

# **GIVING PRECEDENCE TO COMMON POINTS: THE LIMITS OF THE OTHERNESS IN FETHULLAH GÜLEN'S DIALOGIC METHODOLOGY FOR INTERFAITH ENCOUNTERS**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines Fethullah Gülen's teaching on interfaith encounters highlighting his dialogic methodology proposed for a globalised world in which Samuel Huntington's idea of the 'clash of civilisations' (*Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, 1997) is still prominent. This idea, concludes Gülen, stems from the lack of trust in the religion of the "Other" and, rather often than not, from easily passing over the common points. According to Gülen, dialogue is not a superfluous endeavour, but an imperative ("Dialogue is a must") and it should start by "Giving precedence to common points". Gülen holds that the tendency toward factionalism exists within human nature. A meaningful and nonetheless necessary goal, he says, should be to make this tendency non-threatening and even beneficial. To fully appreciate the significance of Gülen's accomplishments, one must understand the perspective from which he approaches the subject of interfaith dialogue. Based on his thinking as noted above, the purpose of this paper is to set out in some detail the way in which this renowned Islamic thinker limits the "domain" of the Otherness (Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2004; *Nation and Narration*, 1990) to make dialogue possible through overcoming both Orientalism (Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1978) and Occidentalism (Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: the West in the Eyes of its Enemies*, 2004). Challenging the discourse of conflict and focusing on common points may be an important strategy when mutual suspicions are still prevalent and when the field of postcolonial studies stand witness to conflicting processes of refraction (Patricia Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought*, 2005; Amin Maalouf, *Les Croisades vues par les Arabes*, 1986).

*Those who act according to what they have seen are not as successful as those who act according to what they know. Those who act according to what they know are not as successful as those who act according to their conscience. (Gülen 2005:106)*

This article aims to explore Fethullah Gülen's teaching on interfaith encounters highlighting his dialogic methodology proposed to a globalized world in which models and theories of clashes are still prominent. These theories, concludes Gülen, stem from the lack of trust in the religion of the "Other" and, rather often than not, from easily passing over the common points. According to Gülen, dialogue is not a superfluous endeavor, but an imperative ("Dialogue is a must") and it should start by "Giving precedence to common points". Gülen holds that the tendency toward factionalism exists within human nature. A meaningful and nonetheless necessary goal, he says, should be to make this tendency non-threatening and even beneficial. To fully appreciate the significance of Gülen's accomplishments and the challenges he is facing, one must understand the perspective from which he approaches the subject of interfaith dialogue. Based on the above-mentioned landmarks of his viewpoints regarding the representation constructs, the purpose of my paper is to investigate the way in which this renowned Islamic thinker limits the "domain" of the Otherness or dilutes many of the apparently instituted boundaries.

My paper starts from the assumption that recognizing the Other on common grounds is a prerequisite of dialogue. The first section of the essay focuses on conceptual frameworks of defining the "relevant" alterity (Orientalism, Balkanism, Occidentalism) and theories of conflict (models of clashes, competing meta-narratives). The second section looks into identity markers expressed or implied by Sufi thinkers (Al-Ghazali, Rumi, Nursi). The third section discusses Gülen's awareness with the Other and, consequently (as detailed in the fourth section) his identification of common grounds for dialogue.

To achieve the aim of my study, throughout all the four sections, Gülen will be presented in a textual exchange of ideas with other thinkers and authors.

## **In Search of the Other**

The first question regarding the possibility or impossibility to establish a dialogue revolves around the issue of the Otherness and the way in which the representation of the Other is construed. From the mere cognitive category (that generally separates the world into "us" and "them"), to the more intricate pattern of exclusion (in-group, out-group) and to the confrontational mentality (*us-versus-them*), the discourse on identities assumes different statuses and has distinctive implications. "... For the nation to exist, it is presupposed that there is some other community, some other nation, from which it needs to distinguish itself." (Triandafyllidou 1998:594) Furthermore, the relevance of the identity is valued in terms of alienation: "(...) la culture des autres est perçue essentiellement comme un écart par rapport à la nôtre, non dans sa propre cohérence." (Todorov 1989: 342).

For Edward Said (in his book first published in 1978 and then reprinted in 1995 under the title *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*) "Orientalism" is a discursive system and a cultural creation through which the West imagined the East as its immature Other. Orientalism, he asserts is "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident'". (Said 1995:8) Said's notion on the modes of

making if not an entirely conflictual Other, at least a problematic one, is brought further conceptually and extended geographically by Larry Wolff (*Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, 1994) and Maria Todorova (*Imagining the Balkans*, 1997). An attempt of a mirror image came in 2004, with Ian Buruma's and Avishai Margalit's *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies*. The representations of the West are equally biased and stereotyping, Buruma and Margalit show, and even more, they formulate the conflicting identities already in the title. It is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate the terms *Occidentalism* and *West* as set forth by the two authors in a rather un-systematic way. Nonetheless, they offer a counter-reflection to the other imagined identities (Orientalism and Balkanism), a partial one in as much as Buruma and Margalit identify the roots of Occidentalism (hostility to the city, repulsion to the material life, adherence to commercial rather than heroic models, etc.) in both the East and Europe.

All the above-mentioned authors achieve, to paraphrase Fethullah Gülen's words, to sum up an entire book and theory in a title. Literally, Gülen says that "sometimes the sun appears in an atom, a flood in a drop, and a book in a sentence" (Gülen 2005:108), after he warns that "every flood comes from tiny drops whose existence and size are neglected. Gradually, it reaches a level that cannot be resisted. A society's body is always open to such types of flood." (Gülen 2005:107)

Religion remains a strong cultural signifier embedded with many layers of meaning and a crucial dimension in the representation of the Other. (Vainovski-Mihai 2000:192) In so far as identity turns out to be meaningful only through the distinction from the alterity, the 'significant others' (Triandafyllidou 1998:595) thus conceived, invented, imagined (to use Said's, Wolff's and Todorova's terms) may shape up the construction of the in-group individuality itself (Appollonia 1996:138) and draw a clear-cut borderline between the in-group of *Us* and the out-group of *Them*. Nowadays religion is no more a mere marker of the otherness in tune with the overtones of travel literature, in which the author's homeland "serves as organizing center for the points of view, the scales of comparison, the approaches and evaluations" (Bakhtin 1990:103) neither is it a label for exoticism. "Exoticism presupposes a deliberate opposition of what is alien to what is one's own, the otherness of what is foreign is emphasized, savored, and elaborately depicted against an implied background of one's own ordinary and familiar world." (Bakhtin 1981:101)

Currently much intellectual effort, in academic circles as well as in the larger political and cultural arena, is devoted to probing many of the world's problems in terms of a clash between secular modernity and religious tradition. At the center of this controversy is a critique of Islam, treated as a more or less coherent culture, civilization, or historical tradition. Typically, Islamic 'fundamentalism' is seen as the prototype of religious extremism. And Islamic 'civilization', according to scholars such as Bernard Lewis and Samuel P. Huntington, has remained 'backward' in comparison with 'the West', because 'something went wrong' earlier in 'Islamic history' (Matin-Asgari 2004:293). In fact, less smoothly than in Matin-Asgari's paraphrase, Huntington claims in all-encompassing terms that "the underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam". (Huntington 1996:217) Huntington's article "The Clash of Civilizations?" appeared in the Summer 1993 issue of *Foreign Affairs* and then developed into a book published three years later. His theory of clashes stands on the assumption that people define their identity by what they are not and makes, among others, the dichotomy between Western "*homo economicus*" and Eastern "*homo Islamicus*". (Bilici 2006: 16) He puts forth the same belligerent way of thought with regard to the Western multicultural communities, within which the viable solution for co-existence is not the respect

for differences as part of our nature (Gülen 2004:249), but assimilation: “Western Culture is challenged by groups within Western societies. One such challenge comes from immigrants from other civilizations who reject assimilation and continue to adhere to and to propagate the values, customs, and cultures of their home societies.” (Huntington 1996:304).

On his turn, Edward W. Said stands far from denying the theory of global cultural conflict, only that he plants it on other ground and labels it as “The Clash of Ignorance”. (Said 2001) “In fact, Huntington is an ideologist, someone who wants to make ‘civilizations’ and ‘identities’ into what they are not: shut-down, sealed-off entities that have been purged of the myriad currents and countercurrents that animate human history, and that over centuries have made it possible for that history not only to contain wars of religion and imperial conquest but also to be one of exchange, crossfertilization and sharing. This far less visible history is ignored in the rush to highlight the ludicrously compressed and constricted warfare that ‘the clash of civilizations’ argues is the reality.” (Said 2001:12)

Thomas Michel implies, too, that conflicts, tensions, and misunderstandings proceed from ignorance. The visibility of Islam in the last decades is often due to sensational events complemented by a certain disinterest or suspicion towards non-violent forms of Islam and the strives in finding common grounds for dialogue. “Someone whose knowledge of Islam is limited to the headlines of the daily newspapers is likely to believe that the religion teaches terrorism, suicide attacks, oppression of women, and hatred for those outside its community.” (Michel 2004:i-ii)

In the same vein, Philip Marfleet argues: “Among the many criticisms of Huntington, one is central: that in order to construct global cultural blocs he has imposed uniformity upon a vast range of people of diverse beliefs and practices. This homogenization of cultures serves to simplify to an extreme degree the complexity of human experience. It denies the fluidity of cultural forms – the complex processes of appropriation and modification of ideas which have taken place for millennia across all manner of borders.” (Marfleet 2003:83)

Among the theories of conflicts, a third one is gaining preeminence, with Stanley Hoffmann’s “clash of globalizations”. (Hoffmann 2002) His model is not grounded on the conflict between separate civilizations, but between different visions of globalization like secularism, fundamentalism or multiculturalism and the sharing of commonly acceptable values. “How can one make the global house more livable? The answer presupposes a political philosophy that would be both just and acceptable even to those whose values have other foundations.” (Hoffmann 2002:109)

On account of Hoffmann’s model, John O. Voll includes Gülen among the designers of bridges arching over the clashes of globalizations: “In the clashing visions of globalizations, Fethullah Gülen is a force in the development of the Islamic discourse of globalized multicultural pluralism. As the impact of the educational activities of those influenced by him attests, his vision bridges modern and postmodern, global and local, and has a significant influence in the contemporary debates that shape the visions of the future of Muslims and non-Muslims alike.” (Voll 2003: 247)

Meanwhile, Michel is regarding Gülen’s thinking and deeds as an alternative to the theory of the “clash of civilizations”: “The need for dialogue among people of faith has been underscored by the events of the past few years. Interreligious dialogue is seen as an alternative to the much-discussed ‘clash of civilizations’. Those who do not subscribe to the theory that a civilizational clash is inevitable are proposing instead a dialogue of civilizations, an exchange of views aimed at mutual enrichment, a sharing of insights that can lead all to a

deeper understanding of the nature of God and God's will for humankind on this planet.” (Michel 2004:i).

As for Gülen himself, the clash is a matter of deep awareness and accountability both for the Self and the Other: “Humanity is a tree, and nations are its branches. Events that appear as heavy winds hurl them against each other and cause them to clash. Of course, the resulting harm is felt by the tree. This is the meaning of: ‘Whatever we do, we do it to ourselves.’” (Gülen 2005:106) On the other hand, confrontation may result from turning a deaf ear to the seemingly contradictory ideas of the Other: “People who do not think like you might be very sincere and beneficial, so do not oppose every idea that seems contradictory and scare them off. Seek ways to benefit from their opinions, and strike up a dialogue with them. Otherwise, those who are kept at a distance and led to dissatisfaction because they don't think like us will form huge masses that confront and smash us. Even if such dissatisfied people have never achieved anything positive, the number of states they have destroyed is beyond counting.” (Gülen 2005:89)

Gülen makes here a good point in the appeal to dialogue and in showing the possible consequences of the “competing meta-narratives”, a phenomenon appreciated by Robert A. Hunt as one of the main problems facing the interfaith dialogue in the contemporary world. “It is the problem of Western civilization claiming to provide the paradigm within which it can understand all other civilizations better than they understand themselves. It is the notion that science can understand religion better than religion understands itself. It is the notion that Christianity understands other religions better than they understand themselves, or that Islam understands Christianity and other religions better than they understand themselves. In the face of such meta-narrative claims, all dialogue essentially ceases because from within a meta-narrative there is no need to listen to the other.” (Hunt 2006:6)

Maintaining the dichotomy between Western “*homo economicus*” and Eastern “*homo Islamicus*” reinforces the monistic conception of modernity as a Western product. The substitution of “*homo Islamicus*” with “Muslim *homo economicus*”, on the other hand, implies a multiplicity of modernities and the existence of commonalities. Emphasis on such commonalities enables interaction and cooperation rather than competition between these two identities (Cf. Bilici 2006:16). Or, as Gülen puts it into words: “We were in friction with one another. We separated in order to solve the problem, but we didn't attain what we expected to. As a result, we lost our own paradise.” (Gülen 2000a:218)

## Sufi Perceptions of the Other

“Although a term comes into popular or academic usage at a certain given historical period, this does not mean that the concept itself is new. The idea may have been discussed in previous ages, but other terms were used to describe it. [Terms like] ‘tolerance’, ‘engagement with the other’, and ‘future of dialogue’ are good examples of this.” – marks out Michel (2002:5) in his analyzing Said Nursi's views on the engagement with the Other and assumes the task to identify Bediüzzaman's ideas couched in the popularly accepted terminology of the day. Michel points out the nine rules of sincerity spelled out in *Risale-i Nur* as a summing up of Nursi's principles of tolerance towards alterity (defined as a “particular outlook”):

- i. To act positively, that is, out of love for one's own outlook, avoiding enmity for other outlooks, not criticizing them, interfering in their beliefs and sciences, or in any way concerning oneself with them.

- ii. To unite within the fold of Islam, irrespective of particular outlook, remembering those numerous ties of unity that evoke love, brotherhood and concord.
- iii. To adopt the just rule of conduct that the follower of any right outlook has the right to say, “My outlook is true, or the best,” but not that “My outlook alone is true,” or that “My outlook alone is good,” thus implying the falsity or repugnance of all other outlooks.
- iv. To consider that union with the people of truth is a cause of Divine succour and the high dignity of religion.
- v. To realize that the individual resistance of the most powerful person against the attacks through its genius of the mighty collective force of the people of misguidance and falsehood, which arises from their solidarity, will inevitably be defeated, and through the union of the people of truth, to create a joint and collective force also, in order to preserve justice and right in the face of that fearsome collective force of misguidance.
- vi. In order to preserve truth from the assaults of falsehood,
- vii. To abandon the self and its egoism,
- viii. And give up the mistaken concept of self-pride,
- ix. And cease from all insignificant feelings aroused by rivalry.” (Nursi 2000:203)

Moreover, Nursi ranks the designation of the relevant Other on terms of moral values and ethics when he speaks about “the collective personality of Europe”: “It should not be misunderstood; Europe is two. One follows the sciences which serve justice and right and the industries beneficial for the life of society through the inspiration it has received from true Christianity; this first Europe I am not addressing. I am rather addressing the second corrupt Europe which, through the darkness of the philosophy of Naturalism, supposing the evils of civilization to be its virtues, has driven mankind to vice and misguidance. As follows: On my journey of the spirit at that time I said to Europe’s collective personality, which apart from beneficial science and the virtues of civilization, holds in its hand meaningless, harmful philosophy and noxious, dissolute civilization.” (Nursi 2000:160)

J. B. Schlubach (2005) steps further back along the Sufi tradition in quest of the representation of the Other. Although, when he is evaluating al-Ghazali’s and Jalaluddin Rumi’s thinking, he is not setting up his textual methodology like Michel, he is ultimately finding the perception of the Other standing implicitly in the discourse of tolerance. He concludes that identity markers are entirely melt away and “tolerance does more than just hinder hostilities. In this sense of tolerance, the boundaries between Other and One become indistinct and lose focus.” (Schlubach 2005:6)

Pertaining to the generation following Nursi, Gülen engaged in Nursi’s call for dialogue taking up equally an entire rich and generous Sufi heritage. “Gülen must be located and understood squarely within that Sufi tradition indicated by al-Ghazali and Rumi. Both the latter insist on non-belligerence in love and do not prescribe strategies for foreign affairs. Both move toward the ultimate end of dimming distinctions between Self and Other, not of prescriptions for peaceably protecting borders. Both lean away from the possibility of defining each other as “other.” Both look on the world of humankind as oriented to eternity, not hegemony. Both define Gülen.” (Schlubach 2005:17)

## Gülen's Constructs of Otherness

In a broad overview of Gülen's and his movement's national-security identity, Hasan Kösebalaban (Kösebalaban 2003) distinguishes three perceptions of the Other defined by varying degrees of separation: (1) a strong degree of common identification with the Turkic world (a Kantian Other in which the distinction between the Self and Other is weak, where the Self perceives the Other as part of its own group), (2) a lack of common identification with the West but a desire to integrate with Western institutions (an approximate of the Lockean Other, where the Self perceives the Other as a peaceful rival), (3) a strong lack of common identification with Iran (an identity shaped in terms of a Hobbesian culture of anarchy in which not only the distinction between Self and Other is clear, but also the Self perceives the Other as a security threat). (Cf. Kösebalaban 2003:172-173).

Although Kösebalaban applies his research primarily on national-security identity, further on he reformulates Gülen's Lockean Other with a view to religion and leaves aside the expression of antagonism: "For him [Gülen], 'it cannot be imagined that a devout person would be against the West', as the West became supreme following universally applicable rules and principles." (Kösebalaban 2003:177) Thus, we come upon the irenism characteristic to Gülen's facts and words, like the following: "To devotees, the value of their ideals transcends that of the earthly ones to such an extent that it is almost impossible to divert them from what they seek – God's gratuitous consent – and lead them to any other ideal. In fact, stripped entirely of finite and transient things, devotees undergo such a transformation in their hearts to turn to God that they are changed because they recognize no goal other than their ideal. Since they devote themselves completely to making people love God and to being loved by God, dedicating their lives to enlightening others, and, once again, because they have managed to orient their goal in this unified direction, which in a sense contributes to the value of this ideal, they avoid divisive and antagonist thoughts, such as "they" and "we", "others" and "ours". (Gülen 2004:100)

Deliberation as social learning is meant to develop an understanding of various ideational worlds. "Once participants acknowledge that they are interacting with representatives of other traditions, the purpose of deliberation becomes one of appropriation and evaluation of other perspectives by mastering the skills of putting oneself into others' shoes." (Kanra 2005:516) The awareness with the Other, the dialogical approach may transform the experience of the Other into an experience of the Self. "Different positions mean different understandings. Once you accept that, you can benefit from others' thoughts and ideas." (Gülen 2000a:206) The hermeneutic exercise of accepting the difference, as a prerequisite to communication, broadens one's ideational scope, without sweeping away the original perspective. "In the fusion of horizons, nobody is fully detached from his/her subjective views, yet arrives at a new juncture..." (Kanra 2005:517).

In today's global village, differences (beliefs, races, customs, traditions) increase in visibility and interact more and more. The desire of leveling the differences means wishing for the impossible, points out Gülen, because each individual is like a unique realm unto himself/herself, therefore a peaceful coexistence "lies in respecting all these differences, considering these differences to be part of our nature and in ensuring that people appreciate these differences. Otherwise, it is unavoidable that the world will devour itself in a web of conflicts, disputes, fights, and the bloodiest of wars, thus preparing the way for its own end." (Gülen 2004:250) The respect for the Other is equaled by Gülen to the respect for the Self: "When interacting with others, always regard whatever pleases and displeases yourself as

the measure. Desire for others what your own ego desires, and do not forget that whatever conduct displeases you will displease others. If you do this, you will be safe not only from misconduct and bad behavior, but also from hurting others.” (Gülen 2005:59) Frustrations might be a result of somebody’s own (mis)conduct, because “Deserving what we expect is very important.” (Gülen 2004:34)

## **Common Points and Shared Responsibilities**

I believe and hope that the world of the new millennium will be a happier, more just, and more compassionate place, contrary to the fears of some people. Islam, Christianity, and Judaism all stem from the same root; all have essentially the same basic beliefs, and are nourished from the same source. Although they have lived as rival religions for centuries, the common points between them and their shared responsibility to build a happy world for all of the creatures of God make interfaith dialogue among them necessary. (Gülen 2004:231)

Gülen rejects conflicting attitudes, prejudice and half-truths and entirely understands the growing interdependencies of today. Establishing and maintaining dialogue should be rooted in giving precedence to the common points and in avoiding the divisive issues. Completely aware that “globalization is rapidly making dialogue between holders of meta-narrative claims a near existential necessity” (Hunt 2006:6), Gülen invites to a emotional coexistence through dialogue across differences and on the basis of joint ethical criteria. A famous verse of the Qur’an calls the People of the Book to a common ground with Muslims:

Say: Oh People of the Book! Come to an agreement between us that we will not worship other than God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God... (Qur’an, 3:64)

All the great universal religions share the same ethical values. “Regardless of how their adherents implement their faith in their daily lives, such generally accepted values as love, respect, tolerance, forgiveness, mercy, human rights, peace, brotherhood, and freedom are all values exalted by religion. Most of these values are accorded the highest precedence in the messages brought by Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, upon them be peace, as well as in the messages of Buddha and even Zarathustra, Lao-Tzu, Confucius, and the Hindu prophets.” (Gülen 2000b:4) Thus, Gülen limits the distance between the Self and the Other and defines dialogue as “an activity that has human beings at its axis” (Gülen 2004:50) forming a bond between people. Meanwhile he rejects confrontational models of dialogue as detrimental. In support of this approach he is quoting Bediüzzaman Said Nursi: “‘Those who are happy about their opponent’s defeat in debate have no mercy.’ He explains the reason for this: ‘You gain nothing by defeating someone. If you are defeated and the other person is victorious, then you would have corrected one of your mistakes.’” (Gülen 2004:74).

As Hunt aptly remarks, the Muslim Sufi tradition offers Gülen a generous resource for overcoming the problem of competing meta-narratives and “it allows him, and it can allow those inspired by him, to come to fellow humans not just as bearers of truth, but as seekers of truth.” (Hunt 2006:9) Through him, Muslim practice and traditions are preserved and brought into consonance with the timely need for interfaith encounters meant to draw understanding and sharing of interpretations.

## Conclusions

This paper showed that the images built on the *Us-Them* disparity tend to create a perceptual gap much larger than the real one, stimulating divergence. Discourses on imagined entities like “Islam”, “The Orient”, “Europe”, “The West” threaten to become a significant obstacle to setting up a dialogic methodology. Our findings in this paper highlight that the drawbacks of such conflicting or competing images and meta-narratives are felt equally by both entities. “Whatever we do, we do it to ourselves.” Or, to use the terminology of post-colonial studies, one is both the subject and the object.

This study pinpoints Fethullah Gülen’s methodology fundamentals for interfaith encounters, in a hermeneutical approach. Gülen’s concrete interaction with the Other deserves a further study on its own.

Finally, I shall use Gülen’s own words in which he is condensing his notion of dialog and is setting out its main pillar: “I believe that interfaith dialogue is a must today, and that 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 2000b:6).