Interfaith Dialogue in the Context of New Theological Language and Fethullah Gulen

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We, Muslim intellectuals, need to be aware of the fact that we live in societies, which are not constituted by Islamic cultural dynamics. In such a socially constructed world, on one hand we need to manage to be remain spiritually intact as Muslims; on the other hand we need to initiate and engage in communication with the adherents of other faiths. In this paper, I am not able to explicate all the modern social, cultural and institutional forces that socially threaten the spiritually intact Muslim. This is another issue and needs a special study. My task here, in this paper, is to explore the potential of Islam and Islamic culture to develop a feasible ground for establishing inter-faith dialogue and communication.

In the Middle Ages, the relationship between religions was often in a hostile atmosphere; for instance Christians' conflict with Muslims had often ended in the battlefield. Christian theological argument with regard to the 'heathen world' and 'heretics' at that time was orchestrated by the Church. Such attitudes not only separated Christians and non-Christians but also Catholics and heretics. As a consequence, the motto *'Extra ecclesiam nulla salus'* (there is no salvation outside the Church) became a central principle of the Catholic Church.

In the Middle Ages, a Christian theology of religions was dominated by exclusivism, that is, all people, [whatever race, colour or religion] must be Christian if they are to be saved. For instance, in the decree of the Council of Florence in 1438-45 it was stated:

> No one remaining outside the Catholic Church, not just pagans, but also Jews or heretics or schismatics, can become partakers of eternal life; but they will go to "everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels", unless before the end of life they are joined to the Church.[1]

In the Protestant world, such an exclusive an attitude was also predominant. Luther in his *Large Catechism* asserted: Those who are outside Christianity, be they heathens, Turks, Jews or false Christians [i.e. Roman Catholics], although they may believe in only one true God, yet remain in eternal wrath and perdition.[2]

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[1] Denzinger, 468-9 *The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church in English Translation* (St. Louis and London: B. Herder Book Co., 1955), p. 165.

[2] Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, II. iii, tans. H. Wace and C. A. Buchheim in *Luther's Primary Works* (London, 1896), 106, quoted in Dewick, *Christian Attitude*, 116.

In the mediaeval period, the world was divided into different religious camps. The governing power in those days sought to justify itself through the way it displayed enmity towards the opposite religious camp.[3]

In this century, in spite of the dominance of such an exclusivist attitude in the Christian world, there has appeared a notable shift from religious exclusivism to the religious inclusivism or even pluralism as a result of the impact of liberal values in the West. One might state that it would have been more fruitful if the Church had reached such a form of inclusive attitude through its own development rather than through the pressure of the dominant secular culture. The Catholic Church's recent but significant paradigm shift made in the Second Vatican Council of 1963-1965 is arguably the result of such a cultural imperative. In its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, promulgated in 1964, the Council declared:

> The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.[4]

If one compares this passage with the statement of *'extra ecclesiam nulla salus'* one can surely realise the progress made towards a more tolerant and better understanding of other religions in the Catholic Church.[5]

Islamic Potential for Inter-faith Dialogue

It is interesting to note that in early and medieval Islam, Muslim scholars approached the issue of the adherents of other faiths within the context of Islamic jurisprudence not that of *Kalam*, Islamic theology. They often thought that the issue of determining the status of those who lived within the domain of Islam was a practical problem, i.e. it arose when a certain group of people or individuals were classified for administrative purposes.

On the other hand, I believe that the basic principles exhibited by the Quran and the *Sunnah* can offer a tangible account of Islamic theology of religions. In addition to this we also see the historical implementation of those principles in Muslim societies throughout Islamic history. Now, I would like to enumerate the Quranic principles with regard to the issue of inter-religious dialogue as propositions, which aim to suggest an account of 'Islamic potential'.

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[3] Philip C. Almond in his *Heretic and Hero: Muhammad and the Victorians*, (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1989) gives an interesting account of the Victorians' image of the Prophet of Islam.

[4] Flannery, ibid., para. 2, p. 739.

[5] As far as the attitude of the Catholic Church toward Islam is concerned, The Vatican Council II has not yet produced a meeting point between Muslims and Christians. What Muslims expect to see from the Christian world is a fair understanding with regard to both the nature of the Quran and the personality of the Prophet. Such an understanding seems quite crucial if there is to be any hope of a Muslim-Christian dialogue.

First, in the Quran, the universality as well as the diversity of God's revelation to humankind is affirmed. Islam explicitly endorses the universality of God's revelation, which plays a significant part in the Islamic understanding of other religions. The God of the Quran is not only the God of the Muslims but the God of all humankind. The Quran illustrates this point by stating: 'Unto Allah belong the East and West, and whithersoever you turn, there is Allah's countenance. For Allah is All-Embracing, All-knowing' (2:115). God of all humankind did not leave any nation in the dark, rather he illuminated them by sending messengers.[6]

Therefore Muslims receive a Quranic sanction that enables them to expand an Islamic account of prophecy in such a manner that it could include those messengers who are not mentioned in the Quran, including Gautama the Buddha, and the avatars of the Hindus. Although all the messengers spoke about the same reality and conveyed the same truth, the messages they delivered were not identical in their theological forms. That is simply because the message was expressed in the specific forms which should accord and make sense for the culture it was sent to. Thus, a messenger is to speak within the cultural context of the community to which the message is revealed.[7]

Second, in Islam multiplicity of races, colours, communities and religions is regarded as the sign of God's mercy and glory exhibited through his creatures.

Plurality in this sense is accepted as a natural phenomenon. The Quran states: "O Humankind! Verily we have created you of a male and female; and we have distributed you in nations and tribes that you might know one another and recognise that, in the sight of God the most honourable of you is the most pious. Verily God is wise and all knowing" (49:13). But what Islam aims to do is to integrate such diversity into unity through the sacred principles of the Quran; it explains the reason and purpose for such racial and religious multiplicity. God created such religious, racial, and other forms of diversity in order to distinguish those who can appreciate the majesty of God and see his purpose from those who ignore the signs of God as such. Otherwise God could have created only one nation.[8]

One of the prime tasks of Islam is to eliminate discrimination based upon race or colour by proposing a single Islamic brotherhood, which aims to unite all the different people under one faith. It has partly achieved this during its history. Beyond this, Islam even managed to establish a unity among all the subjects including the Christians and Jews that it governed. Furthermore, one might even claim that diversity, whether religious or racial, is considered in the Quran as the means to unity.

Third, it is possible that every revealed religion can be named as islam, when it is seen as 'a state of submission to God' (literally islam). Expanding the term *islam* in a manner that could envelope all other revealed religions is not something produced in order to counter the quest for a pluralistic

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[6] The Quran states: "To every nation (was sent) a messenger (10:47); and verily we have raised in every nation a messenger, (proclaiming) serve Allah and shun false gods (16:36); there is not a nation but a warner had paseth among them (35:24)".

[7] The Quran endorses this view: "We sent not a messenger except in the language of his own people in order to make things clear to them (14:4)".

[8] The Quran simply states this point: "If your Lord had so willed, he could have made mankind one nation: but they will not cease to dispute (11:118).

approach. It is a Quranic endeavour, which aims to show all revelations as the part and parcel of God's plan. Muslims believe that *islam* is the name of the basic mission of all prophets throughout history.

The forth principle is that there is no compulsion in religion. This is one of the unique principles of the Quran which was initiated in order to regulate freedom of religious belief in Islam. The Quran reads: "Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error: whoever rejects Evil and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold, that never, breaks. And God hears and knows all things (2:256); Say 'The Truth is from your Lord': let him who will, believe, let him who will, reject (it) (18:29); If it had been the Lord's Will, they would all have believed - All who are on earth! Will you then compel mankind against their will to believe! (10:99).

This verse itself has functioned as a law by safeguarding the freedom of religious belief throughout Islamic history.[9] It was such Quranic injuctions which have provided a rationale for the religious tolerance that has characterised Islamic history. As Bernard Lewis points out, religious persecution of the members of other faiths was almost absent; Jews and Christians under Muslim rule were not subject to exile, apostasy or death that were the choices offered to Muslims and Jews in reconquered Spain. And also, Christians and Jews were not subject to any major territorial and occupational restrictions, such as was the common lot of Jews in premodern Europe.[10]

It would, however, be wrong to say that Muslims consider Judaism and Christianity as authentic as Islam in leading to the truth. Islam considers itself superior to other religions when it presents truth. But what makes Islam different from other religions is that it tolerates the existence of other religions *while it is in power*. As a result of such a principle, although Islam had ruled for some thousand years over Christians and Jews, it did not encourage a systematic 'islamization' of the adherents of these faiths.[11] Like any other religion Islam aims to propagate its beliefs. But what makes it different from other religions is that it did not establish an organisation or institution for its propagation. In its history, Islam did not have missionary societies or any missionary institution. The work of *da'wa* is always left to an

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[9] Vardit Rispler-Chaim compares the verse 2:256 with the other verses in the Quran that speak of the regulation of war and concludes that the verse that propagates religious tolerance was not intended in the first place. It was a *taqiyya* and initiated for a strategic purposes in order to establish the Islamic community. When the community was established it was not tolerance but military campaigns that decided the destiny of Islam. See "There is no compulsion in Religion (Quran 2,256): Freedom of Religious Belief in the Qur'an" *The Bulletin of Henry Martyn Institute of Islamic Studies* 11 (July-Dec., 1992): 19-32. In response to Rispler-Chaim, I argue that the mere existence of such a sacred injunction is sufficient to show the intention of the Quran. If Risper-Chaim really wants to bring out the actual position of Islam with regard religious tolerance, he must compare it with historical Christianity and Judaism. No Muslim, however, claims that Islam can satisfy the requirements of the liberal values of the secular culture. But, its own history proves that Islamic power has tolerated the existence of other religions within its own realm.

[10] Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 8.

[11] In *The Preaching of Islam: A History of Propagation of the Muslim Faith* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1961) T. W. Arnold presents a historical account of the spread of Islam and concludes that Islam has expanded through persuasion and preaching rather than force and compulsion.

individual effort.[12] The Gülen movement in contemporary Islam, is an interesting case that would give us a clue as to which direction inter-religious relations between Muslims and the adherents of other faiths can go in Turkey.

The ground of New Theological Language: Islamic inter-faith dialogue

Opposing most of the reactionary Muslim intellectuals and group leaders who adopt either reactionary or apologetic language, Gülen uses more open and tolerant discourse. I see such attitude as actualisation of Islamic potential. While some other Islamists and even fundamentalists are expressing hatred and intolerance towards those who do not think and behave like them, Gülen is speaking of tolerance, forgiveness, love and peace. As John O. Voll rightly states that he is neither "fundamentalist" nor "secularist" and his ideas provides a vision that transcends modernity.[13]

The first principle he proposes in the context of interfaith dialogue, is that of tolerance and forgiveness. He derives this principle from the Quran by quoting these verses: "And the servants of (God) the All-Merciful are those who move on the earth in humility, and when the ignorant address them, they say: 'Peace' (25:63); Those who witness no falsehood, and, if they pass by futility, pass by it with honourable avoidance (25:72); And when they hear vain talk, they turn away wherefrom and say: "To us our deeds, and to you yours" (28:55). For him, those who feel responsible for spreading the truth of Islam, what he calls the hero of love, ought to possess the character of gentleness and tolerance. In such behaviours, the hero of love must be as generous as Moses and Aaron who were commanded to behave tolerantly and to speak softly to the Pharaoh.[14]

The second principle is "meeting in common word". He takes this concept from this Quranic verse: "O people of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with Him; that we take not some from among ourselves Lords other than God" (3:64). From this standpoint he further develops and speaks of "the necessity of increasing common interests we share with the people with whom we are in dialogue".[15] If these people are Jews and Christians, common interests and common word should be the meeting point. According to Gülen, the common word between Muslims and "the people of the book" is belief in God. Since the above-mentioned verse did not put the prophethood of Muhammad as a condition of coming terms, he appears to be ready to talk theologically to Christian and Jews without putting the prophethood of Muhammad forward. This, I believe, can be considered as a new step forward in interfaith dialogue.

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[12] For instance, the Quran lays down the principles of propagating Islam: "Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for your Lord knows best, who have strayed from His Path, and who received guidance (16:125)."

[13] John O. Voll, "Fethullah Gülen, Transcending Modernity in the New Islamic Discourse" in Turksih Islam and the Secular State; The Gülen Movement, ed. M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito, Syracuse: Syracuse University, Press, 2003, p. 245.

[14] Fethullah Gülen, *Love and the Essence of Being Human*, Istanbul: Jounalists and Writers Foundation Publications, 2004, p. 135.

[15] Gülen, ibid., p. 169.

What about the sharp criticism of the Quran towards Jews and Christians? He answers this by suggesting "the verses condemning and rebuking the Jews and Christians are either about some particular Jews and Christians who lived in the time of the Prophet Muhammad or their own Prophets, such as Moses and Jesus, or those who deserved such condemnation because of their wrong beliefs or practices."[16] He even broadens the boundaries of the ground of interfaith dialogue in order to embrace not only Jews and Christians but also all the good people of other faiths. He states:

> Today there is needed for people who are virtuous, self-possessed, cautious, sincere and pure in heart, who do not steal or think too much of themselves, and who prefer others' well-being to theirs, and have no worldly expectations. If humankind can find people with these characteristics, it means a much better feature for the world is imminent.[17]

The third principle is that religions should not be taken as the instrument of the "clash of civilizations". Instead they ought to be utilised as the means for peace and tolerance in the world. As Voll indicates many social theories that have predicted the end of religion have failed. Secularisation is losing ground and desecularisation has become an important phenomena.[18] In this process, religion is gaining an opportunity to play a significant role in shaping social movements in different countries. Since Gülen addresses and also offers the solution to the moral and social problems that were caused by globalisation, his ideas and his community have become an instrument of resacralization process in the Islamic community. Gülen argues that the world of today is in deep environmental, educational and philosophical crises. Now "in a world that is rapidly becoming smaller and in an era when time and space are shrinking" he argues "there is a need for a new way of thinking, a new approach to sciences, a new life philosophy, and new educational institutions."[19] He suggests that Huntington's claim about the "clash of civilizations" is a strategic move that aims to politically regulate the world rather than a sensible prediction of the future of the world. Instead he wants to talk about "the meeting of civilizations". He insists that religions especially Islam, are and cannot be the source of conflict and war, but are instead the foundation of peace and unity. He argues:

> In truth, no divine religion was ever based on conflict, whether it be the religions represented by Moses and Jesus, or the religion represented by Muhammad, upon them be peace. On the contrary, these religions, especially Islam, are strictly against disorder, treachery, conflict and oppression. Islam means peace, security and well being. Thus, in a religion based on peace, security and world harmony, war and conflict are malfunctioning things. The exceptional case is self-defence like when the body tries to get rid of germs

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[16] Gülen, ibid., p. 209.
[17] Gülen, ibid., p. 170.
[18] Voll, "Transcending Modernity", p. 242.
[19] Gülen, ibid., p. 201.

that have attacked it, and this can be done only according to certain principles. Islam has always breathed peace and goodness. [20]

Science and Religion

In general one can speak of three different approaches towards Modernity in general, modern science in particular in Islamic world. One is the fundamentalist attitude. Some of them aims to neglect or deny modernity and science totally like Taliban. They live in this world. But their mentality has been shaped in the past. They are not able to meet the social problems of modernity and science by depending upon Islam and Islam's intellectual history. Second group is one may call, secularists. They do not consider Islam seriously as a world view. Modernity and modern science are totally welcomed at the expanse of Islamic intellectual tradition. For them, there is of course conflict between science and religion. In this scientific age, religion can be functional as faith not as a total world view, that characterises and gives meaning not only nature but also history of humankind.

Third approach is one may called synthesis between modernity and Islam, science and religion. Gülen is in this camp. He believes that in Islamic Universities, in the madrasas there was lack of interests in the experimental sciences. This was a mistake. That is why Islamic countries fall behind the developed Western countries. According to him, we need to make up this neglect since tomorrow's world will be built on knowledge and everything will take its strength and power from knowledge.[21] According to Gülen, although science is important, it is not sufficient for building a new happy world. There is urgent need for a new approach to the sciences and a new life of philosophy. He states:

> Previous generations witnessed a bitter struggle that should never have taken place: science versus religion. This conflict gives rise to atheism and materialism, which influenced Christianity more than other religions. Science cannot contradict religion, for its purpose is to understand nature and humanity, which are each composition of the manifestations of God's Attributes of Will and Power. Religion has its source in the Divine Attribute of Speech, which was manifested in the course of human history as Divine Scriptures, such as the Quran, the Gospels, the Torah, and others that have been revealed to just prophets since Adam. Thanks to the efforts of both Christian and Muslim theologians and scientists , it seem that the religion-science conflict that has lasted for a few centuries will come to an end, or at least its absurdity will finally be acknowledged.[22]

According to Gülen, modern science is lacking a spiritual guidance. That is why we are witnessing so much social and environmental problems in our century. It is Islamic morality and spirituality can be

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[20] Gülen, ibid., p. 202.

[21] M. Fethullah Gülen,*Toward Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance* , New Jersey: The Light, 2006, p. 255.

[22] Gülen, *Love and Tolerance*, p. 231.

guide for science. Islamic intellectual tradition and Islam as living tradition possesses such merit. He is quite optimistic with regard to future of humanity:

> Our old world will experience an amazing "springtime" before its demise. This springtime will see the gap between rich and poor narrow; the world's riches will be distributed more justly, according to work, capital and needs; there will be no discrimination based on race, colour, language and world view; basic human rights and freedoms will be protected…In this new spring time, when scientific and technological progress has been taken into consideration, people will understand that the current level of science and technology resembles the stage of life when an infant is learning how to crawl. Humanity will organize trips into space as if they were really travelling to another country.

But this new spring time will rise on the foundation of love, compassion, mercy, dialogue, acceptance of others, mutual respect, justice, and rights. In such a world, goodness and kindness, righteousness and virtue will form the basic essence of the world.

In conclusion, traditional Islamic theological language with regard to the adherents of other faiths, especially to Jews and Christians, carries the tone of language that belonged to the religiously divided world of the past. In traditionally constructed societies, polemical and reactionary languages were used in order to define, describe, determine and even condemn the "other". To communicate or to understand the other was not the issue of that time. Now we are living in a different time and in a different space. We, Muslims cannot carry on using the language that was originated for defining and determining, and not for communicating or understanding. In the modern milieu, in global world of today, we need a new theological language appropriate to our modern conditions. Fethullah Gülen as an Islamic scholar, a Sufi and an activist, has paved the ground for a new theological language. Tolerance, love, compassion and forgiveness constitute the content of this new discourse. But, most important of all, is the existence of a community that is ready to hear and do what he has suggested to them. They are the people who are able to actualise what has been offered to them. This is something significant.