

Inter Religious Relations in the Thoughts of Muhammad Fateullah Gülen

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Introduction

Islam is a unique among world religions. It has related itself to the most of the pre-Islamic religions. Islam's recognition of other religions as legitimate religions is the essence of Islamic beliefs. Its relations with other religions are reflecting the world view of Islam. Muslim's view of God, the reality of man and the human history and history of world religions are providing sufficient theological grounds on which Muslims are regulating their relations with the followers of other religions. Islam's relations with Judaism, Christianity and Sabaeism were crystallized first by God through direct revelation in al-Qur'an. The actions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), on the bases of divine guidance, further enhanced Muslims' capacity to work with them. During his life time Holy Prophet entered into agreements with Christians and Jews and at a time went to include them into Muslim Ummah. The Prophet's companions extended this status of official recognition to the Zoroastrians at the time of conquest of Persia. This recognition was extended to Hinduism and Buddhism following the conquest of the lower region of the Indus Valley.

This recognition of almost all pre-Islamic divine religions is a part of basic Islamic beliefs, which are regulating the relations of Muslims with others from the early period of Islam till today. In each period of Islamic history during peace and war Muslims were very successfully able to create interfaith tolerance and co-existence. In spite of political clashes and wars between Muslims and others this recognition remains intact because it is based on basic sources of Islam i.e. al-Qur'an and Sunnah.

In contemporary world due to the spread of the idea of the clash of civilizations and increasing conflicts between followers of different

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religious traditions it became inevitable to search a way forward for interfaith interactions on the basis of original teachings of the religions. Muslims have taken this challenge very seriously and many contemporary scholars such as Muhammad Fateullah Gülen are trying to revive original Islamic teachings regarding inter religious matters. His contribution is unique and addressing almost all important issues of interfaith relations. The aim of this paper is to evaluate his contribution in the field of inter religious interactions while analyzing his thoughts on the basis of mainstream Islamic teachings.

The paper proceeds with the short introduction about the life and work of Muhammad Fethullah Gülen. Then importance of religious pluralism in interfaith relations and thought's of Gülen regarding it has been elaborated. Gülen is establishing interfaith dependence on normative ethics and values which are common essence of humanity. This has been elaborated in third part of this paper. Gülen suggests dialogue and tolerance as strategies for creating understanding and culture of appreciations among the followers of world religions. This has been discussed in forth part of this study. In conclusion of this paper importance of Gülen's thoughts regarding inter religious interactions for Muslims has been identified so that Muslims can actively and positively contribute for peace among the world religions.

Life and Work of Muhammad Fethullah Gülen

Muhammad Fethullah Gülen is a contemporary distinctive personality from Turkey who is trying to create interfaith and intra Muslims tolerance and mutual respect based on mainstream Islamic theology. He is a contemporary Muslim scholar and thinker with impressive writing and speaking skills. He was born in Erzurum, in eastern Turkey in 1938. Gülen was brought up in spiritual atmosphere. He memorized al-Qür'an at a young age and testifies that 'I began prayer when I was four years old, and has never missed a prayer since.'¹ He started his early education in Arabic and Persian as per tradition of time from his father in his village. His father, Ramiz Afendi was a dedicated man used to spend his time in constantly reciting al-Qür'an and reading books and memorizing sufi poems. Love of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) and his companions was main characteristic of his father, who instilled this in his son. This love of Prophet (peace be upon him)

1 Ali Ünal and Alphonse Williams, *Advocate of Dialogue: Fethullah Gülen* (Fairfax: the Foundation, 2000), p.10.

and his companions later on obsessed Gülen and became one of most important aspect of his life.²

Gülen dedicated himself in his early life to a simple lifestyle devoted to prayer, meditation, religious writing and teaching. Eschewing family life he chose an ascetic's path, devoting his life to prayer and religious pursuits and owning virtually no possessions. Early natural life style of Gülen is much reflected in his thoughts. He is fascinated with nature and his village is a place where he met with nature created by Allah Almighty. He always recalls his village and says 'A pleasant silence and calm always dominated the old villages. The morning sunlight, the mewing of sheep and lambs, and the cries of insects and birds would strike our hearts in sweet waves of pleasure and add their voices to the nature's deep, inner chorus. In the evening existence would shroud itself in the cover of dusk, a mysterious condition that would cast a spell on people and produce dreams. The nights always resonated with a song of silence and calm.'³ This closeness created passionate love for nature in his personality. This love resulted into love and care for humanity in general and Muslims in particular.

Gülen was trained in religious sciences by several celebrated Muslim scholars and spiritual masters. He studied the principles and theories of modern social and physical sciences. Based on his exceptional skills in learning and focused in self study, he soon surpassed his peers. After completing his education he taught in Edirne. He also performed his military service. Upon graduation from divinity school with excellent examination results, he was awarded a state preacher's license, and was quickly promoted to a post in Izmir, third largest province of Turkey.⁴ It was here that Gülen started to crystallize his theme and expand his audience base. His social reform efforts have begun during the 1960s; have made him one of Turkey's most well known and respectable public figures. In his sermons and addresses he emphasized the pressing social issues of the time. His particular aim was to urge the younger Turkish generation to harmonize intellectual enlightenment with wise spirituality and a caring human activism.⁵

Gülen did not restrict himself to teaching in inner cities. He traveled around the provinces in Anatolia. He reached to the people in mosques, coffee shops and corner meetings. Through these activities he was able to communicate cross section of the population and to attract academic community and student bodies. His communication through his speeches

2 *Ibid.*, p.11.

3 *Ibid.*

4 Gülen Muhammad Fethullah, *Towards a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance* (New Jersey: Light Publications, 2006), p.xi; Gülen, *Towards The Lost Paradise* (Izmir: Kaynak, 1988), p.i.

5 Gülen, *Towards a Global Civilization of Love*, p.xi.

and writings was not restricted explicitly to religious matters only. He also talked about education, science, economy and social Justice. He retired from formal teaching during 1981, having inspired a whole generation and became one of the most respected figures in turkey.

His unique writings cover a wide range of spiritual topics from questions put to the faith by the modern world to basic introductions to the teachings of Islam and Muhammad (peace be upon him). He gave a series of sermons in the most famous mosques of Turkey from 1988 to 1991. Now he has become one of the most effective voices of Muslim, which is also heard and listened in West and U.S.A. He is trying to convey the message of peace from Islam to the whole world in an inspiringly academic manner.

Muhammad Fethullah Gülen, affectionately called Hodjaefendi, is a scholar of extraordinary proportions. He is one of the most serious and significant thinkers and writers and among the wisest activists, of twentieth century of Turkey or even of the Muslim World.⁶

Gülen's work in Turkey is highly religious in a secularized context as well as a political in a highly politicized environment. In this national context as well as an international environment in which Islamic and other religious rhetoric took on the character of diatribe and ideological denunciations of others as infidels and traitors---- Gülen managed to move back and forth between the religious and the secular, between the Islamic and non-Islamic, promoting his Sufi-inspired tolerance and respect for humanity. Within mainstream Islam he is a person whose goal is to create compatibility of Islam with modernity, democracy and progress.⁷

Religious Pluralism in Gülen's Thought

Inter religious interaction is based on the attitude of the persons involved in interfaith activities. The attitude of the representatives of religious traditions reflects in approaches that they use in interfaith activities. The approaches that are disclosed by the people during the interfaith interactions are classified by Pinnkhar as four dialogical attitudes.⁸ These four dialogical attitudes i.e. exclusivism, inclusivism, parallelism and pluralism, show that extreme fundamentalism is incompatible with interfaith interactions. The first attitude is that of

6 Ali Ünal and Alphonse Williams, *op.cit.*, pp.1-2.

7 Lester R. Kurtz, "Gulan's Paradox: Combining Commitment and Tolerance", *The Muslim World The Muslim World*, Vol 95, No.3 July 2003, p.375.

8 Panikkar Raimon, *The Intra- Religious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p.xiv.

exclusivists, adhering to the fundamental of their faith as those are revealed in the scriptures. Exclusivists, on the basis of 'God's exclusive language' in scripture, refute any thing that is different from their own expression. By regarding other religions as 'diabolical' or at best at human aberrations, exclusivists carry this name because they exclude any way of salvation different from their own way.⁹ The critics of exclusivism say that this trend has two deficiencies, i.e., lack of mature epistemological reflection and lack of self criticism. This limited horizon, in turn, affects the exclusivists' capability to participate in inter religious activities and renders their participation an exercise in proselytising, rather than a real effort of interfaith understanding. Nevertheless, the exclusivists desire to participate in dialogue in order to convert others.¹⁰

In contrast to exclusivists, inclusivists hold to the fundamentals of their religion without excluding other religions, or the right of their followers to hold some other particular doctrinal fundamentals. As such, the inclusivists can also be classified under the title 'fundamentalists,' but not exclusively. Inclusivists hold to the fundamentals of their faith, however, with the awareness of the importance of interpretation for understanding some difficult passage of the scriptures. This is why inclusivists manage to hold both to their religion and to consider positive and true values outside of its domain. However, they believe that their religion includes the whole truth, while other religion contain less truth or are corrupted.¹¹

The third attitudes in which religions are running parallel without interfering with each other, is defined as 'parallelism' by Panikkar. The fundamentals of one's own faith are as important as the fundamentals of others' faiths in parallelism, but still these fundamentals should be finally transcended. Youroukov considers the parallelism's attitude as non-fundamentalist because; in contrast to the exclusivists' and the inclusivists', it does not consider any priority of holding to the fundamentals of one's own religion before those of some other religions.¹²

9 Milko Youroukov, "Dialogue Between Religious Traditions As a Barrier Against Cases of Extreme Religious Fundamentalism", in Plamen Makariev (ed.), *Islam and Christian Cultures: Conflict or Dialogue* (Washington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2001), p.65.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*, p.66.

12 *Ibid.*

Youroukov declares that forth and the most appropriate attitude for interfaith activities is pluralism. It is a perspective that recognizes the pluralistic quality of truth, affirming that truth is always relational. Accordingly, the pluralistic approach does not aim at finding a common truth, but rather the connection to truth in a given context. He distinguishes pluralism from the rest of the three and considers it most appropriate for interfaith coexistence and dialogue. He further elaborates that in pluralism question arise, as to what is truth and how do we relate to truth rather than whether or not the fundamentals of a certain religion are true. Famous Muslims scholar, Syed Hussein Nasr argues that truth comes before peace and peace follows from the truth.¹³ Referring to the saying of Hans Kung 'There will be no peace among the people of this world without peace among the world religions'.¹⁴ The peace among world religions is not possible without mutual understanding and harmony.¹⁵ Interfaith dialogue from the pluralistic perspective, is never about winning over the other through argumentation and deputation. Instead of aiming at total agreement, pluralism maintains that all problems are created by mutual ignorance and misunderstanding.¹⁶

The idea of religious pluralism and interfaith harmony, particularly between Muslims and the followers of other Abrahamic Religions, is promoted in Turkey by many scholars on the base of Sufi tradition, particularly Sheikh Ahmed Sirhandi (1564-1624) spoke of the task of the each believer as being connected with the spiritual relationship between Abraham and Muhammad and with the Sufi concept of friendship (Kbillah). In this connection Yohanan Friedmann noted: 'This friendship is the highest manifestation of love (*hubb*), this is the principle force responsible for the creation of the world and its continued existence. Originally it belonged to Ibrahim, the friend of Allah (Khalīl Allah) having reached this exalted stage, Abraham was made the imām of all and even Muhammad was ordered to follow him.'¹⁷

13 Hussein S. Nasr, 'A Muslim's Reflection on Hans Kung's *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol.LXXVII, No.2 (April 1987), p.149.

14 Hans Kung, *Christianity and the World Religions* (New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1986), p.443.

15 Milko Youroukov, *op.cit.*, p.66.

16 Panikkar, "The Invisible Harmony: Universal Theory of Religion or a Cosmic Confidence in Reality", in Leonard Swidler (ed.), *Towards a Universal Theology of Religions* (Mary Knoll, New York: 10545: Orbis Books, 1988), p.125.

17 Friedmann, *Shaykh Ahmad Sirhandi: An Outline of His Thought and a Study of His Image in the Eyes of Posterity* (Montreal & London: 1971), pp.18-19.

Inspired from this idea, Gülen tries to cultivate a spiritual friendship, outside Islamic community, generally all those who believe on religion and particularly with in all those who profess the faith of Ibrahim i.e. 'People of the Book'.¹⁸ His idea of Islamic religious pluralism is derived from mainstream Islamic theology. He says 'Islam is a word derived from the root words *silm* and *salamah*. It means surrendering, guiding to peace and contentment, and establishing security and accord.¹⁹ Therefore it is a religion of security safety and peace not only for Muslims but for all the human beings. Peace among the religions is a core of religious pluralism. Desire of peace for every one and it's ensuring for other is a main principle permeate the religious and social lives of Muslims. Islamic worships are also reflecting Islam's intension of peace for all. When Muslims stand to pray, they cut their connection with this world, turning to Lord in faith and obedience, and standing at attention in His presence. Completing the prayer, as if they were returning back to life, they greet those on their right and left by wishing peace: 'Remain safe and in peace'. With a wish for safety and security, peace and contentment, they return to ordinary world once again.²⁰

Greeting and wishing safety and security for others is considered one of the most beneficial acts in Islam. When asked which act in Islam is the most beneficial, the Prophet Muhammad replied. "Feeding others and greeting those you know and those you do not know."²¹ Islam's connotation of peace and submission is rooted from the sayings and the actions of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Holy Prophet described Muslims as: 'A Muslim is one whose fellow brothers are safe from harm of his tongue and hands.'²²

Religious pluralism in Islam is based on the acknowledgement of the non-believer on three distinct levels: The first is that of humanism. Islam introduced the concept of *dīn al-fitrāh* to express its judgment that all human being are endowed at birth by God with a religion that is true, genuine and valid for all time. Insofar as they are humans, this claim would be true of them that they have a *sensus communis* by the free exercise of which they can arrive at the essence of all religious truth.

18 Zeki Saritoprak and Sidney Griffith, "Fetullah Gülen and the 'People of the Book': A Voice from Turkey for Interfaith Dialogue", *The Muslim World*, Vol.95, No.3, July 2003, p.332.

19 Gülen, *Towards a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, p.58.

20 *Ibid.*, p.58.

21 Abu Dawud, *Adab*, p.142.

22 Al-Buhakri, *Book No.2 (Belief)*, Hadith No.10.

Without this natural endowment, man would not be man at all. The universalism of this aspect of Islamic doctrine knows no exception whatever. On this basis of *religio naturalis* Islam has based its universal humanism.²³ All men are ontologically the creatures of God, and all of them are equal in their creatureliness as well as in their natural ability to recognize God and His law. Nobody may even be excused from not knowing God, his Creator, for each and every one has been equipped at birth with the means required for such knowledge. Islamic concept of *dīn al-fīrah* differentiates between natural religion and the religion of the history. The latter are either derivations from this most basic endowment; or they come from other sources such as revelation or human passion, illusion and prejudice. If this kind of religion divides mankind, natural religion unites them all, and puts all their adherents on one level. As the Prophet peace be upon him said: 'All men are born Muslims (in the sense of being endowed with *religio naturalis*). It is their parents (tradition, history, culture, natural as opposed to nature) that turn them into Christianity and Jews'.²⁴ On this level of nature, Islam holds the believers and non-believers equal partakers of religion of God.

The second is the level of universalism of revelation. Islam holds that 'There are no people but God has sent them a prophet or Warner'.²⁵ And that no prophet was sent but to convey the same divine message, namely, to teach that God is God and that man ought to serve him.²⁶ As if man has been given by nature is not enough, Islam now adds the contribution of history. In history, every people have been sent a messenger, 'To teach them in their own language';²⁷ and none has been sent in vain.²⁸ Every messenger conveyed and made understood identically one and the same message from God whose essence is recognition of him as God, i.e., as Creator, Lord, Master and Judge, and the service of him through adoration and obedience. All followers of religious traditions, therefore are recognized as possessors of divine revelations, each fitting its context of history and language, but all identical in their essential religious content. Muslims and non-Muslims

23 Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, "Rights of non-Muslims under Islam", In *Ismail Raji al-Faruqi Islam and Other Faiths*, edited by Attaullah Siddiqui (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation Mark field Conference Center, 1998), p.284.

24 Al-Bukhārī, *al- Jāmi al-Sahīl al- Bukhārī*, Bab Ma qila Fi Ulad al-Muslamin, Hadith No.1296.

25 Al- Qur'ān, 35:24.

26 Al- Qur'ān, 16:36.

27 *Ibid.*, 14:4.

28 *Ibid.*, 4:64.

are equal in their experience of divine communication.²⁹ Islam considered adherence to different religious traditions legitimate. Islamic concept of universal revelation made possible a distinction between the revealed essence of a religion which it shares with all other religions and the figurizations, conceptualizations and prescriptivizations of that religion in history. A critique of the historical by the essential, and of the understanding of both by the natural, has become possible for the first time with this breakthrough of Islam.³⁰

On a third level, Islam identified itself with much of the historical revelation of Judaism and Christianity. It acknowledged the prophets of the two religions as genuine prophets of God, and accepted them as Islam's own. It taught its adherents to honour their names and memories. With its acceptance of the Jewish prophets and Jesus Christ, it reduced every difference between itself and these religions to a domestic variation, which may be due to human understanding, rather than to God or the religion of God. It thus narrowed the gap between the Muslims and Jews and Christians to the barest minimum by making the difference internal to the three religions- Judaism, Christianity and Islam – all at once. Following the Qur'an, the Muslim declares: 'Worthier of affiliation with Ibrāhīm (and by extension, all Hebrew prophets and Jesus Christ) are, rather those who follow his religion, this Prophet and the believers'.³¹

Islam does not negate the existence of difference of Muslims with non-Muslims but it considered them personal understanding, not to the religions concerned as such. Even so, Islam took care to give the all non-believers the benefit of doubt, by withholding judgment until incriminating evidence is at hand. The Muslim is required to begin by assuming that Jew and Christian adhere to the same faith as that of Islam on the three levels. On this basis God commanded His prophet (Muhammad peace be upon him) to address them in these words: [O People of Books, let us rally together, around a noble principle common to both of us, namely, that we shall serve none but God; that we shall associate naught with Him, and shall not take one another as Lords beside God'.]³²

Islam has reassured the non-Muslims amply: [Those who believe (The Muslims) and those who are Jews, Christians and Sabaeans-all

29 Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, p.285.

30 *Ibid.*, p.286.

31 Al- Qur'an, 3:68.

32 *Ibid.*, 3:64.

those who believe in God and in the Day of Judgment and work righteousness, shall have their reward with God. They shall have no cause for fear nor grief.]³³

Evidently, Islam acknowledges the non-believers religiously. On the religious plane, it grants every non-Muslim in the world a double religious privilege and religious dignity by virtues of his sharing of natural religion and divine revelation in history. If he happens to be a Jew or a Christian, he is granted a third privilege and dignity, namely, that of sharing in the tradition of Islam itself. This third privilege, granted by God in the Qur'an to the Jews, Christians and Sabaeans was extended by the Muslims to the Zoroastrians, Hindus, Buddhists and adherents of other religions as they came into contact with them.³⁴ Therefore, Islam grants today all three religious privileges to adherents of all the religions of the world.³⁵

Gülen also highlights such ecumenical aspects of Islam in his thoughts. He has very successfully traced theological foundations of these ecumenical aspects of Islam in al-Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet (Peace be upon him). He is not only interested in communication with West on the basis of these foundations but also wants to convince the contemporary Muslims about the importance of inter faith interactions. He is saying 'the attitude of the believers is determined according to the degree of faith. I believe that if the message is put across properly, then an environment conducive to dialogue will be able to emerge in our country and throughout the world.'³⁶ Thus, as in every matter, we should approach this issue as indicated in the Qur'an and Prophet (Peace and blessings be upon him).' In his opinion Islam, beyond accepting the formal origin of other religions and their prophets, requires Muslims to respect them as fundamental Islamic principles. A Muslim is a follower of Muhammad at the same time he or she is follower of Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus and other biblical prophets. From his perspective not to believe in the biblical prophets mentioned in the al-Qur'an is enough to place someone outside the circles of Islam.³⁷

33 *Ibid.*, 2:62.

34 Al-Faruqi, *Islam in Great Asian Religions* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), p. 329.

35 Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, "Rights of non-Muslims under Islam", *op.cit.*, p.287.

36 Gülen, *Toward a Global Civilization of Love & Tolerance*, p.74.

37 See, Zeki Saritoprak and Sidney Griffith, "Fetullah Gülen and the 'People of the Book': A Voice from Turkey for Interfaith Dialogue", *The Muslim World*, Vol.95, No.3 July 2003, p.337.

Gülen has serious concerns about the interfaith activities that lead to more gaps and difference between the adherents of religious traditions. He feels that interfaith dialogue should not be a debate for ego. It must let the truth to appear. He not only warns about the efforts to winning other but also point out principles such as mutual understanding, respect and dedication to justice for true spirit of religious pluralism.³⁸

Gülen's believe on religious pluralism is not limited to the theory of dialogue only. It goes beyond the theory and he shaped it into practice. His relationship with minorities in Turkey also lends support to his reputation for evenhandedness and openness. It is well-known that the situation of Greeks in Turkey is affected by Greek and Turkish politicians almost daily. In the late 1980's, Gülen initiated dialogue, and he has become a hope and a guarantor for Greeks in Turkey. Jewish and Christian minorities are very supportive to him. He established good relations with the Greek orthodox patriarch Bartholomew. His efforts aimed to bridge difference between faiths show that he wants reconciliation between people and cultures in order to decrease enmity.³⁹

Fethullah Gülen visited Pope John II in 1998 in Vatican. This was an important step towards reconciliation between Muslims and Christians. This visit came at a time when Huntington's idea of 'clash of civilizations' was gaining importance in world politics. He saw the need to establish 'dialogue of civilizations' to counter the idea of clash. Some people objected Gülen's meeting with Pope John Paul II. They believed that the visit of a prominent Muslim religious leader to Catholic religious leader would to some extent cause some Muslims to convert to Christianity. But from Gülen's perspective refrain from talking with others is not real Islam. He feels that Islam has promoted and practiced dialogue with the adherents of other religions since its beginning therefore fear from dialogue for contemporary Muslims is completely invalid. In his opinion the attitude of fear stems from lack of trust on Islam.⁴⁰ Gülen says that humanity is entering the age of knowledge and science. Science will rule the world to a larger measure in the future. Thus, the adherents of a religion like Islam, whose principles are supported by reason and science, should not be doubtful or find difficulty in dealing with adherence of the other religions. According to him interfaith interaction is not a superfluous endeavor, but an imperative.

38 Gülen, *op.cit.*, p.74.

39 Zeki Saritoprak and Sidney Griffith, *op.cit.*, p.337

40 *Ibid.*, p.332.

Gülen believes that inter faith reconciliation is among the duties of Muslims on earth to make our earth more peaceful and safer place.⁴¹

Normative Ethics as Base of Inter Religious Relations

It appears from the thoughts of Muhammad Fetullah Gülen that he considered normative ethics as essence of interfaith dialogue. Normative ethics are trans-religious and trans-cultural. These are equally important in all civilizations. This importance of normative ethics could be a point from where communication between religions can be started. Gülen is aware from the fact that some times Muslims are denied basic rights on the name of virtues, like humanism, human rights and generosity. He takes examples from the nature for the importance of love. He says that altruism is an exalted human feeling and its source is love. Whoever has the greatest share in this love is greatest hero of humanity. Such heroes of love are continued to live even after their death. Gülen indicates that love is direct way to get place in the hearts of the people because this is way of Prophets. Those who follow it are rarely rejected; even if they are rejected by few, they are welcomed by thousands. Once they are welcomed through love, nothing can prevent them from attaining their ultimate goal, which is God's pleasure.⁴² From the basic concept of love Gülen derives love for humanity. He declares 'love is the sultan that reigns on the throne of our hearts, with no power struggle involved. The tongue and lips, the eyes and the ears only have a value as long as they carry the flag of love, yet love is only valuable in and itself.'⁴³ Gülen declares love as weapon of prophets against hatred and jealousy. He quotes from the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and verses of Rumi and stressed on the need of deep understanding of human feelings of love. Gülen beautifully derives this human value from Islamic concept of religious diversity and says 'Islamic thought sees each one of us as a different manifestation of a unique ore, as different aspects of one reality. Indeed, the people who have gathered around common points, such as Oneness of God, the Prophet, and the religion resemble the limbs of a body.'⁴⁴

He considered that the universal principles of Islam provide balanced idea of love. Oppressors and aggressors have denied this love, because just as love the mercy shown to oppressors makes them more aggressive, it also encourages them to violate the rights of others. In this

41 *Ibid.*, p.335.

42 *Ibid.*, p.2.; Gülen, *Towards the Lost Paradise* (Kaynak:Izmir:1998), p.44.

43 *Ibid.*, p.4.

44 *Ibid.*, p.7.

regards Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him says: “Help your brother whether they are oppressors or victims. You can help oppressors by making them stop their oppression to others.”⁴⁵

After talking about the importance of love, its effects on human life and its place in Islam Gülen draws attention towards the negative images of the contemporary Muslims, which he feels needed to be changed with the actions of the Muslims based on love. He says that Qur’an is molded in love. In that respect, believing hearts must reclaim these beauties which are already ours, changing the negative image of Muslims. This negative image has been fed to the world and now we must once more communicate the essential characteristics of Islam to those who are presumed to be civilized, using the principle of ‘gentle persuasion’. Let there be endless thanks to the Excellent Just One who feeds us with his bounty for the devotees of truth and heroes of love who have been caring messages of love, tolerance and dialogue all over the world and who are trying to build the ‘new image of the Muslims’ with hearts full of love.⁴⁶

After analyzing problems such as weakness, disorganization and selfishness in Muslim communities in general and Turkish society in particular Gülen suggests way-out from this situation. In his opinion the way of enlightenment that is in built in Islamic morals is solution. He says that essence of the fundamentals that help us to reach the desire maturity is composed of our being aware of the faith with all its particular depth, of undergoing pain and effort in our worship, of being moral in all our acts, of being spiritually, consciously and sensuously revitalized, and of weighing everything against the righteousness of the hearts.⁴⁷ He considered practice of true Islamic morals as a way of salvation not only for the Muslims but for the humanity also. He feels that Islamic ways of righteousness provides supreme criteria for the evaluation of the actions of the human beings. He placed morals as essence and advantages of humanity and with its help human beings can again ensure their eligibility to be ‘in the most perfect form and nature’. This is what Al-Qur’an has declared as:[we have indeed created man in the most perfect form and nature.]⁴⁸ This best creation of the God Almighty must behave with the morals and ethics that are reason of human’s superiority on other creation of God as Al-Qur’an says:

45 Al-Bukhari, al-Jamiya al-Sahi, Hadith No.2263, p.8/311.

46 Fethullah Gülen, *Towards a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, p.52.

47 *Ibid.*, p.20.

48 Al-Qu’rān, 95:4.

[And if you behave tolerantly, overlook, and forgive, then verily God is forgiving and merciful]⁴⁹

Gülen, on the bases of his deep understanding of Islamic theology, considered that righteousness must be an aim of every human being irrespective of his religious affiliation. He derived it from the Quranic verse which says:

[God does not forbid you, regarding those who did not fight you on account of religion and did not drive you out of your homes, to show kindness and deal with them justly].⁵⁰ After conveying Islamic message for the humanity he asks Muslims to practice mercy and forgiveness. He suggests it as a process of reconciliation among the followers of different religious traditions. He derived this from the following verse:

[Tel those who believe to forgive those who do not look forward to the days of God; in order that he may recompense each people according to what they have earned.]⁵¹

Above discussion shows that Gülen treats human ethics such as love, mercy, righteousness and forgiveness as tools of healing and reconciliation among human beings. His thoughts prove that these norms are equally important for adherent of all religions. He considered these norms as actions that are urgently required for saving the world from conflicts. These are not only basis for inter-religious coexistence but also remedies against misconceptions and hatred.

Tolerance and Dialogue: Strategies of Inter Religious Interactions

Muslims are a faith based community: believing and belonging to the community (*ummah*) go hand in hand. Al Qur'an is the anchor of the believing and belonging community and the prophet Muhammad is its leader. The Qur'an is about human being and is for human beings. Its earthly objective is to establish a cohesive, human and just social order. It aims to create a society where the individual and the society are under an obligation to enjoin good and forbid evil.⁵²

As per Islamic belief Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is as one among many Prophets, some of whom it mentions while of others it says: [We have not narrated to you.]⁵³ But every people has been sent messengers and people will judged between them with justice, and they

49 *Ibid.*, 64:14.

50 *Ibid.*,60:8.

51 *Ibid.*, 45:14.

52 *Ibid.*, 3:104;110:9:71.

53 *Ibid.*, 40:78.

will not be wronged⁵⁴. It also declares that for each community God has appointed a different path (*shari'ah*) and way (*minhaj*)⁵⁵. These different communities with various emphases of belief are encouraged to compare with one another (as in race) righteous deeds. Wherever you are God will bring you all together.⁵⁶

Differences of belief are seen in Islamic belief as part of God's plan. The abolition of such differences is not the purpose of the Islam nor is the Prophet Muhammad was sent for that purpose. Al-Qur'an also emphasizes that such difference do not suggest that their origin is different, rather it is emphasises that human beings have a common spirituality and morality⁵⁷. The differences on the basis of religions are infact diversities of human choice because God has given them the freedom of choose: [If it had been your Lord's will, they would all have believed –all who are on earth Will you then compel people against their wills to believe.]⁵⁸

These few verses from the al-Qur'an suggest that Muslims have enough theological resources to redefine their position in the contemporary world. A society based on inter religious dependence can be built so that those involved, Muslims or otherwise, can feel to engage and participate fully in the society that they are living in.⁵⁹

Relying upon above mentioned argumentation of mainstream Muslims regarding the inter religious interactions Gülen go forward and suggest tolerance and dialogue as alternatives of clash and conflicts. Tolerance in his opinion is a term that is sometimes used synonymous to mercy, generosity or forbearance. This is most essential element of moral system; it is a very important source of spiritual discipline and a celestial virtue of perfect people.⁶⁰ The Prophet, upon him be peace and blessings, defined a true Muslim as one who harms no one with his words and actions, and who is the most trustworthy representative of universal peace.⁶¹ Al-Qur'an always accepts forgiveness and tolerance as basic

54 *Ibid.*, 10:47.

55 *Ibid.*, 5:48.

56 *Ibid.*, 2:148.

57 *Ibid.*, 7:172,91:7-10.

58 *Ibid.*, 10:99.

59 Atallah Siddiqui, "Believing and Belonging in a Pluralistic Society — Exploring Resources in Islamic Traditions", David A. Hait (ed.) *Multi faith Briton* (London: O Books, 2002), pp.23-25.

60 Gülen, *Towards Global Civilization of Love & Tolerance*, pp.33-34.

61 Al-Bukhari, Book 2, Hadith No.9.

principle, so much so that the servants of 'All-Merciful' are introduced in the following manner:

[And the servants of (God) the All-Merciful are those who move on the earth humility and when the ignorant address them they say Peace.]⁶²

[When they meet hollow words or unseemly behavior, they pass them by with dignity'.]⁶³

[And when they hear vain talk, they turn away there from and say: "To us our deeds and to you yours'.]⁶⁴

After quoting these verses Gülen says that general gist of these verses is that when those who have been favored with true servant hood to God encounter meaningless and ugly words or behavior they say nothing unbecoming, but rather pass by in a dignified manner. In short: 'Everyone acts according to his own disposition'⁶⁵ and thus displays his or her own character. The character of heroes of tolerance is gentleness, consideration, and tolerance. After driving his opinion from these verses of the Holy Qur'an he gives example of the Holy Prophet to whom he named the pride of the Humanity, peace and blessing be upon him. This ideal personality lives in an orbit of forgiveness and forbearance. He even behaved such a manner toward Abu Sufyan, who left no stone untouched in enmity of the Muslims throughout his lifetime. During the conquest of Makka, even though Abu Sufyan still was not sure about his conversion to Islam, The Messenger said: "Those who take refuge in Abu Sufyan's house are safe, just as those who take refuge in the Kaaba are safe". Thus, in respect of providing refuge and safety, Abu Sufyan's house was mentioned alongside Ka'ba.⁶⁶ After narrating this event Gülen observes 'In my humble opinion, such tolerance was more valuable than if tones of gold have been given to Abu Sufyan, a man in his seventies, in whom egoism and chieftainship had become ingrained.'⁶⁷

Gülen believes that forgiveness and tolerance have been given great importance in the messages of all the prophets particularly in the message of Prophet Muhammad. In addition to being commanded to take tolerance and to use dialogue as his base while performing his duties, the prophet was directed to those aspects in which he had things in common with the People of the Book (Jews and Christians)

62 Al-Qu'rān 25:63.

63 *Ibid.*, 25:72.

64 *Ibid.*, 28:55.

65 *Ibid.*, 17:84.

66 Muslim, Al Jamiya al-Sahi , Kitab al-Jihad wal Siyer, Bab fateh Makkah, Hadith No.1780,p.3/1407.

67 Gülen, p.34.

[Say: "O people of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that We worship none but God; that we speculate no partner with him; that we take not some from among ourselves for Lords other than God' .]"⁶⁸

Gülen feels that tolerance and genuine interfaith dialogue are not simply pleasant ideals that will be fulfilled in some future paradise, but is some thing at the core of what it is to be done by the Muslim in the here and now. Indeed he asserted that very nature of religion demands this dialogue.⁶⁹ He evaluates reasons of awkwardness and says 'In countries rife with corruption, intolerance and mercilessness such things as freedom of thought, polite criticism, and the exchange of ideas according to norms of equity and fair debate is absent; It would be meaningless to talk of the results of logic and inspiration.'⁷⁰ He asked the Muslims to look into the message of Al-Qu'rān and Sunnah where tolerance and mercy are inbuilt human values. Allah almighty commanded to the hearts filled with belief and love to behave forgiveness and tolerance, even to those who do not believe in the after life:

[Tell those who believe to forgive those who do not look forward to the Days of God: It is for Him to recompense each people according to what they have earned.]⁷¹

Those who consider themselves addressed by these verses, all devotees of love who dream of becoming true servants of God merely because they are human beings, those who have declared their faith and thereby becomes Muslims and performed the mandated religious duties, must behave with tolerance and forbearance and expect nothing from other people.⁷²

Dialogue means the coming together of two or more people to discuss certain issues, and thus the forming of a bond between these people. In that respect we can call dialogue an activity that has human being at its axis. Undoubtedly, every one is rewarded according to their sincerity and intension. If people direct their actions with sincerity and with good intensions, then they may be winner even others considered them losers.⁷³

Gülen feels that dialogue, tolerance and openness are demonstrated in the all embracing nature or universality of Islam. He mentions verse which states [peace is good].⁷⁴ The verse does not necessitate its being particular to

68 Al-Qu'rān, 3:64.

69 Ali Ünal and Alphonse Williams, *op.cit.*, pp.193-194.

70 Gülen, *op.cit.*, p.35.

71 Al-Qu'rān 45:14.

72 Gülen, *Towards a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, pp.69-70.

73 *Ibid.*, p.50.

74 Al-Qu'rān 4:128.

certain event, meaning and framework. The rule is general. He questions! Does not the root of noun "Islam" express soundness, surrender, peace, safety, and trust? Then it is not possible for us to be true Muslims without fully representing and establishing these characteristics. In addition to this underlying the meaning of this sacred name is an essence that incorporates embracing all and approaching everything with love.

Gülen is well aware of importance of dialogue for Muslims. He also has information of Muslims' mistrust on it therefore he says that Muslims will lose nothing by employing dialogue, love, and tolerance. Muslims continuously seek the approval of God; this is the greatest gain of all. In this respect things that may appear as losses to some people are seen gains by the Muslims, while certain other events may actually be detrimental even when they appear to be lucrative. Moreover we have no doubts concerning Islam, its holy book Al-Qu'rān or its most glorious representatives, the Pride of Humanity, Muhammad peace blessing be upon him. Gülen addressed the concerns of Muslims about dialogue and says indeed we do not need to have any worries as we believe that the illuminating expression and statements of the Al-Qu'rān and our Prophet offer lasting solutions to myriad of problems. He says in my opinion those who are equipped with these torches will suffer no loss, with the help and bounty of God, wherever they may go in the world and with whomever they may enter into dialogue. Thus there is no cause for concern. The important fact here is that we should understand the sources that we possess and we should employ them as necessary. Moreover, we should not abuse them by associating them with our own faults, our bodily or earthly desires. With their assistance and guidance we shall seek only the approval of God and the afterlife.⁷⁵

Gülen not only framed Muslims role in interfaith dialogue but also suggest benefits to world as a result of dialogue with Muslims. According to him for the purpose of re-establishing good relations between science and religion dialogue is evitable. Science in the West has been an enemy of religion for several centuries. Christianity has suffered very much from this thinking. Through Muslim-Christian dialogue, both religions will be able to once again reconcile religion and science. He says 'If there was no other reason for promoting Muslim-Christian Dialogue other than this, this reason would be enough to engage in that dialogue, as being of utmost importance.'⁷⁶

An other aspect of establishing and maintaining dialogue is the necessity of increasing the interests we have in common with other people.

75 Gülen, *Towards a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, p.53.

76 Zeki Saritoprak and Sidney Griffith, "Fetullah Gülen and the 'People of the Book': A Voice from Turkey for Interfaith Dialogue", *The Muslim World*, Vol.95, No.3, July 2003, p.336.

In fact, even if the people we talk with are Jews and Christians, this approach still should be adopted and issues that can separate us should be avoided altogether. For example, when the Al-Qu'rān calls the people of the Book, It says [O People of the Book! Come to a word (that is common) between us and you]. What is word? [Let us not worship anything but God.] Because real freedom is realized only by being saved from being someone's slave. When someone becomes a servant of God he is rescued from being anyone else's slave. So come and let us unite on the matter. Al-Qu'rān continues, [Let us not take some of us for Lord.]⁷⁷ What is meant here is that our primary common point is belief in God: mentioning the Messengership of Muhammad has not been even mentioned yet. In another verse: [Say to those who believe: Let them forgive those who have no hope for the afterlife.] What is being said here is let those who do not believe in the afterlife and resurrection after death be forgiven, because [God only rewards or punishes a people with what they have earned,]⁷⁸ if some one is going to be punished, then God will punish them in this matter does not concern any one else.

It is evident from the thoughts of Muhammad Fateullah Gülen that Muslims have not to worry about the fate of non-Muslims. It is matter between them and God only. Whatever decision God will take for them it will not effect the belief of the Muslims. Therefore he framed appropriate Islamic attitude of the Muslims toward non-Muslims within tolerance, mercy, forgiveness, righteousness and dialogue.

Conclusion

Muhammad Fethullah Gülen Hodjaefendi is one of the most serious and significant thinkers and writers of the contemporary Muslim World. Inspired from Sufi ways he declared love and care for humanity his aims of life. He is interested in intellectual enlightenment with wise spirituality and a caring, human activism and is trying to convey, in an inspiring manner, the Islamic message of peace to the whole world. He is a person whose goal is to create compatibility of Islam with 'modernity, democracy and progress'.

Gülen's understanding of harmony and inter religious relations is mainly based on recognition of religious pluralism in his thoughts. The purpose of engagement in interfaith activities from the pluralistic perspective, is never about winning over the other through argumentation. He is fully agreed with the opinion that all problems among adherents of different religious traditions are created by mutual ignorance and misunderstanding. Religious pluralism is aimed at peace among world religions. After tracing security, safety and peace from Islamic teachings

77 Al-Qu'rān, 3:64.

78 *Ibid.*, 45:14.

Gülen also indicates that peace for every one is permeate of the religious and social lives of Muslims.

Gülen treats trans-cultural human ethics such as love, mercy, righteousness and forgiveness as tools of inter religious dependence. He declares love as the sultan that reigns on the throne of our hearts. In an attractive way Gülen declares that religious diversity is manifestation of a unique essence and different aspects of one reality. He declares righteousness as supreme criteria for the evaluation of the actions of the human beings.

Inspired from the idea of Abrahamic Umma, Gülen tries to cultivate a spiritual friendship outside Islamic community. Islamic concept of universal revelation made it possible to understand distinction between common revealed essence of religions and its figurizations in the history. Gülen highlights such ecumenical aspects of Islam in his thoughts and declares that beyond formal acceptance of other religions and their prophets, Muslims are required to respect them as fundamental Islamic principles. This respect, which is part of Islamic belief, is a milestone in interfaith interactions. He feels that interfaith dialogue must be aimed at mutual understanding; respect and dedication to justice for true spirit of inter religious dependence. Gülen's thought took practical shape when he engaged in inter religious activities in Turkey and outside Turkey for the purpose of reconciliation among people and cultures in order to decrease enmity. He proposed idea 'dialogue of civilizations' to counter the Huntington's idea of 'clash of civilizations'. He feels that tolerance and genuine interfaith dialogue are not simply pleasant ideals but are some very important religious duties, which have to be performed by the Muslims in its true spirit.

Muhammad Fethullah Gülen has serious concerns about the image of Islam in contemporary multi faith world. He wants that Islam must be presented as a religion, exemplified in mind, heart and daily life, and should not be a means of selfish partisanship, personal or national hatred, and feelings of enmity. In his opinion, representing faith today with its true values has gained an even greater importance than before. It is need of time that sincere, virtuous; self possessed, cautious, and pure of heart Muslims should work for the betterment of humanity as their religious duty. This will not only help the Muslims to present true Islam through 'gentle persuasion' but will also bring the world religions closer.