



# INVESTIGATING THE CONTRIBUTION OF FETHULLAH GÜLEN THROUGH THE ACTIVITIES OF A GÜLEN-INSPIRED RELIGIO-CULTURAL SOCIETY BASED IN IRELAND

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## Abstract

Fethullah Gülen motivates his followers to mobilize by insisting that the mere aversion of transgressions is not sufficient to being a 'good Muslim'. One must also become active in order to improve the conditions in the world. This principle has inspired the establishment of a multitude of organizations around the world devoted to interfaith dialogue and peaceful co-existence. This article focuses on a Gülen-inspired society based in Ireland, namely the Turkish Irish Educational and Cultural Society (TIECS). This society provides a range of interfaith and intercultural activities, several of which I discuss in this paper. I draw on ethnographic work and qualitative interviews I conducted with members of TIECS. The study hopes to shed light on the real and practical contribution of Fethullah Gülen. Ireland provides an interesting site for this study because unlike Holland, France and Britain, inward migration is a relatively new phenomenon in Ireland, as are debates on multiculturalism and integration. Since the mid-1990s, Ireland's economy has grown from strength to strength to become one of the leading economies in Europe. Consequently, it has witnessed unprecedented levels of immigration and likewise an unprecedented mixture of cultures and religions. Until recent years interfaith dialogue in Ireland was dominated by Catholicism and Protestantism and the dialogue was often focused on crisis intervention. Islam is now the fastest growing religion in Ireland, with over 31,000 adherents and has now become part of the national conversation vis-à-vis Irish identity. Muslims living in Ireland originate from a multitude of nations, counting Ireland, and from a number of Islamic zones. The paper argues that TIECS and the Gülen community practice 'Turkish Islam' which has Sufi principles at its core, promoting tolerance and reason as the keys to peaceful coexistence. This article illustrates how Fethullah Gülen's principles are practiced in a European context.

## 1. Introduction

Fethullah Gülen motivates his followers to mobilise by insisting that the mere aversion of transgressions is not sufficient to being a 'good Muslim'. One must also become active in order to improve the conditions in the world. Islam, according to Gülen's articulation, is action-oriented. This principle has inspired the establishment of a multitude of organisations around the world devoted to interfaith dialogue and peaceful co-existence. This article focuses a Gülen-inspired society based in Ireland, namely the Turkish Irish Educational and Cultural Society (TIECS). This society provides a range of inter-faith and intercultural activities. From my study of this group, I hope to shed light on the real and practical contribution of Fethullah Gülen.

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Ireland provides an interesting site for this study because unlike Holland, France, Britain and Germany, inward migration is a relatively new phenomenon in Ireland and likewise debates on multiculturalism and integration. Piaras MacEinri and Paddy Walley argue that Ireland can now be understood 'as a microcosm of the realities of globalisation' (2003: 18) and Fintan O'Toole insists that 'The Republic of Ireland is the most globalised country on earth' (2003: 4). Trade and finance pass fluently in and out of the territorial boundaries of Ireland. As of 1993, Ireland received 25% of all new U.S. investment into Europe, employing 94,000 people in 2002 (O'Toole, 2003: 6). This inward investment since the early 1990's along with EU contributions over the last two decades has resulted in Ireland's economy flourishing, making it one of the strongest economies in the world (O'Toole, 2003). This effervescent economy is necessarily coupled with inward migration to Ireland. Since 1997, Ireland, for so long suffering from an emigration haemorrhage, became an immigration destination (Lentin and McVeigh, 2002; Ruhs, 2005). Immigrants were courted by Irish companies and the government to fill job shortages. Consequentially, we have witnessed unprecedented levels of immigration in Ireland and likewise an unprecedented mixture of cultures and religions. Irish culture has moved from one defined by Catholicism, nationalism and economic isolationism, to one oriented towards economic and cultural liberalism. Ireland has moved from a nation that largely perceived itself as homogenous to one that is renegotiating its identity on the recognition of heterogeneity.

Irish culture has been steeped in the Catholic tradition for centuries and though there has been a decline in practicing Catholics in Ireland (see Inglis, 1998; Tovey and Share, 2003), over 3.6 million of the total population of nearly 4.2 million in Ireland still claim to be Catholics (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2007). The Irish state still pays great deference to religion in Ireland, inviting religious groups to perform prayers at state events. The most recent example of this was the 'National Day of Commemoration'; an event that pays tribute to all the Irish people who died in wars or on United Nations duty. Leaders of the Jewish, Christian and Islamic communities were invited to say a prayer peculiar to their faith tradition, at this event (O'Reagan, 2007).

Until recent years interfaith dialogue in Ireland was dominated by Catholicism and Protestantism and the dialogue was often focused on crisis intervention. Islam is now the fastest growing religion in Ireland, with over 31,000 subscribers (CSO, 2007) and has now become part of the national conversation vis-à-vis Irish identity. Muslims living in Ireland originate from a multitude of nations, counting Ireland, and from a number of Islamic zones. I maintain that due to historical, geographical and cultural reasons, we can talk of Islam in the plural sense. Drawing on the work of M. Hakan Yavuz (2004), I argue that TIECS and the Gülen Movement practice 'Turkish Islam'<sup>449</sup> which has Sufi principles at its core, promoting tolerance and reason as the keys to peaceful coexistence. This article illustrates how Fethullah Gülen's principles are practiced in a European context.

I begin this paper by surveying the various Islamic institutions in Ireland. I describe the multiple and diverse expressions of Islam practiced by Muslims living there and issues arising vis-à-vis integration into Irish society. This is followed by an articulation of the need to talk about Islam in the plural sense and a description of one expression of Islam, namely, Turkish Islam. I establish the links between Fethullah Gülen and Turkish Islam before describing the potential for Gülen's approach to dialogue as a possible remedy to the integration problems faced by the Turkish diaspora in the complex German situation. Subsequent to this I introduce the Gülen-inspired TIECS. I firstly focus on its members'

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<sup>449</sup> This expression of Islam has also been referred to as 'Anatolian Islam'. However for consistency's sake I will use the term Turkish Islam throughout this paper.



attitudes towards integration in Ireland before analysing their principal pursuit, namely, conferences celebrating the commonalities amongst the 'Abrahamic religions'. I show how members implement the thought of Fethullah Gülen in these symposiums and evaluate their effect in the Irish context.

## **2. Islam in Ireland**

Islam is the fastest growing religion in Ireland. Census figures indicate that in 1991 there were only 3,873 Muslims living in this country. The 2006 Census shows a massive increase with over 31,000 Muslims now living there (CSO, 2007). The activities of Muslims in Ireland have, however, attracted little academic attention. An exception is Kieran Flynn (2006) who offers a timely survey of Muslims in Ireland. Importantly, he notes the diversity of practices amongst Muslims and observes that despite its small size, it is quite fragmented.

Flynn notes that whilst the early Muslims living in Ireland were typically students or working in the textile or catering industries, Muslims are now predominantly middle-class and involved in a much wider range of professions, including medicine and information technology. There appears to be a strong Arab influence amongst Islamic institutions in Ireland. One of the most prominent establishments, the Sunni-oriented Islamic Cultural Centre of Ireland (ICCI) based in Dublin, is run by the Al-Maktoum Foundation and directed from the United Arab Emirates. This has caused some tension amongst the Islamic community, some of whom feel disturbed by the fact that they do not have control of their local centre. Flynn astutely recognises that the heavily subsidised ICCI cannot be considered independent given the fact that it is fiscally dependent upon this Arab Foundation. Despite this, he insists that the ICCI is an important organisation for Muslims all across Ireland, playing a vital role in civil society by hosting politicians and religious groups, and operating several Qur'anic schools, with hundreds of students attending. Though there are several state recognised Muslim primary schools in Ireland (though no secondary schools), the majority of Muslims in Ireland attend mainstream schools.

Surveying the various Islamic communities in Ireland Flynn notes a wide diversity. Besides the Sunni-oriented ICCI, there is also a strong Shi'a presence in Ireland with up to 2,000 members, originating predominantly from the Middle East and Pakistan. 1996 saw the official opening of Shi'a Ahlul Bayt Islamic Centre in Milltown, Dublin. Flynn pays tribute to this organisation claiming that 'The Shi'a community and its leadership have emerged as the voice of moderation within the Irish Islamic community, representing an Islam that is at once tolerant, progressive and in tune with the challenges of a modern society' (2006: 227). Flynn cites its endorsement of democracy and human rights in the Middle East as evidence of its commitment to moderation, noting that this has also gained the group positive regard vis-à-vis the media in Ireland.

Flynn (2006) also notes the emergence of the Urdu-speaking Islamic Communities in Ireland and points to the opening of two prayer rooms as evidence of this. The numbers attending Friday prayers reach 1,000 and members originate from Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. This group has courted a degree of scandal in relation to some of their 'more radical and reactionary members' (ibid: 227). There are also a number of other Islamic communities around the country, notably in Cork (which hosts the second largest Muslim population in Ireland) and Mayo. Writing in *The Irish Times*, Mary Fitzgerald (2006) notes that around the country there are many different prayer rooms subscribing to different schools of thought within Islam, including several different Sufi-inspired groups.



Flynn argues that the greatest challenge to Islam in Ireland is its diversity. This is supported by Fitzgerald who notes that one of the newest Muslim communities in Ireland is that of Nigerian Muslims, led by an imam originating from Lagos, who claims to preach “African Sufism”. The preacher argues that “It’s a real Nigerian community thing. Islam as a religion is based on unity and we recognise that but we are different in some respects to Arab and south Asian Muslims” (cited in Fitzgerald, 2006). I believe this statement, describing the specificity of culture and geography is the key to understanding Islam in Ireland. This will be discussed in greater detail in the next section, when I introduce the concept of Turkish Islam.

According to Fitzgerald (2006) there has been thus far no comparable institution to the Muslim Council of Britain, with a ‘clearly defined leadership’ in Ireland. This has led to a spate of squabbling between different groups and personalities vying for control. The outspoken South African, Sheikh Shaheed Satardien argued that Muslim leaders in Ireland were “in denial” regarding a growing number of extremist Muslims here. These claims have been denied by most Muslims and remain largely unproven. The South African Sheikh gained a lot of media attention for his outburst and has subsequently been ‘ostracised’ by some members of the Muslim community in Ireland (Fitzgerald, 2006). This incident is an illustration of the lack of consensus amongst Muslims in this country.

This brief survey of Islamic communities in Ireland is an explicit illustration of their diversity and indicates the desire of different groups to organise societies peculiar to their faith and culture. According to the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI) (2007), most Muslims living in Ireland have successfully integrated. However, they have faced some difficulties due to racism/Islamophobia from members of the host society.

Until recent years there was a fallacious notion that Ireland was free of racism. Given that Ireland was a post-colonial state, it was argued that how could they be racist. Ronit Lentin and Robbie McVeigh led the charge in 2002 illustrating that racism has been present in Ireland for a long time, noting that anti-Traveller racism and anti-Semitism were seen as ‘common sense’ and unproblematic. With the dramatic increase in migrants over the last 15 years, racism has become far more conspicuous to the point whereby there is a general acceptance of the problem of racism by the state and civil society. There has been quite a lot written in recent years about racism in Ireland (see Lentin and McVeigh, 2002; 2006; Fanning, 2002; Garner, 2004) though little attention given to the topic of Islamophobia (exceptions include, NCCRI, 2007; Lentin and McVeigh, 2006). In this regard, Flynn argues that ‘Muslims in Ireland tend to experience racism through avoidance and indifference’ (2006: 235). There may be some truth in this, though the NCCRI argue that there have been more explicit forms of Islamophobia in Ireland, especially in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attack on the ‘twin towers’ in New York on September 11, 2001. These incidents included physical and verbal abuse. The NCCRI (2007) also note that ‘typical’ Islamophobic abuse reported to them include ‘verbal abuse, other forms of harassment and disrespect rather than physical assaults or criminal damage’. They also draw attention to some recent hyperbolic headlines in major Irish newspapers that help create a milieu whereby Islamophobia can thrive. Examples include:

‘Fascist fundamentalism is rife among young Irish Muslims’ (cited in NCCRI, 2007)

‘The green jihads’ (cited in NCCRI, 2007).

The NCCRI note that whilst the actual article may be balanced, these sensationalist headlines can have a powerful impact on the reader, leading to irrational fear of Muslims. Wilson and Gutierrez (1985) take this point up in a more general context, arguing that because there is a lack of positive



portrayals of minority ethnic groups in the media, then it is quite conceivable that in the minds of the audience, this partial representation of minority ethnic groups becomes accepted as the reality (cited in Campbell, 1995: 83). It becomes the taken for granted expression of 'how things really are'. It thus enters into the realm of 'common sense' and largely goes unchallenged (Hall, 1982). The race theorist Teun Van Dijk insists that this systematic negative representation of the 'Other' leads 'indirectly to the enactments and reproduction of racism' (Van Dijk, 2000:48). Stuart Hall (1982) contends that this reproduction of the ideology of racism often takes place on the unconscious level. He does not believe that there is a group of media elite who consciously and malignly promote their version of reality to the explicit exclusion of others. Rather he argues that '...statements may be unconsciously drawing on the ideological frameworks and classifying schemes of a society and reproducing them –so that they appear ideologically 'grammatical' – without those making them being aware of so doing' (Hall, 1982: 72). In other words, when journalists and broadcasters frame media narratives, they do so drawing on classifications signified by the ruling group in society. Those working in the media therefore unconsciously reproduce these categories as if they were natural and immutable. Returning specifically to the Irish context, despite some Muslims in Ireland experiencing Islamophobia, the NCCRI note that the majority of Muslims in Ireland have integrated successfully and Islamophobic incidents are isolated.

### **3. Turkish Islam**

Edward Said (1997) argues, rightly in my view, that the majority of opinion-makers in Europe and America, both journalists and academics, have predominantly portrayed Islam as a monolithic group determined to challenge the West through terrorist activities. This articulation has intensified in recent years due to high-profile terrorist attacks by Muslim fundamentalists. Said points out that many Western scholars understand western civilization as complex and heterogeneous and have devised a multitude of theories in an attempt to understand its multifaceted nature. Yet when it comes to Islamic society, it is treated as a single undifferentiated group. Aziz Al-Azmeh is critical of this view and rightly argues that "there are as many Islams as there are situations that sustain it" (cited in Yilmaz, 2005: 385). Too often ignored are the distinguishing factors of geography, culture and history. These features are integral in order to account for the manifold differences across borders (both territorial and symbolic). This point is supported by the Turkish-born sociologist Talip Küçükcan, who argues that 'Islamic movements are very diverse in terms of their clientele, origins, ideology and composition. This leads us to conclude that one should talk about 'Islams' in the modern world rather than one bounded and fixed 'Islam'" (1999: 191). Social, historical and geographical conditions must be taken into consideration when discussing what one means by 'Islam'.

Yavuz (2004) concurs with Küçükcan's position regarding the existence of multiple 'Islams'. He maintains that there are seven different 'ethno-cultural' zones of Islam: Arab countries, Persia, Turkey, South Asia, Malay-Indonesia, African and places where Islam is a minority faith (Yavuz 2004: 215). Each zone is peculiar to a particular region and its interpretations of Islam differ due to a variety of factors: 'Each zone's understanding of Islam is primarily informed by its own national culture and by diverse historical and economic factors' (ibid: 215). He argues that Turkey has its own zone that offers something unique regarding Islamic thought. This zone, however, is not restricted to the territorial boundaries of Turkey but rather refers to the Turkic people. Yavuz draws on Ahmet Ocak, who suggests that 'We should accept the fact that there is a specific way of being Muslim which reflects the Turkish understanding and practices in those region [which] stretch from Central Asia to



the Balkans. (cited in Yavuz, 2004: 218). Ocak refers to this form of Islam as 'Turkish Islam'. Yavuz argues that it differs vastly from Arab and Persian Islam regarding 'the interpretation of Islamic principles' (Yavuz, 2004: 218). He argues that Sufism is an integral part of Turkish Islam and the 'Turkish understanding of Islam is very much punctuated by the tolerance of Rumi, love of Yunus and reasonability of Hacı Bektasi Veli' (2004: 219). Rumi, Yunus and Hacı Bektasi Veli are all Turkish Sufi mystics, who according to Yavuz have been extremely influential to Turkish Islam (for a more comprehensive discussion on the origins of the concept of Turkish Islam see Uğur, 2004; Bilir, 2004; Küçükcan, 2004).

#### 4. Fethullah Gülen and Turkish Islam

Writing in the *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Ünal Bilir (2004) attributes the popularising of the concept of Turkish Islam to Fethullah Gülen. Narrating the history of Islam in Turkey, Gülen, of course, recognises that Islam emerged from Mecca and Medina, but goes on to insist that Islam did not come directly from these areas but was routed through Central Asia. (cited in Unal and Williams, 2000). The Turkic people of Central Asia adapted Islam to their own culture before exporting it through migration to the Anatolian region. A key point, according to Gülen, is the fact that Islam was not forced on the Anatolians but they embraced it freely and wholeheartedly in great numbers. The corollary of this, he maintains, is that Islam in Turkey has remained 'tolerant, open, and un-dogmatic' (Bilir, 2004: 267). Gülen calls himself a Muslim Turk because he sees the two as inseparable, noting that 'the Turkish nation put its true values on a solid foundation after becoming Muslim' (cited in Unal and Williams, 2000: 56). Islam in Turkey has gone through many phases since the founding of the Turkish Republic and abolition of the Caliph in the 1920s. It has, however, undoubtedly remained a constant feature vis-à-vis identity formation amongst Turks, despite the various state and military interferences over peoples practice of Islam (privately and politically) over the years. The discursive construction of Turkish Islam may be understood as an attempt to enshrine a sense of national patriotism within Islam in order to conjure up consensus as Turkey continues to modernise.

Gülen acknowledges that some may see a contradiction within his articulation of Turkish Islam, given the importance to universality within Islam. He responds:

Islam is universal with respect to its principles. Details can be interpreted differently. It's my humble opinion that the Turkish nation has interpreted those interpretable matters quite well. If Ottoman tolerance existed today in the world, I believe there would be a very good basis for dialogue not only among Muslims but also humanity. In a world that is becoming more and more globalized, being open to dialogue is very important. (cited in Unal and Williams, 2000: 56)

Gülen clearly recognises the universal principles of Islam, though he importantly notes the differences in interpretation. As I argued above, based on geographical, cultural and social elements Islam is interpreted and expressed in different ways which leads us to talk about Islam in the plural sense. Gülen draws on the Ottoman legacy as an example of tolerance and relatively convivial relations between various religious groups further noting that "In our history, a synagogue, a church, and a mosque stood side by side in many places" (cited in Yilmaz, 2005: 395). Zeki Saritoprak of the John Carroll University and Sidney Griffith of the Catholic University of America, echo this sentiment:



The Empire was composed not only of Muslims, but of many Christian and Jewish groups, and Zoroastrians. Until the emergence of modern nationalistic ideas, Muslims, Christians and Jews had managed to live together more peacefully and productively in Ottoman times than has been possible more recently in the twentieth century (2005: 332).

Though this is a largely uncritical view of the Ottoman Empire, it is still fair to claim that relative to most other empires of this period, the Ottoman Empire had a comparatively more tolerant attitude towards minority religions.

In recent years, Fethullah Gülen has become renowned for his work on dialogue between different groups supporting different interpretations of Islam and between different monotheistic faith groups. In his pursuit of peaceful coexistence he has met with several world religious leaders, including the former Roman Catholic Pope, John Paul II, the leader of the Orthodox Church, Patriarch Bartholomew; Turkey's Chief Rabbi, David Aseo; Israel's Sephardic Head Rabbi, Eliyahu Bakshi Doron. He has also met with and influenced Turkish presidents and academics. These endeavours have made Gülen an important religious figure both in Turkey and around the world.

With a belief in the necessity of Dialogue between different cultures and religions he helped establish the Journalists and Writers Foundation in 1994. He is the honorary president of this Foundation which organises conferences and meetings to promote dialogue and tolerance between different sections of Turkish society. Gülen has also inspired hundreds, if not thousands, of organisations in all continents promoting interfaith and intercultural dialogue. All of these activities come out of Gülen's articulation of Turkish Islam as grounded in openness and tolerance. It is my intention to analyse the practical contribution of Gülen's work by focusing on a society inspired by him, based in Dublin. Firstly however, I briefly look at the role of Turkish Islam vis-à-vis social and cultural integration of Turkish migrants in the German context.

## **5. The Gülen Movement and Turkish Islam in Germany: Prospects for Integration?**

Ünal Bilir (2004) investigated the potential for Gülen's articulation of Turkish Islam in helping the Turkish diaspora in Germany to integrate. The majority of foreign settlers in Germany were the part of the "guestworker" system and by far the largest group of settlers were Turks. The number of Turks in Germany is estimated to be around two million, many of whom born in Germany (Oezcan, 2004; Yurdakul, 2006). Atalik and Beeley are correct, in my view, to suggest that 'The cultural impact of Turkish labour migration to Europe may prove to be at least as durable and penetrating as the economic' (1993: 168). Turkish people differ from the majority of Germans with regard to culture, religion and language. These factors made Turks in Germany easily visible as a separate ethnic group. Landau is right to claim that they met 'with serious cultural and linguistic difficulties of acculturation to their new milieu' (1996: 223). He further contends that because the Turkish language is very different in both syntax and origin, it was difficult for Turks to acquire the German language: '[like] a left-handed person having to master physical skills with his right hand' (Landau, 1996: 222). This cultural and linguistic distance made Turkish migrants susceptible to prejudices and racism by some Germans. They were an easy target for scape-goating during the economic recession of the 1970's and again during the anomic conditions of reunification between East and West Germany (Castles and Miller, 2003).



According to Doornik, 'assimilation into German society or a return to the country of origin appear to be the only options which the German government is willing to accept' (1995:12). Due to these assimilationist tendencies, Castles et al suggest that for a Turkish youth in Germany to be successful '...in education...often means rejecting their origins and accepting middle-class cultural dominance as a pre-condition for selection from higher levels of education (Castles et al 1987:167). This is anathema for many Turks who take great pride in their national heritage, culture, customs and language. This results in a high failure rate amongst Turkish children in German schools (Castles and Miller, 2003). Yagmur contends that rejection and subordination by the majority population can lead to a boost in 'language maintenance' (2004:139). This was to prove the case for the Turks in Germany. In many German cities, Turks have carved out areas with a 'quasi-oriental character' (Gogolin and Reich, 2001). In such areas, one can acquire all one's daily needs, including goods and services, through the Turkish language. Gogolin and Reich (2001) acknowledge that youths that are raised in these quarters from an early age are normally as linguistically competent in Turkish as most monolingual youths living in Turkey.

The German citizenship law has traditionally been based on *jus sanguinis* (law of blood). With the Citizenship law (1999) there was a shift in orientation towards *jus soli* (law of land) which makes it easier for immigrants to become naturalised Germans. However Castles and Miller (2003) note that this measure disallows the immigrants from holding dual citizenship. They note that a variety of Turkish immigrant organisations have been established to challenge such issues at the political level. Gökçe Yurdakul (2006) takes up this point in her study of Turkish associations in Berlin. More will be said about this in a later section. It is enough to note at this stage that Yurdakul makes the point that Turkish migrants in Germany are not "passive recipients" (2006: 437) of German state policy. She illustrates that Turkish migrant associations are active participants in negotiating and lobbying for their rights in Germany, despite the various obstacles.

Bilir (2004) notes that although the presence of the Gülen Movement in Germany is small it has the potential to grow and have a large impact on the Turkish diaspora there. The Islamic political group, Milli Görüş (National Outlook Movement) is popular amongst Turks in Germany, though the German government is unwilling to engage with them. This is due to Milli Görüş' checkered past where until recent years its ideology was underpinned by a strong anti-Western stance (Yilmaz, 2005: 401). Bilir contends that Gülen's moderate articulation of Islam has the potential to counter radical Islamic Turkish groups in Germany. He argues that Germany's Gülen Movement can gain the confidence of the German government to act as a mediator between the Turkish diaspora and the German state in order to improve conditions for integration. He does, however, acknowledge that the Gülen Movement's emphasis on the priority of Turkish culture may prove difficult for the German state that still prioritises assimilationist policies.

Jill Irvine of the University of Oklahoma is optimistic about the impact of the Gülen Movement in Germany. She conducted a series of interviews with members of the Gülen Movement in Munich, Berlin and Ingolstadt. She argues that their vision of integration 'is one of cultural exchange and enrichment rather than assimilation' (Irvine, 2007: 83). She contends that the activities of this movement in Germany may act as a 'middle way' between the German population and the isolated Turkish migrants. Due to the complexity of the German situation, much more analysis is needed in this regard. I now turn to the Irish case and analyse the contribution of the Gülen Movement and its expression of Turkish Islam in the context of an emerging multicultural society.



## 6. TIECS' Attitudes to Integration

Before describing how TIECS was initiated, I relate some demographics regarding the number of Turkish migrants living in Ireland. According to the Turkish embassy in Ireland, there are 650 Turkish migrants living in the Republic of Ireland (phone call with the Turkish embassy, 21 February, 2006). However, this is contested by Turkish migrants themselves who suggest it is between 2,000 and 3,000. The Turkish embassy may have an investment in down-playing the number of Turks in Ireland given the negative reception of Turks in other European countries, such as Germany, Holland and France (Castles and Miller 2003; Atalik and Beeley 1993). Another reason for understating these statistics may be due to the negative attention the Turkish construction company GAMA received vis-à-vis the alleged underpaying of Turkish workers in Ireland (Barry 2006). Coupled with the ever-increasing racism in Ireland (Lentin and McVeigh 2002; 2006; Garner 2004), the embassy may have thought it wise to keep its guesstimate low. The numbers provided by the Turkish embassy are only an educated guess, as Turkish migrants do not have to declare themselves at the embassy on arrival.

The Turkish Irish Educational and Cultural Society (TIECS) was established by Turkish labour migrants living in Ireland. The precursor to TIECS involved gatherings of Turkish migrants congregating in order to deal with common bureaucratic issues such as visa problems. Another issue discussed amongst these migrants at this early stage concerned the socialisation of their children in a society dominated by a different culture than their own. The most prominent members of the Turkish community in Ireland are men and several members claimed to have difficulties gaining a visa that would allow them to bring their families to Ireland.

As these Turkish migrants settled down a few years, bureaucratic issues became less urgent. They began to focus on developing a social and cultural society. This culminated in the establishment of TIECS in 2004. Though TIECS was established by members of the Turkish diaspora living in Ireland, its composition has changed and it now includes temporary migrants from Turkey and Turkmenistan. These migrants were recruited in order to build up an affiliate of the Gülen Movement in Ireland. With the growth of the organisation and the lack of manpower, other members of the Gülen Movement contributed.

It appears then that members of the Gülen Movement help set up organisations whereby members of the Turkish diaspora have already established a base. Active members of the Movement periodically travel to Gülen-inspired organisations and advise its members on the best way to implement the objectives of the Movement. Ireland has become an important European centre for business and culture and the initiation of the Gülen-inspired TIECS may be seen as a strategic move in order to make an impact in Europe. There appears to be a concerted attempt to gain influence in Europe by the Gülen Movement in recent years with the initiation of other Gülen-inspired associations not only in Dublin, but also in Belfast (NITECA), Edinburgh (Dialogue Society for Scotland) and Brighton (Interfaith Dialogue Society) all opened in 2004/5. The Dialogue Society in London preceded these and was established in 1998.<sup>450</sup> One cannot fail to notice that the mushrooming of these organisations run concurrent with the opening up of talks between Turkey and the European Union (EU) regarding Turkey's possible accession into the EU.

The political scientist Hasan T. Kösebalaban draws attention to some interesting insights in the context of Gülen's views on European integration. He argues that 'Fethullah Gülen is the leader of a

<sup>450</sup> [www.dialoguesociety.org](http://www.dialoguesociety.org)



formally apolitical social movement who nevertheless has influenced Turkish political debates, including those related to international relations' (Kösebalaban 2003: 171). This has particularly been the case regarding European Union (EU) accession. Kösebalaban (2003) notes the polarisation of opinion regarding Turkey's relationship with Europe. Some argue that European integration will lead to the loss of Turkish-Muslim identity. Alternatively, Gülen has been an avid supporter of EU accession from the start (see Gülerce, 2004; Yilmaz, 2003: 235). He maintains that Islamic identity and European identity are not necessarily incongruous but can be complimentary. Given Gülen's support for European integration of Turkey, it is plausible to view the emergence of Gülen-inspired organisation as a concerted attempt to promote a positive image of Turkey in an attempt to gain support for European accession.

TIECS is inspired by the thought of Fethullah Gülen and consistent with his emphasis on Turkish culture, tolerance and dialogue, its members developed a variety of pursuits. These include Turkish language classes, interfaith dialogue conferences and several trips to Turkey per year for Irish people and others. It is important to note that TIECS' members do not appear to be involved in any sustained transnational economic activity. Nor are they involved in any political quests. Indeed several members of TIECS noted that both TIECS and the Gülen Movement are apolitical. TIECS endeavours appear to be purely of the 'socio-cultural' type.

Surveying TIECS website we can get a summarised version of its aims and objectives:

*...It is the mission of Turkish Irish Educational and Cultural Society (TIECS) to serve societal peace, love, and friendship by striving to bring forth the common values of humanity; values such as tolerance, respect, and compassion. TIECS acknowledges the importance of spreading these most significant values within Dublin's diverse communities, hoping for all to take them on as a common virtue. In order to build a better future, TIECS will work hand in hand with Irish and other communities and groups that recognize the same mission and uphold the same values (TIECS Homepage)*

From their earliest meetings, members of TIECS were adamant that they did not want to assimilate into Irish society. They rather intend to simultaneously integrate whilst preserving their own culture and traditions and passing these down to their children. Integration according to these early members was the key to successful settlement. This is echoed in their Mission Statement above, which emphasises 'values such as tolerance, respect, and compassion'. It is furthermore consistent with the wider goals of the Gülen Movement. This is a useful starting point to outline the principal goals of TIECS. However, by interviewing various members of this society, I was enabled to explore these goals in more depth and establish the principles adopted from Fethullah Gülen.

It is useful to look a little deeper at the views of TIECS vis-à-vis integration into Irish society. Members of TIECS I spoke to insisted that they had learned from the mistakes of other Turkish migrants abroad who made little attempt to integrate in the early years, which led to subsequent generations of Turks feeling displaced and isolated from the mainstream society. Several participants pointed to Germany as the principal site where Turkish migrants were caught in an 'in between' or liminal space. The majority of these Turks are a legacy of the 'guestworker' system established in the 1960's.

One member of TIECS claims that:



...what happened to the Turkish people in Germany? They didn't start to do volunteering work or social work 30 years ago and now they have big problems with the young generation because they have a kind of dual identification, actually not dual identification, no identity. They don't feel they belong to any society. They don't describe themselves as German. It is not easy to say "I am Turkish". So they are kind of in the middle somewhere. And this is not integration, not assimilation even, just standing in the middle of somewhere and you don't know where you are, who you are. And we want to stop this because we were lucky here, our generation, our children are very small at the moment, so if we start now we can provide them with a healthy environment.

I discussed the complex nature of the Turkish diaspora in Germany in a previous section and illustrated how the German government must take a large proportion of the responsibility regarding the lack of integration of Turkish migrants there. The TIECS member above is dismayed that Turks in Germany are caught in a liminal space, arguing that they are neither here nor there. They are unsure if they are Turks or Germans. They are neither integrated, nor assimilated. In the words of the above respondent, they have 'no identity'; 'they are kind of in the middle somewhere'; 'just standing in the middle somewhere, and you don't know where you are, who you are'. This articulation of the position in Turkish migrants in Germany has been well documented (Castles et al, 1987; Atalik and Beeley 1993). However what is less discussed is the important contribution Turkish associations in Germany make to immigration reform and integration through political engagement in Germany.

Gökçe Yurdakul (2006) analysed the role of two Turkish associations, TBB and the Cemaat (Gülen movement), in Berlin. Acknowledging the difficulties faced by Turkish migrants in Germany, she shatters the racialised view of the Turkish diaspora in Germany as a single homogenous group, by illustrating the diversity in attitudes and actions of its various members. Her principle focus, as mentioned previously, is to show that some Turkish associations in Germany are actively promoting integration and reform through political engagement. She notes that 'Many German political authorities refer to the TBB and the Cemaat as the supporters and guardians of immigrant integration'. (ibid: 444). Yurdakul's study is important as it shows not all Turkish migrants are caught in a liminal space but many have adapted to the German context, whilst often preserving their own culture.

Though the TIECS member quoted above referred to Turks in Germany in a stereotypical fashion, his main point is that members of TIECS want to avoid the problems of integration that did indeed face many Turkish migrants in Germany. Later in the interview, he says that:

And also, we are part of this culture. We are not here just here for doing this work. We are living here and we are contributing as part of society.

This is an interesting example of the promotion of integration of the Turkish community in Ireland. The interviewee insists that they are not just here as representatives of Turkey but they are now also part of Irish society and they are keen to contribute. They are part of the broader Irish society and not just part of the diaspora community. However, they have no intention of assimilating but instead intend to integrate, whilst simultaneously showing their culture and learning others culture. I now look at one of TIECS main activities in order to evaluate the contribution of Fethullah Gülen in a very real and practical way.



## 7. TIECS, Dialogue and Turkish Islam

TIECS has initiated a variety of social and cultural events. This section focuses on a series of conferences celebrating the Abrahamic Religions, organised by this society. I have chosen to discuss this event as I believe it best illustrates TIECS' relationship with the work of Fethullah Gülen and his promotion of Turkish Islam. TIECS has held two conferences celebrating the 'Abrahamic Religions'; Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In 2005 the conference was staged in University College Dublin (UCD) and in 2006 it was held in Trinity College Dublin (TCD). There were speakers from each of the three religions and all were interested in promoting interfaith dialogue. The Jewish and Christian speakers were residents in Ireland, whilst the Muslim speakers were rather of Turkish origin, living in London, and related to Gülen-inspired organisations in England. In 2005 Kerim Balci, a journalist with the Gülen-inspired *Zaman* newspaper represented the Muslim view of interfaith dialogue. In 2006, Ozcan Kelesh, of the Dialogue Society of London (a Gülen-inspired organisation promoting interfaith dialogue), spoke on the theme of compassion in Islam. Admission to these conferences was free and the attendees included representatives of different faith groups, academics and students.

I asked one member of TIECS, why this society organised these conferences:

The conferences are so important to introduce...the correct Islamic views to the society, because nowadays Islam is one of the main religions, which is...[misunderstood] by the people, especially in the Western world. There are many reasons and also because of the mistakes of some Muslims... Also because of bias[es] and prejudices by some of the intellectuals in the western world. So as a Muslim, we believe we have some responsibility to introduce our belief to the society... some people have forced it to be recognised as a kind of religion for violence. And it was not easy for us to accept this without doing anything. The conference series is one of the projects which we would like to tackle this misunderstanding problem...

From this excerpt we can see that the main aim of the interfaith conferences organised by TIECS is to 'introduce the correct Islamic views'. It may be argued that interfaith dialogue is of secondary importance to members of TIECS whilst promoting a tolerant understanding of Islam is the main objective. This is understandable given the imbalanced nature of reports regarding Muslims in both academia and the mainstream media. The above respondent maintains that Islam has been largely misunderstood in the Western world. He blames both the 'prejudices' of various intellectuals towards Islam and indeed some Muslims who 'misinterpret' the Koran and engage in violence. With regards to the former, Edward Said (1997) takes up this point, claiming:

Malicious generalizations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West; what is said about the Muslim mind, or character, or religion, or culture as a whole cannot now be said in mainstream discussion about Africans, Jews, other Orientals, or Asians. (1997: xi/xii)

In any other context, such denigration would be rightly regarded as racism. However in the context of Islam, such vilification appears acceptable as it has become part of the 'common sense thinking' of many people in the Western world. In the absence of a collective effort to portray positive representations of Muslims by western opinion-makers, it is only the negative depictions that filter down to the general media consumer. Said (1997) notes that for every book written fairly on the



subject of Islam, there are numerous written with an unbalanced orientation towards depicting Muslims as terrorists. The corollary of this, according to Said, is that 'the average reader comes to see Islam and fundamentalism as essentially the same thing' (ibid: xvi). For the average person, Islam becomes synonymous with terrorism, violence and atavism. Said's position was articulated before the terrorist attacks in New York (2001). A variety of authors have since shown that the denigration of Islam by Western opinion-makers has intensified since the attacks in New York (Modood, 2005; Anwar, 2005; Parekh, 2006; Ishay, 2004; Wu, 2004). The objective of TIECS in this context is to illustrate that not only is Islam not synonymous with violence, but on the contrary, the religion is tantamount to peace.

Another member of TIECS explained other reasons for holding these conferences:

*...it is...good to show the similarities between the Abrahamic religions, Christianity, Islam and Judaism...this really builds a bridge in society between believers and it really brings a kind of synergy between the people, breaking prejudices and biases. And it is good for a healthy society because when Irish society knows what Islam is, what true Islam is: when they deal with the Muslim people in Ireland, they have more open and healthy perspective because of the information and knowledge they get. So conferences help us to achieve this goal... and also it helps us to make good friendships and to collaborate with other groups... And we are focusing on the common point between us. All of us believe that there is one God. And this is the main moving point for us and when you put common points on the table, you see more common points than which you conflict on and you can just focus on the common points. This doesn't mean we are all the same. That is normal, the differences, but respect and tolerance [are] the magic words if you live. So conferences help us to succeed these goals.*

By illustrating the parallels amongst the 'Abrahamic religions', members of TIECS are attempting to find common ground with other monotheistic religions in Ireland. The reasons for this are two-fold. Firstly, as mentioned previously, to educate other faiths on the tenets of Islam in order to dispel the malign myth that Islam is tantamount to brutality. Secondly, the above TIECS member believes that it will aid the integration process for Muslims and serve to prevent them being isolated from the mainstream society. He recognizes that people are different but stresses that 'respect and tolerance [are] the magic words'.

The words spoken above and actions taken through the conferences are entirely consistent with Fethullah Gülen's articulation of Turkish Islam, grounded in the Sufi principles of tolerance and dialogue. Members of TIECS use the same strategy as Gülen to bring apparently irreconcilable groups together around the one table. The focus on commonalities to build a strong and secure foundation upon is the key to their success, ignoring or suspending the dogma of each sect, faith or cultural group.

Through TIECS interfaith conferences, members naturally attempt to promote Islam as they understand it. In the two conferences they have held so far, the Muslim speakers were of Turkish origin and members of Gülen-affiliated groups. They emphasised 'tolerance', 'love' and the 'reasonability' of Islam as promoted by Gülen and other Turkish Sufi mystics. There is, however, competition regarding the interpretation of Islam in Ireland. As previously mention, Islam is the fastest growing religion in Ireland today, and these followers of Islam come from many different



regions in the world, including Ireland, and from all the Islamic zones mentioned by Yavuz (2004). TIECS is now involved in a competitive market with other interpretations of Islam.

TIECS is first and foremost a Turkic religio-cultural society, with an emphasis on Turkish culture and the Turkish understanding of Islam. It is too much to ask this small organisation to solve the problems of multiculturalism in Ireland. Indeed it is too much to ask that this group resolve the complexities of even Muslim integration in Ireland. What this society has, however, accomplished is a small platform, whereby they promote a positive and moderate image of Islam, countering the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of this religion by leading opinion-makers in the West. They have further contributed to Irish society by engaging in dialogue with different faith groups and cultures. Indeed, the efforts of this group are an example of how migrants with different cultural, linguistic and religious differences can adapt and integrate into a host society dominated by a very different culture. Furthermore, the presence of this Gülen-inspired organisation is an illustration of the very real and practical contribution of the thought and action of Fethullah Gülen. The fact that such an organisation is present in Ireland (a country that up until 15 years ago was understood by many outsiders as a backwater of Britain), is indicative of the reach of the thought of Fethullah Gülen. Their various activities, inspired by Gülen, are an example of how peaceful coexistence is possible amongst different ethnic groups in a diverse society in a European context.

## **8. Conclusion**

This article began by surveying the various Islamic communities living in Ireland. I noted that there has been an academic deficit in this department in Ireland, though Kieran Flynn (2006) must be commended for his work. My principle aim in this section was to illustrate the diversity and different expressions of Islam practiced in Ireland and support my argument that based on geographical, cultural and social differences we can talk about Islam in the plural sense. This section also served to contextualise TIECS in the Irish setting. Subsequent to this I introduced the theme of Turkish Islam as one expression of Islam, before evaluating Fethullah Gülen's contribution to the popularising of this concept. Drawing on the work of Bilir and Irvine this section questioned the potential of the Gülen Movement in Germany to act as a positive force in helping the Turkish diaspora in Germany to integrate into their host society. I then moved to the heart of this article by introducing the Gülen-inspired TIECS and exploring its member's attitudes to integration. They show a deep commitment to becoming part of Irish society, whilst simultaneously maintaining their Turkish identity. They refuse to isolate themselves, arguing that they have learned from the mistakes of other Turkish migrants, especially in Germany. Drawing on Yurdakul's work I also noted the active role Turkish associations in Germany play vis-à-vis promoting integration and lobbying for better conditions for Turkish settlers in Germany. This section then showed how TIECS are an exemplary of Gülen's thought regarding openness and tolerance.

The final section focused on TIECS very practical and visible contribution to integration and interfaith dialogue in Ireland. I examined their motivations for organising a series of conferences devoted to exploring the commonalities between the Abrahamic religions. I argued that one of the main reasons for this conference was to counteract the overwhelmingly negative media portrayal of Muslims as violent and atavistic. Drawing on the work of Said, I contended that in any other context such denigration would be referred to as racism but in the context of Islam, such denigration appears uncritically acceptable to many in the West. This section also showed how TIECS adopts Gülen's



articulation of Turkish Islam grounded in the principles of openness, tolerance and reason and promote these in their conferences.

Despite the lack of consensus amongst Muslims in Ireland, Flynn (2006) points out several positive points, arguing that both the main Shi'a and Sunni institutions in Ireland have made attempts to engage with the Irish public and civil society through a variety of activities. It is my contention that TIECS will become another major player in the debate about the role of Islam in Ireland. Drawing on the experience of Fethullah Gülen's dialogical work between apparently irreconcilable groups in Turkey, TIECS may be able to draw together the different expressions of Islam as well as different world faiths present in Ireland in a spirit of open discourse.

In conclusion, this article has attempted to show the real and practical contribution of Fethullah Gülen by focusing on a society inspired by his thoughts. By analysing the motivations and activities of TIECS, I illustrated how a group of Turkish Muslims have comfortably settled into a country with a very different culture and contributed in a very meaningful way. This may be understood as an exemplary case of peaceful coexistence amongst different ethnic and religious groups in a European context.