

Fethullah Gülen's Use of Philosophical and Scriptural Resources for Tolerance

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One of the most successful aspects of the Gülen movement has been its effort to promote tolerance among adherents of different religions by promoting events that help us understand one another. Behind this sort of effort is a presupposition that education about the realities of our different ways of living always or usually leads to understanding, which always or usually leads to tolerance. In this paper, I will provide a philosophical argument, elaborated from Mr. Gülen's own thoughts, for that presupposition based on the fundamentality of our common humanity. Interwoven with this argument will be insights from the Qur'an, and the Sunna that have been cited by Mr. Gülen to show that tolerant behavior is both spiritually and rationally required of us. I am no scholar of the Qur'an or the Sunna, so I cannot hope to offer a convincing argument that my understanding of Qur'an and Hadith are the one best understanding. But as a philosopher, I believe that I can provide compelling reasons to think that the understanding I will offer is a reasonable one, one that is open to intelligent and honest people of good will. Since a view that recommends a way to live in peace is in itself attractive, I take it that to show it is also reasonable is enough to recommend it to us as a guiding principle.

I. The Philosophical Argument

I will start with the philosophical argument not because it is more important or more authoritative than Qur'an and Sunna, but because it is the human place to begin. There are those who read their scriptures, come to a conclusion about what it requires of them, and conclude that their understanding is the word of God. Such people have forgotten something important about what it is to be human. To be human is to be fallible. It is certainly true that the word of God cannot be false. It follows from the very nature of God as omniscient and perfectly good that whatever He says is true. But it certainly does not follow that what I understand Him to have said must be true. I am eminently capable of making mistakes, of misunderstanding what I am told. I cannot simply say "God has said this" as if I were a perfectly transparent and flawless conduit of God's words. To insist that my understanding of the word of God is the word of God is to come dangerously close to shirk.

In other words, we must approach scripture humbly, aware of our shortcomings, and be prepared to revise our understanding in the face of good reasons. We must start from where we are, human beings with the minds and hearts God has given us—and which, incidentally, he has given to all humans equally. When there are prophets, the prophets themselves must speak to human beings as they are. They must find a way to make

their message fit into the hearts and minds of people as God has made them. So, what do we know about what it is to be human? This must be our starting point.

One way to look at what it is to be human is to look at it from the phenomenology of being human—what it’s like from the inside, as it were. If we can see what we value, what we want for ourselves in our most rational moments, we can then see what consistency demands we give others. In other words, in some ways the golden rule is a rule of logic. If I dislike a kind of treatment, then consistency demands that I not give that same treatment to those who are relevantly like me. Insofar as I have reason to believe that all human beings share, by their very nature, some likes and dislikes, and that at least some of those likes and dislikes are reasonable, rational values, I also have reason to act with regard to others out of respect for those shared values. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” is grounded in consistency and our common human nature. Mr. Gülen expresses this sentiment in a recent article in *Fountain* magazine.¹ In the opening paragraph of that article, he says:

Loving and respecting humanity merely because they are human is an expression of respect for the Almighty Creator. The other side of the coin, loving and showing respect to only those who think the same as one thinks, is nothing but egotism and self-worship.

Some might object to the idea that there is a common human nature, or that there are universal, rational values. I think that’s a mistake. As I look at what makes me who I am, I find two broad categories of things: beliefs and desires. I have a picture of the world, its history, and my place in it that comes from my own experiences and education. A lot of that, perhaps most of it, is shared knowledge, but it is nevertheless my own, as well. Because I can see the value that picture has for me, and because I think I can trust my own senses, memory, reasoning, and the like, I should extend the courtesy to others to allow them to form their own views, as well. This is part of tolerance. If I believe I should be allowed to form my own picture of the world, then I should allow others the same liberty, insofar as I can see that they are equipped with the same kind of mind as I am. This also allows us to share knowledge. I trust my own faculties; I see that you are equipped with the same faculties; so, I can reasonably trust your faculties, too. That’s why it is reasonable to expect to be able to learn about the world from other people, and not just our own experience. And a good thing, too! If I had to reconstruct modern science, or write a history of the world, or draw a map of the world, I wouldn’t get very far if I didn’t take other people’s word for things.

Just as we all have basically the same cognitive equipment and experience of the world, and so have reason to trust each other’s word, we also have the same basic nature that leads us to value the same things. Although there are wide differences among human beings

¹ “Respect for Humankind,” *Fountain* 53, January/March 2006, p. 4.

in the details of how they think about the world and what they want from it, there is a level of generality at which the differences disappear. We all dislike pain, and seek to avoid it. We all want to be fed, clothed, sheltered, and loved by other human beings. We all want to be allowed some liberty to order our lives as we see fit. Recognition of our common human nature then gives us reason to avoid causing suffering to others and relieve their suffering when we can; to feed, clothe and shelter others when they need it; to extend love to those we can; and to allow others liberty to make their own way in the world, when doing so doesn't interfere with others. This is the ultimate grounding of the Golden Rule. The reason I should treat others as I would like to be treated is that the other is like me in all relevant respects.²

One aspect of not interfering with the liberty of others is to allow them to decide for themselves what to believe about their relation to God. I should not interfere with another human being's religious decisions because I recognize it as part of my basic human nature to want to make those decisions for myself. Whatever makes it right for me to make those decisions for myself also requires that I allow others a similar freedom. Of course, we do not tolerate—and should not tolerate—any and all behavior from our neighbors, and it is not always easy to draw the line as to what is intolerable and what is not. Nevertheless, there are clear cases. We should not tolerate people killing others, enslaving them, or otherwise harming them without reason. Respect for human freedom of the will requires that we protect our fellow human beings from that kind of depredation, rather than requiring that we protect the predator. Likewise, it is clear to most of us that choices that have no effect on others at all must be tolerated even if we ourselves don't understand or condone the choice. The question, then, is whether choice of religious belief falls into the category of the tolerable or the intolerable. I'm not at all sure there is a way to make the positive case that differences of religious view should be tolerated, so in order to make a case for religious belief being a matter for toleration, I will examine some reasons people give for being coercive in matters of religion, and show the mistakes on which their arguments rest.

Perhaps the most popular argument for coercion in religion is based on the idea that people who make mistakes in their religious beliefs are bringing harm upon themselves and others around them. Since we think it is frequently right to interfere with a person's liberty to save his life, then surely it is right to interfere with his liberty to save his soul! I think we can dispose of this argument easily; coerced belief is not real belief, and so it doesn't actually help the person coerced. While I may effectively save a man's life by forcing him not to cross the street in front of a bus, I can't really save a man's soul by forcing him not to believe heresy. I can't, in fact, force him not to believe heresy; and I certainly can't force him to believe what I

² This is substantially the argument I offered in "Trust, Tolerance, and the Concept of a Person," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 11 (1997), 415-429.

take to be the truth. When the Qur'an says "There is no compulsion in religion,"³ it means that compulsion in religion is impossible, not undesirable. It says that there is no compulsion, not there should be no compulsion. Mr. Gülen makes that point in his Questions and Answer about Faith⁴. Discussing that very verse, he says:

The Islamic way of life cannot be imposed or sustained by force, for faith is essential to it. And, as we know, faith is a matter of the heart and conscience, both of which are beyond force. In the absolute sense, therefore, compulsion is impossible, for one can believe only with and from the heart.

But even if it were possible to coerce religious belief, it would be a mistake. Lurking in the background of arguments for intolerance, there is usually a certain kind of logical mistake. People tend to reason this way: The word of God is infallible, therefore what I believe it to say is truth, therefore anyone who disagrees with me is wrong, therefore I should, when necessary, use force to bring them in line with the truth. Each step in that reasoning is reasonable, but in at least two places the reasoning is mistaken. Many, in the name of tolerance, would like to deny the inference from "I am right" to "Anyone who disagrees with me is wrong." For example, consider the following passage from Stephen Asma's book, *The Gods Drink Whiskey*.⁵ Talking about strategies for handling religious disagreement, he says

The most problematic strategy is the aggressive elimination of competing options... This strategy is usually wedded to the fundamentalist concept of truth—absolute, universal, and scripturally literal.

He identifies the problem as a "fundamentalist concept of truth." According to this line of thought, to believe something is simply true is to be motivated to violence against those who disagree. Likewise, Lester Kurtz, in the recent special issue of *The Muslim World*, calls the combination of commitment and tolerance a "paradox," as if being committed to a truth automatically makes it the case that you cannot tolerate those who disagree.⁶ Professor Kurtz believes that Mr. Gülen has solved the paradox, but he has done it by accepting that "[s]piritual practice and morality are ... more important than ritual and dogmatism."⁷ In other words, we can have tolerance at the price of softening our commitment to ritual and doctrine; we don't lose commitment completely, but we soften commitment to truth in particular.

This way of promoting tolerance is a mistake, and a potentially dangerous one. It is a mistake because, as a matter of simple logic, the denial of a truth is a falsehood. If we are to

³ *Baqara* 2:256. This and all subsequent quotations from the Qur'an come from the translation of Ahmed Ali, published by Princeton University Press in 1993.

⁴ *Questions and Answers about Faith*, volume 1 (Fairfax, VA: The Fountain, 2000), p. 20.

⁵ *The Gods Drink Whiskey* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2005), p. 109.

⁶ Lester R. Kurtz, "Gülen's Paradox: Combining Commitment and Tolerance," *Muslim World* 95 (2005), 373-384.

⁷ "Gülen's Paradox," p. 377.

believe in an objective world, a real truth about how things are (and I think Muslims, Jews and Christians, and probably most other religious folk, are committed to an objective world), then we must accept that at most one view of how it is can be correct. That is why this strategy for tolerance is a mistake: it makes my beliefs about God and the world private matters of personal taste, not serious and momentous commitments about the universe.

The failure in that plausible line of inference does not come in the middle step, but rather in the first and last steps. The error in the first step, from “The word of God must be true” to “I cannot be wrong about what the word of God requires” need not detain us for very long, either. In order for people to understand the difference between God’s revelation and man’s understanding of that revelation, it should be enough (for reasonable people) to point out the distinction. As the Apostle Paul said to the Romans, “Let God be true and every man a liar.”⁸ To insist on identifying my understanding of the word of God with the word of God itself is, as I noted earlier, to skirt dangerously close to shrk; only God can be omniscient and infallible. But aren’t some things in scripture very clear, and beyond dispute, so that we may rightly be certain about them? I suppose so, but what follows from that? First of all, there is broad and reasonable disagreement among men and women of good will as to what those certainties of scripture are. And, more importantly, it is not clear that even permissible certainty underwrites intolerance of others. If I may be certain that some element of my interpretation of scripture is true, then I may be certain that people who believe differently are wrong, but it does not follow that I may use force against those whom I know to be wrong. This is the second flaw in the “reasonable line of inference,” the inference from “Those who disagree with me are wrong” to “I may use force to bring people in line with the truth.” Stated thus baldly, there seems to be little to recommend the inference; there seems to be no reason to think that just being wrong about something makes it permissible for people to force me into orthodoxy. But remember the true insight that grounds this reasoning: false belief about religious matters causes great harm, to the believer in falsehood and to all those whom he or she influences. Since the harm is great, force is justified. I have argued that we have general philosophical grounds for rejecting that line of thought, in that a) coercion in these matters is itself a violation of our duties to humanity, and b) it doesn’t work anyway. But such an argument is—and should be!—of no effect for Muslims if its conclusion is inconsistent with the teaching of the Qur’an and Sunna. So now I turn to them.

II. Resources from the Qur’an and Sunna

Of the many passages from Qur’an that Mr. Gülen has cited as proof that tolerance is a religious duty, I have selected a few illustrative examples. First:

⁸ Romans 3:4.

Tell them: 'O people of the Book, let us come to an agreement on that which is common between us, that we worship no one but God, and make none his compeer, and that none of us take any others for lord apart from God.' If they turn away, you tell them: 'Bear witness that we submit to Him.'⁹

Mr. Gülen calls this passage "history's greatest ecumenical call."¹⁰ It clearly indicates that Muslims are required to treat the people of the Book (Christians and Jews) with respect and tolerance, and the history of Islam in the Middle Ages bears witness that the Qur'an has been understood this way. It is a commonplace that Christians and Jews in Muslim lands certainly fared better than Jews did in Christian lands at the same time.

Here is another Qur'anic verse cited by Mr. Gülen:

Tell the believers to forgive those who do not fear the visitations of God, so that He may requite the people for their deeds.¹¹

This echoes the requirement Jesus laid on his followers to leave judgment in God's hands, when he said, "Judge not, that ye be not judged."¹² Mr. Gülen understands this verse to impose a religious duty on Muslims, saying

...those who have declared their faith and thereby become Muslims and perform the mandated religious duties must behave with tolerance and forbearance and expect nothing from the other party.¹³

In his *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, he discusses that verse along with two others:

Yet if you forbear, overlook, and forgive, God is indeed forgiving and kind.¹⁴

God does not forbid you from being kind and acting justly towards those who did not fight over faith with you, nor expelled you from your homes. God indeed loves those who are just.¹⁵

He cites all three of these passages to show

⁹ *Al-Imran* 3:64.

¹⁰ "The Necessity of Interfaith Dialogue," *Turkish Daily News*, January 11-12, 2000, reprinted in *M. Fethullah Gülen: Essays, Perspective, Opinions* (Rutherford, NJ: The Light, 2002), p. 37.

¹¹ *Al-Jathiya* 45:14.

¹² Matthew 7:1.

¹³ Quoted in Ali Ünal and Alphonse Williams, eds., *Advocate of Dialogue* (Fairfax, VA: The Fountain, 2000), pp. 257-258.

¹⁴ *Al-Taghabun* 64:14.

¹⁵ *Al-Mumtahana* 60:8.

[R]eal Muslims never injure anyone.... It cannot be any other way; in the Qur'an, the Sunna, and in the pure and learned interpretations of the Great Scholars there is no trace of a decree or an attitude that is contrary to love, tolerance or dialogue.... We cannot conceive of a religion that wills the good of all, and who calls all—with no exceptions—to be otherwise.¹⁶

In the same work, he says that "[t]he Qur'an always accepts forgiveness and tolerance as basic principles,"¹⁷ citing this verse as evidence:

Devotees of Ar-Rahman (the Merciful) are those who walk with humility on the earth, and when they are addressed by the ignorant, say: "Peace."¹⁸

Again, the point is that true Islam requires us to be humble and tolerant, as any other attitude is inconsistent with the nature of the very God a Muslim aims to serve. He is Mercy itself, so we must be merciful. Of course, it is well known that Islam does not require pacifism; in fact, Muslims are expected to fight in self-defense. But there are strict limits on when and how force is to be used. The presumption should always be in favor of peace. In particular, a Muslim must be at peace with the peaceful, no matter who they are. In that connection, Mr. Gülen cites this verse:

But if they are inclined to peace, make peace with them, and have trust in God, for He hears all and knows every thing.¹⁹

To fail to live in peace is a failure of faith in the omniscient God. As Mr. Gülen explains,

Even in an atmosphere in which two armies have fought against each other and blood has been spilled, if the enemy forgoes fighting and wants to make a treaty, then the Muslims are commanded not to react emotionally, but to make a treaty, putting their trust in God. Thus, a universal principle regarding this subject has been established.²⁰

The reference to "universal principle" reveals something important about how Mr. Gülen interprets the Qur'an. Before I turn to the general question of interpretation, though, let me address one Hadith that Mr. Gülen cites for the same conclusion. He says

As I have mentioned at other times in different contexts, the Pride of Humanity, the reason for creation and the Prince of Prophets one day stood up as a Jewish funeral was passing by. One of the Companions at his side said, "O Messenger of

¹⁶ *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance* (Somerset, NJ: The Light, 2004), pp. 51-52.

¹⁷ *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, p. 69.

¹⁸ *Al-Furqan* 25:63.

¹⁹ *Al-Anfal* 8:61.

²⁰ *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, p. 176.

God, that's a Jew." Without any change in attitude or alteration of the lines on his face, the Prince of Prophets gave this answer: "But he is a human being!"²¹

The implication is clear (in fact, Mr. Gülen says, "There is nothing I can add to these words"); that someone is a human being is sufficient reason for that person to be treated with respect. Jews and Christians speak of human beings as being created in the "image of God," not meaning that human beings look like God, since God has no physical form, but rather that they are endowed with mind and heart, intellect and moral conscience, as nothing else in creation is. It is this heart and mind that we all share that gives us our obligation to treat one another with respect, tolerance, and love.

One might object that while this is one way to interpret Qur'an and Sunna, and one that sits nicely with our Western, modernist, conciliatory frame of mind, there is no reason to take it to be the best way to understand Qur'an and Sunna. After all, there are a great many other schools of thought on this matter, many of them understanding Islam as requiring all-out war with Europe and America, and endorsing horrendous acts of violence as necessary for the defense of Islam. Is there some principled reason—not just a preference for the results—to take Mr. Gülen's way of understanding the requirements of Islam as better? As I have already noted, I am no Islamicist, no scholar of either Qur'an or Sunna, so even if I were to offer an argument here, you should not give it any weight. I can, however, speaking as a philosopher, offer this consideration in favor of Mr. Gülen's interpretation.

Scriptural interpretation is always a matter of harmonizing a lot of different utterances, delivered at different times on different kinds of occasions, sometimes to different people. The trick is to distinguish what is intended only for the particular occasion of utterance from what is intended as "universal principle." Particular commands are always given in the light of basic principles, and the principles are more important than the commands. ²² Interpreters of the Qur'an have been making these distinctions for a long time. Interpreters of the Bible, both Torah and Gospel, are faced with a similar problem, and have similarly had no difficulty making the distinction. No one takes God's commandment to the Israelites to kill all the Amalekites to be an eternal principle, but rather an expedient that was necessary at that given time, under those conditions, peculiar to the exigencies of the conquest of Canaan. And while some have thought differently, most interpreters of the Gospels don't take it to be a universal rule that we should sell all we have and give to the poor. This is the significance of Mr. Gülen's identifying the rule of tolerance as a "basic principle" or "universal principle."

²¹ *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, p. 44. The hadith cited is to be found in Bukhari, *Janaiz*, 50, as well as Muslim, *Janaiz*, 81 and Nasai, *Janaiz*, 46.

²² This rule of interpretation is recommended by several prominent scholars today. See Daniel Brown, *A New Introduction to Islam* (Malden, MA :Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 231-232.

III. Conclusion

Mr. Gülen has argued that both religion and reason tell us that we ought to tolerate differences, even differences of opinion about matters of great moment. Not only do the Qur'an and Sunna show us that tolerance, kindness, and humility are virtues we should strive to develop and nurture, but also rational reflection on what makes a human being valuable shows us that consistency requires us to be tolerant, kind, and humble. I have tried to elaborate on Mr. Gülen's lines of thought, to show that tolerance is indeed a fundamental moral value, and that Qur'an (and any other scripture) should be interpreted in that light.