

REFLECTING ON THE GÜLEN MOVEMENT'S INTERFAITH DIALOGUE WORK THROUGH THE ACTIVITIES OF NITECA, A GÜLEN-INSPIRED SOCIETY BASED IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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Abstract

Until the peace agreement of 1998 the Catholics and Protestants of Northern Ireland were pedantically focused on what separates these two identities. Following the end of the decades-long 'civil war', reconciliation has led to increased migration to the region, which now hosts more than 20,000 people from ethnic minority backgrounds. This means that there are now more than just two identity communities in Northern Ireland.

This paper focuses on an unlikely actor in this peace-building endeavour, a Turkic religio-cultural organisation, the Northern Ireland–Tolerance, Educational and Cultural Association (NI-TECA), inspired by the Turkish Islamic scholar Fethullah Gülen. The paper relies on ethnographic work and qualitative interviews conducted with members of NI-TECA, and draws on the writings of Fethullah Gülen and others to explain the organisation's principles and policies as implemented by NI-TECA. The paper also reflects on the global influence of Fethullah Gülen's ideas, of which the existence and work of NI-TECA is an illustration.

Introduction

Did you hear the one about a Muslim man who entered Northern Ireland?

The policeman stopped him and asked: “Are you a Catholic or Protestant?”

To which the man replied, “I am a Muslim”.

The policeman then asked, “Are you a ‘Catholic Muslim’ or a ‘Protestant Muslim’?”.

The above ‘joke’ serves to illustrate the traditional division in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants. The society has been so pedantically focused on the two separate primordial articulations of identity, that it was difficult, until recent years, to think outside of this dual paradigm. For so long the two communities lived separately and antagonistically. Thousands have been killed in a ‘civil’ war that has spanned decades.

A peace agreement was signed in 1998, which has led to relative peace in the region. This more benign environment is pregnant with potential for lasting peace. The reconciliation has also led to increased migration to the region, which now hosts more than 20,000 people from minority ethnic backgrounds, including roughly 300 Turkish people. This means that there are now more than just two identity communities in Northern Ireland. This paper focuses on an unlikely actor in this peace-building endeavour, a Turkic religio-cultural society, namely the Northern Ireland-Tolerance, Educational and Cultural Association (NI-TECA). This society was inspired by the Turkish Islamic scholar Fethullah Gülen.

I am interested in exploring the Gülen Movement through the endeavours of this association, as well as drawing on the written word of Fethullah Gülen and an array of different authors. I also use their presence in Northern Ireland as an example of the global scope of this Movement. This article draws on ethnographic work and qualitative interviews I conducted with members of NITECA.

I begin by describing the current situation in Northern Ireland. I argue that the form of democracy practiced in this region, namely consociational democracy, is a flawed system and has served to entrench ethnic divisions further in Northern Ireland. Along with an increase in racist incidents, this is the situation in which NITECA is attempting to bring its style of dialogical practice. This section is followed by a brief description of the work and ideas of Fethullah Gülen. I then introduce the core principles of NITECA before describing some of their activities. This latter section will predominantly be drawn from interview excerpts with members of NITECA. This is followed by an analytical section that links the local endeavours of NITECA with the global endeavours of the wider Gülen Movement.

Describing the Current Situation in Northern Ireland

I find it necessary at this early juncture to describe the current situation in Northern Ireland in order to situate NITECA in the appropriate context. In 1998, after three decades of violence in Northern Ireland, the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) was signed by the elites of the two major opposing parties in an attempt to bring stable governance to the region. Consociational Democracy was adopted as the model for governance. At the heart of this system is the ‘grand coalition’. This entails a number of various antagonistic segments (potentially hostile) sharing power in a grand coalition and attempting to cooperate and run the government together. One of the architects of consociational theory, Arend Lijphart maintains that because the stakes are so high in a plural society (i.e. winner takes all) ‘a grand coalition is therefore more

appropriate than the government-versus-opposition pattern' (i.e. British model) (1977: 27). Presently Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) represent each community in the grand coalition in Northern Ireland.

There are disputes by academics and politicians as to whether this form of government is a step forward or a missed opportunity. It is my contention that it was a missed opportunity as it institutionalises the notion of primordial identities which necessarily perpetuates the conflict (albeit in a largely non-violent form). Literary theorist Declan Kiberd praised the GFA, claiming that '...it offers a version of multiple identities...open rather than fixed, as a process rather than a conclusion?' (cited in Finlay, 2004: 4). In this sense Kiberd is claiming that there is recognition in the GFA that identities are constructed and open to change. However, Andrew Finlay (2004) rightly points out that Kiberd's reading of the GFA is selective. Read as a whole, the document promotes 'parity of esteem' for two communities only, namely 'British or Irish, unionist or nationalist' (Finlay, 2004: 5). Furthermore, Finlay insists that "'parity of esteem' [necessarily] depend[s] on an implicit essentialism' (2004: 23). This echoes the logic of consociational theory which fixes, reifies and objectifies identities that in reality are much more fluid and changing.

There is evidence to suggest that since the signing of the GFA in 1998, there has been an augmenting abyss developing between communities in Northern Ireland. By 2004, there were 37 'peace walls' dividing potentially antagonistic 'communities'. In 1994, the year of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) cease-fire, there were only 15 such 'peace walls'¹ (Wilford and Wilson, 2004: 8). There is no suggestion here that consociational democracy (epitomised by power-sharing by two conflicting 'segments' in society) has created this abyss between the two 'communities'. Of course, these problems were already in existence. However, it is my contention that this form of democracy has led to its exacerbation and consolidation. The people of Ireland, particularly Northern Ireland, were exhausted with the violence and havoc of the previous 30 years. They were ready for radical transition in 1998 when the GFA was signed. However, the adoption of consociational democracy represents a missed opportunity and in my view was myopic. The physical barriers of the 'peace walls' are mirrored by a growing pessimism towards the possibility of concordance amongst the different 'communities'. This has been documented by the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey of Public Attitudes which discovered that the people of Northern Ireland are very cynical about the future of peace (cited in Wilford and Wilson, 2004: 8).

So, Finlay is correct to suggest that the GFA (guided by the tenets of consociational theory) 'remains resolutely bicultural in the way that it privileges the rights of two indigenous communities, each of which is presumed to have its own cultural identity, conceived in essentialist terms' (2004: 24). In this context one must ask what is the affect on other ethnic groups in Northern Ireland that do not fall into the bicultural model of the GFA. Lentin and McVeigh (2006) note that regardless of Northern Ireland's slack economy, it is attracting a sizeable number of migrants. Whilst the GFA caters and promotes the two 'segments' in society, it ignores other minority ethnic groups. McGarry and O'Leary (2004) dispute this claim, insisting that provisions are made for individual human rights complaints through the European Convention of Human Rights in Northern Ireland Law and the Northern Ireland Act (1998). In theory, of course, they are right. However, it is my contention that due to the state sanctioned divisions and institutionalising of mistrust between the two major 'segments' in Northern Irish society, mistrust of all ethnic groups has penetrated throughout the region.

¹ 'Peace Walls' are a euphemistic name for walls of up to and over 1 kilometre in length and up to 20 feet high in Northern Ireland built specifically to keep apart "warring factions" (www.geographyinaction.co.uk)

Deepa Mann-Kler (2002) is an Indian woman living in Belfast and a community activist in Northern Ireland. She maintains that ‘One of the many legacies of the Troubles has been the denial of the existence of racism in Northern Ireland’ (2002: 63). She notes that there are over 20,000 people of minority ethnic background living in Northern Ireland and they are largely ‘non-recognised’ (Taylor, 1994) by the state and consequentially inequality towards these groups is endemic. More recently, Gabriele Marranci (2005), Ronit Lentin and Robbie McVeigh (2006) and Robbie McVeigh and Bill Rolston (2007) have pointed out the rise in racism in Northern Ireland. In 2005 the prominent German magazine *Der Spiegel* claimed that Belfast was ‘the most racist City in the world’ (cited in Lentin and McVeigh, 2006: 145). Lentin and McVeigh (2006) make the point that this claim is both complex and disputed. Nevertheless, the aforementioned commentators provide evidence for growing intolerance in Northern Ireland.

Bottom-up Approach

Though I have outlined several criticisms regarding the model of democracy practiced in Northern Ireland, ruefully I am unable to offer a solution. I do, however join Cochrane and Dunn (2002: 4), who insist that there is a dire need for an empirical focus on the bottom-up approach of actors involved in peace-building. They recognise that the overwhelming majority of research focuses on the top-down approach of the elite representatives rather than those working on the ground.

Cochrane and Dunn provide some interesting research vis-à-vis grassroots organisations in Northern Ireland. Their focus is on indigenous groups such as the ‘Families Against Intimidation and Terror’ (FAIT) and ‘Quaker House’ (QH). My focus is somewhat different, focusing on a non-indigenous group, namely NITECA, who amongst other things offer an island of dialogue amongst a tense post GFA ethnic climate. Before focusing on the principles and activities of this group, I give some brief biographical details about the man who inspired this association, namely Fethullah Gülen.

Fethullah Gülen

The Gülen-inspired publishing company, Fountain, describes Gülen as follows: ‘An intellectual with a distinctive spiritual charisma, a prolific writer and poet, M. Fethullah Gülen has been an extremely effective and popular scholar of Islam for the last three decades’ (Fountain, 2002: i). This type of description is echoed by other scholars, including the political scientist, M. Hakan Yavuz (2003) and the Islamic theologian, Zeki Saritoprak (2005). Gülen was born in Turkey, where he eventually became a licensed Imam and subsequently an esteemed writer and orator. As well as being educated in Islamic theology, he is also well versed in the natural and social sciences and has reportedly ‘tried to synthesize positive science with religion, reconcile their apparent differences, and bring the ideologies and philosophies of East and West closer together’ (Fountain, 2002: 4). Though he has largely been influenced by the Sufi tradition, and indeed wrote a best-selling book (Gülen, 2004a) on its major principles, he never established anything like a Sufi order (Gokcek, 2005).

Gülen’s emphasis on tolerance in Islam and adherence to the secular state gained him favour with several important Turkish politicians and his charisma, heart-felt speeches, ascetic lifestyle and his prolific writings gained him millions of followers amongst the Turkish public. Gülen offers his supporters a worldview that is grounded in Islam and more specifically in the Sufi tradition. Fethullah Gülen is an advocate of interfaith dialogue between different

Muslim groups and different religions. In his pursuit of this goal, he has met with several world religious leaders, including the former Roman Catholic Pope, John Paul II, the leader of the Orthodox Church, Patriarch Bartholomew; Turkey's Chief Rabbi, David Aseo; Israel's Sephardic Head Rabbi, Eliyahu Bakshi Doron. He has also met with and influenced Turkish presidents and academics. These endeavours have arguably made Gülen an important religious figure both in Turkey and around the world.

With a belief in the necessity of Dialogue between different cultures and religions he helped establish the Journalists and Writers Foundation in 1994. He is the honorary president of this organisation. This Foundation consistently organises conferences and meetings to promote dialogue and tolerance between different sections of Turkish society. In early 1995, they initiated a Ramadan Dinner (Iftar) which included representatives from many different strata of Turkish society. Yilmaz tells us that 'In terms of diversity of the participants, it was the first of its kind' (2003: 230). Early in 2000, they also held an interfaith conference that focused on the celebration of Abraham, as the common figure amongst Jews, Christians and Muslims (Yilmaz, 2003). In 2004, on the 10th Anniversary of the Journalists and Writers Foundation, they held a conference in Istanbul, named 'The Common Moral Values in the Three Monotheistic Religions and Terror', where members from different faiths congregated to discuss the relationship between religion and terrorism. These are just some of the many conferences organised by this Gülen-inspired foundation.

The Journalists and Writers Foundation represents the largely structured part of the Gülen movement. Most of the movement is however much more fragmented and grassroots, which is perhaps the reason for its success. Organisations have been set up all around the world, inspired by Fethullah Gülen, though he appears to have little knowledge and control over them. Ihsan Yilmaz (2003: 235) notes that Gülen encourages his followers to migrate in order to become ambassadors for the Turkish state around the world. This idea is encapsulated in the concept of *dar al-hizmet* (country of service), which Gülen interprets as meaning that Muslims are not obliged to live in Muslim countries but wherever they go they must respect the law of the land they are in and serve their faith by respecting those in their host country (Yilmaz, 2003: 234). Gülen further motivates his followers to mobilise by insisting that the mere aversion of transgressions is not sufficient to being a 'good Muslim'. One must also become socially active in order to improve the conditions in the world. Islam, according to Gülen's articulation, is action-oriented. He argues that to become an integral Muslim one must live to serve the benefit of others in order to be satiated in the next world (see Agai, 2002: 38; Komecoglu, 1997: 52). This principle has inspired the establishment of a multitude of organisations around the world devoted to interfaith dialogue, peaceful co-existence and conflict resolution. One such organisation is based in Northern Ireland and goes by the name of NITECA. I intend to use this group as an example of the real and practical contribution of Fethullah Gülen.

Introducing NITECA

NITECA was initiated in 2004 by a number of Turkish residents living in Northern Ireland. Amongst its principal goals are to help integrate Turkish people living in Northern Ireland into the host society. This does not mean assimilating but promoting their own culture whilst learning from their host country's culture. They promote a wide range of activities aimed at promoting tolerance and respect for different communities, as well as demonstrating aspects of their own culture. Their pursuits include a strong focus on interfaith and intercultural dialogue. More will be said about this in the next section. At this stage it is enough to note that

these include, conferences celebrating the commonality amongst the Abrahamic Religions, subsidised trips to Turkey and a range of other events promoting Turkish culture.

NITECA was established by a few Turkish academics and business-people living and working in Northern Ireland, several of whom had experience of working in Gülen-inspired associations in different countries. As the group grew, however, they recruited several university graduate students from Turkey and other Central Asian² nations, who were committed to their ideals, in order to consolidate their association in Northern Ireland.

I asked one member of NITECA how he felt about coming to Northern Ireland. He admitted that he had heard that it was a troubled place. Some of his friends exclaimed “oh it’s not a good place in Northern Ireland. It’s not safe”. Despite this warning he made the trip to Belfast and has now been working voluntarily with NITECA for three years. The important point is that he believed Belfast to be an unsafe place to live and he still showed the courage to go there to work voluntarily. He now feels that these warnings were naïve and feels very safe living in Belfast.

Another member from Turkey speaks humbly about his experiences working in troubled spots around the world such as Albania and Kosovo, where he was director of a Gülen-inspired school. He claims that these Balkan countries share hundreds of years of history with Turkey from the Ottoman era and he therefore felt at ease in these regions despite the conflictual situations surrounding him. He also noted that there were still many Turkish-speakers there. Many other members of the Gülen Movement have entered into war-thorn regions, especially in Central Asia and the Balkans over the years in order to promote their ideals. Given the experiences of these volunteers they were largely unflustered by the violent history of Northern Ireland and the thought of entering into an apprehensive post GFA atmosphere.

The work undertaken by members of NITECA is voluntary. I asked members of the association what motivated them to give up their time to engage in these social endeavours. One member said:

I think it is a responsibility. It is not a hobby... If I don't do it I will be irresponsible according to my religion. It is one of the major requirements of my religion... You can't sit down in your house all the time. If Islam is good you have to live it... You must be proactive, especially in this part of the world... [where] dialogue is needed.

This opinion is widespread in NITECA. Members believe it is their responsibility as “good Muslims” to carry out good works. They insist that though prayer, pilgrimage and asceticism are core components of Islam, so is engaging in social endeavours to make the world a more peaceful place. They do this through the promotion of dialogical activities. This echoes Gülen’s action-oriented Islam which is grounded in social engagement with other faith and cultural groups. It further illustrates the impact of his conceptualisation of dar al-hizmet previously referred to. Gülen (2005) describes organisations like NITECA that promote interfaith dialogue, as ‘Peace Islands’. These ‘Peace Islands’ he argues promote “understanding” and “tolerance” and must be designed to encourage ‘universal human virtues’ and draw together those of different beliefs and orientations in a mutually respected milieu. I now illustrate the manifestation of these principles by describing some of the projects NITECA has initiated.

2 See Turam, B. (2003) for a discussion on Gülen’s emphasis on the ancient ethnic affinity between Turkey and the Turkic countries of Central Asia

NITECA's Activities

Interfaith dialogue is a must today, and the first step in establishing it is forgetting the past, ignoring polemical arguments, and giving precedence to common points, which far outnumber polemical ones (Gülen, cited in Unal and Williams, 2000: 244/5)

In an era when Huntington's (2002) mediatised thesis arguing for the inevitable clash of civilisations is gaining strength, Gülen insists that dialogue should replace the potential clash. This can only be accomplished, he argues, by side-stepping the most antagonistic and apparently irreconcilable differences and instead focusing on the similarities amongst different groups, which he insists far outweigh the differences.

This attitude threads all the activities of NITECA. One member explains their dialogical practice. He insists that dialogue must begin at the most basic level and proceeds to give an example:

...in the Kurban festival, we sacrifice the sheep and then we have meat, fresh cooked meat and we shared [it] with all the neighbours in [the area we live in Belfast]... And at first they were surprised... For 20 minutes we explained [to a local man] and he was very suspicious and then at the end he said "Is it possible to get one more plate?". And these are the reasons – to know each other...but also we celebrate Christmas and then they celebrate our festivals. It is very good samples for dialogue.

This anecdote is illustrative of the humble and small-scale attempts by NITECA to begin dialogue in Northern Ireland. They begin by sharing what they know and then attempt to learn from their ethnically and religiously different neighbours. From basic acts like these, NITECA has built up many relationships with different faith groups, including, Jewish, Catholics, Protestants and Bahai'is. Following the lead of Fethullah Gülen and the Writers and Journalists Foundation, they have organised Ramadan dinners (Iftar), whereby they invite different faith groups to share a meal together, hosted by NITECA. A NITECA member notes that though it is common for Muslims to share food with others during the month of Ramadan;

...inviting different faith groups to the dinner is a new idea and it started in Turkey in the 1990's again by Fethullah Gülen.

This dinner has taken place for the last two consecutive years and the members claim it was a great starting point to get to know different groups in the area. They acknowledge that some Muslims believe that Ramadan is only about sharing with other Muslims but insist that those people misinterpret the spirit of the festival. They further maintain that the Koran specifically calls "people of the book" (i.e Jews, Christians and Muslims) to come together. Inspired by this principle, these dinners play host to Catholics, Protestants, Jewish, and different Muslim groups, all seated around the same table.

One senior member of NITECA pays tribute to the work of Gülen and his close associates for their extraordinary work. However, he recognises that NITECA cannot accomplish such massive feats as meeting the Pope and Head Rabbis. He does, however, point out the importance of the dialogue, not only between the faith leaders, but also between the 'participants of different faiths' (which he means non-clerics – lay-people). Without this commitment to the ordinary man and woman, he argues, dialogue between the faith leaders will come to nothing. This is very much a bottom-up approach which engages at the community level. He mentions that he has organised a table-tennis competition between different faith groups and insists that this is a form of dialogue that is every bit as important as any conference.

Celebration of the Commonalities in the Abrahamic Religions

The insistence on the ubiquity of commonalities between the Abrahamic religions is one of the keys to Fethullah Gülen's thought. He claims:

As a Muslim, I accept all Prophets and Books sent to different peoples throughout history, and regard belief in them as an essential principle of being Muslim. A Muslim is a true follower of Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and all other Prophets. Not believing in one Prophet or Book means that one is not a Muslim. Thus we acknowledge the oneness and basic unity of religion, which is a symphony of God's blessings and mercy, and the universality of belief in religion. (Gülen, cited in Unal and Williams, 2000: 242)

One must believe in all the prophets of the Abrahamic religions in order to be "true Muslim", he argues. Though there are clearly differences between the beliefs in the different personalities of the Prophets, Gülen encourages Muslims to embrace all religions but pays most attention to the Abrahamic ones as they have most obvious things in common. In an effort to bring peace he encourages his followers to embrace the similarities and ignore the differences between the different faith groups.

The most explicit promotion of interfaith dialogue by NITECA comes in the form of the interfaith symposiums they organise. In 2006 they held a conference focusing on the 'Mercy in the Abrahamic Religions', inviting speakers from the Jewish and Christian community in Northern Ireland. In 2007 they organised a symposium, namely 'Fundamentals of Peace', where there were speakers from the three faiths again, who talked about the universal principles of 'truthfulness and trustworthiness'. There was also a professional storyteller from the Baha'i community. These conferences attracted up to 100 attendees from a variety of religious backgrounds, including Jewish, Catholic, Protestant and Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. One member of NITECA explained the reasoning behind these conferences:

...it is important to share and discuss the common values... We believe in the Abrahamic religions. At the basic principles all the religions are the same. As a Christian you cannot tell me that being a thief is good behaviour, no you cannot say this...the Muslim people believe that all of these Abrahamic religions... are from the same light... The origin is the same. We invited a professional story teller. She was of the Baha'I community... She read from stories of the Bible and the Koran... each religion was represented... at the conference... When we are organising this [conference], the aim is not to compare the religions and it is not to talk about the differences. I think if we come together and talk about the differences we will not solve our problems. You are a Christian. If you are a good Christian you are happy and I am happy. You should be a good Christian and I should be a good Muslim. But while I am being a good Muslim, I should be aware of you and learn about you and your traditions... the aim is not to convert or to make them Muslim or Christian...

Again this echoes Fethullah Gülen's work with an insistence on the certain compatibility of the different Abrahamic religions. This volunteer argues that focusing on the differences will lead to more conflict. One must, he argues, learn and appreciate each other's culture and traditions in order to live in harmony. Members of NITECA acknowledge that they did not 'invent' these themes but they just replicate the annual conferences going on in Turkey. Indeed the same conferences with the same theme are replicated in many different countries around the world, inspired by organisations belonging to the Gülen Movement.

The dialogical approach of this Gülen-inspired association sounds quite simplistic especially in the context of Northern Ireland with its violent past. Indeed it is a straightforward approach and in the current climate whereby the guns have largely stopped firing in Northern

Ireland, this simple approach appears to be having some impact, although modest. The sight of Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims, sitting around the same table in a peaceful milieu bodes well for the future.

Another example of NITECA's ideas on dialogue can be explained by a recent visit they had from an academic who was interested in understanding their perspectives on education. She asked one of the leading members if he thought that Islam should be incorporated into the curriculum. He replied, to her surprise, in the negative and insisted that Islam should not be taught in schools but should be left to the parents direction. This principle is consistent with the ethos of the Gülen-inspired schools around the world. Islam is not taught or privileged in these schools (Turam, 2003). This came as a surprise to the Jesuit academic Thomas Michel who visited several of these schools and studied Gülen's education vision. He noted the ethnic and religious diversity of these schools and insisted that proselytising was never a factor as students from different faiths and ethnic backgrounds studied harmoniously (Michel, 2003). Journalist Nicole Pope (1998) found similar results in the Gülen-inspired schools in Turkmenistan. In another of these Gülen-inspired schools in Kazakhstan, Turam was taken aback at finding Turkish Jews opening high schools in the name of Gülen. Furthermore she discovered through interviewing students and students' parents that they were unaware of any Islamic association with these schools or aware of Fethullah Gülen.

Returning to the NITECA respondent mentioned above, instead of teaching Islam in schools, he proposed that there ought to be 'dialogue classes' incorporated into the curriculum which would 'teach people to live together'. This would serve all the people of Northern Ireland. He suggests piloting it in a few schools to begin with to see if it works. This indeed is an interesting proposal in an attempt to deschool society of prejudices. NITECA made similar recommendations at another conference organised with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI).

PSNI Conference

Muslims should say, "In true Islam, terror does not exist." In Islam, killing a human is an act that is equal in gravity to unbelief. No person can kill a human being. No one can touch an innocent person, even in time of war. No one can give a fatwa (legal pronouncement in Islam) in this matter. No one can be a suicide bomber. No one can rush into crowds with bombs tied to his or her body. Regardless of the religion of these crowds, this is not religiously permissible (Gülen, 2004b: 1).

The above is an unambiguous condemnation of terrorism by Fethullah Gülen. One cannot be a Muslim and a terrorist, he insists. Shortly after the 9/11 attacks in New York, Gülen wrote an article in *The New York Times*, expressing a similar sentiment. This attitude inspired NITECA to organise a conference, named 'The Necessity of Dialogue to Prevent another 7/7' with the Police Service of Northern Ireland's (PSNI) Community Safety Branch. It was a closed conference whose attendees were solely from the PSNI, including, the Chief Constable of Northern Ireland and a number of police officers working in the field of community relations. The main speaker was Ozcan Keles of the London Centre for Social Studies. He reportedly spoke about the key factors that caused the attacks in London on the 7th of July 2005 which resulted from 'prejudice, preconception, misunderstanding, fear, suspicion and animosity' (www.NITECA.org.uk). He subsequently went on to argue that the interfaith dialogical approach promoted by Fethullah Gülen serves as a possible way to prevent another such terrorist attack. One member of NITECA noted that though this was a small conference,

it was effective.

Given that the PSNI has always had major difficulties dealing with the largest minority group in Northern Ireland, namely Catholics, for reasons too complex to discuss here, it is a progressive move to see that they are embracing other minority groups in this increasingly diverse region. It appears to be a sincere attempt to help understand the situation of Muslims living in Northern Ireland. From the decades of troubles in the region perhaps the legally armed forces of this disputed territory have finally realised that dialogue is the answer to peaceful coexistence. The conference also served to raise the profile of NITECA amongst state officials and other minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland.

Cultural Events Organised by NITECA

Much of the discussion above has focused on conferences organised by NITECA, which are typically aimed at elites in society; those who can make changes at an official level. However, NITECA is also engaged in a variety of cultural pursuits which are aimed at the general public. Each year they distribute a dessert known as ‘Noah’s Pudding’. In collaboration with Catholic and Protestant churches, they dispense the puddings to those leaving church on Sunday mornings. They also include a leaflet describing the reason for distributing this pudding and also detailing the ingredients. The leaflet narrates that when the Prophet Noah survived the flood, his family gathered all the remaining food on the ship and made a pudding. NITECA members replicate this symbolic gesture in order to remember the Prophet Noah. This endeavour is also an act of dialogue. They claim that:

Sharing food offers a way to re-affirm unity and the essential relationship of humans to one another, regardless of faith background and belief (www.niteca.org.uk)

Other cultural events organised by NITECA include a trip to Turkey, subsidised by business associates of the Gülen Movement in Turkey. This trip is articulated as an intercultural event. They also organised the Whirling Dervishes to come to Belfast. This group has its roots in the work of the famous sufi poet, Mevlana Jalal al-Din Rumi, whose work has been very influential on Fethullah Gülen. Rumi is renowned for his emphasis on tolerance and dialogue.

Analysis

The examples of NITECA’S activities discussed in the previous section illustrate its declared commitment to tolerance and dialogue. They are different to the traditional organisations working for dialogue and peace in Northern Ireland in many ways. They are obviously non-indigenous, whilst the vast majority of groups engaged in dialogical practice in Northern Ireland are natives to Ireland. The most important difference, however, is the difference in outlook. Indigenous groups in Northern Ireland act locally and think locally. They work at a grass-roots level to try and bring peace to the region. Their thoughts are on peace in their local area and region and they are unlikely to envision their modest work as having a global impact.

NITECA on the other hand engages in an explicit form of what sociologists refer to as glocalization. This concept has its origins in marketing culture whereby global corporations adapt their products and managerial practices to local conditions and tastes (Robertson, 1997). Roland Robertson (1997) generalises this concept to refer to the interpenetration of the global and local in any given context. In a very practical way members of NITECA act locally and think globally, always positioned delicately and concurrently in the two contexts without

incongruence. By thinking globally (in their capacity as NITECA volunteers) they always pay heed to the messages and principles of Fethullah Gülen and are loosely connected to other Gülen-inspired groups around the world in a global circuit. They largely work in unison with the same aims and objectives but adapt their dialogical methods to local situations. As shown in the previous section NITECA are keen to work with anybody who is willing to engage with them. This has included, faith members of all the Abrahamic religions, including Catholics and Protestants. They have also adopted a conscious strategy of inviting local academics and clerics to speak at their conferences, whilst at times electing to draw from their international reservoir of ‘sister organisations’ to bring in spokesmen to represent the Muslim opinion on a variety of issues.

Their emphasis on localism largely extends to funding also. NITECA members insist that they get most of their funding from local Turkish business-people and other funding from the City Council, though they also have collection boxes in local shops to help with their fundraising. They maintain that finances are regularly tight but they do not let these obstacles deter them. They do however sometimes ‘go global’ in an attempt to gain funding for some activities. Members acknowledged that they get some financial assistance from business-people in Turkey to help subsidise a yearly trip they organise to Turkey for indigenous people of Ireland. This trip, as mentioned above, is a continuation of their promotion of intercultural dialogue. It also serves to promote Turkish culture in Northern Ireland.

Having spoken in-depth to several members of NITECA, as well as attending conferences and a trip to Turkey, I am of the opinion NITECA’s main aim is to promote a positive version of Islam and Turkey. However, as previously mentioned, guided by their faith in Islam, they also feel an obligation to serve humanity in order to be rewarded in the hereafter. Following the lead of Fethullah Gülen, they attempt to endorse a tolerant version of Islam that is grounded in the Sufi principles of love and tolerance. They claim that fundamentalist Muslims have, to an extent, ‘hijacked’ Islam. They further maintain that the image of Muslims and Islam as violent is reinforced by a disproportional and sensationalist focus by the media on this minority of Islamic fundamentalists. This view is supported by the author of the ground breaking book, *Orientalism* (1979), Edward Said. He has taken up this theme in his book, *Covering Islam: How the media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (1997). This volume attempts to illustrate how the majority of opinion-makers in Europe and America, both journalists and academics, have predominantly portrayed Islam as a monolithic group determined to challenge the West through terrorist activities. Said claims that:

Malicious generalizations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West; what is said about the Muslim mind, or character, or religion, or culture as a whole cannot now be said in mainstream discussion about Africans, Jews, other Orientals, or Asians. (1997: xi/xii)

In any other context, such denigration would be rightly regarded as racism. However in the context of Islam, such vilification appears acceptable as it has become part of the ‘common sense thinking’ of many people in the Western world, particularly since the September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington. In the absence of a collective effort to portray positive representations of Muslims by western opinion-makers, it is only the negative depictions that filter down to the general media consumer. Said (1997) notes that for every book written fairly on the subject of Islam, there are numerous written with an unbalanced orientation towards depicting Muslims as terrorists. The corollary of this, according to Said, is that ‘the average reader comes to see Islam and fundamentalism as essentially the same thing’ (Said, 1997: xvi). For the average person, Islam becomes synonymous with terrorism, violence and

atavism. Muslims in the West have thus been racialised in this derogatory manner. Said's position was articulated before the terrorist attacks in New York (2001). A variety of authors have since shown that the denigration of Islam by Western opinion-makers has intensified since the attacks in New York (Modood, 2005; Anwar, 2005; Parekh, 2006; Ishay, 2004; Wu, 2004).

Members of NITECA feel a duty to help remedy this situation through the various conferences and cultural projects they organise which emphasise dialogue as the key to peaceful coexistence. However, though I maintain that a key element of NITECA's activities include the promotion of a positive image of Islam and Turkey, it is important to note that their events help bring different faith groups together and their presence is conducive to the project of lasting peace in Northern Ireland. Furthermore their activities may contribute to the formation of an antidote to the growing racialisation of migrants and ethnic minorities in post GFA Northern.

Given the difficult history of ethnic and religious intolerance in Northern Ireland and the current nervous post-GFA environment, one may question whether another ethnic and faith group in Northern Ireland could exacerbate tensions rather than acting as a potential antidote. In response, it is clear that we now live in a globalised world and one corollary of this is an increase in migration and furthermore an unprecedented mixture of cultures and religions. As aforementioned there has been a dramatic increase in migration to Northern Ireland in recent years. The Turkish community are amongst these migrants. They do not claim to represent all Muslims in the region but do espouse views of tolerance and through Gülen's conceptualisation of *dar al-hizmet*, they obey the laws of the land and offer a contribution to the society based on their system of beliefs which avowedly has service to humanity at its core. By hosting various functions and inviting different ethnic and faith groups, including Catholics and Protestants, NITECA has acted as a conduit by setting up a platform which may be interpreted with suspicion if it was initiated by either of the aforementioned Christian groups. In this sense the neutrality of Islam vis-à-vis the different Christian groups may serve as their strongest asset in promoting their dialogue platforms. Furthermore it has been well documented that some migrants isolate themselves in their host country. This is often exacerbated by restrictive and assimilationist tendencies of the host government. NITECA have shown that they are willing and indeed actively engaged in integrating into the mainstream in Northern Ireland, combating potential problems of isolation and discordance.

Cochrane and Dunn (2002: 178) note that it is difficult to assess the quantitative influence of small bottom-up organisations working for peace in Northern Ireland. They claim that it is only when you see the cumulative affect of all of these organisations that you realise the importance of each small group. NITECA is amongst these associations whose contribution is humble, though noteworthy. In the same light NITECA is but a small organisation inspired by Gülen. Their input to the Movement is certainly humble though added to the hundreds of other Gülen-inspired associations around the world, the cumulative affect is considerable and has helped turn a social movement peculiar to Turkey into a global social movement with peace and tolerance as their avowed core principles.

Conclusion

This article attempted to evaluate the contribution of Fethullah Gülen by focusing on an organisation inspired by his teachings. I believe my methodological approach helps the reader to understand the very practical and grounded contribution of Fethullah Gülen to interfaith

and intercultural dialogue. Using the backdrop of Northern Ireland, I illustrated the commitment of the Gülen Movement members by entering into an uncertain post-conflict territory that was named in 2005 by *Der Spiegel* magazine as ‘the most racist City in the world’ (cited in Lentin and McVeigh, 2006: 145). A focus on Northern Ireland also demonstrates the global reach of Fethullah Gülen’s ideas. I found it necessary near the beginning of this article to discuss the current situation in Northern Ireland. Some people may be under the illusion that since the GFA was signed in 1998, ethnic tension has ceased. I argued that instead of ending, it may have exacerbated and indeed created a milieu whereby there is a widespread distrust of all ethnic groups. With growing migration to the region, the potential for ethnic tension is ominous. I argued that the dialogical activities of the Gülen-inspired NITECA may contribute to the antidote to this ethnic tension and their presence is conducive to peace-building in the region.

Largely using the words of NITECA members I displayed several of their activities and clearly showed the influence of Fethullah Gülen’s thought on all of their projects. These endeavours include conferences focusing on the celebration of the Abrahamic religions, Iftar dinners for different faith groups and a seminar with the PSNI in order to discuss ways to prevent terrorist attacks. These activities are oriented towards the elites in society, in an attempt to influence academics and important state institutions. Other endeavours target the general public. These include more basic and simple elements such as playing games and picnicking with other faith groups, as well as the distribution of Noah’s pudding and organising subsidised trips to Turkey. NITECA members insist these are good ways to begin dialogue.

Analysing their activities I argued that NITECA embrace the process of glocalization. They act local but think global. I explained that NITECA adapt the philosophy of Fethullah Gülen to local conditions but concurrently think of the global impact of their work and are always connected to the global circuit of the globalised Gülen Movement. I further argued that amongst NITECA’s aims are to promote a positive image of Islam and Turkey, whilst also offering a service to humanity. I thus concluded that their presence in Northern Ireland is conducive to a peaceful milieu in the region. Though their contribution is modest, they are challenging the racialisation of minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland by engaging in constructive dialogue. NITECA can be understood as a ‘Peace Island’ that may indeed replace the so-called ‘peace walls’ in Northern Ireland.

Professor of Philosophy, Bhikhu Parekh (2006) argues that there are many powerful groups in Europe that insist that the values and practice of the 15 million Muslims residing there are incompatible with European values. However he importantly notes that there is little evidence to corroborate this proposition. By focusing on the Gülen-inspired NITECA, this article has shown how a group of Muslims have adapted to one of the most difficult situations in Europe (i.e. post GFA Northern Ireland) and have indeed found their niche in this region on the edge of Europe.

In conclusion as the title of this conference indicates, the Muslim world is in transition. It now has to deal with extremists within the *Ummah* as well as with the portrayal of Islam as inherently radical and its members as an undifferentiated group, by the majority of opinion makers in the West. With the hyperbolic claims of the inevitability of the ‘clash of civilizations’ permeating the general consciousness, there is a need for a counter-discourse from both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. John Esposito notes that

While a minority of extremists focus on revolution in their own countries and abroad, others concentrate on more peaceful political and social “revolutions” and reforms dedicated to the

incorporation and expression of Islamic values in both the public and private spheres. (2003: 1)

Fethullah Gülen and the Movement that has surrounded him have discursively and practically contributed to peaceful participation in civil society. I hope that this paper has illustrated this point. There is need for a more balanced investigation of the variety of expressions of Islam and a need for academics to focus more on the peaceful movements and movements promoting moderation. I hope I have contributed to this endeavour by focusing on the dialogical relations practiced by the Gülen Movement at a very micro level.