our own, whose value system intersects with ours at various points? Thus, for the Christian who wants to enter into dialogue with Muslims, the first step is to distinguish and recognize the movements, organizations and communities of Muslims who are open to dialogue with us, who have something to say to us from which we might learn something, and who are also ready to listen to us, to hear our stories, and to appreciate our religious and humane vision of life, even as they remain committed to their own spiritual path.

2. The Hizmet Movement: A good partner in Dialogue

One of the Muslim movements with whom I have found much common understanding is what is often called “The Hizmet Movement”. This is a community of Muslims inspired by the thought of M.FethullahGülen, a Turkish scholar and educator. Mr. Gülen has denied that he has any movement of his own, but describes the movement rather as one of like-minded colleagues and students who share a common vision and commitment to society. I came to know this community back in 1990s through a close friend of mine, Msgr. George Marovitch, who was the secretary of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Turkey. Over the years, I have met many members of this movement and I have grown respect for who they are and what they are seeking to do in society. It is about this movement that I would like to speak you today.

To understand this movement, it is necessary to know a bit of the background and spiritual journey of the founder. FethullahGülen was born and educated in the far eastern region of Anatolia, in the city of Erzurum. He began his career as a teacher of religion and preacher in the mosques. In 1958, at the age of 20, Gülen became aware of the writings of Said Nursi, which had a formative influence upon his thinking.[1] Like many other Turkish Muslims, Gülen undertook a study of the Risale-i Nur, Said Nursi's voluminous (6600 page) commentary on the Qur'an.

Gülen became a teacher of Qur'anic studies in the Mediterranean city of Izmir, and it was in that modern, cosmopolitan environment that the movement had its origins. In the 1970s, by means of lecturing in mosques, organizing summer camps, and erecting "lighthouses" (dormitories for student formation), Gülen began to build a community of religiously motivated students trained both in the Islamic and secular sciences.

The importance that the lighthouses (işikevler), residences (yurts), and study halls (dershanes) play until today in the formation and cohesion of the movement must not be underestimated. Students not only supplement their secular high school studies and prepare for university entrance examinations, but they form friendships and a network of social relations, receive spiritual training through the study of the Qur'an and the Risale-i Nur, and pursue their educational goals in a social environment free from the use of alcohol, drugs, tobacco, premarital sex, and violence.

Gülen gave a socially-oriented thrust to religious commitment. Gülen taught the need to transform society through generous service. In Gülen's vision, it is the social effect of conscientious, dedicated, committed Muslim social agents that is the key to renewal of the Islamic life. Gülen hopes to form Muslims who will be tolerant and open-minded, who can build peace with others, and who are ready to serve others through education, development and dialogue.

3. Hizmet Schools: A new pedagogy

Members of the Hizmet community hope to change society through a new type of education that draws from and integrates disparate strands of previous pedagogic systems. Gülen's starting point was his recognition of the need for a new kind of school, a system of education that would draw what was best from the existing alternatives and integrate them into the kind of education needed by modern students. Gülen looked at the kinds of education that were being offered in Turkey in his day. He found that each had some strong point but that each was also lacking in some important areas.

He felt that the secular schools were unable to free themselves of the prejudices and conventions of modernist ideology. On the other hand, the madrasas have limited their efforts to transmitting the religious sciences and have shown little interest or capability to meet the challenges of technology and scientific thought, and as a result, the madrasas lack the flexibility, vision, and ability to break

with past, enact change, and offer the type of educational formation that is needed today. The Sufi-oriented tekkes, which traditionally had placed the emphasis on the development of spiritual values, have lost their dynamism. Finally, the educational training offered by the military, which had in previous ages been a symbol of national identity and interior religious energy and activity, has in the course of the past century deteriorated into an inflexible program aimed at self-assertion and self-preservation.

The challenge today, as Gülen see it, is to find a way in which these traditional pedagogical systems can overcome the tendency to regard each other as rivals or enemies, so that they can begin to work together and learn from one another. By integrating the insights and strengths found in the various educational currents, educators must seek to bring about a “marriage of mind and heart” if they hope to form individuals of “thought, action, and inspiration.”[5] Integration of the interior wisdom which is the cumulative heritage accumulated over the centuries with the scientific tools essential for the continued progress of the nation would enable students to move beyond the societal pressures of their environment and provide them with both internal stability and direction for their actions. He states: “Until we help them through education, the young will be captives of their environment. They wander aimlessly, intensely moved by their passions, but far from knowledge and reason. They can become truly valiant young representatives of national thought and feeling, provided their education integrates them with their past, and prepares them intelligently for the future.”[6]

4. From Turkish student initiative to transnational movement

In the new social and economic climate that emerged in Turkey during the presidency of TurgutÖzal, the Gülen movement grew from involving a small number of students in a few cities like Izmir to become a huge educational endeavor with important business and political links. Although stemming from a broadly-conceived religious motivation, the schools are not traditional “Islamic” schools, but secular institutions of high quality, as shown by the winning performances of students in science Olympiads and the like.

In the 1980s, the community moved beyond its schools into the media with the publication of a daily newspaper, Zaman, and a television channel, Samanyolu. Today Zaman is published in 20 countries with an average circulation of a half-million. In all, about 35 newspapers and magazines in various languages are projects of the Gülen community. The monthly journal in Turkish, Sizinti, the longest continuously published Islamic magazine in Turkey, with a circulation over 500,000, has enjoyed uninterrupted publication since 1979; the English version, Fountain, has worldwide circulation in the tens of thousands. The influential weekly newsmagazine, Aksiyon, is a Turkish equivalent of Time or Newsweek. In addition, the community puts out a number of professional journals, for doctors, engineers, teachers etc.

After the fall of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in 1989, the Gülen community was a key player in filling the gap in the post-Soviet educational systems. Hundreds of schools and universities were set up throughout the former Soviet republics, both within the Russian Federated Republic - particularly in its predominantly Muslim regions such as Tatarstan, Yakutia, and Chechnya - , in the newly independent nations of the Caucasus and Central Asia, and in the predominantly Muslim and pluralist regions of the Balkans such as Albania, Macedonia, Bosnia, Moldova, Bulgaria and Kosovo. Television programs were prepared which were destined to be aired in the vast reaches of Central Asia, and scholarships were granted for study in Turkey.

The new century saw a further expansion of the educational activities of the Hizmet community as it moved beyond the boundaries of Muslim-majority regions into China, Western Europe, North and South America, Africa, and Southeast Asia. The primary but not exclusive focus was on educating migrants from Turkey and other Muslim countries. Here the pedagogic approach underwent some adaptation. In many parts of Western Europe, the economic and bureaucratic difficulties of opening and supporting new schools discouraged and often prevented this activity. Moreover, in these regions, the movement often encountered a level of education of high quality. The educational task became not so much one of competing with the existing national public school systems, but that of ensuring that immigrant Turks and others would have an adequate educational background to be able to compete and succeed in the government schools. Thus, in many parts of Western Europe, the Hizmet community in its educational efforts has focused on weekend classes and tutorials aimed at supplementing the instruction given in the state schools and at preparing for standardized exams.

In the schools associated with the movement in the United States, the challenge has been to provide an opportunity for students to attain a high level of academic achievement. In fact, particularly in scientific fields, in states like New Jersey and Texas, schools run by members of the Hizmet movement have been among the most highly awarded. These are not “Islamic schools” in that even though the inspiration for the schools is found in enlightened Islamic ideals; both the teaching and administrative staff and the student body are made up of the followers of other religions as well as of Muslims. In some cases, religious instruction is offered once a week, while in other cases religion is not taught in the schools.

The schools do not form a centralized “school system.” Each school is established and run by individual members of the Hizmet community in a privately registered and funded foundation. The teachers receive a common spiritual training and are sent to wherever the need is considered the greatest, but there is no central governing board that sends out instructions on educational policy, curriculum, or discipline. Rather, each school is “twinned” with a particular city or region in Turkey, which undertakes financial responsibility for the new school.

Gülen's genius does not lie so much in reinterpreting the teaching of the Qur'an as in applying traditional Islamic prescriptions in entirely new ways to respond to constantly changing social needs. According to the Albanian scholar Bekim Agai; the schoolteacher becomes a prophet who fulfills Islamic principles by imparting knowledge. The key point for Gülen is that the Islamic principles are unchanging, and yet must be given concrete form in each new era. Once, a Qur'an course might have been the best way to invest Islamic donations, but [today] other Islamic activities take precedence. He succeeds in gaining support in conservative Islamic circles for new Islamic fields of action by using traditional Islamic terminology and defining his terms conventionally, but at the same time furnishing them with innovative implications for the present day. He argues that questions of morality and education are more essential for today's Islam than are political issues, and that present-day Muslims are confronted with entirely different problems than the question of whether or not to introduce the shari'a.[9]

5. Commitment to dialogue

Gülen's reading of the needs of today's world has led him and his movement to put interreligious dialogue at the center of their concerns. This was not an entirely original insight on the part of Gülen. The Gülen community inherited its openness to interreligious dialogue and cooperation from the writings of Said Nursi in the Risale-i Nur, but this commitment has been renewed and given new impetus in the writings of Fethullah Gülen. In his speech in 1999 at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Capetown, Gülen presented an optimistic vision of interreligious harmony.

"It is my conviction that in the future years, the new millennium will witness unprecedented religious blooming and the followers of world religions, such as Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and others, will walk hand-in-hand to build a promised bright future of the world".[10]

Gülen believes that the duty of Muslims to work for dialogue and unity should not be limited to Christians, but is to be extended to conscientious followers of all religions. Secondly, the motivation for this dialogue is not simply a strategic alliance to oppose atheistic and secularizing tendencies in modern life but is called for by the nature of Islamic belief itself. Gülen stated "the very nature of religion demands this dialogue. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and even Hinduism and Buddhism pursue the same goal. As a Muslim, I accept all Prophets and Books sent to different peoples throughout the history and regard belief in them as an essential principle of being Muslim"

To further its pursuits of interreligious dialogue, the Hizmet movement has been active in sponsoring and organizing "Abrahamic" Dialogues with high-ranking representatives of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The movement also organizes associations for the promotion of interreligious activities at the local and regional level, and has established dialogue associations in Africa, Europe, North and South America, and Asia, all of which take independent initiatives toward promoting interreligious understanding and cooperation.

I conclude by returning to my original idea. The first step in dialogue is to identify those individuals, groups, and movements in society with whom we can speak and with whom we can work for the good of all. I suggest that Christians in Africa, as in Europe and America, those interested in dialogue with Muslims could not do better at the present time than to regard the Hizmet community as a movement in which they will find suitable and enriching dialogue partners.

[1]Aras and Caha trace two major influences on Gülen's thinking: 1) the liberal, parliamentary Turkish Islamic tradition represented by Namik Kemal and 2) the writings of Said Nursi. Bülent Aras and ÖmerCaha, "FethullahGülen and his Liberal 'Turkish Islam' Movement," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 4, No. 4, Dec. 2000.

[2]M. HakanYavuz, "The Gülen Movement: the Turkish Puritans," *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003, p. 22.

[3]M. FethullahGülen, *Towards the Lost Paradise*, London: Truestar, 1996, p. 11.

[4]ibid.

[5]Thomas Michel, "FethullahGülen as Educator," *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, Syracuse: Syracuse U.P., 2003, pp. 69-70.

[6]Gülen, *Criteria or Lights of the Way*, I: 59.

[7]Fatih University in Istanbul, Turkey; Qafqas University in Baku, Azerbaijan; Ataturk-Alatoo University in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan; Black Sea University in Tbilisi, Georgia; SuleymanDemirel University in Almaty, Kazakhstan; International Turkmen-Turk University (ITTU) in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. New universities are being planned in Africa and in the Balkans.

[8]Ahmet T. Kurucan, "FethullahGülen's Search for a Middle Way between Modernity and Muslim Tradition" in *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, p. 116.

[9]BekimAgai, "FethullahGülen: a Modern Turkish-Islamic Reformist?", *Qantara.de Dialogue with the Islamic World*, online newsletter, http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-575/_nr-2/_p-1/i.html

[10]FethullahGülen, "At the Threshold of a New Millennium," *Parliament of the World's Religions*, Capetown: 1999, p. 12.

[11]FethullahGülen, "The Necessity of Interfaith Dialogue: a Muslim Perspective," *Parliament of the World's Religions*, Capetown: 1999, p. 14.