



SEARCHING FOR A NEW UNITY OF THOUGHT (FİKİR BİRLİĞİ) AMONG PEOPLE OF DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS AFFILIATIONS: VOICES FROM CENTRAL EUROPE

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Abstract

Generally, the more windows are opened the more light enters our space. Fethullah Gülen is one of those charismatic Muslims of our time who try to 'open windows' of true dialogue and to overcome the image of *furor Islamicus* communicated by the European media. In his effort to engage in inter-religious tolerance Gülen condemned the use of term *kafir* to describe people of other faiths and he also called on Turks to build mosques next to Alevi assembly centres (*cemevleri*) in order to set an example to the outside world. This paper investigate the possibilities of peaceful coexistence of all humankind as seen from Central European perspective. Current techno-scientific civilization is systematically obscuring our connection with the metaphysical world, and serious reflection is often replaced by cynical polemics, such as the debate about 'who came first'. The paper focuses on the ideas and attitudes of the Czech Catholic priest Tomáš Halík and Slovak Catholic missionaries in Azerbaijan. Both groups represent people who are engaged in dialogue with the Muslim world, on the one hand in everyday life in predominantly Shi`a Azerbaijan, on the other hand in scholarly circles and the Czech intellectual milieu. By surveying their beliefs and opinions it is possible to throw some light on perspectives of inter-religious dialogue in fast-changing conditions. People of Muslim faith who in the broadest sense stand close to the ideals of Fethullah Gülen, but do not necessarily form an organizational backup as his supporters, are sometimes termed as those who create with him the 'unity of thought' (*fikir birliği*). The present contribution would like to point out that similar "unity of basic principles" should bring about those who urge the necessity of dialogue and sharing of values.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam have lived since time immemorial at close quarters, and they are likewise so closely related in a structural sense as religions of revelation, that tensions and petty rivalries have been common.

(Hans Küng 1987: 6)

As a Muslim, I accept all Prophets and Books sent to different peoples throughout history, and regard belief in them as an essential principle of being Muslim.

(M. Fethullah Gülen 2000: 4)

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1. Introduction

A few years ago, on the eve of the Christmas holiday and New Year's Day, Czech Roman-Catholic Archbishop Miroslav Vlk has sent his congratulations to Karol Sidon, the Jewish rabbi of Prague. "But his Christmas is not a holiday for me," reacted the rabbi, he himself equally of Czech nationality, and further explained his position at length: "I also do not send him congratulations to our New Year. Cardinal Vlk means well, and I am pleased, but at the same time under such a display I perceive a certain meticulously calculated Christian attitude that counts on all of us becoming one day Christians".

The afore mentioned minor example reminds us of the fact that mutual perception and interfaith relations cannot be seen in isolation from their historical, doctrinal, societal or political context. Likewise, people of different religious, ideological or ethnic background would often like wholeheartedly to engage in a dialogue, but each would prefer to carry it on a little bit differently. Some are prepared for self-criticism, indeed even self-irony, acting friendly, while other people may be more reserved or trying to approach partners with an enormous ego. There are those who have no mutual reminiscences of a conflictual past, but someone else's mind may be full of unpleasant memories that influence dialogue and interaction until the present day. For Muslims too, dialogue can be understood as reflective thinking and exchange of inner experiences, whereas others may approach dialogue as *da'wa* (in Turkish *davet*), a term that is translated mostly as 'appeal', 'call' to believe in Islam, 'invitation' to share the same faith, sometimes 'challenge', but also 'mission' or 'propaganda'.⁵⁶⁵ Be it as it may, secular-minded or agnostic Westerners in particular could feel that such a dialogue is unattractive, although it may be reflecting mutually acceptable boundaries of dialogue for Christians who are engaged in missionary activities. The best response to such 'problems of definition' could be in intercultural dialogue that is not based on or rooted in any particular philosophical, religious or semantic system, but this may seem almost unattainable, indeed at best illusory, especially when participants have their own religious convictions.

In the age of radical pluralism and massive contact between various faiths, however, the necessity of sharing certain basic values is an area of considerable importance if humans are to behave as humans, and not as Rambo-style super-humans. Dialogue then, in spite of its many shortcomings, may be the only practical way of empathic approximation to the Truth, and the way to put ourselves in somebody else's place. When debating issues of inter-religious dialogue, the matter in question is always much more than just theology, aspects of a political and economic character are involved almost by definition and conflicting claims often cause discord rather than harmony.

2. Delusive History?

History, especially in a 'mythopoetic' garment, is a pet topic for evaluation too, although almost never on purely academic grounds. Historical events resemble deep sediments in human relations and not even the majority of them are presented, let alone acknowledged, in unison. If one only thinks of the loss of Constantinople as witnessed by the Christians, and the loss of Granada, or possibly Jerusalem, as perceived by the Muslims, it becomes clear how much historical events influence and deeply hurt the mental ecology of those who are concerned.

⁵⁶⁵ See the headword 'da'wa' in EI² (1960-2003) *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (New Edition, Leiden, E.J.Brill); also Mendel, M. (1995) The Concept of "ad-Da'wa al-Islāmiya". *Archív Orientální*, 63, 286 – 304.



What is more unfortunate, however, is that serious debates are often replaced with 'peripheral historical consciousness' and polemics, such as the one that deals with the 'who came first' issue. On the one side, for example, the argument sometimes goes as follows: it was only in 863 AD that Byzantine missionaries Constantine and Methodius were invited to *Moravia Magna* (on the territory of present-day Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary), and only in 988 AD that Prince Vladimir of Russia accepted Christianity, almost three centuries after the arrival of Islam to *al-Andalus* (in 711 AD) and long after Islam established itself in the Volga region, southeast of Moscow. In this context, Muhammad Abbas, editor-in-chief of the Czech webpage *Muslimské listy* (the Muslim Journal), observes that Islam arrived in Andalusia about two hundred years before Christianity reached Central Europe, the argument which apparently wants to indicate that Muslims are justified in feeling at home in Europe at least to the degree Christians do (*Revue Prostor* 2006: 145).⁵⁶⁶ As an illustration of how zealously these matters can be treated one need only mention the argument of the imam of one of Moscow's four mosques who points out that the word 'minority' should not be used in connection with Muslims living within the territory of the Russian Federation, because Islam "emerged on Russia's territory far earlier than Christianity did".⁵⁶⁷

Arguments of primordality on the Muslim side are countered by similar undertakings on the Christian side. Here the notion of Spanish *reconquista* is instrumental, as if those who have lost the lion's share of the Iberian peninsula to the Muslim armies, namely the Visigoths, were culturally, religiously or ethnically identical to those who 're-captured' Spain several centuries later, namely Castilians, Basques, Catalans, Portuguese and others. In his famous saying, Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset once asked to his great astonishment how is it possible to call something that lasted for eight centuries a 'reconquest'?⁵⁶⁸ To name but one additional example, the Christian Crusades were also partly driven by pursuit of the 'primordial state of affairs' and 'legitimate' claims, whilst these were further supported by genuine anti-Muslim philippics.

Perhaps even more insidiously, because more in evidence for the present generations, the Muslims of Bosnia were recently depicted by some non-Muslims as aliens and late-comers in the Balkans, as those who arrived with the Ottomans roughly six hundred years after the Slavs, and consequently those who should 'go home to Turkey'. Strangely enough, the same argument, reduced to absurdity and slightly altered in accents, could be used even against the Turkish Muslims by claiming that the apostles disseminated the message of Christ in Turkey (or as contemporaries would put it, in Galatia, Antiochia, Cilicia or Pamphylia) well before the arrival of Islam to Anatolia. Against this background, we may be tempted to ask then, how many years of residence does one need under any given conditions to be considered indigenous?⁵⁶⁹

As this brief sketch shows, the irrepressible power of history and the natural human passion for polemics are hard nuts to crack. That is why it is not by coincidence that Catholic theology since the Second Vatican Council urges everyone to forget the past. The first step in establishing dialogue, as understood by the prominent and charismatic Turkish Muslim thinker, religious reformer (*müceddid, mujaddid*) and activist Fethullah Gülen too, is "forgetting the past" (Gülen 2000: 5). No

⁵⁶⁶ Author's frequent attempt to avoid country's present name, Spain, in favour of *al-Andalus* is deliberate and significant, if not abusive in itself, as if somebody referred to Turkey constantly as *Byzantium*.

⁵⁶⁷ See 'A benign growth', *The Economist*, 4 April 2007.

⁵⁶⁸ In Spanish original: "cómo se puede llamar Reconquista a una cosa que duró ocho siglos"?

⁵⁶⁹ Pinson, M. Ed. (1996) *The Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge), p. x – xi.



matter how deep are differences among human beings, in our world that is marked by various aberrations, argues Fethullah Gülen, it is important to remove distances in understanding through 'unity of thought' and to work for the sake of coming together (*bir vahdet teşkiline çalışmak*). The oft-repeated assertion about forgetting the past should certainly not invalidate history as a scholarly and academic discipline, neither should it promote and encourage historical amnesia. It is only a symbolic *Ausdruck* that aims at challenging our self-confidence, whereas for obvious reasons we should still make efforts to understand better our separate conflictual histories.

3. Tomáš Halík and the Idea of a Link between the Secular West and Islam

When we look at the possibilities of finding interlocutors for Gülen's peace initiatives on the Central European scene, the name of professor and priest Tomáš Halík comes to my mind. No doubt, nowadays only a handful Christian thinkers are similarly open to atheists as well as to non-Christians in the Czech Republic. Before 1989 a clandestine student of theology in communist Czechoslovakia, Halík was active in underground church and samizdat publishing work that developed around Czech dissident circles embodied later by ex-President Václav Havel. After the fall of communism he became the President of the Czech Christian Academy and promoted Czech-German reconciliation and ecumenical dialogue.

Having been influenced deeply by current sociological concepts, well versed in the religious science, Halík is a prolific writer, widely known for his extensive publication activities and media presentations (noisy tele-evangelism is not his niche, however), scientific and popular as well, both at home and abroad. Since the mid-1990s he has been internationally involved in promoting dialogue and inter-religious understanding in India, Japan, the USA, Israel, Thailand, Nepal, Great Britain as well as two Muslim countries, Egypt's Al-Azhar University in Cairo and Jordan. As is usually the case, there are also those who are discomfited by Halík's openness. One critical voice, for example, described him as "the opposite of an apologist", and *eo ipso* a person who is not defending his faith, but "recontextualizing it."⁵⁷⁰

Since Halík understands politics as a spiritual duty, it came as no surprise, that he was even considered to stand for the president of the Czech Republic in 2002. Similarly as in the case of M. F. Gülen, to attain political position is generally outside and sometimes even contrary to Halík's primary objectives, but there are nevertheless elements of a political project in his activities anyway, though he never formulates political or ideological slogans. Drawing from ideas of Fethullah Gülen we could say that if a man who tries to avoid politics *per se* engages in bringing up a new enlightened "golden generation" (*altın nesil*), he as an individual, by means of a silent and conciliatory evolution rather than a noisy and bloody revolution, also possesses a societal and political project to transform and re-shape the future administrative, entrepreneurial, decision-making and ruling structure of the state, figuratively speaking one prepares the ground for an alternative state ("*alternatif devlet*").

⁵⁷⁰ Other critics also drew attention to the fact that Halík "treats more traditional Catholic thinking with contempt and labels it dogmatic" or, more straightforwardly, that "he does not feel intellectually at home in a priestly environment." See Fuchs, J. (1998) Tomáš Halík – "Ptal jsem se cest." *Distance*, 1/4 (retrieved in August 2007 from <http://www.distance.cz/ieindex2.htm>). Furthermore, we could legitimately ask whether Halík's pluralism would also translate into readiness to become internally Muslim in order to experience the deepest avenues of Islam, as some 'progressive' Christians propose.



From the strictly Christian point of view it may seem a bit discomfoting when Halík states that “secular Western society is neither the end of Christianity and religion, nor an enemy of Christianity, but a form of Christianity” (Halík 2004: 61).⁵⁷¹ To put it more precisely, however, it is important to say that Halík understands Catholicism as one of the historical ‘isms’ that no longer shape our lives today. Being the dominating principle in Europe roughly until the 19th century, Catholicism has lost its monopoly of religion as *religio* and is today in the period of decline. Since religion, and later also science, have ceased to be the *religio* of Western societies, claims Halík, the medias have taken their place. Reflecting our deep-seated aesthetic and visual dispositions, they are today’s “*religio* of the West”, new altars of the times incarnated in television and PC screens. Europe of the present is not less religious than before, reassures Halík nevertheless, she only picked the media as a new “functional equivalent of the previous religious systems” that frames our existence into the “culture of image” (Halík 2004: 40).

Meanwhile, he differentiates between religion as *religio*, *confessio* and *pietas*. Whereas *religio* integrates the society as a whole and has been distinctive in Europe during the pre-modern era, *confessio*, based on doctrine and institution, links together certain groups as *gemeinschafts*. Finally, assures Halík, *pietas*, understood as spirituality and personal choice, governs our present time of Catholicity. Instead of Catholicism Halík proposes the non-hegemonic concept of Catholicity.

For Halík, secular society is in its essence a victory of “faith over religion”, more exactly of Catholicity over Catholicism, because unlike in the era of Catholicism, today it is possible to think responsibly about the faith we confess. Boundless secularism should be avoided though, especially in its extreme form: secular fundamentalism that he denounces as “late Jacobinism” which breaches the principles of laic society. As he does not wish to exclude spirituality from social and political life, Halík (Halík 2004: 117, 126-128) backs those who think that we should revise the ‘paradigm of secularization’.⁵⁷² In general, it is possible to argue that his ideas on secularism as a non-hegemonic principle that refrains from incursions into individuals’ private lives are akin to the reasoning included in the final declaration of the Abant platform, a regular forum of distinct voices on Turkey’s pressing societal issues, as well as to the ideas of Fethullah Gülen, who is not construing secularism as a non-Muslim phenomenon either. Summarizing their argument that secularism should be defined primarily as

⁵⁷¹ The Czech Republic is usually mentioned among the most atheist countries in the world where believers in God represent only a minority. Partly due to historical legacy, Czechs view ‘church Christianity’ and institutionalized religion in their majority with deep suspicion, and this fact is reflected also by Halík. According to the Czech Ministry of the Interior’s recent report, in 2005 there were some 11 thousand Muslims living in the Czech Republic (out of 10.3m inhabitants), about 63% of them are classified as originating from the Sunni Turkic ‘sub-civilization’, mostly immigrants from Russia, Kazakhstan, ex-Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Turkey. The two big congregational mosques in the Czech Republic are situated in Prague and Brno. Halík has supported the construction of the first mosque in the Czech Republic after the fall of communism. See Topinka, D. Ed. (2007) *Integrační proces muslimů v České republice – pilotní projekt* (Praha, VeryVision)

⁵⁷² He refers to the article “Secularization, R.I.P.” by Stark, R. – Finke, R. (2000) *Acts of Faith* (Berkeley and Los Angeles).



a legal and not as a politico-ideological, philosophical, ecclesiastical or behavioural issue, Gülen and his supporters take stand against the notion of a boundless secularism too.⁵⁷³

Let us now limit our discussion on Halık's ideas to those aspects that cover the area of interfaith relations and understanding. In his essays Halık lays specifically considerable emphasis on the idea that Christianity could serve as a link between the secular West and the Muslim world. Christianity, as is clear from what he says, has a unique and so far unused chance to communicate, so to speak, to both sides. On the one hand, having had many common characteristics with Islam and Judaism, Christianity stands close to its sister monotheistic religions that originated in the Middle East. On the other hand, it is in contact with the "laicist humanism" of the West, because secularism in fact has its roots in the heart of Christianity (Halık 2004: 286). Shortly and aptly, he proposes to hold out "both hands to both sides" in order to create a "hermeneutics of trust" and "methodological sympathy". At the core of Halık's idiom lies his idea of the 'third path' between Catholic triumphalism and militant secularism. Faithful to his commitments, he considers it necessary to reject both religious and secular fundamentalism. We may notice that in the writings of Fethullah Gülen similar 'antifundamentalist paradigm' with reference to the extremist religio-political or militant Islamism is convincingly defined as a clear enemy of humankind as *humanum*. Gülen's claims that politicizing of Islam represents one of the biggest insults toward religion ("dini politize edenler dine büyük kötülük etmiş olurlar") stands very close to the famous statement of the outspoken Egyptian Sheikh Muhammad Sa'îd al-^cAshmawi, namely that "God intended Islam to be a religion, but men have attempted to turn it into politics" (Ashmawy 1994). Likewise, Gülen warns that 'politicizing religion will harm religion before it harms any particular government' (Ünal – Williams 2000: 36).

4. Abrahamic Religions: Coexistence, Tolerance and Dialogue

The most concrete achievement so far of the Christian-Muslim dialogue, indeed of the triologue between Muslims, Christians and Jews, can be summarized as the acknowledgement of the common Abrahamic heritage that both faiths share with Judaism. Meanwhile, Halık warns all sides not to fall into the temptation to "expropriate Abraham only for self-satisfaction" in order to show him as a

⁵⁷³ The platform that is organized by the associates of Fethullah Gülen near the Anatolian city of Bolu deals annually with various issues, the one on secularism has summarized its conclusions in the 1998 Final Declaration (*Abant Sonuç Bildirgesi*). The state is here understood as a "human institution that does not possess sanctity... [it] removes all obstacles from religions... [and] guarantees everyone freedom of religion...[so that] secularism is essentially an attitude of the state, and a secular state cannot define religion or pursue a religious policy" (Yavuz – Esposito 2003: 251-253; compare also Ünal – Williams 2000: 152). Contrary to these proposals were the statements made by the former Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer (2000 – 2001) that verged on secular fundamentalism. As an illustration let us mention only two cases in point. During his opening speech at the 21st World Congress of Philosophy in August 2003 in Istanbul President Sezer proclaimed that "philosophy must be modern and secular". In September 2004 during a symposium on religion organized by the state *Diyanet* he declared that "secularism is a way of life, which should be adopted by an individual". Fethullah Gülen, in contrast, is inspired by the idea that "a state is secular because secularism is a legal issue" and as a consequence he stands against the ideological secularism (or laicism) promoted by the Turkish Kemalist hard-liners, a unique model of militant wordliness that is better to call secularity or 'laiciness' (in Turkish labeled *lâikçilik* instead of the official term *lâiklik*) – find more details in Türköne, M. (2006) *Türk Modernleşmesi* (İstanbul, Lotus). p. 120-123 and 267-410. In general terms, the American-style (ethos of) secularism which is well-known for its respect for a wide range of religious liberties strengthened by clear constitutional guarantees represents an example that the mainstream of Turkish Muslim elites considers worthy of imitation. Because of the historical legacy, the issue of legal pluralism is also often raised by some Muslim circles (e.g. Ali Bulaç), but this idea is opposed by the *lâik* judiciary.



“Christian before Christianity” or a “Muslim prior to Islam”, in other words he urges us to take pains to prevent any sort of domestication or particularization of Abraham (Halík, 2004: 296). On All Saints Day Halík encourages his co-religionists to think also of those men and women who remember their own saints worshipping at “all the other Christian churches, but also in synagogues and mosques” (Halík 2004: 199). Furthermore, he feels that in addressing sainthood Christians should not start with St. Benedict, but with “Saint Abraham” (Halík 2004: 199). Proceeding from the assumption that there can be no talk or attempt at assertion of shared superiority over other non-monotheistic religions, the idea of strengthening the ‘Abrahamic ecumenae’ is closely linked, in his opinion at least, with efforts to search for points of continuity with secular Western society (Halík 2004: 73).

As an important participant in interfaith dialogue, he warns us not to give way to a cheap politeness that is without true interest (Halík 2002: 81) Ideally, second-hand dealers with dialogue are truly unwelcome. Hence dialogue, underlines Halík, should not have a missionary character, the missionary work in consequence should not be regarded as identical with proselytism. As he sees a disjunction between dialogue and mission, he opposes winning people of other religions over to ‘our’ side (Halík 2002: 87). Being aware of the difficulties that impede dialogue, Halík reflects on the strategies for coming closer to Muslims without destroying the bridges connecting Christians with the West (Halík 2004: 298) To get to know other religions has to do with serious mental work which should be done by ‘inspecting’ religious life in its own home conditions (Halík 2002: 78).

In spite of having been blamed from time to time for using bons mots and wisecracks, he makes a wide use of turns of phrases. His favourite quote concerning the three revealed religions and atheists is the one borrowed from Nicolas Lashe who emphasizes that “Jews, Christians, Muslims and atheists are at one with each other in that they do not believe in gods.” It seems to me that a similar spirit must have led Fethullah Gülen to say that “...one cannot be a Muslim unless one believes in the pre-Islamic prophets.”⁵⁷⁴

Halík finds special liking for contemplation and common prayer in order to overcome the “fear of contact” with believers of other religions, the fact that he expresses in the following way:

Allahu akbar, It is God who is magnificent, sounds several times a day in so many parts of the world from mouths of a billion of our Muslim brothers and sisters; ‘There is no God except Him’ starts their confession, ‘There is no God except Him’. It is necessary to pronounce loudly these words to all corners of the world (Revue Prostor 2006: 282).

He turns against those who would intend to adopt a bellicose definition of the term *ecclesia militans* and transform their spiritual struggle into the fight against others “from our midst and outside”. This he compares to the externalization of the term ‘jihad’ which, according to his apprehension, equally transforms the spiritual struggle with our own sins into a fight under the “this worldly” logic (Halík 2004: 200-201). Yet, what is missing here is a closer clarification that would explain in greater detail the semantics of the word jihad in its Arabic original, meaning in principle ‘striving on the path of God’. This would be appropriate in order to make distinction between ‘jihad’ and ‘qital’ (killing, war). Moreover it is always necessary to elucidate to most European readers that numerous Muslim thinkers, including Gülen, differentiate between a greater and lesser *jihad*. Greater jihad is understood by Gülen as a fight against evil desires, convictions and superstitions or as an internal struggle with one’s self. Lesser jihad means a material fight, but as I understand it, always in the sense

⁵⁷⁴ Saritoprak, Z. (2005) Introduction. *The Muslim World*, 95, p. 326.



of *iustum bellum*, not *bellum sacrum* that is more often than not translated as 'the holy war' (qtd. in Yavuz – Esposito 2003: 178). In addition, argues Gülen, the fight with unbelievers or non-Muslims is always to be comprehended only as a lesser jihad. Apart from that, failure in a greater jihad cannot lead to any success in a lesser jihad.⁵⁷⁵

Halík's irenic approach becomes more palpable when he writes that for him it is unacceptable to join those who demonize Islam after September 11, 2001, whilst he simultaneously rejects Western fundamentalists' call for "rearming the West ideologically", an idea that reminds him of the rule of a strong hand.⁵⁷⁶ At the same time Halík, however, refuses to negotiate with terrorists and he gives preference to those peaceful people who try to understand the Islamic world and the "circumstances that produce deviant offshoots of Islam". A rapid reaction to confront terrorism as a 'diabolic method' came within only one day after the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York from Fethullah Gülen as well. In an open letter he wrote among other things that "[J]ust as Islam is not a religion of terrorism, any Muslim who correctly understands Islam cannot be thought of as a terrorist".⁵⁷⁷

Viewed from yet another angle, it may be useful to go back to the idea of tolerance and moderation which represents a common ground in both Gülen's and Halík's writings. As has been indicated elsewhere, Gülen attributes the quality of moderation and "middle way" to Islam itself, more exactly to the idea which can be found in the Holy Qur'an as expressed by the well-known verse 143 in the *Sūrat al-baqara* ("and so we made you the community of the middle way", in Arabic '*wa-kadhālika ja'alnākum 'ummataṅ wasataṅ*'). The balance between materialism and spiritualism, modernity and tradition, or asceticism and worldliness is then *de facto* an expression of the Muslim concept of the 'straight path' (Kuru 2003: 117-118). Furthermore, Gülen based his conception of tolerance on ideas of charity and love. In his effort to engage in inter-religious tolerance and coexistence Gülen condemned the use of term *kāfir* to describe people of other faiths and he stimulated believers of various faiths and urged all those who go to mosques, churches and synagogues to shake hands with each other. Similarly, on the intra-religious Muslim-to-Muslim level he called on Sunni Turks to build mosques next to Alevi assembly centres (*cemevleri*) in order to give example to the outside world, moreover he openly expressed sympathy for both practicing and non-practicing Muslims. Nevertheless, according to some observers, Gülen's tolerance in a plural society - Turkish as well as Western - is still not all-encompassing and his attitudes towards the Iranian Twelver Shi'is, women, individual rights, communists or ethnic Kurds – let alone members of the Church of Scientology or gay people – are insufficiently clarified, leaving thus space for speculations as far as the honesty of his endeavour is concerned. For example, Gülen's harsh criticism, suspicion and deep mistrust towards the Iranians (mainly Persians) and in a lesser extent also towards the Arabs indicate that quite a lot of innovative work remains to be done on both sides in order to broaden the scope of intra-religious understanding.

⁵⁷⁵ <http://www.mfethullahgulen.net/questions> (retrieved in Spring 2001) or see Pirický, G. (2004) *Islám v Turecku: Fethullah Gülen a Nurcuovia* (Trnava, UCM). p. 102-103.

⁵⁷⁶ <http://www.halik.cz/ja/before.php> (retrieved in August 2007). It is also noteworthy in this context that as early as in 2003 Halík condemned the USA for her war against Iraq with the argument that it is impossible to use military intervention in order to "implant" Western style democracy (Halík 2003: 193 – 194). In contrast, he supported the intervention of NATO forces against Serbia in favour of the Kosovo Albanians in 1998.

⁵⁷⁷ Quoted in Michel, T. (2002) Turkish Experience for Muslim-Christian Dialogue: A Thinker: B. Z. Nursi & An Activist: M. F. Gülen. Paper presented at the Conference held in Australian Sydney: *Peace and Dialogue in a Plural Society: Common Values and Responsibilities*, p. 5.



On the religious level, needless to say, it is Catholicity that Halík situates in the middle from where he extends moderation and tolerance to both non-Christian believers and atheists. Since man is an “incurably religious being” according to his opinion, the ‘middle way’ serves to bring closer to the Catholic spirituality all those “urban agnostics” who feel interested. If Halík’s principal aim is to extend “both hands to both sides” in various lifetime situations, then his intermediary position in the middle dictates a pragmatic, but judicious and spiritual, ‘middle way’ that is nevertheless not just an adjustment, but a dignified way of arguing. Yet, apart from following Halík’s endeavours with admiration, concerning his strategy and practice vis-à-vis the Czech atheist majority one is also tempted to ask doubtfully whether it is not ‘refreshingly naïve’ to await something more than marginal results that go outside of the general public. Also, further obstacles are based on the fact that Halík’s activities are not supported by such a powerful and influential dialogue and entrepreneurial foundations, school networks and media outlets as in the case of the Gülen community (e.g. *Gazeteciler ve Yazarlar Vakfı, İş Hayatı Dayanışma Derneği, Akyazlı Vakfı* or *Feza Gazetecilik*).

5. The Empowerment of School Manuals

One of the issues raised by Fethullah Gülen has to do with a proposal to set up a new type of education, where science is combined with personal character under the formula ‘religion plus knowledge’, yet the religious commitment is inculcated through personal example, interaction and service (in Turkish *hizmet*) rather than teaching. The theoretical aspects of his understanding of the ‘middle way’ are put in practice through the upbringing and education of the young generation. Complementary in this regard is Gülen’s emphasis on the future of every individual that “is closely related to the impressions and influences experienced during childhood and youth. If children and young people are brought up in a climate where their enthusiasm is stimulated with higher feelings, they will have vigorous minds and display good morals and virtues” (Gülen 2005: 39). Consequently, in their early stages, children are best adjusted to stimulate their feelings of coexistence, dialogue and cooperation, and to become committed to them.

Education is also highly valued by Tomáš Halík and in his estimation we will not manage European integration without reform of national and confessional history, therefore a certain rewriting of our national histories is needed, because “the art of reading our own history also from the perspective of others” is a necessary dimension of European coming together (Halík 2004: 153-155). Pessimists would say that religions belong to their differing histories and segregated interpretations, characterized by specific ‘historical matrixes’, and so – to use Kenneth Cragg’s terms – it is best to never venture “to translate their own ethos into the idiom of another” (Cragg 1999: 2). Furthermore, it must be borne in mind that reading one’s own history from the perspective of others is also delicate, because it may hit self-confidence (Halík 2004: 154).

From my personal perspective, in order to coexist and cooperate in harmony and to promote a certain ‘unity of thought’, the role of school manuals and teaching materials, to say nothing about the visual media, has to be considered very seriously. As the French scholar Etienne Copeaux emphasizes in his monograph, school manuals dealing with history and religion have a rare quality in comparison to other books and publications: they hardly ever cross state boundaries and are therefore hidden from a broader audience (Copeaux 1997: 21). Foreign scholars and observers are usually unaware of the content of *curricula* taught at primary or secondary schools in various countries. More significantly though, for the majority of young people, school manuals – which are usually meticulously prepared



and overseen by the state authorities – represent the only source of information on alien cultures and religions in a lifetime. Thanks to the fact that these publications influence human beings in their formative period, it is probably right to say that school manuals brand us for our whole lives.⁵⁷⁸ What is even more important, they considerably form our identity and collective memory, and above all, contribute to consensus building within different societies (Copeaux 1997: 22). Consequently, when writing about the historical and religious developments of ‘rival’ cultures, the general outline, especially in school manuals, should always be presented in a way recognizable to the other side, with winners’ and losers’ points of view next to each other.

Because of the often conflicting views on history and religion, wholesale acknowledgement or adoption of rivals’ renderings of the past cannot be intended here, yet certain comparative perspective on the level of school manuals for pupils could perfectly help to transform mutual exclusiveness into inclusiveness at an age when minors form their ideas about the ‘*Gestalt*’ of this world. Acquiring this ‘dialogue literacy’ is supposedly a long-term process, but if the aim is to build more stable and harmonious society, educational reform has to start with school manuals as well and assure an honest two-way traffic of information on religions and cultures.

6. The Salesians of Don Bosco in Azerbaijan

My second case in point is an example of dialogue through mission as being witnessed by the Slovak Salesian missionaries in predominantly Shi’a Azerbaijan, who had no previous experiences of massive interaction with Muslims.⁵⁷⁹ Although dialogue has often been understood as antithetical to mission, “believing that one compromises the other” (Zebiri 1997: 37), interfaith dialogue is nevertheless sometimes, be that as it may, closely connected with interfaith competition. But in practice, apart from Catholics there are many other educational and missionary centres in present-day Azerbaijan, among them high schools and educational centres run by the Turkish Sunni Muslim associates of Fethullah Gülen.⁵⁸⁰

To put these two groups side by side as partners in dialogue in Azerbaijan is more accidental than it is genuine, of course. And sure enough, various Christian circles and scholars of Turkish religious communities have already compared the followers of Fethullah Gülen to other organizations, such as

⁵⁷⁸ For further information see e.g. Ferro, M. (2004) *Comment on raconte l'histoire aux enfants à travers le monde* (Paris, Payot) or Burckhardt, J. (2007) *Judgements on History and Historians* (London, Routledge).

⁵⁷⁹ The society of Salesians, made up of both clerics and laymen, was founded in Italy by St John Bosco in 1855 and named after St Francis de Sales. As far as Muslims in Slovakia are concerned, the following may be said in brief: with its clear Catholic majority and Protestant minority, Slovakia has only some 5 thousand Muslims according to the unofficial reports (we do not have authentic statistics), mostly immigrants, out of 5.3m inhabitants. The Slovak authorities have not allowed the erection of a single congregational mosque up to now. According to the new and also more strict legislation adopted in 2007, registration of religious communities and churches requires at least 20 thousand signatures of citizens with permanent residency in Slovakia. The new laws are considered discriminatory by the Muslims living in the country.

⁵⁸⁰ The late Turkish Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit once said that ‘Gülen’s schools’ in Azerbaijan had saved the country from falling under Iranian influence.



the Catholic Opus Dei or the Jesuits.⁵⁸¹ While the Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei (“Work of God”), an organization dedicated to missionary activities, has developed from the Spanish national movement to a worldwide net of members and supporters who dedicate their talents to the service of God, the Jesuits (*Societas Iesu*) are among the largest and most influential religious orders of the Roman Catholic church. As far as Protestantism is concerned, points of convergence were stressed by some researchers who likened the entrepreneurial mentality or even the reformist agenda of Gülen’s followers to the allegedly similar phenomenon initiated earlier in the Protestant world.⁵⁸²

Educational activities and the engagement of lay people, side by side with their missionary role, represent the bulk of the activities of the Salesians of Don Bosco. Although certainly not representing scholar-missionaries, the Salesians are recognized by the Catholic Church as an institute of pontifical right “dedicated to apostolic work”. They promote Christian education of the young and help to erect hostels and houses for young people in difficulties and build retreat houses. Being educators of the faith for the ordinary people, they usually proceed by means of social communication. For the Salesians, “the Christian perfection of its associates is obtained by the exercise of spiritual and corporal works of charity towards the young, especially the poor, and the education of boys for the priesthood”. If Halík’s critics reproach him for trying to leave out more traditional Christians, even for being a pluralist with much airing among agnostics or atheists; Salesians are firmly integrated into mainstream Catholicism and adopt an inclusivist approach to non-Christians that is in accord with the Vatican’s line today.

In Azerbaijan, the work of Salesian missionaries concentrates on the revival of the Catholic Church in the country.⁵⁸³ Due to the harsh conditions under the Soviet rule, the Catholic Church in Azerbaijan, albeit small in numbers, has been scraping a living for seventy years without a church or a priest. It was only in 2007, more than seventeen years after the fall of the totalitarian communist regime and seven decades after the destruction of the original church building in Baku by the Bolsheviks (1931), that the first Catholic church on Azeri territory was re-established by the Slovak Salesian missionaries

⁵⁸¹ For example, two leading scholars working on the Gülen movement, Hakan Yavuz and Bayram Balci, expressed these views in an interview for the Prague-based Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; available at <http://www.rferl.org/features/features Article.aspx?m=06&y=2004&d=A6393817-E7D9-4C2C-951A-EDBC2131DE25> (on 7 June 2004). According to Yavuz, both members of Opus Dei and associates of Gülen represent elitist missionary religious movements that are characterized by the lack of formal structure, secrecy and participation in networking activities “seeking to influence Turkey’s polity by networking with decision-makers”. In this context I refer also to Introvigne, M. (2006) Turkish Religious Market(s), in: M. H. Yavuz (Ed) *The Emergence of a New Turkey: Democracy and the AK Party* (Salt Lake City, The University of Utah Press). p. 42. See also ‘A Bridge to Inter-religious Cooperation: The Gülen-Jesuit Educational Nexus’ (forthcoming), paper that is planned to be presented and published at the international conference *Muslim World in Transition: Contributions of the Gülen Movement*, London 25-27 October 2007. In author’s view the Jesuits and the ‘Fethullahçis’ share similar approaches to education and both movements aim at educating new generations holistically in science and ethics as well. Besides, other common aspect is to be found in the importance they give to the lay leadership.

⁵⁸² See Pirický, G. (1999) Some Observations on New Departures in Modernist Interpretations of Islam in Contemporary Turkey: *Fethullah Gülen Cemaati*. *Asian and African Studies*, 8, 90.

⁵⁸³ Some 350 Christians are living nowadays in Azerbaijan, 150 locals and 200 foreigners, further information at <http://www.saleziani.sk/azerbajdzan-dar-polskeho-prezidenta-katolikom-azerbajdzanu.html>



and consecrated.⁵⁸⁴ This has been made possible thanks to the positive, though uneasy, steps of the Azeri government and its Muslim community. The donors of the new church have included the Azeri sheikh of Islam Allahşükür Paşazade. Apart from that, Azeri Muslims have been praised by Christians for artistically creative work they have done on some of the interior parts of the new Catholic church: windowpanes, font or ceramic composition of the main altar.⁵⁸⁵ The church is dominated by a five meters high statue of the Virgin Mary – the work of local artist Hüseyin. The statue is said to be the symbol of unity of both Orthodox and Catholic churches as well as Muslims, since for all of them Mary represents the mother of Jesus, and the value of this connecting aspect is complemented by a firmly established common-held belief that Jesus will return.

On the whole then, here we are witnessing an example of those Catholics who see a genuine link between dialogue and mission in its more classical sense, similarly to a great many Muslims who perceive dialogue to be an intrinsic part of *da'wa*. Their preaching is combined with 'service', one is even tempted to use the Turkish word *hizmet*, yet on closer examination, it is probably right to say that the first represents a smaller proportion of Salesians' missionary activity. Doing good deeds for the needy may serve as a point of intersection with numerous believers of different faiths. For Salesians, it seems, dialogue is a "means of becoming better acquainted with what the 'other' actually believes in order to facilitate the communication of the message to them in an appropriate form" (Zebiri 1997: 38), or an umbrella term that can serve at least to reduce political conflict. Surely, those who consider dialogue as a cover for proselytism on the Muslim side remain afraid and unconvinced as far as the motives for the revival of Catholicism in Azerbaijan are concerned. It only remains for us to hope that dialogue will be led not in order to persuade, but in the interest of accommodating each other.

7. Towards Unity of Basic Principles

People of Muslim faith who in the broadest sense stand close to the ideals of Fethullah Gülen, but do not necessarily form an organizational backup as his supporters, are sometimes termed as those who create with him the 'unity of thought' (*fikir birliği*) that translates into a certain 'mind linkage' (*fikir bağlantı*). The present essay would also like to point out that similar 'unity of basic principles' should bring together those who urge the necessity of dialogue and sharing of values, in brief, who side with the 'jihad for tolerance and cooperation'.

As I tried to insinuate, excessive passion for 'hegemonic' history may be more a contributing cause to present problems, as well as an impediment on the way to a true and genuine dialogue, because history as a human science is subject to human errors and distortions. It is more history in conversation and comparison that could make intelligible our different human destinies, but here too "it means being truly ready for the questions and *not* being too ready with the answers as if they were all foreordained" (Cragg 1999: 11). Forms of evaluation of our respective traditions must be coupled wherever and whenever possible with the irreducible dictum: be critical but not negative. As has been

⁵⁸⁴ See their own webpages at <http://www.catholic.az> and <http://www.misie.sdb.sk>. Slovak missionaries include Jozef Daniel Pravda (2000 - 2003), Martin Bonkalo, Ján Čapla (senior head of mission), Peter Červeň, Marián Kališ, Štefan Kormančík and Jozef Marek. In the course of his ninety-sixth pontifical journey to Azerbaijan (22 – 23 May 2002), the late Pope John Paul II praised both former Azeri President Heydar Aliyev, the *sheikh al-islām* of Transcaucasia Allahşükür Paşazade and the Salesians for their contributions leading to the rebirth of Catholicism in the country.

⁵⁸⁵ In addition, certain Muslim businessman met all expenses for the altar.



emphasized, it is insufficient to read other religious systems in the light of the assumptions of one's own, thus producing a picture which is not recognized by members of the tradition which is under scrutiny.

Although on the whole we are nowadays experiencing numerous downs in the relations between the major monotheistic religions, and even in better times we will certainly never achieve a complete harmony in Christian-Muslim encounters, the basic need for understanding remains. Indifference is not the right track because it was only in the times of the Roman Empire that territories outside the imperial domain could be described in terms of '*hic sunt leones*', today, however, we need to get to know and understand the inner experiences of all previously unknown and distant religious and cultural systems in order to survive. Accommodation between Christians and Jews has been reached in course of the twentieth century not so much on a theological basis, but rather on historical and societal platform. Similarly, Muslims and Christians could expand distinctive paths towards accommodation and dialogue by drawing inspiration from their specific interests and conditions. Encouraging examples are not so rare as it seems on the surface. Recently, for instance, Czech Christians, Jews and Muslims, irrespective of their Abrahamic roots, have banded together against the proposal of a legal norm that would make euthanasia unpunishable. A distinguished Czech religionist Jaroslav Krejčí speaks of the 'ethos of symbiosis', an ethical principle which asks for stretching a point towards all religions or social theories that are willing to respect the Western conception of human rights (qtd. in Müller 2005: 123). In order to reduce the distance between various religious denominations, Fethullah Gülen, by the same token, proposed to open a theological faculty in Urfa (Harran), a major town in south-eastern Anatolia that is considered to be the birth-place of Abraham, where scholars and teachers of the three monotheist religions would teach together. The call for Muslim-Christian cooperation and dialogue as a fulcrum in human relations is to be found equally in the writings of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, a Turkish religious leader and author of the Epistles of Light, a seminal contribution to the interpretations of Islam in the fast changing conditions of the twentieth century. The re-opening of the Catholic Church in Baku is an encouraging example in Muslim-Christian relations, as is similarly inspiring the 'intelligent interest' of Tomáš Halík in Christian-Muslim dialogue. If dialogue today is to reach wider segments of the population, it cannot be limited to the elites, but has to be spread properly. Further possible steps in the area of education have been humbly suggested in this essay, too.

"No one is fully a believer until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself," says one of the numerous Muslim hadiths. It could be taken as an example, an invitation indeed, to throw out all past and present misunderstandings and failures in communication. And last but not least, paraphrasing somewhat one could also make a suggestion: let us hope that the 'fundamentalists of tolerance and responsibility' will expand their ranks.⁵⁸⁶

Acknowledgement.

I am indebted to Ivan Horáček and Viktor Krupa for their intellectual and emotional help and support while working on this paper.

⁵⁸⁶ The Gülen community was once described by *Milliyet* newspaper, that has a nation-wide circulation in Turkey, as "Fundamentalists of Tolerance". See Oğuz, Ş.: 'Kökten hoşgörücüler', *Milliyet*, 30 April 1997.