

# THE GÜLEN MOVEMENT: ITS NATURE AND IDENTITY

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## **Abstract**

The Gülen movement is increasingly visible through the work of a range of institutions across the world. Its visibility has led to the beginning of formal academic inquiry into the nature and identity of the movement and its activities. Such academic study is necessary before one can offer to evaluate the short- and long-term outcomes of the movement and their desirability. While little of an academic nature has been published so far, there have been a number of politicised or journalistic accounts of the movement, characterising it variously as a sect, cult or order. This paper scrutinises a number of those accounts as a way into a more accurate, evidence-based description of the teachings of Fethullah Gülen and of the conduct of the members of the movement inspired by him.

This paper aims to examine the identity and nature of the Gülen Movement. To do this I consider some questions which have been raised about the movement in the academic and political arenas. Specifically, I address whether the movement comprises a sect, cult or religious order by examining the discourse and action of Gülen and the Gülen Movement.

## What is a 'Sect' in Islamic Thought?

As a preliminary, it must be highlighted that in the use of this term, 'sect'<sup>1</sup>, lies a potential cross-cultural communication problem with significant consequences in the academic and the political world. It is common for academics and journalists commenting on the Muslim world to use such terms with the same import as they have in a European or American context. I shall not compare definitions because for the purposes of this paper how the Western experience is defined is irrelevant. Instead, I will state what comprises a sect within Islamic thinking.

One important science in Islamic is *aqida*, that is, the statement of belief, or the creed. At its simplest, this is the *shahadah*, the statement of witness that there is only one God and Muhammad is His Messenger (pбуH). The *aqida* outlines in more detail the elements of the seen and unseen that Muslims believe in, and is derived from the Qur'an in a quite straightforward manner. A sect arises because the *aqida* of a group differs from that of the majority, either by addition or subtraction. In the history of Islam, Muslims have generally concurred that there are two sects in Islam, the majority Sunni and the minority Shi'a. It is safe to say that most Muslims feel that this division is regrettable but few would go so far as to say those in the other sect are not Muslims, since Sunni and Shi'a are united by the *shahadah* and, contrary to current belief in the western media, have lived side by side in peace for centuries. Also, Shi'a Muslims receive permits to visit the holy sites of Islam on the Arabian Peninsula.

Within Sunni Islam, there are then four main *madhabs*. This word is translated in different ways, sometimes as 'schools of thought', or as 'schools of law'. These are not sects; there is mutual recognition between them. They are traditions which interpret the application of Islamic law to all aspects of life, and while it is necessary to choose one *madhab* to follow, it is legal and morally acceptable to follow a particular ruling from a different *madhab* under certain conditions.

The important thing to note is that the division of the Muslim community into sects or sectarian groupings is anathema to canonical Islam. There are warnings against this in the sayings of the Messenger of God (pбуH), and he (pбуH) welcomed differences of opinion in the *umma* as 'a mercy'. Consequently, Islamic culture is very varied and has made a great contribution to world legal culture (Sykiainen 2007). For these reasons, Muslims avoid breaking off from the main body of Islam into sectarian groupings and are well able to avoid breaking off.

Thus, asking if the Gülen Movement is a sect, means asking if it is enacting a new or deviant form of Islam. If this is not so, it is interesting to ask why the accusation is used, who makes it and what is their purpose.

## What is a 'Cult'?

Having looked at the definition of 'sect', it is easy to see that anything which could be termed a 'cult' would immediately and obviously fall outside the boundaries of traditional Islam. So, the word *cult* is used in the Muslim world in the same way as it is in Western culture for

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1 The academic study of religion has tended to move away from the more classical sociological language of 'sect' (in the Weberian sense of intention, which does not necessarily carry negative overtones) to that of 'New Religious Movements' or 'NRMs'. See particularly, Eileen Barker, *New Religious Movements: A Perspective for Understanding Society* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982); and Eileen Barker, *New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction* (London: Home Office, 1990).

a religious grouping, usually small, with a number of particular and potentially dangerous characteristics for cult members or for society. To deal with this with respect to the Gülen Movement I will pose a number of relevant questions.

## **What is an ‘Order’ in Islamic Thought?**

The Gülen Movement has been likened to a Sufi tariqa or order and recently to a Christian lay order. There are a few simple points that can be made about such comparisons. A Sufi order may have some surface similarities with but is quite different from a Christian order.

Tariqas adhere to Islamic teachings so they, for example, demand chastity but not celibacy, unlike most Christian orders, so there is a general expectation in Muslim societies that one will marry. Tariqas are open to men and women equally and though members of tariqas may spend periods of time apart from worldly life, there are no monasteries or convents; members live in society and are expected to make their own living. Since Gülen Movement participants are men and women, live in society, marry, and make their own livings, this leads to the question whether the Gülen Movement is some kind of new tariqa.

The similarities between Christian orders and tariqas lie in some of the processes and hierarchical structures found within them. So, there may be long novitiates, a high level of commitment, and quite a high degree of control over aspects of members’ lives.

## **Why have These Questions been Raised About the Gülen Movement?**

These questions were first raised in Turkey and to ascertain the motivations behind them we need to consider the social context of the Gülen Movement.

The Republic of Turkey is a secular state but this term needs some clarification. Çinar (2005: 16) spells out how reality differs from what might be expected:

The Atatürkist innovation was to bring Islamic authority under the full and absolute control of the secular state. Rather than following the common pattern where all religious affairs are separated from formal political affairs, the institutionalization of secularism involved bringing all religious activity under the direct control and monopoly of the secular state. In 1924 a Directorate of Religious Affairs was formed to act as the ultimate authority on the knowledge and practice of Islam.

In doing this, the new republic, unintentionally no doubt, created potential for social conflict, as Eickelman (1998: 90) describes:

The ideals of civil society, democracy, and open debate over basic values-ideals that are explicit in the works of ... Turkey’s Fethullah Gülen ... are up against strong vested interests. These ideals threaten the sinecures of many preachers, specialists in religious law, educators, and clerics. Not surprisingly, some efforts at reform have been met with threats of violence.

Lofland (1996: 229) argues that inability or unwillingness of authorities to deal with acute social crisis prepares people to affiliate with Social Movement Organizations. Such organizations would include the educational, cultural and dialogue projects of the Gülen Movement. In a milieu of crisis, religious communities and orders survived and revived though they officially do not exist. Therefore, Alpay (1995) argues that “modern institutionalization and

organization in Turkey remain behind, backward, whereas religious brotherhood and solidarity, basic forms of social organization, continue”.<sup>2</sup>

Because of this backwardness in institutionalization and organization, politics in Turkey is based on protective relationships<sup>3</sup> in which the very concepts of religion and democracy are misused (Fuller, 2004: 53; Cerrahoğlu, 1995<sup>4</sup>). Yavuz (2000c: 22) argues that “the sharp division between moral community and the political sphere is the source of many problems in Turkey. As the Turkish political domain does not provide an ethical charter, the moral emptiness turned the political domain into a space of dirty tricks, duplicity and the source of corruption”.

Consequently, the form of civic, faith-based initiative, or social capital<sup>5</sup> and modernization enacted in the Gülen Movement became a source of worry and a ‘matter of state security’<sup>6</sup> for the self-declared statist-elitist-secular bureaucrats, some generals, and state-sponsored businessmen (Yücel, 2002: 23).<sup>7</sup> These people comprise the protectionist vested interest within the establishment. Because religious orders, sects, their leadership, affiliation to and supporting them are outlawed by the Turkish Constitution, many people have been prosecuted for this in Turkey. Just one way for vested interests to countermobilize against what they see as opposition is to refuse to acknowledge the self-identity of any civil society movement, such as the Gülen Movement, and accuse it of being an order or sect. Smith (2001: 3) comments wryly, “Critics further say that Ankara has cultivated a seamless web of internal and external threats – some real some imagined – to keep the enterprise afloat.”<sup>8</sup>

Support for statist-elitist-secular criticism of Gülen comes from what might seem a surprising quarter – radical Islamists. Gülen’s meeting with John Paul II received wide public support in Turkey, but hard-line secularists and radical Islamists criticized him for it; the former on the grounds that Gülen, by speaking individually to the Pope to promote interfaith dialogue, had revealed his desire for an Islamic state with himself as head; the latter on the grounds that he was degrading Islam by dialogue with a non-Muslim leader (Griffith and Saritoprak 2005: 335–6).

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2 Also Ünal and Williams, 2000: 156–7; Sykiainen, 2006: 116; Yılmaz, 2005: 397.

3 Dorransoro and Massicard, 2005: 2; Özbudun, 1975: 473–9, 1981: 234, 237–8; Mardin, 1975: 7–32; Kalaycioglu, 1988: 149–79, 1997 at [www.biu.ac.il/SOC/besa/meria.html](http://www.biu.ac.il/SOC/besa/meria.html); Çarkoglu, 1998: 544–53; Secor and O’Loughlin, 2004: 11; Ataman, 2002: 122; Aliriza, 2000: 2–5, and 2001: 1–5; Smith, 2001: 17; Babahan, 2006; *Turkish Daily News*, 2000; Hekimoglu 2000; Koru, **2000a**; Pope, 2000; Önis and Turem, 2001: 24–5, 27.

4 Also in Ünal and Williams, 2000: 152.

5 As an example of considering the implications of religion in relation to the notion of “social capital” generated and sustained among civic organizations, see Weller, 2005: 271–89.

6 For the recurrent theme used by the protectionist groups of ‘regime under threat’ or ‘national security syndrome’, see Howe, 2000: 39; Ataman, 2002: 122, 150; Hale, 1999; Jung, 1999; Öniş, 2004: 23; Yücel, 2002: 3–4; 2004: 2–6, 23–4; Dumanli, 2006; Alpay, 2007.

7 Also Yavuz, 2003c: 19–23; Yavuz and Esposito, 2003: xxvi.

8 Similar views are expressed in Ülsever, 2001; also Ülsever (2003) argues: “Thus, the so-called ‘heritage of the revolutionary leaders of independence’, i.e. the ruling military and civilian bureaucracy, have become the keepers of status quo especially after 1980’s! ... The claiming heritage [sic] of the once revolutionary elite is now the most reactionary group of the country and they are blocking the way of Turkey before modernity i.e. ‘Westernization’ in their definition.”

## Is the Gülen Movement a Sect?

Is there any substantial evidence for this claim? So far, no academic or religious scholar has claimed to find any in Gülen's works. The other place to look is in the practices and beliefs of movement participants. Journalist and author Abdullah Aymaz comments:

The Gülen Movement has never attempted to form a distinct unit within Islam or Turkey. They are not a distinct unit within the broader Muslim community by virtue of certain refinements or distinctions of belief or practice. Neither is it a small faction or dissenting clique aggregated around a common interest, peculiar beliefs or unattainable dreams or utopia. . . The Movement has no formal leadership, no sheikhs and no hierarchy. They don't have any procedures, ceremonies or initiation in order to be affiliated or to become a member.

On how participants are regarded by the wider public, Aymaz comments:

The participants in the Movement, with their words, actions and intentions, have proved themselves not to have any strongly held views or ideology that are regarded as extreme by the majority in Turkey and abroad. They have never been regarded as heretical or as deviant in anyway by the public, in the media or in the courts. They have not been accused of being different from the generally accepted religious tradition, practices or tendencies. All the people in the Movement are highly educated, mostly either graduates or post-graduates, serving voluntarily. These volunteers work by themselves, thousands of miles away from a specific doctrine or a doctrinal leader. So how can anyone call them a sect?<sup>9</sup>

## Is the Gülen Movement a Cult?

One of the efforts to delegitimize Gülen, the Movement, and their services is the accusation that they are a sect or cult, backward and thus subversive.

Though non-political, the movement is controversial in some Turkish quarters. Radical Islamists revile it, saying it is too open to Western ideas and other faiths, and many military officials and secular-oriented intellectuals worry that Gülen and his devotees secretly want to establish an Islamic state in Turkey. (Murphy, 2005)

However, all accusations initiated by protectionist groups or ideologically motivated prosecutors have failed to bring any substantial evidence. After listing almost one hundred lower court hearings and judgments, Webb (2000: 171–8) concludes that “according to the verdicts given, experts appointed by the courts and the courts, the major conclusion is that the allegations and such similar claims” about Gülen “are untrue, baseless and unsubstantiated”.

If the Gülen Movement were a cult, most or all of the following questions would elicit a ‘yes’: Is Gülen a charismatic leader? Has he preached, instructed, led or encouraged anyone into any absurdities, deviations, violence, killings, suicides or abuse of any sort? Are destructive processes ever activated? Does the Movement engender myth, rites, mythical or fantastic enemy, and rebirth? Can the cultural, traditional or spiritual values the Movement is talking about be interpreted as a reactionary call to a kind of regressive utopianism? Does it negate the existence of different levels and different tools of analysis? Does the GM foster among the participants a herd mentality, the character of a flight into militancy, a different theology or drug use and suicide?

Another two questions would require a ‘no’: Does the Movement value differences in beliefs,

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<sup>9</sup> Excerpt from interview I conducted with journalist and author Abdullah Aymaz in January 2005 as part of my doctoral thesis (unpublished) on the Gülen Movement.

racess, customs and traditions for richness and the common good? Is a competitive spirit encouraged?

In expressing their impressions of Gülen, people occasionally use the word ‘charismatic’, using it not in the Weberian but the popular sense. They mean that “Gülen is so kind, attractive and appealing to all.”<sup>10</sup> On this theme, Eileen Barker (2002) talks of:

the authority that is accorded by the followers being charismatic, in so far as it is not bound by rules or by tradition and the charismatic leader has the right to say what the followers will do in all aspects of their life – whom they will sleep with, whom they will marry, whether they will have children, what sort of work they will do, in what country they will live – perhaps whether they will live – and what toothpaste they will use. It really can cover anything; and it can be changed at a moment’s notice.

As this authority is accorded by followers, Barker calls it ‘charismatisation’. This makes a leader in the eyes of members, new converts and others interested a very special person, and involves myths about his childhood, holy objects he has used and so on. All stories and things contribute to a picture of this perfect person as out of the ordinary but prepared to come down to the level of ordinary people. Charismatisation makes a leader more unaccountable, unpredictable and power-mad in a number of ways. A leader can change his or her mind at a moment’s notice, without referring to or conferring with anyone. (Barker, 2002)

Gülen has been visible in public life since he was sixteen years old as preacher, writer and civil initiator. He has not preached, instructed, led or encouraged anyone into any absurdities, deviations, violence, killings, suicides or abuse of any sort. He has not presented any unaccountability and unpredictability in his thoughts and actions (Woodhall, 2005: 4; Irvine, 2006: 59; Ünal and Williams, 2000: 328; Aslandođan and Çetin, 2006: 42–4, 51–2). This is one indication that Gülen and the Movement are not like the sects, cults or new religious movements studied by Barker and others.

## **Is the Gülen Movement a Sufi order?**

Hermansen (2005: 9–10) summarizes the arguments against using the tariqa label for the Gülen Movement:

Bekim Agai concludes that this is a misrepresentation because unlike classical tariqa Sufism, there is no requirement of initiation, no restricted or esoteric religious practices, and no arcane Sufi terminology that marks membership in the Gülen Movement. Enes Ergene also strongly disagrees with the characterization of the Movement as a tariqa in any classical social or organizational sense although he feels that Gülen as an individual thinker could be considered a “contemporary Sufi”.

So, what distinguishes the Gülen Movement from Sufi orders, is the fact that no religious processes or hierarchies are found within it. Muslims in the movement respect the opinions of qualified Muslim scholars, but there is no internal religious hierarchy at local levels or transnationally.

## **What are the characteristics of the Gülen Movement?**

It is always difficult to prove a negative, so trying to show what the Gülen Movement is not proves harder than showing what it is. If the Gülen Movement defies characterization as a

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10 Excerpt from personal correspondence with Dr. Ergun Çapan in 2006 for my doctoral thesis (unpublished) on the Gülen Movement; also see Akman 1995: 16–18.

sect, cult or order, what is special about it? I shall illustrate the more significant and identifiable features of the movement which account for its public visibility and success, while continuing to highlight aspects of its identity which distinguish it from sects, cults and orders.

First of all, the reflexivity of the Gülen Movement is very high. The participants are fully aware of what they are doing and why they are doing it. They have a clear definition of the services, the field of the action, the goals and the instruments used to achieve them.<sup>11</sup> The Gülen Movement also has the necessary accumulated experience and is successful at imparting it to participants and to third parties.<sup>12</sup> The clarity of the general goals, particularity of objectives, the stress on and the observation of legitimacy of means and ends, and the attainability and accountability of the projects they take on demarcate Gülen and the Movement from cults and sects in a clear way (Hermansen, 2005: 4–9, 9–11; Aslandoğan and Çetin, 2006: 43).

In the Movement, direct participation in the services given provides motivation for highly symbolic, cultural, ethical and spiritual values rather than worldly goods or material gains (Hermansen, 2005: 27). Kuru (2003: 123) notes, “Gülen is against the kind of rationalism that focuses on egoistic self interest and pure materialistic cost-benefit analysis.” Motivation and incentives are gained through the relational networks and the services given corporately and altruistically. This ties individuals together (Tekalan, 2005: 7–8) and means “living among people by continuously discerning the Divine unity amidst multiplicity” (Gülen, 2004b: 19). Therefore, the Gülen Movement, unlike sects or cults, prefers being with people, rather than avoiding them. Participants do not draw back into themselves, sever relations with the outside, nor renounce all courses of action (Gülen, 2000c: 73).<sup>13</sup>

Quite the contrary, Gülen (2004a: 230) reminds his readers of the current interdependency of communities and that any radical changes in a country will not be determined by that country alone because this is a period of interactive relations, a situation that causes closeness between peoples and nations. Therefore, people should seek ways to get along with each other (Gülen, 2004a: 42). Differences in beliefs, races, customs and traditions are richness, and should be appreciated for the common good through peaceful and respectful relationships (Gülen, 2004a: 249–50).

Gülen (2000d: 73) maintains, “People must learn how to benefit from other people’s knowledge and views, for these can be beneficial to their own system, thought, and world. Especially, they should seek always to benefit from the experiences of the experienced.” It seems unlikely that individuals in a movement who have been reading and listening to Gülen would be in a sect-like relationship or structure (Kömeçoğlu, 1997: 77–8).

Moreover, the Movement does not designate internal and external scapegoats so as to turn aggressive energies onto itself or any group, so destructive processes are not activated. Far from passivism, though, this encourages a higher motivational level and opens the way for individual and collective responsibility and mobilization. For Gülen (2005: 102), the first and principal way to realize projects is

through the consciousness and the ethic of responsibility. As complete inertia is a death and

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11 See Irvine, 2006: 59, 66–8; Aslandoğan and Çetin, 2006: 36–7, 40–5; Tekalan, 2005: 6; Ünal and Williams, 2000: 328, 338–47.

12 For further discussions, see Aslandoğan and Çetin, 2006: 33; Sykiainen, 2007: 124–6, 128–9. Aslandoğan, 2007: vii; Hendrick, 2007: 12–3, 30–1; Ünal and Williams, 2000: iii; Çetin, 2005: 5.

13 Özdalga, 2005: 434.

disintegration, and irresponsibility in action is disorder and chaos, we are left with no alternative but to discipline our actions with responsibility. Indeed, all our attempts should be measured by responsibility.

This ethic of responsibility nurtures individual upward mobility in the SMOs in the Movement. Tekalan (2005: 8) argues that these “institutions have a corporate identity and their management is in the hands of real people. However, having been appointed as a manager through a social contract, these people are not allowed to utilize the institutions for their own benefits. Those who are now unable to work actively in the movement give over their role to the young people who will carry the torch of the altruistic services of the movement”.

Individual upward mobility is always possible for all in the Gülen Movement (Özdalga, 2005: 440) because entry and exit, commitment and withdrawal are always voluntary and always possible.<sup>14</sup> Competitive spirit is encouraged and predominates over primary solidarities (Özdalga, 2005: 435). Individuals are employed at the SMOs for professional qualifications rather than Movement experience (Aslandoğan and Çetin, 2006: 50; Irvine, 2006: 59). These features prevent the rise of dogmatic leaders, ideologues, rites, or exclusivist functions. They also prevent any attempt to construct an ideal self-image with exclusive values and symbolic resources and taking refuge in myth. The Gülen Movement does not create its own sacred texts, or develop rituals and priestly functions. It does not offer rewards unattainable in real life,<sup>15</sup> nor does it seek sacral celebration of the self in an abstract and anachronistic paradigm. In this way, the possibilities for a conflictual mobilization remain very remote (Barton, 2005: 43).

As action is not directed towards a mythical adversary, any shortfall must be socially defined in terms included in the actor’s frame of reference. Gülen (2002: 84; 2004a: 199) identifies three major enemies to tackle: ignorance, poverty, and internal schism (social disunity). He (2005: 100) expands on this list:

Once, our enemies used to be ignorance, illiteracy, poverty, disunity, and bigotry. Now to these have been added cheating, bullying and coercion, extravagance, decadence, obscenity, insensitivity, indifference, and intellectual contamination.

The limits of the reference system do not permit an aggressive and non-institutionalized mobilization, impractical and incompatible demands or expectations, or anything crossing over the Turkish and international threshold that may trigger conflict. (Gülen, 2000: 21)

Another indicator that the Movement is not a cult or sect is that participants perceive their own consistency and continuity<sup>16</sup> and can compare their action in the many different conditions and times since their emergence. As a result, institutions, services given and their success do not belong to anyone alone.

Gülen affirms that “If there is no adaptation to new conditions, the result will be extinction” (Webb, 2000: 86). To Gülen, not only the establishment of justice is hindered by the lack of

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14 For more on social mobility and professionalism, see Bulaç, 2006: 102; Hendrick, 2006: 25–8; Aslandoğan and Çetin, 2006: 36–37, 40–43, 47;

15 For more on incentives and rewards, see Gülen, 2004a: 200–1; Hermansen, 2005: 4–5; Ünal and Williams, 2000: 276, 326; Turgut 1998; Aslandoğan and Çetin, 2006: 36–7; Stephenson, 2007: 149.

16 The ability to calculate the costs and benefits and make predictions by comparison among successive situations (Melucci, 1999: 293).

well-rounded education, but also the recognition of human rights and attitudes of acceptance and tolerance toward others.<sup>17</sup> If people are properly educated to think for themselves and espouse social justice, human rights and tolerance, they will be agents of change to implement these goals (Michel, 2006: 108–9).

For this to come about, Gülen (2004a: 199; Woodhall and Çetin, 2005: vii) asserts that a new style of education is necessary “that will fuse religious and scientific knowledge together with morality and spirituality, to produce genuinely enlightened people with hearts illumined by religious sciences and spirituality, minds illumined with positive sciences”, who are “cognizant of the socio-economic and political conditions of their time”. So, the Movement does not try to limit the curriculum in the educational institutions its participants sponsor. Instead, the institutions follow national and international curricula. Students are encouraged to use external sources of information, such as the internet and universities’ information.

Michel (2006: 110) argues that Gülen’s use of spirituality includes not only specifically religious teachings, but also ethics, logic, psychological health, and affective openness. He adds that the key terms in Gülen’s writings are compassion and tolerance, and such “non-quantifiable” qualities ought to be instilled in students by education in addition to training in the “exact” disciplines. Michel considers that such an education is more related to identity and daily life rather than ‘political’ and believes that it will yield a new spiritual search and a moral commitment to a better and more human social life. The moral aspects of education are conveyed by example in the teachers’ behaviour, rather than proselytizing.

Other terms used frequently by Gülen (1996: 16; 2000b: 35, 44–5) are ‘cultural’ and ‘values’: “Little attention and importance is given to the teaching of cultural values, although it is more necessary to education. If one day we are able to ensure that it is given importance, then we shall have reached a major objective.” Critics have seen this as a reactionary call to return to pre-Republican Ottoman society, a kind of regressive utopianism, and accused him of being an *irticaci*, which might be translated as “reactionary” or “fundamentalist” (Michel, 2006: 111). In response, Gülen discusses the term used (Dinç 1998<sup>18</sup>; Webb, 2000: 95):

The word *irtica* means returning to the past or carrying the past to the present. I’m a person who’s taken eternity as a goal, not only tomorrow. I’m thinking about our country’s future and trying to do what I can about it. I’ve never had anything to do with taking my country backwards in any of my writings, spoken words or activities. But no one can label belief in God, worship, moral values and purporting matters unlimited by time as *irtica*.

Melucci argues that (1999: 104–5) some movements at their inception are characterized by their regressive utopianism. As a group forms, it defines its identity in terms of the past, drawing upon a totalizing myth of rebirth with an almost quasireligious content. Its action involves a utopian appeal with religious connotations. This regressive utopianism reduces reality to the unity of one all-embracing principle. It negates the existence of different levels and different tools of analysis, and identifies the whole of society with the sacral solidarity of the group. It translates the reappropriation of identity into the language and symbols of an escapist myth of rebirth. Melucci adds that the predominating religious element in movements makes them susceptible to manipulation by the power structure, to marginalization as sects, and to transformation into a fashion or commodity for sale in the marketplace as a soothing of mind. He further argues that contestation in such movements changes into an individual flight, a mythical quest or fanatic fundamentalism.

17 Gülen, 1999: 4; Ünal and Williams, 2000: 22–3; Woodhall and Çetin, 2005: viii.

18 English version is available at <http://en.fGülen.com/content/view/1216/14/> as retrieved on Jan 17, 2007 19:30.

On the other hand, other theorists dub this an overgeneralization. Asef Bayat (2005: 894) draws attention to the reductionism in the understanding of the social theorists on the left, like Alain Touraine and Alberto Melucci, because these consider all religious or revivalist movements, especially Islamist, as regressive utopianism.

With respect to the Gülen Movement, Gülen's historical references show no sign of a cultural politics which attempts to negate any period of history, especially not those moments associated with the origins of modernity (Woodhall and Çetin, 2005: xviii). He has not evoked a past that appears to want to restore a sultanate or monarchy as a paradigm for ideas of unity, order, hierarchy, homeland, religion, and family. Michel (2005: 349) maintains that Gülen does not propose "a nostalgic return to Ottoman patterns". In contradiction to utopian thought, since the origins of the Movement, Gülen has offered models of self-improvement and social transformation (Woodhall and Çetin, 2005: xviii).

Gülen relates to the past to tell us who we were and are. He looks for examples to follow and mistakes to avoid. He looks for ways to progress beyond that which has remained in the past.

Today, it is obviously impossible to live with out-of-date conceptions which have nothing to do with reality. Continuing the old state being impossible, it means either following the new state or annihilation. We will either reshape our world as required by science, or we shall be thrown into a pit together with the world we live in. (Gülen, 1996: 74. Italics added.)

Gülen instils in younger generations a historical consciousness which enables them to locate themselves in relation to the past and present in a rigorously modern, progressive way. He clarifies the concepts of the present that are mostly shaped by the concepts and events of the past. To him, knowing history is a feeder to an innovative and successful future. Gülen says, "If keeping your eyes closed to the future is blindness, then disinterest in the past is misfortune" (Sevindi, 1997a, 1997b; Ünal and Williams, 2000: 38).

Çinar's (2005: 140). analysis of the state control of 'history' indicates how this more inclusive and continuous view of the people and the nation, that is, how references to 'our long history' and 'the saints of our past', challenge the way in which some militant secularists conceptualize Turkey as a modern state:

[T]he writing of the official national Turkish history, which was written by a committee convened under the leadership of Atatürk, inscribed the Turkish nation into time, defamed the Ottoman and Islamic past, established Atatürk as the founder of the Republic, and set the founding moment as 29 October 1923.

However, Gülen does not impose on his audience an ideal of citizenship which reflects a certain kind of racial, ethnic, cultural and religious homogeneity based on any past society (Gülen, 1996: 86). He sees such homogeneity as inconsistent with the pluralist character of the historical and contemporary culture of Turkish society. He deems that consoling oneself with re-telling the heroic deeds of others indicates the psychological weakness of those who have failed to discharge their responsibilities to the present society (1996: 52–3). He argues:

Of course, we should certainly commemorate the saints of our past with deep emotion and celebrate the victories of our heroic ancestors with enthusiasm. ... Each scene from the past is valuable

and sacred only so long as it stimulates and enthuses us, and provides us with knowledge and experience for doing something today. ...Today, our duty is to offer humanity a new message composed of vivid scenes from the past together with understanding of the needs of the present. (Gülen, 1996: 53)

The Gülen Movement endows individuals progressively with a capacity for action. Identity is constructed by each individual in her or his capacity as a social actor. Altruistic services always relate to human sociability and to social relationships.<sup>19</sup> Relationship is formed at the level of the single individual, awakening the enthusiasm and capacity of the individual for action. Through such sociability people rediscover the self and the meaning of life.<sup>20</sup> Herein lies all the distinction of the Gülen Movement. It does not lead to a flight into the myth of identity or an escapist illusion that one is magically freed from the constraints of social action or behaviour. It reaffirms the meaning of social action as the capacity for a consciously produced human existence and relationships.

Gülen (2005: 21) frequently talks about a renaissance, yet never of a magical rebirth. Woodhall and Çetin (2005: xv) argue that this renaissance is an active process, hard work to “prevent illnesses like passion, laziness, seeking fame, selfishness, worldliness, narrow-mindedness, the use of brute force” and replace them instead “with exalted human values like contentedness, courage, modesty, altruism, knowledge and virtue, and the ability to think universally”. Acknowledgement of diversity, multiplicity, the necessity of division of labour, and the power relationships within society, subscribe the Gülen Movement to a form of rationality geared to assessment of the relationship between ends and means, and to protecting people from the imbalances and divisions created by the forms of power required to govern complexity.

Gülen’s work is a constant exhortation to greater effort, greater knowledge, greater self-control and restraint. (Woodhall and Çetin, 2005: xiv–xv)

Cults and cult-like sects refuse to accept people as different, diverse and interdependent. They lack a solution for handling difference within complexity. Their totalizing appeal does not take into account that people are simultaneously living in a system interdependently (Melucci, 1999: 189). The Gülen Movement does not deny the interdependence of the social field in its values, worldview or actual organizational frame. It does not have a totalizing ideology that possesses and controls the social field and thus identifies those who do not belong to the group in negative terms. Gülen (1998; 2000: 279) says:

Islam has banned all ethnic, colour and racial discrimination. We have a long history during which many peoples of different beliefs, races, colours and languages existed together in peace. Without giving priority and prominence to such ‘natural’ differences and by being awakened to the common factors which they share to live together, we hope different ethnic groups can live together.<sup>21</sup>

The Gülen Movement acknowledges the true social character of such conflicts, and therefore

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19 For more on collective social altruism and participation, see Nevval Sevindi (1977a), *Yeni Yüzyil*, ‘The New York Interview with Fethullah Gülen’, July 20–29, 1997a; also at <http://en.fGülen.com/content/view/783/13/> and <http://www.nevvalsevindi.com/oku.php?id=347>; and also Çetin (2006), ‘Voluntary Altruistic Action: Its Symbolic Challenge against Sinecures of Vested Interests, presented at “Second Annual Conference on Islam in the Contemporary World: The Fethullah Gülen Movement In Thought and Practice” Norman, Oklahoma, 4–5 November, 2006.

20 Excerpt from interviews I conducted with Ergun Capan, Enes Ergene and Abdullah Aymaz in January 2005.

21 Gülen’s Message to the President of the Angels’ Movement, 02.26.1998 at <http://en.fGülen.com/content/view/970/14/> as retrieved on Jan 20, 2007 11:10; and also in Ünal and Williams, 2000: 279.

does not produce unpredictable forms or expressions of collective action. It responds to the specificity of individual and collective demands, without allowing them to cancel out one another. It does not escape into a reductionism that cancels out the individual for the appropriated identity of the Movement.

The Gülen Movement shares with the rest of society a set of general issues and seeks common grounds and references. Gülen (1998) says:

We believe that peoples, no matter of what faith, culture, civilization, race, colour and country, have more to compel them to come together than what separates them. If we encourage those elements which oblige them to live together in peace and awaken them to the lethal dangers of warring and conflicts, the world may be better than it is today.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, a sect simply breaks any such connection, ideologically and ontologically creating division and rupture that cannot be overcome. Its identity politics and appeal cover up or deny the fundamental dilemma of living a social life in complex systems (Melucci, 1999: 189). As an exclusive organization, a sect demands a long novitiate, rigid discipline, high level of commitment and intrusion on every aspect of its members' lives (Barker, 2002; Della Porta and Diani, 1999: 145). The worldview or collective action of the Gülen Movement is not an isolationist withdrawal into a pure community-based or sect-like structure (Gülen in The Fountain, 1996: 1–3; Kömeçoğlu, 1997: 77–8). Gülen says (1996: 86):

We should know how to be ourselves and then remain ourselves. That does not mean isolation from others. It means preservation of our essential identity among others, following our way among other ways. While self-identity is necessary, we should also find the ways to a universal integration. Isolation from the world will eventually result in annihilation.

If the search for fulfilment within specific closed networks or a society is unable to handle information flow, it withdraws from social life and transforms spiritual needs into intolerant mysticism. Identity claims are pushed too far and evolve a movement into a conflictual sectarian organization with an intolerant ideology. The movement fragments into selfassertive and closed sects.

However, the Gülen Movement with its participation in education, interfaith and intercultural issues, and transnational altruistic projects and institutions, proves itself able to process information and emergent realities. Abdullah Aymaz therefore holds that the Gülen Movement helps to contribute to addressing global concerns.

The Gülen Movement acknowledges the fact that the common points, grounds, references and problems affecting humanity in general are far more than the differences which separate us. ... People can come together and cooperate around a universally acknowledged set of values. The way to do so is through education, convincing argument, peaceful interaction and negotiation.<sup>23</sup>

Aymaz emphasizes that the Movement does not engage itself with identity politics. It does not seek ethno-religiously, culturally or geographically to be different from other people. Participants abide by Turkish and international regulations and law, share concerns common to people all over the world and work to contribute to their resolution. The intention, worldview and efforts of the Movement are accepted by the overwhelming majority in Turkey and others who know its work outside Turkey.

The Gülen Movement acts as a reconciling agent between diverse communities around the

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22 Ibid.

23 Excerpt from interview I conducted with Abdullah Aymaz in January 2005.

world through legal and institutionalized means. The Movement is already defined in terms of its social and multicultural relations. The intention to seek consensus among communities legitimates its transnational projects<sup>24</sup>, so it does not deviate into or let others be led into fundamentalism or sectarianism.<sup>25</sup>

Ergene argues that the Gülen Movement does not reduce reality to a small number of truisms. It does not attempt to mask anything from the larger environment. Its openness and transparency make it effective and strengthen faith in it. Turam (2007: 74–75), an independent researcher, contrasts this openness with the behaviour she encountered among the marginal groups opposing the movement:

STKB's<sup>26</sup> negative attitudes and discouragement of the study of Islam, especially the Gülen movement, stood in sharp contrast to the Gülen movement's openness and encouragement for being a subject of social research. . . I tried numerous times to get in touch with several STKB organizations in order to hear their adherents' views on the issue. Like most of my calls, these efforts to communicate were often left without a response. The adherents were often too busy fighting the movement, which did not leave much time, energy and recognition for "understanding" it.

In contrast to such intellectual rigidity, in the Gülen Movement the spirit of cultural innovation and the spiritual quest in one's own faith, along with other faith community members, dispense security to others. Though everyone who comes into contact with Gülen acknowledges and respects his knowledge, asceticism, piety, expertise and scholarliness on religious, spiritual and intellectual matters, this does not result in any sacral recognition or charisma for Gülen, as discussed earlier. The common description of him as the leader of the Movement, which he has never accepted (Akman, 1995)<sup>27</sup>, has not resulted in the emergence of an authoritarian personality or personalities. He is instead very much in favour of collective reasoning, consultation and consensus which cannot foster a herd mentality among Movement participants (Gülen, 2005: 43–8).

Çapan points out that in over forty years there has been no case of crisis, greed, or drug use and suicide within the Movement because people do not feel a situation of frustration, isolation, disappointment and exploitation within the Movement; quite the contrary, they feel and find hope, a true human and humane identity, communication, compassion and peace.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have illustrated the nature and identity of the Gülen Movement and shown how it cannot be matched against recognized definitions of sects, cults or orders. I have illustrated how accusations that it is a sect, cult or order are raised within the Turkish context by particular interest groups, that is, the militant secularist elite or other vested interests in the state apparatus and radical Islamists, groups, all of which appear to be largely opposed to more widespread and equal participation in the public space. In contrast to these two groups the Gülen Movement also has widespread public support both inside and outside Turkey, and thus provides a symbolic challenge to the ideology, authority and control of the groups which

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24 *Fountain*, 2002: 5; BBC, 2000; Stephenson, 2006: 30–1; Benard, 2003: 38; Aslandoğan and Çetin, 2006: 45–8; Irvine, 2006: 55–74; Hendrick, 2006: 29; Ateş, et al., 2005: 14; Özdalga in Akman 2003; Weller, 2006: 86–8.

25 Excerpt from interview I conducted with Enes Ergene in January 2006.

26 Sivil Toplum Kuruluşları Birliği (United Civil Society Organizations), a secularist umbrella organization.

27 Also at <http://en.fGülen.com/content/view/760/13/> as retrieved on Jan 22, 2007 10:11; also in Ünal and Williams, 2000: i, 328;. Irvine, 2006: 66–7; Gülen in Gündem, 2005: 83–4

28 Excerpt from interview I conducted with Ergun Çapan in January 2006.

countermobilize against it.

The Gülen Movement has proved that it acts lawfully within the system in the pursuit of shared objectives. This has had two major outcomes which have sparked opposition from those vested interests in Turkey. The first is that the movement has provided incentives for modernization of the political system, consolidation of civil society and pluralistic democracy, and institutional reform in Turkey. The second is that the movement has shown previous conceptual frameworks to be inadequate and highlighted the shortcomings of categorical and biased approaches to faith-based communities, especially to peaceful, mainstream Muslims, and cultural Islam.