



M. F. GÜLEN: A BRIDGE BETWEEN ISLAM AND THE WEST

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Abstract

Ever since 9/11 the Western world has been gripped with anxious fear as to what some Muslims might do next. Hardly any journalist in the Western world speaks about moderate or liberal Islam, although plenty of Muslims globally fall into that category. This paper deals with the thought of M. Fethullah Gülen, a moderate Muslim. It argues that Gülen may be a bridge toward better understanding between Islam and the West because of his views on peace, tolerance, and interfaith dialogue and because of his optimistic view of the future relations between the two aforementioned blocs. I base my argument on five theses:

Thesis 1: *We live in a global world:* Gülen argues that we live in a global world, one tremendously different from the past. Today what happens in one part of the world is known throughout the world almost instantaneously because of the Internet and the cell phone. Technology has caused our world to shrink.

Thesis 2: *Islam and the West have become estranged:* The estrangement between Islam and the West began with the Crusades followed by the Mongol invasion of the Muslim world, notes Mr. Gülen. Western civilization has been based on the physical sciences and has unfortunately succumbed to materialism, its Achilles heel.

Thesis 3: *Dialogue, particularly interfaith dialogue, is the key:* Gülen sees dialogue as a give and take between two or more parties involving respect, honesty, and compassionate love. In dialogue one must retain self-integrity while encountering the other as a true other, who is neither falsely similar, nor too alien from me. For interfaith dialogue to succeed one must forget past hurts, ignore polemics, and concentrate on the commonalities between the dialogue partners.

Thesis 4: *Love conquers all:* Gülen speaks eloquently of love as the greatest power, the most radiant light, and the chain that binds humans one to another.

Thesis 5: *The future looks hopeful:* Gülen does not see a clash of civilizations between Islam and the West. By focusing on dialogue, tolerance, peace, and love the future of the relationship between Islam and the West looks rather rosy.

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1. Introduction

Ever since 9/11 the entire Western world has been gripped with anxious fear as to what some Muslims might do next. Hardly any journalist in the Western world speaks about moderate or liberal Islam, although plenty of Muslims around the globe fall into that category. My proposed paper deals with the thought of M. Fethullah Gülen, a moderate Muslim. I argue that Gülen may be a bridge toward better understanding between Islam and the West because of his views on peace, tolerance, and interfaith dialogue and because of his optimistic view of the future relations between the two aforementioned blocs. I base my argument on five theses, which can be distilled by looking carefully at his copious writings.

2.1. Thesis 1: We Live In a Global World

Mr. Gülen argues that we live in a global world, one tremendously different from the past. Today what happens in one part of the world is known throughout the world almost instantaneously because of the Internet and the cell phone. Technology has caused our world to shrink (Ameli, 2004, p. 324). Those who think that any radical changes in a particular nation will be determined by that nation alone are in for a rude awakening. We exist in a totally interdependent world, a global village (Stiglitz, 2002, p. 9; Kellner, 2007, p. 54). The events of 9/11 show that the world has become one place. The attacks on the United States shook the world on a global scale. For example, within two hours of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center towers, almost eighty percent of Sweden knew about it. In fact, both national radio and T.V. in Sweden changed their programming in order to cover the story (Larsson, 2005, p. 34).

Gülen notes that today's world has a plethora of problems that can only be solved by many nations working together in unison. Some examples of these problems are: global warming, the regulation of outer space, over-fishing of the seas and oceans, water pollution and dealing with international terror, to name but a few (See Gülen, 2000a, p. 240). Gülen manages to put his finger on a twenty-first century phenomenon that intellectuals and others see as increasingly important, viz., globalization. Like the word, spirituality, globalization is an ill-defined concept, an umbrella term. Globalization means different things in various cultures and geographical regions.

The West often views globalization in economic terms, namely, as the free and untrammled movement of capital, goods, labor, and services across borders. In other words, globalization refers to the integration of technologies, nations, and markets to an unprecedented degree. However, globalization has taken on a different meaning in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. There globalization is perceived in mainly ideological terms and hence attacked as a new brand of imperialism, although some like King 'Abdullah of Jordan view globalization in positive terms. In the MENA region many people see globalization as a threat to their cultural, economic, or political independence. This is the case despite the fact that the MENA region, *in toto*, remains one of the least globalized areas in the world (Looney, 2007, p. 342).

Gülen thinks of globalization in more than economic and ideological terms. For him globalization is a more encompassing term. It refers to connectivity and interdependence in all areas of life, cultural, ecological, economic, political, religious, social, and technological. Gülen would be comfortable in saying that globalization is the process by which the experience of everyday living is becoming standardized around the world.



How precisely has the world become a global village according to Mr. Gülen? Gülen attributes globalization to advances in communication, science, and technology (Gülen, 2004b, p.230). He points out that thanks to advances in technology, more specifically electronic technology, both the acquisition and exchange of information is gradually growing. The Internet would be a good example of globalization. Through the Internet people all over the world can be linked together. At the same time, though, those without computer access are left in the dark and ignored. Sometimes entire regions are cut off, for example, in parts of South America where the Amazon River flows in areas inaccessible to roads.

Gülen came upon the notion of globalization by reflecting on the nature of the universe. For him the universe is clearly and unmistakably an inseparable whole. Every being on every level is interrelated to every other being. Quantum physics points toward this unity or unbroken wholeness of the universe, including human beings (Gülen, 2000b, p. 4). Since there exists an interdependence of all beings in the universe, whatever causes a flower to exist must be responsible for a tree, notes Mr. Gülen. And whatever causes a tree to exist must be responsible for the forest. Such interrelatedness and interconnectedness means that all beings in the universe help each other.

Gülen finds the order, organization, and harmony in the world completely fascinating. He does not believe that this order and harmony derive from matter or come about randomly through chance. Rather, in his view everything that happens in the universe takes place according to certain laws. The most trifling event cannot occur without putting into the equation one who has an absolutely perfect knowledge of the universe and who possesses absolute power. That one is God the Creator. Gülen argues that God reveals himself in the book of nature which, addressed to humanity as a whole, makes known its Author (Gülen, 2000b, p.13).

2.2. Thesis 2: Islam and the West Have Become Estranged From One Another

In speaking about Islam and the West several important distinctions must be made. First, one must distinguish between Islam as a religion and Islamism as a political ideology. This distinction is implicit in Gülen's writings, for example, in his essay, "True Muslims Cannot Be Terrorists." (Gülen, 2002b, pp. 95-98). As a religion Islam insists very strongly on peace, love, and tolerance. For Gülen love binds existence. Gülen notes that Muhammad, a man of affection, was given the title, 'Habibullah,' which comes from the word, *habib*, meaning 'he who loves God and is loved by God.' Gülen narrates several stories (*hadith*) from the Prophet Muhammad that make the point there is no room for hatred in Islam or in the multicolored world of its ambassador, Muhammad, the Prophet, may his name be blessed. For Gülen the entire Qur'an has tolerance and forgiveness as its foundation (Gülen, 2002b, p. 99).

Islamism, though draped in religious imagery and presented in apocalyptic language, has more in common with secular ideologies of terror than it does with the Islamic religion. For example, just as the Irish Republican Army cannot in any way be equated with Roman Catholicism, so Islamism as an ideology cannot be thought of in the same breath as the Islamic religion (Desai, 2007, pp. 59-87.).

One of Gülen's favorite aphorisms goes like this: "In true Islam, terror does not exist." In the Islamic religion no one can be a suicide bomber, not even in time of war. The Islamic religion forbids such barbarism. To kill another person according to the Islamic religion is tantamount to *qulf* or atheism. A true Muslim cannot say, "I will kill someone and then go to heaven." How can someone receive the



approval of God by taking a precious human life? In the Islamic religion this is a sheer impossibility (Gülen, 2004b, p.185).

Second, when Gülen speaks of Islam is he thinking of *customary* Islam characterized by the combination of regional practices and those shared by most Muslims around the globe who desire to surrender themselves to the will of Allah as revealed in the Qur'an or of *revivalist* Islam? Note, though, that this customary tradition is not a unitary one, since each region of the Islamic world has made its own version of customary practices. For example, the customary tradition in Morocco includes reverence for saintly figures that some Muslims argue have no basis in the Qur'an. Does Gülen have in mind *revivalist* Islam, the most common alternative to customary Islam? The revivalist tradition, also known as fundamentalism or Wahhabism, argues against local deviations and practices. Instead, it stands for a renewed stress on Arabic as the language of revelation, the illegitimacy of local political institutions, (since they usurp the sovereignty of Allah), the revival of practices from the early period of Islam, and, lastly, the authority of the revivalists like Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab as the sole qualified interpreters of Islam. I would argue that Gülen speaks of Islam in the former sense, viz., that of *customary* Islam (Kurzman, 1998, p. 6.).

I would also observe that Gülen thinks that Islam has become a way of life or a culture for some Muslims who do not adhere to Islam as a faith. These Muslims have restructured Islam in accordance with their own thoughts. Gülen sums up his feelings on this matter by asserting that an Islamic world does not exist. What does this imply? Gülen means that some Muslims live Islam as it suits their own purposes so that a Muslim culture is dominant rather than an Islamic one (Gülen, 2004b, p. 186).

If the term, Islam, can be problematical, so does the term, the West, have its ambiguities. First, the term, the West, can be understood geographically. As such it refers to those countries in which most of the inhabitants are Christian and where pluralistic political systems and free market economies thrive. Historically, this would include Canada and the United States, Europe west of the former East Germany, plus Australia and New Zealand, along with South Africa and possibly Israel since the majority of Israelis are Jewish and not Christian.

Today, however, one could argue that past geographical boundaries defining the West no longer hold and are porous. In the post cold-war era the West incorporates Russia, the urbanized, moneyed-elites in Latin America, and an advanced capitalist, democratic Japan as well as Taiwan, and the power-brokers in the oil-rich Gulf States like Dubai (Abramsky, 2007, p. B8).

Second, the term, the West, can be understood culturally either as part of the world that shares a Judaeo-Christian heritage or as synonymous with secular humanism and the mind-set of the Enlightenment. The question, then, boils down to this, namely, does the West refer to a state of mind or to a particular plot of land? There exists no doubt where Gülen comes down on this question. Gülen understands the West mainly in cultural and religious terms. For him Western civilization has been based on the hard sciences, such as physics and mathematics. In his estimation a gigantic conflict has arisen in the West between the hard sciences and religion, a conflict that need not exist. Gülen sees the West as succumbing to materialism and secularization. On this matter Gülen aligns himself with other Muslim thinkers who feel this way, e.g., Sayyid Qutb (Ayoub, 2007, p.49).

The East, on the contrary, has emphasized moral, religious, and spiritual values, while at the same time, giving short shrift to the hard sciences and technology. Gülen notes that the estrangement between Islam and the West began with the Crusades followed by the Mongol invasion of the Muslim world (Gülen, 2002b, p. 27). The Crusades were crucial in setting a pattern for the long history of



mistrust and conflict between Islam and the West (Lewis, 2004, p. 47). Although Jesus in the gospels taught love of neighbor, the Crusaders apparently never learned the meaning of love of neighbor.

The Crusades have made Muslims wary of entering into dialogue with Christians but many other factors also play a role. For example, Gülen points out that in the twentieth century far more Muslims have been killed by Christians than all Christians were killed by Muslims throughout the march of history (Gülen, 2002b, p. 33). Attacks by Europeans collapsed the Ottoman Empire, while Christendom's portrayal of Islam as a crude, distorted version of Judaism and Christianity upsets many Muslims to this very day. In hopes of building a better future, Gülen insists on interfaith dialogue as the key to overcoming the historical conflict between Islam and the West. Gülen says, in effect, "Let the healing begin." We now turn to this extremely important matter of dialogue.

2.3. Thesis 3: Dialogue is the Key

Despite the tension and struggles between Muslims and Christians for almost fourteen centuries, Gülen calls interfaith dialogue a necessity. Throughout his writings Gülen insists that for interfaith dialogue to succeed, we must forget the past, ignore polemics, and focus on the points both religions have in common (Gülen, 2002b, p. 34). He notes that all revealed religions are based on peace, security, and world harmony. Like Jesus' call to "turn the other cheek," Gülen exhorts us to return good for evil and overlook discourteous treatment (Gülen, 2000a, p.192).

Should Muslims engage in dialogue with Jews and Christians? Based on his reading of the Qur'an Gülen answers with a resounding "yes." At the beginning of the Qur'an in 2:2-4 people are called to accept the former prophets of both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament and their books. Gülen interprets this passage as sending an important message in terms of establishing dialogue with Jews and Christians. In 29:46 of the Qur'an we are enjoined not to dispute with People of the Book except with means better than mere disputation. The Qur'an thus gives us a method of how dialogue should be conducted with Jews and Christians. Based on his reading of the Qur'an Gülen believes that tolerance should be extended not only to Jews and Christians but to all people (Gülen, 2000a, p.260).

I would also point out that Gülen argues that there are as many theoretical reasons for Muslims and Jews to draw together in dialogue as there are for Jews and Christians to engage in dialogue. There has been no discrimination on the part of Muslims toward Jews, no denial of their basic human rights, and no *Shoah* or Holocaust. Gülen observes that Jews were welcomed in times of trouble. For example, the Ottoman State embraced Jews after they were expelled from Spain (Gülen, 2002b, p. 33).

Gülen always speaks of dialogue in connection with toleration, forgiveness, love, and opening one's heart to everyone. He makes an important distinction between matters that are fundamental to Islam and those that are accidental. Dialogue, toleration, love, forgiveness, and opening one's heart to all are basic to Islam (Gülen, 2004b, p.71). In the dialogue with others Gülen states that the dialogue partners should look at what they have in common, rather than focusing on the differences. He remarks that issues that can separate us should be avoided altogether.

Gülen calls dialogue and toleration the two roses of the emerald hills. What exactly does Gülen mean by dialogue? Gülen understands dialogue as the encounter between two or more individuals in order to discuss specific issues. What does dialogue bring about? Dialogue helps form strong bonds between the dialogue partners. Gülen calls dialogue an activity that has the human person as its axis. In



dialogue the discussants share their thoughts and their feelings. Knowledge alone does not suffice. In dialogue we open our minds and hearts to others in a compassionate and loving way. Dialogue is not something we achieve on our own. Only with the help of God can we concentrate on matters of dialogue and toleration, says Gülen. (Gülen, 2004b, p.55).

What is the goal or purpose of dialogue? Is it to drive one's dialogue partner in the ground using tools of superior logic and insight? Not at all, retorts Mr. Gülen. Dialogue exists so that the truth emerges from the dialogue more clearly. One enters into dialogue neither to best one's dialogue partner nor to satisfy one's ego. Rather, the goal is to let the truth emerge out of the conversation. In dialogue with others, particularly in interfaith dialogue, one must not neglect such important items as mutual understanding, dedication to justice, and, above all, respect for one's dialogue partner (Gülen, 2000a, p.259).

How did Gülen come to intimately link tolerance with dialogue? Gülen took his cues on the importance of toleration and dialogue from the Qur'an and the *sunna* of the Prophet. In the Qur'an 25:63 we read that the servants of God are humble and when the ignorant address them they say, "Peace." In other words, the servants of Mercy do not return evil with evil. Instead, they take tolerance and dialogue as their basic principles in dealing with those who are rudely ignorant. Other verses in the Qur'an such as 25:72 and 28:55 make a similar point, namely, that when the special servants of Allah encounter ugly words or behavior, they overlook such things and pass by in a dignified way (Gülen, 2000a, p.257).

Gülen remarks that the life of Prophet Muhammad was an orbit of forgiveness, toleration, and patience. Take the case of the Prophet's dealings with Abu Sufyan who persecuted Muhammad throughout his life. Although Abu Sufyan had doubts about Islam during the conquest of Mecca, Muhammad said that those who take refuge in the home of Abu Safyan are as safe as those who take refuge in the Ka'ba. What an incredible passage because it mentions the home of Abu Safyan in the same breath as the sacred Ka'ba, in terms of safety and security. In commenting on this passage Gülen notes that such tolerance was more valuable to Abu Safyan than giving him tons of gold (Gülen, 2000a, p. 257).

In short, Mr. Gülen sees dialogue as a give and take between two or more parties involving respect, honesty, and compassionate love. In dialogue one must retain self-integrity while encountering the other as a true other, who is neither falsely similar, nor too alien from me. Not only is interfaith dialogue critical to peace in today's world. There must also be a dialogue of cultures, viz., a dialogue between Islam and the West.

2.4. Thesis 4: Love Conquers All

Gülen speaks of love in conjunction with compassion, forgiveness, and tolerance. For him these are the pillars of dialogue and basic human values. Love has the ability to overcome every force, elevate every soul that absorbs it, and it also prepares the soul for the journey to eternity. Love is, then, our human way of making contact with eternity. Mr. Gülen speaks eloquently of love as the greatest power, the most radiant light, and the chain that binds humans one to another. On the individual level love is the sultan that reigns on the throne of the human heart. On the social level there is nothing more lasting or more real than love in any nation or society. For Gülen it is axiomatic that love should be as vast as the oceans. Love calls us to take every soul to our bosom.



Those who have the greatest share in this love are the greatest heroes on earth. Such heroes live on even after death. These lofty souls light a new torch of love in their hearts on a daily basis. In turn, they are loved by others. What makes these heroes of love so special? They transcend the generality of others by their ability to uproot from their hearts any personal feelings of animosity toward others (Gülen, 2000a, p.253).

How should we deal with those who put us down? Gülen counsels us to take the approach of Yunus the poet: not striking those who hit us, not replying in kind to those who curse us, and not holding any secret grudges against those who abuse us. This goes against the grain on the natural level. That is why Gülen sees God, the Truly Beloved One, as the fountainhead of this type of love (*Mahabba*) (Gülen, 2004a, p.149).

Genuine love of God means to stand in God's presence, wholly set on the Beloved, and mindful that complete union with God will only occur in the afterlife. A persons' love for God varies in accordance with the degree of one's obedience to the Beloved. To come closer to God in true love, one must fight to overcome one's faults and deficiencies, says Gülen. Those individuals on the highest stage of love are illumined with the light of God's being and are in touch with the spiritual world. These favored souls recognize that they are an inspiration to those with whom they come into contact. Gülen would say that one's true identity and personality come from one's inner spirit. The more humans are filled with the love of God, the more that they can say with the prophet Abraham that "I love not things that set" (Gülen, 2000b, p.107).

Imagine what the world would look like if more people possessed true, spiritual love. What a difference this would make if leaders of nations possessed such a deep, dynamic, and transforming love. If they did, they could solve an entire mountain of problems and there would be no clash of civilizations. This is Gülen's message to today's broken, fractured world of egoism, individualism, and greed.

2.5. Thesis 5: The Future Looks Hopeful

In light of the preceding section on love, it is not surprising that Gülen has an upbeat, hope-filled view of the future. Most assuredly, Gülen does not subscribe to the clash of civilizations thesis advanced by Sam Huntington. By focusing on such qualities as dialogue, peace, and love Gülen has high hope that Islam and the West can resolve their differences amicably through dialogue. By focusing on dialogue, tolerance, peace, and love, the future of the relationship between Islam and the West looks rather rosy.

Gülen's belief in the resurrection and last judgment helps him look at life in a qualitatively different way than the secular humanist and others who believe that life ends with the grave. For Gülen life on earth prepares us for an eternal life with God in heaven. Gülen views this present life as a test for the human race. We are to brace ourselves, so to speak, for the future by caring for others and by putting on such qualities as love, gentleness, and inner peace. Those who live their lives on the plane of eternity can forgive others their trespasses and overlook their shortcomings. In short, Gülen remains convinced that human life on earth is absurd and meaningless without a strong belief in the resurrection of the dead (Gülen, 2000b, p. iii).

Gülen argues that if we look at life through the windows of God, then it follows that hope is the dynamic of action that does not falter. Hope may be regarded as the life-giving nourishment of those



souls who live for others, rather than looking out for number one. Gülen calls hope a source of energy which never diminishes for souls that are other-centered. Finally, Gülen's reflections on hope are epitomized in these poetic words, "I am keeping my hope alive for the world and humanity, fresh as evergreen leaves and I keep on looking upon tomorrow with a smile." (Gülen, 2004b, p. 234).

3. Concluding Observations

I conclude my essay with these four observations written in the spirit of Mr. Gülen:

1. Unfortunately, many Western observers today see the Islamic world as a threat, similar to the way the Soviet Union was considered a threat to the West during the Cold War. Actually, the Islamic world does not really threaten the West economically, militarily, or politically (Robb, 2007, p. 7). Many Western nations control the most precious asset of the Muslim world, viz., oil, and desire to recover the money they have paid for it, either through the creation of safe markets or by selling military hardware. (Nasr, 2007, p. 374). Far from being a threat to the Western way of life, the Muslim world is only a threat to Western interests in the Muslim world itself. For example, tapes of the Qur'an are not about to replace rap music in Western culture. On the other hand, Gülen might say that the secularization and materialism of the West, the so-called Coca Cola culture, is a threat to the Islamic emphasis on spiritual and moral values.
2. It is abundantly clear from this essay that Gülen's moderate views on the Islamic faith may be an effective antidote to the Islamophobia now sweeping the world as chronicled in the Western media where Muslims are depicted stereotypically (Pratt, 2005, p. 175). By this I mean that all Muslims are judged to be evil by the very fact that they are Muslims. Hence Islam is perceived in the West as a pernicious and dangerous religion, rather than one of peace, love, and tolerance (Larsson, 2005, p. 37). If Western journalists and intellectuals would read the writings of M. Fethullah Gülen carefully, they would understand the true meaning of Islam as a religion of peace, love, and forgiveness.
3. A close reading of Gülen's writings would teach the Western world a critical lesson, namely, tolerance. Unfortunately, the West sees its own development in history as the only true path for other cultures and civilizations to follow. The Muslim world, on the other hand, questions many assumptions held by the West: humanly devised laws over against the divine law, secular humanism or the denial of any transcendent dimension to human existence, as opposed to the Islamic faith, and the supremacy of human rights over divine rights. From Gülen the West can learn to be *tolerant* vis-à-vis a Muslim world that wishes to develop according to its own Islamic principles and dynamic (Nasr, 2007, p. 374). The Western world can make an infinitely small start by trying to understand the world from an Islamic perspective (Shahrur, 2007, p. 353). Muslims world-wide are outraged by the loss of Muslim lands, particularly in Palestine, on the basis of exclusive historical claims that deny the claims of Muslims to these lands. Also, many Muslims do not feel the leaders of Western governments care seriously about the greater welfare of the Muslim community or *ummah*. The Western powers care for the greater welfare of Muslims only if doing so coincides with the economic, political, and military interests of the West. For example, look at the attitude of the West in regard to democracy in the Muslim world. The West countenances free elections only to the extent that the winners align themselves with Western interests. How does this make most Muslims feel?



4. Gülen has also something to say to the Muslim world. Muslims must not write off the West as completely secular and materialistic. The vast majority of people in the United States, for example, attends church regularly and is deeply religious. Moreover, there are striking similarities between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All three are Abrahamic religions which take their origin from the deserts of the Middle East. All three religions believe in monotheism and regard God as transcendent, ineffable, and completely above the world as its creator and sustainer. Not only do we urgently need interfaith dialogue but a dialogue between Islam and the West. Gülen would opine that our very existence may well depend on its success.