

GÜLEN AND HIS GLOBAL CONTRIBUTION TO PEACE-BUILDING

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Abstract

Fethullah Gülen is one of the most influential scholars and thinkers in the contemporary Islamic world, particularly in Turkey. Although recent studies have put forward Gülen's ideas on various topics, Gülen's approach to peace building is one of the less studied. Given the contemporary reality of wars and ethnic/religious strife, this is a neglect that needs to be corrected. Fethullah Gülen stands up for peace and for the prevention of any clash of civilisations, not only through his speeches and writing, but through his actions as well. This paper examines the concept of peace building through Gülen's writings and activities with reference to the main sources of Islam and Gülen's commentary on them. In focusing on Gülen's activities, the paper emphasises certain American institutions, notably the Washington D.C. based Rumi Forum for Interfaith Dialogue (of which Gülen is the honorary president), and its contribution to peace-building through interfaith activities.

“O Lord, you are peace and peace comes from you. Give us, our Lord, a life full of peace.” (Prophet Muhammad (pbuH))

Our world has become a global village, where people are more interconnected than ever. Technological progress continues in an amazing speed. The emergence of human beings’ awareness of their place in the universe increases human sharing in one another’s happiness and sorrow; this consciousness is unique to our time and carries risks as well as benefits. No nation or ethnicity in the world can claim complete isolation, even the most primitive of societies. As a result of increased interaction and access to faster channels of communication, human beings have greater need than ever for the maturity of mind and spirit to coexist peacefully. In contrast to the high speed of technological development, the building of human relationships appears to be slower than ever. Where greater communication should foster real relationship between members of the human family; today’s world instead faces conditions in which two-thirds of the world’s population suffers from interpersonal violence and war.

In this paper, I will examine a sampling of Fethullah Gülen’s views on peace and peace building, and the roots of these views in the Qur’an. This does not claim to be an exhaustive study of Gülen’s writings on peace.

Building peace among human beings is the most important task, though one of the most difficult of all tasks required of the human family. Peace is one of the names of God (al-Salam). Many Muslims carry the name Abd al-Salam (the Servant of Peace). Humans must live peacefully in order to reflect the divine name, Peace.

The Qur’an makes hundreds of references to peace. The root word for peace is s-l-m, which carries connotations of both “peace” and “submission.” The words “Islam,” “Muslim,” “Muslimun” (plural), and “Salam” all come from this same root. The word “Salam” is mentioned many times in the Qur’an, for example, when describing the quality of the servants of God, who are defined by their peaceful response: “The servants of God are those who walk on the earth modestly, and when certain foolish people address them, their answer is “salam” (25:63). Another Qur’anic verse says, “When the servants of God pass near negative behavior, they pass by with dignity and kindness” (25:72).

Considering the violence in today’s world, and the proliferation of weapons capable of rendering the human species extinct several times over, it is urgent that both Muslims and non-Muslims must follow the instructions of the Qur’an for human relationship: “Peace is better” (4:128). Even in the midst of war, on the battlefield, if there is an opportunity for peace, the Qur’anic injunction is “if the enemy inclines towards peace, you should incline toward it too” (8:61).

The very beginnings of Islam were marked by successful peaceful resolutions to ongoing conflicts. The Prophet was known for his peaceful response to violence and persecution in Mecca. His peace building skills were so well known that he and his followers were invited by the leaders of Medina to build peace among rival tribes that had been fighting for centuries. Under his leadership, a peaceful society was successfully established in Medina, and later, even Mecca.

Islamic civilization is based on two essential principles: mutual cooperation, and the loving interrelatedness of creation. In the first principle, the planet depends upon all creatures

helping one another: rain helps grass to grow; grass helps animals to grow; and animals help human beings to grow. In the second principle, all members of creation are considered brothers and sisters. This principle requires all human beings to reject anything that does damage to this essential relationship; in Islam all forms of chauvinism (including racism and nationalism) are unacceptable.

The Islamic view of human society is based on the principles of harmony and peace: wars and violent actions, while part of the history of every major world religion, have no place in the essence of Islam. The ideal society described in the Qur'an is Paradise, *Dar al-Salam* (the Abode of Peace). It is required of believers that they make this world as similar as possible to this ideal society.

The Qur'an acknowledges the reality of human nature and the possible conflicts that may arise between peoples. However, it constantly encourages believers to incline towards peace in any situation of dispute. First of all, all human beings should assume the responsibility of making peace, in accordance with the divine principles: "be fearful of God and make peace among yourselves" (8:1). A similar Qur'anic verse speaks of the responsibility of political authorities to make peace and stop violence if it occurs: when fighting occurs between two rival groups, it is incumbent upon the Islamic authority to make peace between the two.

If two groups of believers fight against each other, make peace between them. If one party does wrong to the other, you fight that which does wrong until it return to the ordinance of God. If it returns, make peace between them justly, and act equitably; God loves the just. (49:9)

Since God has put no limitations on the devastating capacity for human anger, building peace is one of the most difficult tasks for human beings. It requires steadfastness, resolve and patience. It is a long process, and may take generations in order to build a worldwide peace. The Qur'an encourages peace-builders in this struggle by reminding them of the eternal rewards they will receive. Even if they are not fully successful, still they will be rewarded for their works, and therefore they should not lose hope in the work of peace: even the angels in paradise will greet such peacemakers with joy. "Peace be with you," they will say, "because of your patience in the life of the world" (13:24).

Peace is such a central notion to Islam that the very greeting among the people of paradise is "Peace," or *Salam* (10:10). The righteous will be told, "enter paradise peacefully and safely forever" (15:46). Muslims in their daily greetings use the same language: *as-Salamu Alaikum*, "peace be with you."

Some scholars suggest that the five pillars of Islam have a direct relationship with the work of peace building and non-violent action. Obeying God and the Prophet (and disobeying others if needed); discipline through daily prayer; social solidarity through compulsory charity (*zakat*); self-sacrifice, suffering, and patience through fasting; and finally unity and friendship through pilgrimage are all elements through which one is prepared to make peace and to accept peace.¹

The Prophet himself dealt with building peace between tribes as well as individuals. One example of the Prophet's peace-building is the famous story of the black stone, in which he solved a dispute among several Arab tribal leaders in such a way that all were able to equitably share in the honor of placing the sacred stone. On another occasion, the reconciliation of

¹ See Abu-Nimer, *Non-violence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and practice*, p. 45. Also see Chaiwat Sathanand, "Core Values for Peacemaking in Islam: the Prophet's practice as paradigm" in *Building Peace in the Middle East*, ed. Elise Boulden, (Boulder: Lynne Rinner, 1993).

two individuals took precedence over even the Prophet's prescribed daily prayer; this occasion is recorded in certain Islamic references which indicate that Abu Bakr led the prayer in the Prophet's absence. *Sahih al-Bukhari*, the most authentic collection of the sayings of the Prophet, contains an entire book on the Prophet's sayings about peace-building, or reconciliation (*sulh*).

Nowadays, the majority of the world's population is suffering the effects of global conflicts and wars. The victims are mainly the vulnerable: children, women and the elderly. The world experienced one of its most devastating wars just decades ago, and there is fear that history may repeat itself. The very building in which this conference is being held was, only 60 years ago, in the midst of intense bombing. According to one account, as many as 35 million people were killed during World War II, which can be considered a collective suicide of Europe. Enlightenment and civilization did not help prevent the civilized world from engaging in such destruction.

When describing the effects of the two World Wars, the world agrees, "never again." However, the current trend of our world is unfortunately not peace-oriented; every indication is that we are headed for much more horrible destruction. Therefore, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and adherents of all other religions should make all efforts for the dominion of peace.

In the Islamic world one can see some important efforts in this direction. The focus of this paper will be on the efforts of Fethullah Gülen (b. 1941-), as one of the most influential personalities of our time. As elaborating on Gülen's biography is beyond the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that Gülen's passionate pursuit of peace began at a young age, in a time when anarchy and chaos were dominating Turkish society. In the 1970s, college students, teachers, and even some professors were highly influenced by Marxism. Marxist and nationalist groups were in armed conflict with one another. More than 10,000 people in Turkey were killed in two decades in these clashes. Even families were not immune to this violence and tragedy; members of the same family could be found fighting on opposite sides. Gülen made all efforts to extinguish the fire of conflict amidst this chaos, and made great impact in building peace. Gülen in one of his statements narrates the following:

My admirers know that when anarchy was everywhere in our country, I called for calmness and controlling of anger. I had received death threats, yet, I called upon my admirers to continue working for peace, 'If I am assassinated, despite all your anger, I ask you to bury my body and seek order, peace and love in our society.' Regardless of what happens, we believers should be representatives of love and security. I continue saying the same today.²

Gülen's efforts were mainly educational. It can be argued that he did not directly stop the armed conflict, but his efforts equipped young people with values that prevented them from engaging in such conflicts. Gülen believes that the new generation should be equipped with qualities such as wisdom, compassion, and knowledge. As an inspired Muslim scholar, he has spiritually influenced thousands of people through his educational efforts as well as his public speeches. He continues to influence millions in Turkey and around the world.

It is a tradition among Turkish intellectuals to work for the creation of an "ideal generation." For example, Mehmet Akif, the writer of the Turkish National Anthem, spoke of a generation that he named the "Generation of Asim" (*Asim'in Nesli*). Bediüzzaman Said Nursi spoke of the "New Generation" (*Nasl-i Jadeed*, in Turkish: *Nesl-i Cedid*). Necip Fazil,

2 Hurriyet daily, 4.21.2004 (an interview given to Safa Kaplan).

another prominent Turkish poet and author, idealized his generation as the “Faithful-Youth Generation” (*Imanli Genclik*). Gülen, having read the work of his predecessors, looked for his own generation and found the lack of proper education to be the essence of the problems they faced. Through his writings and educational institutions, he has attempted to create such a generation, which he has coined the “The Golden Generation” (*Altin Nesil*). The aim of the Golden Generation is to provide a perfect education for a perfect generation in order to obtain a perfect society. The Golden Generation also requires the young people of the community to show a great respect for religious and national values.³ Gülen hopes that a lasting peace can be achieved through the work of a generation which is peaceful, made up of individuals who are living examples of peace, who will build bridges of dialogue and mutual understanding to make peace among people. To Gülen, the Golden Generation has certain specific qualities: knowledge, faith, love, idealism, altruism, and action.⁴ In the last decade, when some political scientists spoke of a “clash of civilizations,” Gülen ardently urged the building of “wave-breakers” in order to prevent such a clash.

It is not an exaggeration to assert that the endeavors of Gülen have, and will continue to have, a global impact on building peace. Gülen’s philosophy of peace and his efforts are not considered isolated instances in Islam; in fact, as briefly mentioned above, the entire heritage of Islam is considered to be the foundation of Gülen’s understanding of peace. He counts among his role models, certainly, mystics such as Hasan al-Basri, and Abu-Talib al-Makki; scholars and mystics such as Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali, Jalal al-Din Rumi, Ahmet Sarhandi, and Bediüzzaman Said Nursi; and most importantly, the companions of the Prophet. One can argue that if any of these Muslim personalities had lived in our time, they would be involved in the same work as Gülen.

Contemporary scholars of peace-building have elaborated on certain elements that are essential for making peace in any part of the world. Two of these elements are education and knowledge. There is no doubt that Gülen’s greatest efforts and contributions are related to these two fields. Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, in the beginning of the twentieth century, stated that “there are three major enemies of Muslims: ignorance, poverty, and internal division.”⁵ If we take a closer look at our modern world, we can easily understand the importance of education, particularly for Muslims, who constitute 22% of the world’s population. Population growth is faster among Muslims than any other population, while literacy rates remain significantly low.⁶ Gülen considers lack of education to be a disease requiring a cure; he wants to cure the diseases that were diagnosed by Nursi. Education, according to Gülen, will result in peace.

Today in Turkey, Central Asia and many other parts of the world, the educational institutions that were established by admirers of Gülen have continued to contribute greatly to the education of people of different religions and ethnicities. In fact, his Golden Generation has already contributed, through educational endeavors, to the building of peace in many areas of conflict, including the Balkans, northern Iraq, Northern Ireland, and the Philippines.

Thomas Michel, in his article on Gülen, speaks of a school established by the admirers of Gülen on the Philippine island of Mindanao, which he visited in 1995. Michel visited an area

3 Bayram Balci “Fethullah Gülen’s Missionary Schools in Central Asia and their Role in the Spreading of Turkism and Islam.” *Religion, State & Society*. 31:2, 2003. pp 151-169.

4 Begim Agai, *The Muslim World*, 2003, Vol. 57

5 Nursi, *Hutbe-i Samiye*, in *Risalei Nur*, II, p. 1976.

6 Akbar Ahmed, *Islam Under Siege: From Clash to Dialogue of Civilisations*, p5.

of the island where kidnapping, guerrilla warfare, and armed conflict was constant between Moro separatists and the state. Michel states, “The school [which is named the Philippine-Turkish School of Tolerance] offers Muslim and Christian Filipino children an excellent education and a more positive way of living and relating to each other.”⁷ Michel found, in this school, students from all backgrounds, and described it as a “heaven of peace” in this area of conflict.⁸

Another example comes from my own experience, when I visited Skopje, Macedonia in the summer of 2004. I had a chance to visit a school established by some Turkish businessmen who were supporters of the Gülen movement. I was told that when civil war was going on in the region, members of different ethnicities were sending their children to this school. Their parents were fighting, but the children were living peacefully under the roof of the same school.

In order to contextualize Gülen’s peace building philosophy, I would like to draw upon the famous Muslim sociologist Ibn Khaldun’s understanding of building peace. In Ibn Khaldun’s philosophy, individual efforts and sacrifices remain essential. He says, “peace in society is possible through willingness of an individual to subordinate [the individual self] to the group. Without this, peace and social development are not possible.”⁹

Ibn Khaldun addresses the development of urban society in the term *Asabiyya*, or “group solidarity,” in a way which he empties of its original connotations of racism and nationalism, both of which are prohibited in Islam. I would like to borrow this term from Ibn Khaldun to indicate solidarity around a value or an idea that is shared by members of society. Gülen’s “Golden Generation” exemplifies Ibn Khaldun’s idea of the establishment of peace in society.

Gülen believes in the integrity of the individual; his approach to social restoration and peace building, therefore, is one of “bottom-up” social change. It should be noted that Ibn Khaldun’s concept of *Asabiyya* carries its own risks of an excessive group loyalty, which can be dangerous for a harmonious society. Ahmad Akbar points to such a danger. Gülen solves this problem by emphasizing the quality of individuals, since his ideal Golden Generation is based, not on ethnicity, but on moral and ethical dimensions. Gülen describes his Golden Generation as “selfless people, sincerely thinking of others rather than themselves.” He says:

Who knows? Maybe in the near future some selfless people, who sacrifice themselves to make others live, will unite hearts and minds through their efforts. The conscience and logic will become two different, deeply rooted dimensions of their lives that will complete each other. Physics and metaphysics will abandon the fight between themselves: in order to give the opportunity for the beauty of everything to express itself in its own language, each will return to its own field. These selfless people will discover the interconnectedness of the divine command and the laws of nature. People will repent for their previous meaningless fights with one another. An atmosphere of serenity will be built and be felt in homes and in schools. No dignity will be stepped on. The hearts will be full of respect to the extent that no one will trespass on the properties or the dignities of others. The powerful will act justly so that the weak and the poor will have a chance to live humanely. No one will be arrested just because of an assumption. No one’s house or business will be attacked. No innocent’s blood will be shed. No oppressed person will cry out. Everyone will love human beings as a duty towards God. It is exactly this time when the world, which is a corridor to Paradise, will

7 Thomas Michel. “Fethullah Gülen as Educator.” *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement*. Ed. M Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito. Syra Cruz, Syra Cruz University Press, 2003. pp 69-84.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqqadimah*

become a paradise-like place that will always be enjoyed.¹⁰

He strongly advocates selflessness and living for others as the most essential qualities of the builders of peace. He calls them “sacrificed souls” (*adanmış ruhlar*). By living for others, he says, an individual should always prefer the advantages of others over his/her own. This is in fact a description of the believers in early Islam, namely the companions of the Prophet as the Qur’an speaks of them. The verse says: “They prefer others over themselves even if they are in need.” Without a generation with such qualities, Gülen, like Ibn Khaldun, argues that peace would not be possible. This is why he constantly asserts the need for faithful and selfless individuals to dedicate themselves to the establishment of peace. Educational institutions should serve to bring up such individuals from the realm of imagination to the realm of realization. All of Gülen’s educational efforts work towards this realization.

Despite the overwhelmingly negative and violent state of the world, Gülen remains hopeful about the future of humanity. He believes that the efforts of building peace in the world and attempting to create a harmonious society will bear fruit. This great hope is exemplified in the following statement:

Once upon a time, despite intercontinental obstacles, through the teaching of the Qur’an, a permanent love, respect, and dialogue was achieved. These days, I have full faith that through the efforts of these *holy people* a new atmosphere, new understandings and dialogue will be achieved. Even now, through the *immigrants* who carry this idea around the world, the rivers of love have started to flow. Now they are heard in every corner of the planet. The breezes of tranquility and happiness have started to be felt. And in every corner of the world, they are creating *islands of peace* for stability and harmony.¹¹

According to Gülen, his ideal Golden Generation will always think of positive steps to build peace. His Golden Generation will not be distracted by historical mistakes. He would say, despite some negative historical experiences like the Crusades and colonization,

We are resolved not to remember those events and not to give an opportunity for the rebirth of animosity. We strongly encourage the constraint of historical mistakes within the limits of the history books so as not to resurrect the feelings of animosity among people.¹²

Describing his ideal generation further, Gülen says:

there is no bullying, no greed, no quarrelling, no distrust, no lies, no oppression, and no deception. On the contrary, there is chivalry, tenderness, the efforts of revival, the love for life, kindness and dialogue, respect for truth, trust, acknowledgement of kindness and generosity, the spirit of righteousness, justice, and the following of the straight path.¹³

To Gülen, the Golden Generation can be an important instrument for establishing such a world of peace where “people love love and hate hatred.” Gülen compares hatred to a destructive flood which destroys trust among segments of society. This hatred brings baseless accusations against the people who strive for peace. Through hatred, words can be taken out of their context and even the most innocent statement can be used against an individual.¹⁴

10 M. Fethullah Gülen, *Örnekleri Kendinden Bir Hareket* (A movement whose samples are from within itself) (Çag ve Nesil Serisi, N.8), (Izmir: Nil Yayinlari, 2006), p110

11 *Ibid.*, p111

12 Fethullah Gülen, *Isigin Gorundugu Ufuk* (Çag Ve Nesil Serisi-7) (Izmir: Nil Yayinlari, 2006), pp158.

13 Fethullah Gülen, *Yeseren Dusunceler* (Çag ve Nesil 6) (Izmir: Nil Yayinlari, 2006), p88-92.

14 Fethullah Gülen, *Ornekleri Kendinden bir Hareket*, p. 75.

One has to acknowledge that building a global peace is not an easy task. Gülen suggests that the individuals who dedicate themselves to working for humanity and building peace have to be patient and uninfluenced by the trend of quick and sloganeering politics.

Gülen insists that people should light candles in their communities in order to enlighten society: it is the duty of the ideal generation to enlighten people rather than sulk in darkness. Gülen is aware of the fact that it is difficult to do this without the power of the media. For this reason, during the 1980s, his movement worked towards the establishment of a newspaper, and later, the establishment of a television channel. Both projects became highly successful both within and outside of Turkey. Through these, as well as through monthly and weekly journals, the Gülen movement successfully established a powerful media presence, which directly and indirectly contributes to the building of peace. *Zaman* (“Time”), which started in 1986, is regarded as one of the best newspapers in Turkey, with a circulation of more than 600,000 copies per day. With its many correspondents around the world, it is now published in many different languages and countries, including Australia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Germany, Romania, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Macedonia, Turkmenistan, and the United States of America.¹⁵

Gülen suggests that his admirers should invest first in human beings. Any investment in human beings takes years, so people must be patient in their expectation of results. His own experience indicates some of the difficulties that peace builders face: in the 1990s, when Gülen promoted dialogue between different ethnicities and adherents of different religious traditions, both some extreme secularists and some extreme Muslims opposed him. Eventually, he left Turkey, ostensibly for medical reasons, but also to avoid this conflict.

Gülen was confident about his approach and its compatibility with the core teachings of Islam. He compared his opponents in Turkey to the Kharijites of early Islam, saying:

similar to the logic of Kharijites, this destructive group destroys everything positive; like an anarchist under the control of hatred and revulsion, they attack everything. They run from one wildness to another, destroying the bridges of understanding and making the roads of dialogue impassable, causing despair in the loving spirits and injecting violence and hatred into hearts that beat with love.¹⁶

These thoughts express his deep concern and fear for the future of peace in his country. Despite this, he has never lost hope and has always believed that the efforts for building peace will eventually bear fruit. When all doors were closed against him, the media and the secular elite pronounced him *persona non grata* to the extent that his life was under threat.¹⁷ Despite the hardships that Gülen faced during the process of accusations, spiritual persecution and exile, he never sought revenge. “We are going to be respectful for our character,” he says.

“We will not harm those who persecuted us. We will not seek an eye for an eye. We will never curse them. We will not break hearts and, in the manner of Yunus [the famous 14th century Turkish poet], we will invite everyone to love. . . . As a believer, I promise that I will never shun any person

15 Greg Barton, “Turkey’s Gülen Hizmet and Indonesia’s neo-Modernist NGOs: Remarkable Examples of Progressive Islamic Thought and Civil Society Activism in the Muslim World,” in *Political Islam and Human Security*, eds. Fetih Mansouri and Shahram Akbarzadeh (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006), pp140-160.

16 Fethullah Gülen, *Ornekleri Kendinden bir Hareket*, pp75-82.

17 For the details of Gülen’s feelings, see *ibid* pp75-82.

and I will not prosecute those who transgressed against me.”¹⁸

For Gülen, forgiveness is an essential element to building peace. When a woman accused of committing adultery was brought to Jesus, he said, “Let the person who is without sin, cast the first stone.” Gülen says of this, “Those who understand the deep sense in this statement cannot throw stones at others while they deserve to be stoned themselves.” Self-criticism, for Gülen, is an important step towards forgiveness. “In fact, we will never be able to make a right decision, neither on behalf of ourselves nor on behalf of others, until we break, with courage such as Abraham’s, the idols within us.”

There is no doubt that forgiveness is one of the most important elements for building peace. Therefore, according to Gülen, the most important gift for the coming generation is to teach them how to forgive. Gülen states, “today’s generation’s greatest gift for their children and for their grandchildren is to teach them how to forgive even the most offensive behaviors and nauseating actions.”¹⁹ He calls forgiveness a heavenly medicine that can cure the many wounds of society.

For Gülen, another effective element to build peace is love. He considers love to be an effective weapon; he embraces this weapon of love against all violent actions:

In a time when people are defeated by their sense of revenge and animosity, when masses are driven into struggles and wars, when truth is silenced before force, when those who wield power behave against their dissidents as tyrants, when dictators and oppressors are applauded and promoted, while the oppressed are treated badly, we once again say: love. I believe that love has the capacity to change the rhythm of our life.²⁰

According to Gülen, once one is equipped with love and compassion, there will be no difference between “you,” “we” and “others.” Gülen believes that for building peace, love is essential. Furthermore, today “we need love and compassion more than water and air.”²¹ Gülen describes those who love others and live for others as heroes. He says, “happy are those who make love their guide in their journey. How unfortunate are those who do not perceive the love that is grounded in their spirit and who spend an entire life blind and deaf.”²²

In recent years, Gülen’s admirers have started building bridges between adherents of different religious traditions. In the United States where I live, I know of dozens of institutions that promote inter-faith dialogue. In major cities of the United States such as Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and Washington D.C, one can find many such institutions. For example, I lived for five years in the Washington D.C. area, where I participated in the establishment of the ‘Rumi Forum for Interfaith Dialogue.’ In 1999, two years before 9/11, a group of Turkish-American Muslims who admire Gülen’s idea of dialogue approached me and asked me to help establish a forum for interfaith dialogue. I witnessed the foundation of this institution and the dedication of the members of the Turkish-American community in the greater D.C. area, when they voluntarily came and painted the doors and walls, cleaned the floors, and did whatever was necessary to make the center function. I asked myself, what was the motivation

18 Fethullah Gülen, *Isigin Gorundugu Ufuk (Cag ve Nesil Serisi-7)* (Izmir: Nil Yayinlari, 2006), p217.

19 Fethullah Gülen, *Sag ve Nesil (Cag ve Nesil Serisi-1)* (Istanbul: Nil Yayinlari, 2006), p77.

20 Fethullah Gülen, *Yeseren Dusunceler (Cag ve Nesil 6)* (Izmir: Nil Yayinlari, 2006), p. 113. For further reading on Gülen’s understanding of love for human beings, see *Isigin Gorundugu Ufuk (Cag Ve Nesil Serisi-7)* (Izmir: Nil Yayinlari, 2006), pp. 34-38.

21 Fethullah Gülen, *Ormekleri Kendinden bir Hareket*, p. 184.

22 Fethullah Gülen, *Yitirilmis Cennete Dogru (Cag ve Nesil Serisi-3)* (Izmir: Nil Yayinlari, 1997), p. 98.

behind this? These people would not receive any material benefits from such an institution; on the contrary, they gave of their own funds to support it.

Having witnessed this communal solidarity, I was reminded of Ibn Khaldun's concept of 'solidarity of group,' which emerged in a remarkable way in this local community. The motive for a computer engineer, who volunteered as a painter at the center, was evident in his statement: "solidarity with other people to build peace." In fact, their efforts became so fruitful that within a year, the institution became one of the most well-known organizations of inter-faith dialogue in the area.

Dr. Ali Yurtsever, the current president of the Rumi Forum, responding to my request for information regarding their recent endeavors, states that in recent years, the institution has reached thousands of people, including Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus and Buddhists, as well as adherents of other faiths. As for the institution's goal, he reminded me of the Qur'anic verse: "human beings are created to know each other" (49:13). When asked how these events would contribute to the building of peace, he said: "knowing each other is the first step to eradicate hatred."

What attracted me most to the people of the forum was their great sense of devotion to their work. Dr. Yurtsever categorizes such activities into six groups: establishing relationships with churches, planning trips to Turkey, organizing conferences and seminars, presenting cultural activities, organizing *iftar* programs for Ramadan, and participating in peace building work with community leaders.

Yurtsever states that the Forum members have communicated and become familiar with approximately 150 leaders in a variety of Christian churches. By organizing common events and building relationships, they have overcome prejudices and hatred on both sides. At many of their gatherings, he says there are over 50 differing ethnicities and nationalities present.

The Forum organizes trips to Turkey to build friendships between the members of the Turkish and American communities. They have already invited over 150 community leaders to Turkey to develop such friendships. Yurtsever says, "We have successfully managed to establish beautiful relationships between Turkish and American people during these trips."

The Rumi Forum plans conferences, seminars, and other academic events, through which they inform and educate the public and students about various cultures and religious traditions. They also publish booklets and leaflets in order to establish bridges between peoples.

The Forum's cultural activities are designed to develop friendships and peace among people through music. These include cultural and religious events such as performances of the Whirling Dervishes and picnics through which they introduce the cultural diversity of their society.

The Forum also organizes *iftar* programs in the month of Ramadan, in order to recognize those who contribute to the establishment of dialogue and peace in their community, wider society, and world. The purpose of these programs is to inform Washington, D.C.'s elites, such as congressmen, senators, and think-tank scholars, about what is going on in the realm of building peace, and to recognize the efforts of those who work hard towards this goal.

Finally, the Forum meets regularly with political leaders to inform them of developments in the work of peace around the world, and to prevent misunderstandings regarding the religion of Islam. By this, the Forum makes a connection between members of Muslim society and the leaders of the local community, including law enforcement agents.

Alongside these six categories, the Rumi Forum website indicates further activities. Such activities include monthly gatherings with Georgetown University scholars to discuss certain themes of Islam and Christianity. I personally heard very positive remarks from many attendees of such inter-faith activities, who benefited from them immensely. None of these activities are financed by any government; rather, they are developed and run by the efforts of individuals.

Fethullah Gülen has no worldly possessions and he is celibate. One cannot imagine that Gülen receives any material benefits from any activities inspired by his teaching. The benefit here, rather than material, is a spiritual one, which encompasses all.

The concept of compassion in the teachings of Gülen is one of the most important principles in Gülen's understanding of peace. His own compassion can be seen in his physically drained reaction to the plight of innocent human victims of chemical weapons in northern Iraq, to a deep respect for the life of such an insignificant creature, like an insect.

In the tradition in which Gülen was brought up, his understanding is that no matter how small, every creature praises God in its own tongue, and therefore deserves its proper respect and compassion. As Yunus Emre, the famous Turkish poet, said, "we love creatures for the sake of the Creator." Therefore, compassion can be read frequently in the writings of Gülen:

Compassion is the beginning of being; without it everything is chaos. Everything has come into existence through compassion and by compassion it continues to exist in harmony. . . . Everything speaks of compassion and promises compassion. Because of this, the universe can be considered a symphony of compassion. All kinds of voices proclaim compassion so that it is impossible not to be aware of it, and impossible not to feel the wide mercy encircling everything. How unfortunate are the souls who don't perceive this. . . human beings have a responsibility to show compassion to all living beings, as a requirement of being human. The more one displays compassion, the more exalted one becomes, while the more one resorts to wrongdoing, oppression and cruelty, the more one is disgraced and humiliated, becoming a shame to humanity.²³

Gülen reflects the Qur'anic teaching of compassion in this statement, which is confirmed by Akbar Ahmed as an important component of peace building:

Search for global solutions to common global problems confronting human society, and the quest for a just, compassionate, and peaceful order, will be the challenge human civilization faces in the twenty-first century. To meet the challenge is to fulfill God's vision to embrace all humanity. Doing so is to know God's compassion.²⁴

23 M. Fethullah Gülen, *Towards the Lost Paradise*, (London: Truestar, 1996), 40-2; see also M. Fethullah Gülen, *Fatiha Uzerine Mula hazalar (Considerations on the Chapter Fatiha)*, (Izmir: Nil Yayinlari, 1997), 90-95.

24 Ahmed, *ibid*, p8.