



## BEYOND EAST AND WEST: FETHULLAH GÜLEN AND 'BORDER' THINKING

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### Abstract

East is East and West is West. We have heard it many times; Kipling said they shall never meet Huntington that they shall clash. 'Bordering' (or barrier-building) is a fundamental practice of modernity, creating dichotomies and trenches between *us* and *them*. Gülen's message of dialogue is shown to depart from this practice. It developed with the help of both Eastern and Western arguments. Through the concept of 'border thinking' I argue for the special bi-polar vision Gülen holds thanks to his Turkish experience of modernist Kemalism and deep-rooted Islamic tradition. Gülen holds that today we are all living in borderlands, a global border village where no one can live a life sheltered in one tradition only. We therefore need to engage in dialogue. For dialogue to be possible there must be difference as well as belief in our ability to understand each other despite difference. 'Bordering' modernity has seen only difference and dichotomies. The meaning of the concept of civilization is explored to differentiate between the barrier-building Huntingtonian concept and Gülen's affirmation that we are all fundamentally of the same make, that we sing different harmonies on the same song; describe different parts of the same elephant. The paper argues for the importance of Sufism to Gülen's position on civilizational understanding. The concepts of borderland and 'border thinking' are taken from Walter Mignolo, a leftist post-colonial critic of modernity. His aim is to be open to thinking other than modernity. I explore the affinities between Mignolo and Gülen without trying to make them fit each other's projects. I argue for the need for not only interfaith dialogue, but dialogue between these different strands of critiques of the border building modernity.

### 1. Introduction

East is East and West is West. We have heard it many times. Kipling said they shall never meet, Huntington that they will always clash.<sup>327</sup> They both say that there is a distinct border between them. They are both mistaken.

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<sup>327</sup> Kipling's phrase is the refrain of the poem "The ballad of East and West" to be found for example in Stedman, Edmund Clarence, *A Victorian anthology 1837-1895: selections illustrating the editor's critical review of British poetry in the reign of Victoria*. Houghton & Mifflin, Boston, 1895, p. 1129. Huntington presented his theory in Huntington, Samuel P., "The clash of civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*, nr 3, 1993.



But Kipling and Huntington are not alone in imagining an uncrossable border between East and West. They are merely two all-too ordinary representatives of Western modernity, and bordering is a fundamental practice of modernity. In this paper I will discuss Fethullah Gülen as a critic of modernity that departs from these bordering practices and offers an alternative of civilisational dialogue.

These opening paragraphs are scattered with opaque and difficult entities — East, West, modernity, civilisation. Everything said in such big generalising terms is bound to be rather superficial, but distinctions will be made along the way.

## 2. Modernity as Border Building

I will begin with a sketch of a kind ideal type of modernity that fits the intention of this paper. As said, the practice of creating borders is a fundamental aspect of modernity. The border can be seen as a political and epistemological invention of European modernity, politically established with the peace of Westphalia in 1648 and spread around the world with imperial colonialism, epistemologically maybe most influentially articulated by René Descartes in the same time.<sup>328</sup> In different areas dichotomies and trenches were created between *us* and *them* – this state and that state, mind and body, civilised and barbarian, either-or...

One aspect of this was developed in Cartesian theory of science where an object could only have one essence, a cause only one effect. The burning of coal, for example, created heat and energy. That was the essential outcome. Other effects could only be interpreted as side effects, pollution was thus not essential. But in the long term we might see that pollution will kill everyone that the coal could warm and produce energy for. From that perspective the energy effect can be seen as only a temporal gain from a deeply destructive process. This very simplified example serves to show that matters are more complicated than the border building, either-or thinking modernists could see. The over-confident belief in science dominant in positivistic modernity is something Gülen has often criticised under the name of materialism. “Enlightenment movements beginning in the eighteenth century saw human beings as mind only. Following that, positivist and materialist movements saw them as material and corporeal entities only.”<sup>329</sup>

If we take modernity to be what the staunchest modernists wanted it to be, as I have done so far, we run the risk of simplifying life lived in the modern society. Modernisation did not make the world modern in the way the modernist expected. But in my use modernity is the ideology and practice of the modernists, the borderland is a place where its shortcomings and abuses become visible. Another way of stating that modernist modernity never has been hegemonic can be found in the sociological

<sup>328</sup> On the Westphalian order see the International Studies Review: Special issue – Continuity and Change in the Westphalian Order, vol 2, no 2, 2000. On Descartes as the father of modern dichotomous epistemology, born in concert with the formation of the nation-states, see Mignolo, Walter D., *Local histories/global designs: coloniality, subaltern knowledges, and border thinking*, Princeton studies in culture/power/history, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999, pp. 60.

<sup>329</sup> Gülen, M. Fethullah, “Education from Cradle to Grave”, in *Essays – Perspectives – Opinions*, the Light, New Jersey, 2004, p. 79.



concept of multiple modernities, there have always been many different ways of being modern.<sup>330</sup> From a sociological perspective I find that concept fruitful, but from a more philosophical perspective modernity is useful as a marker for the ideology and practice of Western expansionism.

### 3. Gülen as a Border Transgressor

But Gülen is not merely a critic of *them* on the other side of the civilisational border. His critique is directed to both sides.

The East's and West's civilizations existed separated from each other. This separation, which should not have occurred, was based on the former's retiring from intellect and science, while the latter retired from spirituality, metaphysics, and eternal and invariable values. As a result, the last centuries of this millennium have witnessed disasters that are hard to believe.<sup>331</sup>

The border set up between East and West is a false one, he says. To say that science is Western and spirituality Eastern is just a symptom of the bordering mentality. The separation should not have occurred, Gülen says. It was an invention. As all inventions it had a purpose connected to its time and place of invention. I would argue that one important purpose with the invention was to prove the West's superiority. Its time has run out and there is no room for it today.

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.<sup>332</sup>

The above words are taken from Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa. She is claiming the borderland as a place to have a full identity, not accepting all those that say that purity and belonging to only one side is essential for a qualitative identity. In her writings the borderland becomes a place for a new understanding of traditions, heritage and identity. She is from the indigenous Mexican mestizo population of south Texas that came under US rule after the wars between the United States and Mexico in the middle of the nineteenth century. Her borderland is Anglo-Spanish-Aztec. Her story is tied to her very special biography. But her example can be inspiring in the analysis of many other places.

### 4. Turkey as a Borderland

Turkey is often called a bridge between East and West, a place where they meet and intermingle. Tourist guides are full of that kind of wordings. We could, to sound more academic, instead call it a borderland. A borderland where East and West are wrapped in layer upon layer that makes it impossible to say what is what: Hittite, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Seljuk, Ottoman, Turkish, Central Asian, Kurdish, Muslim, Sunni, Alevi, Balkan, Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, European, and many

<sup>330</sup> On multiple modernities in relation to Turkey and Islam, see Göle, Nilüfer, "Snapshots of Islamic modernities" i, *Daedalus*, vol 129, nr 1, 2000.

<sup>331</sup> Gülen, M. Fethullah, "At the threshold of the new millennium", in *Essays – Perspectives – Opinions*, p. 28.

<sup>332</sup> Anzaldúa, Gloria, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The new Mestiza*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco, 1999, p. 25.



other layers. If Turkey is a borderland, Fethullah Gülen can be called a person who has developed and preached a border gnosis that takes us beyond the confrontational understanding of East and West. (I will return to the concept of border gnosis later.)

But Turkey is not the only borderland, maybe just a more obvious one. At least in a metaphorical way today we are all living in borderlands, a global border village where no one can live a life sheltered in one tradition only. If we could only escape from the comfortable self absorption of fixated identities, and instead live in the multilayered present we might see that bordering is a modernistic and even unnatural practice. Many on each side of the imagined East-West divide, be it a Sayyid Qutb or a Hindutva man, or a Donald Rumsfeld or a staunch Kemalist, will of course cling frenzily to the fixed identities guarded by the border and its barbed wire. They want to stay safe and only have to mingle with those who are one of *us*.

Fethullah Gülen, on the other hand, has devoted much of his time and made many efforts to mingle with *them*, and it could be said that he has seen the borderland as a place to meet *them* and dialogue with *them*. Since the borderland is an undetermined place it is a place where something new can come to be. The bright future of the new millennium that Gülen speaks so often about is for him not a return to something pure and forlorn within the established borders, it is something new and transgressive. "Giving up their centuries-old clashes, these two worlds should come together for a happier, more peaceful world."<sup>333</sup> For Gülen religion will be the foundation for a new and happier world, the revelation sets parameters for it. So even if Gülen is an advocate of dialogue and a spokesman for everyone's place in a global civilisation of love and tolerance, he still has a firm normative ground for his message. Religion, in a very inclusive understanding, is the answer, and atheism is unacceptable.<sup>334</sup>

Religion reconciles opposites that seem to be mutually exclusive: religion-science, this world-the next world, nature-Divine Books, the material-the spiritual, and spirit-body. Religion can erect a defence against the destruction caused by scientific materialism, put science in its proper place, and end long-standing conflicts among nations and peoples. [---] The goal of dialogue among world religions is not simply to destroy scientific materialism and the destructive materialistic worldview; rather, the very nature of religion demands this dialogue. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and even Hinduism and other world religions accept the same source for themselves, and, including Buddhism, pursue the same goal.<sup>335</sup>

## 5. Gülen on the Western Side of the Border

As said, Gülen has special experiences that make him able to be transgressive and inclusive. His Turkish experience of modernistic westernistic Kemalism and a deep rooted and familial Islamic tradition gives him a double vision. As he says himself: "We have one side in common with Europe and one side in common with the Muslim world."<sup>336</sup> He uses that double belonging to argue for his cause from both sides. He is as firm in his critique of the lack of intellect and science in the Islamic

<sup>333</sup> Gülen, Fethullah., Advocate of dialogue, The Fountain, Fairfax, 2000, p. 58.

<sup>334</sup> Gülen, Fethullah., Advocate of dialogue, pp. 241.

<sup>335</sup> Gülen, Fethullah., Advocate of dialogue, p. 241-242..

<sup>336</sup> Gülen, Advocate of dialogue, p. 189.



tradition as of the materialistic denial of the spiritual in the Western tradition. He shows that there is a Western counterpoint to the materialistic strand and tries to argue for a different and truer Western canon in contact with Platonist and Christian thinking. In this non-materialistic canon he places thinkers like Plato, Descartes, Pascal, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Bergson and Heisenberg. With this broadened Western tradition he can argue against the materialist imitators of the West, who, he says, are always more radical in their borrowed modernist attitudes.<sup>337</sup> The Westerners in the East are thus trying to imitate a fake image of the West.

But what role do European thinkers play in Gülen's message? It is difficult to see that they have any part in shaping his arguments. Here and there in his writings he invokes their names to strengthen his point against those who believe that science must equal materialism and atheism. "The worldly allusions derive their specific meaning through their existence within the sacred universe of God and the Ultimate Truth that stands at its centre.", one could say.<sup>338</sup> The quote is taken from an analysis of Martin Luther King's rhetoric. To me, Gülen's and King's use of the Western canon are very similar. As Fredrik Sunnemark argues in his analysis of King's rhetoric it is hard to find any detailed content in the references made to the authorities of the modern canon. They are no building blocks for the argument. It might seem as if King's use of literary references simply fills the function of ornamentation. But that is a too simplified understanding, Sunnemark says. The allusions are a method of legitimising the civil rights movement's claim to righteousness. But it is not a philosophical method; it is a preacher's method. The allusions are significant and important, but they are part of a rhetorical establishing of a theological argument formed without their participation. Therefore a rather superficial understanding of these sources can make do, for both preacher and listener.<sup>339</sup> The same can be said of Gülen and his style of argumentation.

## 6. Gülen's Theory of Science

But not all of Gülen's use of the Western tradition is rhetorical. Science is one of the most important subjects in Gülen's message. Science is something that during the last couple of hundred years have been developed in the West. To get rid of its compartmentalised and materialistic conceptions of reality, Gülen says, it needs to be conducted within the spiritual and moral frame of Islam. "There is no reason to fear science. The danger does not lie with science and the founding of the new world it will usher in, but rather with ignorance and irresponsible scientists and others who exploit it for their own selfish interests."<sup>340</sup>

His discussions of science are very much in tune with contemporary strands in the theory of science field gathered under the name of Science and technology studies (STS).<sup>341</sup> But here the relationship is rather opposite to the one with the classical philosophers. Here Gülen does not mention any names. It

<sup>337</sup> Gülen, *A civilization of love and tolerance*, pp. 148.

<sup>338</sup> Sunnemark, Fredrik, *An inescapable network of mutuality: Discursivity and ideology in the rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, *Acta universitatis Gothoburgensis*, 2001, p. 215.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 198-261.

<sup>340</sup> Gülen, *The Essentials of the Islamic faith*, p. 233.

<sup>341</sup> STS works from the understanding that social, political, and cultural values affect science and technology innovation, and that they in turn affect society. It is richly presented in Jasanoff, Sheila, (ed.), *Handbook of science and technology studies*: published in cooperation with the Society for Social Studies of Science, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 1995.



is thus difficult to know whether his arguments stem from readings of this field, or if he has come to similar conclusions from a different angle. He very strongly emphasises that “none of the findings of scientific research are ever absolute.”<sup>342</sup> To support this claim he refers to the majority of scientists, without giving any references. Also without mentioning names he distance himself from those who try to see simple correspondences between today’s scientific results and verses in the Qu’ran. “The great volume of articles and books produced in this vein in recent times will be open to ridicule in the future.”<sup>343</sup> Gülen’s reluctance to name people like Maurice Bucaille or Harun Yahya as those who fit his description of an improper stance is probably due to his wish not to create divisions in Islam.<sup>344</sup> The wisdom of the Qu’ran does not need any external support, Gülen stresses. His position on the relation between Islam and science is similar to the British Muslim writer Ziauddin Sardar’s. But a big difference is that Sardar makes many references to the contemporary debate among theorists of science in the STS-tradition such as Thomas Kuhn, Jeremy Ravetz and Donna Haraway.<sup>345</sup>

What we must, and do, reject is that the truth of Qu’ran and hadith should be made to depend on verification and confirmation by scientific data which are, as explained above, incomplete, disconnected from the meaning and purpose of life as a whole, and vulnerable to change as the borders of human ignorance change.<sup>346</sup>

Gülen criticise Darwinism for being too certain of the truth of its claims. His argument that the theory of evolution is just a theory that leaves many things unexplained is a rather standard one from religious critics.<sup>347</sup> But Gülen does not approve of the theory of intelligent design, it is a debate in the wrong arena, trying to beat the opponent in his own field with scientific arguments rather than trying to transgress the dichotomy and see the explanations as incommensurable.<sup>348</sup>

## 7. Border Gnoseology

Gülen can be seen as a border thinker, as a producer of border gnosis: but what does that mean?

Argentinean philologist Walter Mignolo has theorised about the border and developed the concepts of border thinking and border gnoseology. It might seem as pure post modern jargon, but according to Mignolo it is often necessary to change the terms in order to change the content of a discussion. I will argue that there are certain affinities between Mignolo’s and Gülen’s critical ambitions. Or maybe

<sup>342</sup> Gülen, M. Fethullah, *Questions and answers about Islam*, vol 2, The Light, New Jersey, 2005, p. 105.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>344</sup> “I have no time or intention to show enmity to others. The Qu’ran teaches us: ‘You must be busy with yourselves; don’t allow others’ following different ways to keep you busy.’” In Gülen, *Advocate of dialogue*, p. 67.

<sup>345</sup> See mainly Sardar, Ziauddin, *Explorations in Islamic science, Islamic futures and policy studies*, Mansell, London, 1989, and Ziauddin Sardar, *Introducing science*, Icon Books, Cambridge, 2002. A good exposition of different Muslim conceptions of science is Stenberg, Leif, *The Islamization of science: four Muslim positions developing an Islamic modernity*, Lund studies in history of religions, 6, Almqvist & Wiksell International, Stockholm, 1996.

<sup>346</sup> Gülen, M. Fethullah, *Questions and answers about Islam*, vol 2, The Light, New Jersey, 2005, p. 107.

<sup>347</sup> See for example, taken rather randomly, Denton, Michael, *Evolution: a theory in crisis*, Burnett, London, 1985.

<sup>348</sup> Thomas Kuhn saw theories as incommensurable if there is no common theoretical language that can be used to compare them, and since there is no place outside the paradigms, different paradigms will from their own perspectives judge the others’ theory as flawed. There is no absolute way to decide which theory is better. Gülen’s argument is in line with Kuhn’, but as I have said, since there is no references, I cannot know if Gülen is influenced by Kuhnian perspectives. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970, chapter 10..



more to the point – that Gülen is a representative of the break with modern/colonial epistemology that Mignolo is trying to encourage and develop.

Mignolo develops the concept of gnosis as an alternative to episteme. They are both Greek words for knowledge. But in the modern international academic language gnosis has been connected with Gnosticism and the search for knowledge about God.<sup>349</sup> The rational knowledge revered by modernity's big philosophers such as Descartes, Kant and Husserl is episteme, which is connected with empiricism and rationalism. But Mignolo argues that that division was made not only in the interest of philosophy and science, it also excluded a lot of local, non-Western knowledge that was articulated in different, maybe non-textual, ways and therefore were not recognised as epistemic knowledge by modernity.<sup>350</sup> A lot of important local knowledge was thus lost forever, but some it is still possible to reactivate.

As stated in the opening quote from Gülen, episteme was reserved for the West and gnosis for the East. That was of course a simplification, but a simplification that in time became productive in the sense that the two sides of the dichotomy came to reproduce themselves in line with it. Gnosis was non-Western and therefore not wanted in the West. Episteme was Western and therefore not understandable or useful to the East. And so the prejudice and empty phrase that East is East and West is West was born. It implied that we should stick to our respective fields of expertise and learn to live with the fact that we cannot understand each other. For the hardliners it meant that the others should be conquered and ruled over, or even that they had no right to live.

It is very important to note that the reverence for episteme and despise for gnosis grew hand in hand with the colonial expansion. Among the radical propagators of epistemic fundamentalism was those Gülen criticise as scientific materialists and Bediüzzaman Said Nursi called students of philosophy and positivists.<sup>351</sup> Mignolo rather calls them propagators of colonial knowledge, to emphasise that this

<sup>349</sup> In explaining the concept of ma'rifa (turk. marifet) the English translators Ali Ünal uses the term gnosis as a synonym for the Turkish word marifet. "A traveler who is completely closed to all else save God, who has resisted all corporeal desires and impulses in order to be carried by the tides of peace, has reached the stage of ma'rifa. One who travels around this point is called a traveler to ma'rifa; one who has reached it is called an 'arif (a Gnostic, or one who has spiritual knowledge of God). The differences found in commentaries on ma'rifa are based on the temperaments and schools of thought or levels of the Gnostics." In Gülen, M. Fethullah, *Key Concepts in the practice of Sufism: Emerald hills of the heart*, vol 1, revised edition, The Light, New Jersey, 2004, p. 147. Compared to the corresponding section in Turkish: "Hak yolcusunun bütün bütün ağıvara kapandığı, tamamıyla nefsaniliğe karşı gerilime geçtiği ve kendini huzurun gel-gitelerine saldığı işte bu nokta, mârifet noktasıdır. Bu nokta etrafında dönüp durana 'ırfan yolcusu', başı bu noktaya ulaşana da 'arif' denir. Mârifet mevzuunda söylenen sözlerin farklılığı, istidat ve meşrep ayrıntılarından kaynaklandığı gibi, seviye farklılığıyla da alâkalı olabilir." In Gülen, M. Fethullah, *Kalbin zümürüt tepelerin*, Nil Yayınları, 2001, "Marifet". This opens the very interesting question of translation, and transmission of knowledge. Here the translator has inserted a rather Christian concept to explain to readers in English what the Arabic ma'rifa is. In Gülen's exposition of the Turkish marifet there is no such connection, instead we find a reference to ibn Hanbal, al-Ghazzali and al-Daylami that is omitted in the translation. It is not a question for this paper, but if Gülen is to be seen as an important scholar, as stated in all introductions to his books, there is a need for more scholarly translations into English. Now it seems as if accessibility is chosen before accuracy. It is often not so easy to find the original version corresponding to texts by Gülen published in English, and therefore it is hard to tell if the message might be somewhat altered in the translation process. I would very much welcome a study on this subject by someone equipped with the language skills needed.

<sup>350</sup> Mignolo, pp. 10.

<sup>351</sup> The references for this could be numerous, see for example Gülen, M. Fethullah, *The Essentials of the Islamic faith*, The Light, New Jersey, 2005, pp. 228, and Said Nursi, *Bediüzzaman, The Words: On the nature and purposes of Man, Life and all things*, From the Risale-i Nur Collection 1, Istanbul, Sözler Publications, 2004., 30<sup>th</sup> Word, 561-69.



knowledge was used to gain control over nature and other peoples, by suppressing other ways of knowing. To escape from this version of colonial modernity Mignolo want to resurrect the concept of gnosis with a meaning covering both episteme and doxa and use it so that Western philosophy no longer will be allowed to judge over other forms of knowledge.<sup>352</sup> Instead different ways of knowing can suit different times and different places, and there is no need for a totalising system of all knowledges where they are put in boxes and hierarchies.

Border thinking, or border gnosis, is thinking and knowledge produced from the borders of colonial modernity, knowledge that recognises the colonising aspects of what has been seen as true knowledge in mainstream modernity, and uses local resources to confront and alter that knowledge in order to know the particularities of life lived in that setting better.

The first criterion for a border thinker is that (s)he cannot be an unproblematic part of the centre, nor entangled only in a local tradition. Fethullah Gülen fits very well into Mignolo's description, even if Gülen comes from a very different background and position than the authors Mignolo deals with.

Mignolo's insistence on different ways of knowing puts universalism into question. If there is no universally valid knowledge, can there be any universal values? If border thinking is opposed to universalism then Gülen can hardly be a border thinker. His message is definitely universalistic. Also in this analysis do we have to release ourselves from an over dichotomous understanding a choice between absolute universalism and absolute particularism. There might be universal values, but every attempt to express them will be tied to the time and place where the attempt takes place, it will be coloured by what Mignolo calls its loci of enunciation. German sociologist Ulrich Beck has coined the concept contextualised universalism to describe a similar position.<sup>353</sup> The emancipatory power of border thinking lies in the double vision it upholds, the border thinker is more prone to see this situatedness of every expression. Thinking made in the borderland might still spring from universal values, but it will be aware of the impossibility to speak for everyone. Therefore the border thinker, like Gülen, will need to dialogue with others to see, and show respect towards, other localised understandings of the universal values.

## **8. Border Dialogue**

A dialogue must start with difference (or we will have monologue) and a belief in the possibility that we can understand each other. We must break with the empty phrase that East is East and West is West. First and foremost we are human beings of the same make. In Western epistemology there has been a dominant tradition to separate the understanding of non-Westerners to special fields such as anthropology. In anthropological philosophy, a branch of philosophy discussing the possibilities of understanding other peoples, it has been common to state that it is something different to understand a person or a custom from another tradition. For example: It might be hard for me as a Swedish historian of ideas to try to relive the thoughts of Aristotle, but to try to understand an African sage is

<sup>352</sup> Mignolo, pp. 10.

<sup>353</sup> Beck, Ulrich, *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*, Sage, London, 1992.



utterly impossible since we do not share the same *we*, which Aristotle and I are assumed to do.<sup>354</sup> Such a view makes true dialogue impossible and therefore meaningless. That is the stance of those protecting borders.

There are of course representatives of a similar position from Eastern countries. But I am not the most fitted to give examples.<sup>355</sup> To them Gülen says: “Islam is the religion of the whole universe. That is, the entire universe obeys the laws laid down by God, so everything in the universe is ‘Muslim’ and obeys God by submitting to His laws.”<sup>356</sup> His message goes out to all humanity. We are all of the same make and therefore we can understand each other. The differences are only on the surface; essentially we are all the same.

Another requisite for dialogue is that we do not think that a person or a tradition can only speak for themselves. Walter Mignolo might be called a post colonial critic. One of the main aims of post colonial critique is to show that the urge to gain knowledge of the non-Westerners has often been used to conquer, rule and diminish them.<sup>357</sup> It is easy to jump to the conclusion that any attempt to seek knowledge about another person or culture is a way of suppressing them. The next logical step is to say that no Western orientalist or islamologist can understand Islam, that only a Muslim has the right to talk about Islam. But the just moral imperative that everyone should have the right to speak for themselves does not imply that everyone can *only* speak for themselves. This would lead to a position holding that we cannot represent someone else’s rights and thus take away the possibility for engagement for others and for humanitarian solidarity. Those who are too oppressed to be heard cannot gain any rights if that view is put into practice. It would lead to an egoistic and cynical world.

But Gülen is no advocate of that kind of misguided respect for the other. As we have seen he takes the right to argue from both sides of the border, a must in a real dialogue.

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<sup>354</sup> Clack, Brian R., *Wittgenstein, Frazer and Religion*, Macmillan press, London, 1999, pp. 76. I take my understanding of this from Motturi, Aleksander, *Filosofi vid mörkrets hjärta: Wittgenstein, Frazer och vildarna*, Glänta produktion, Göteborg, 2003, pp. 235. A way to make it possible for me to understand Gülen within these axioms would be to argue that Aristotle is as Muslim as he is Western European. For example in Gülen’s discussion of proofs for God’s existence we can see the strong Aristotelian legacy in Islam. We have the same philosophical ancestors and thus we can understand each other. But that would only serve to argue for a more exclusive Abrahamic dialogue. See Gülen, M. Fethullah, *Questions and answers about faith*, vol 1, The Fountain, Fairfax, 2000, pp 1.

<sup>355</sup> Gülen criticise the lack of universality with the neo-salafiyah, Gülen, *Advocate of dialogue*, p. 54.

<sup>356</sup> Gülen, M. Fethullah, “A comparative approach to Islam and Democracy” in *Essays – Perspectives – Opinions*, the Light, New Jersey, 2004, p. 18, as well as in *Toward a global civilization of love and tolerance*, the Light, New Jersey, 2004, p. 223.

<sup>357</sup> For an introduction to post colonial thinking see, Gandhi, *Leela Postcolonial theory: a critical introduction*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1998.



## 9. Civilisations?

But what are these 'sides of the border'. What are East and West? What is a civilisation? Both Gülen and Samuel Huntington speak of civilisations. If we shall not assume they are comrades in arms it is important to see the differences in their understanding of what the term civilisation denotes.

The word civilisation (turk. *medeniyet*) has more than one meaning. According to the English dictionaries the main meanings are 1. the state of being civilised, 2. culture 3. cultural entity. In Turkish *medeniyet* covers roughly the same meaning of being civilised and as *Redhouse* puts it: "the sum of those qualities that give a society its particular character". In both languages it is connected with the root civic or *medeni*, used in concepts like civil law, or *medeni hukuk*.

A major problem with talk about civilisation is that the different meanings often are intermingled and the descriptive use of civilisation for different cultural entities in the world often becomes linked to an understanding of a hierarchy according to those entities different level of civilisation. The scale for that levelling is of course always the Western civilisation's most chauvinistic self image of itself as being guided only by liberty, equality, reason and democracy. Only in the West is there Culture. Only in the West is there true civilisation.

One of the major proponents for the importance of civilisations in understanding the present state of the world is infamous Samuel Huntington. In the context of my discussion it is not so important whether one accepts his argument for the inevitable clash of civilisations or not. It is more important to scrutinise his definition of civilisations. In my view he would be just as mistaken even if his thesis was "the peaceful co-existence of civilisations". That is because he is committed to the East-West dichotomy, to the barbed wired border. Every civilisation has its own unique core values and we can not understand each other, he says. It is the same stance as the one shown in anthropological philosophy. Even if Huntington wasn't militaristic, his definition of civilisation can never lead to understanding or real dialogue. The most positive option within that conception of civilisations is some kind of exoticising interest in those whom we can never understand. As we can see this is far from Gülen's stance. His concept of civilisation cannot be the same as Huntington's. But what is the content of his concept? Unfortunately is not easy to find out since he uses civilisation in a rather broad and undistinguished way.<sup>358</sup> Gülen's concept of global civilisation seems to refer to the state of being civilised, but also that the world will come together in one civilisation, one culture and cultural entity. This is possible because we already are essentially one.

Can this ideal be called border thinking? If the borderland becomes global then there are no borders anymore. Let us return to the difference between Huntington and Gülen. Huntington argues that the West is the only civilised civilisation. I would interpret Gülen's global civilisation as something that can only be realised in the borderland. It is realised by the golden generation, and their special power comes from the fact that they are brought up in a borderland. Of course this takes the notion of borderland from its localised setting in south USA and transforms it into the broader concept-metaphor of a global border village hinted at earlier in this paper. Everyone can share the experience of living in borderlands, and in that respect everyone is part of the same global entity. But the

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<sup>358</sup> Again we encounter the problem of translation. Is it only the Turkish term *medeniyet* that is translated as civilisation? *Medeniyet* is derived from the Arabic *medeniyet* and even if the meaning given in the dictionaries are rather similar, the Arabic origin unavoidably has different connotations than the very Enlightenment made concept of civilisation as opposed to barbarism. Again I can only point to an important topic to study.



understanding of that entity is always coloured by a specific local experience. Even if this is a possible interpretation it would hardly be endorsed by either Mignolo or Anzaldúa, they would most probably find it to Utopian.

On of the important aspects of Turkish Islam highlighted by Gülen is the importance of love and tolerance.<sup>359</sup> That is the Sufi strand. Like mystics in all religions the Sufis seeks the experience of oneness and are less akin to border building and sectarianism. Since we are parts of the same whole we belong to the same creation. Civilisations in the meaning of cultural entities are just different ways of expressing life in this creation. Every civilisation has developed some knowledge and understanding, but often failed to see that it was only a partial understanding. But from the mystic perspective they are not dichotomous but complementary. We can sing different harmonies in the same song; describe different parts of the same elephant; I we break all the cups, the water will be one. There are countless images to express this belief that the ultimate truth is Unity. “Sufism is the way of being God’s “friend”, Gülen says and makes Sufism a very natural part of Islamic life.<sup>360</sup> There is no tension between the exoteric and the esoteric aspects of Islam or religion as such in Gülen’s writings.

## **10. Something Bordering to a Conclusion**

Mignolo is a Latin American leftist and he mainly reads and uses other thinkers with a leftist approach. Gülen is a preacher more connected to the political right, if anything, and building his message from Islamic sources.<sup>361</sup> But they are both deeply committed to furthering dialogue and respect between different traditions of knowledge. The fact that they come from perspectives often seen as opposing each other, as maybe the main opponents, is interesting and might shed light on their respective views on dialogue. Are there hidden borders? Can there be dialogue between these perspectives?

I think that the mystical can be a meeting place and a starting point. From a post modern point of view mysticism can be seen as a rational humility towards the complexity of the world. There are things we cannot know, that others might have come closer to by other means than epistemic knowledge. From a religious point of view mysticism opens for a curiosity of how others have experienced and explained the ungraspable mystery. In this paper I have tried to explore the concept of border thinking to better understand Fethullah Gülen and reach that meeting place beyond East and West.

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<sup>359</sup> Gülen, *Advocate of dialogue*, p. 53 and 196.

<sup>360</sup> Gülen, *Advocate of dialogue*, p. 359.

<sup>361</sup> On Gülen’s ties with right wing politics, see Özdalga, Elisabeth, “Worldly asceticism in Islamic casting: Fethullah Gülen’s inspired piety and activism”, *Critique*, vol. 17, 2003.