

GÜLEN'S RETHINKING OF ISLAMIC PATTERN AND ITS SOCIO-POLITICAL EFFECTS

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Abstract

Over recent decades Islamic traditions have emerged in new forms in different parts of the Muslim world, interacting differently with secular and neo-liberal patterns of thought and action. In Turkey Fethullah Gülen's community has been a powerful player in the national debate about the place of Islam in individual and collective life. Through emphasis on the importance of 'secular education' and a commitment to the defence of both democratic principles and international human rights, Gülen has diffused a new and appealing version of how a 'good Muslim' should act in contemporary society. In particular he has defended the role of Islam in the formation of individuals as ethically-responsible moral subjects, a project that overlaps significantly with the 'secular' one of forming responsible citizens. Concomitantly, he has shifted the Sufi emphasis on self-discipline/self-denial towards an active, socially-oriented service of others – a form of religious effort that implies a strongly 'secular' faith in the human ability to make this world better. This paper looks at the lives of some members of the community to show how this pattern of conduct has affected them. They say that teaching and learning 'secular' scientific subjects, combined with total dedication to the project of the movement, constitute, for them, ways to accomplish Islamic deeds and come closer to God. This leads to a consideration of how such a rethinking of Islamic activism has influenced political and sociological transition in Turkey, and a discussion of the potential contribution of the movement towards the development of a more human society in contemporary Europe.

From the 1920s onwards, in the context offered by the decline and collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Islamic thinkers, associations and social movements have proliferated their efforts in order to suggest ways to live a good “Muslim life” under newly emerging conditions. Prior to this period, different generations of Muslim Reformers had already argued the compatibility of Islam with reason and “modernity”, claiming for the need to renew Islamic tradition recurring to *ijtihad*¹. Yet until the end of the XIX century, traditional educational systems, public forms of Islam and models of government had not been dismissed. Only with the dismantlement of the Empire and the constitution of national governments in its different regions, Islamic intellectuals had to face the problem of arranging new patterns of action for Muslim people.

With the establishment of multiple nation-states in the so-called Middle East, Islamic intellectuals had to cope with secular conceptions about the subject and its place and space for action in society. They had to come to terms with the definitive affirmation of secularism and the consequent process of reconfiguration of local sensibilities, forms of social organisation, and modes of action. As a consequence of these processes, Islamic thinkers started to place emphasis over believers’ individual choice and responsibility both in maintaining an Islamic conduct daily and in realising the values of Islamic society. While under the Ottoman rule to be part of the Islamic *ummah* was considered an implicit consequence of being a subject of the empire.

Not many scientific works have looked at contemporary forms of Islam from this perspective. Usually Islamic instances are considered the outcome of an enduring and unchanging tradition², which try to reproduce itself in opposition to outer-imposed secular practices. Rarely present-day forms of Islamic reasoning and practice have been considered as the result of a process of adjustment to new styles of governance under the modern state. Instead, I argue that new Islamic patterns of action depend on a history of practical and conceptual revision they undertake under different and locally specific versions of secularism³.

From this perspective I will deal with the specific case of Fethullah Gülen, the head of one of the most famous and influent “renewalist” Islamic movements of contemporary Turkey. From the 1980s this Islamic leader has been able to weave a powerful network of invisible social ties from which he gets both economic and cultural capital. Yet what interests me most in this paper, is that with his open-minded and moderate arguments, Gülen has inspired many people in Turkey to live Islam in a new way. Recurring to *ijtihad* and drawing from secular epistemology specific ideas about moral agency, he has proposed to a wide public a very attractive path for being “good Muslims” in their daily conduct.

After an introductory explanation of the movement’s project and of the ideas on which it is based, my aim will be to focus on such a pattern of action. Particular attention will be dedicated to Gülen’s conception of a “good Muslim” as a morally-guided agent, because such a

1 In Islamic jurisprudence the practice of referring directly to primary fonts of the Law (Qur’an and *Sunnah*) and to make an independent reasoning on them with the aim of interpret these same fonts in order to resolve current practical problems. For an account on *ijtihad* in relation to Fethullah Gülen’s thought see Yılmaz 2003.

2 This reading of Islam has informed an entire tradition of works in the anthropology of Islam. For a general assessment see Asad Talal, 1986, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, Occasional Paper Series, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown Univ. Center for Contemporary Arab Studies. For a recent critic of more subtle contemporary forms of “neo-Orientalism” see Kandiyoti 1997 and Navaro-Yashin 2002.

3 Secularism as a political doctrine is not a monolithic object and has different historical realizations in different countries and periods. Yet, as I am going to show, secular as an ontology and an epistemology implies specific ideas about the subject, reason, human agency and history (see Asad 1993, 2003).

conception reveals underneath secular ideas on both responsibility and moral agency. These considerations will constitute the basis from which we can look at the transformation of Islam – and more generally of “the religion” – in the contemporary world.

Then a part will be dedicated to defining the specificity of Gülen’s proposal, which will be compared with that of other Islamic revivalist movements in other contexts. Some common point between them will merge from this comparison. Both indeed use the concept of responsibility in order to push subjects to actively engage in reviving Islam. Yet, on the other hand, I will show how Gülen’s followers distinguish themselves by the fact their commitment possesses a socially-oriented and reformist character.

Finally I will consider the proximity of Gülen’s conceptualisation of moral agency with that the modern state has organised around the idea of “civic virtues”. I argue Gülen’s recall for taking responsibility of social moral decline is a way of charging his followers with a similar burden the modern state has charged its citizens. Thus I suggest the Islamic leader’s proposal can be seen as the tentative of supporting the modernity project by defining a new and specific space to Islam and religion into it. This proposal opens the possibility of new and interesting forms of interconnection between secular ideas of modernity and the so-called “Islamic” ones. At the same time I think it sheds a new light over contemporary “renewalist” movements, which can be considered a concrete proposal about how to realise, in a different background, modern forms of governance by reconsidering their moral basis.

Gülen’s Rethinking of the Islamic Tradition

At the beginning Gülen is an influential interpreter of Sufism and a theorist of the disciplinary path a person should accomplish to reach the virtuous condition of *al-insan al-kamil*⁴. Then from the 1980s onwards he has significantly widened its conceptual views and ideas. Urged by the perception that society is affected by a general moral decline, he has promoted a series of activities directed at reforming individual inner selves. Gülen has directed his followers toward the promotion of such activities, putting less emphasis over the need to respect traditional Islamic practices and refusing political Islam. This attitude involved both recall for renewal (*ijtihad*) and a critic of other approaches to Islamic tradition in Turkey and abroad.

The emphasis Fethullah Gülen places over the need for renewal in Islamic tradition comes from his idea that Islam should be able to offer people the resources they need to overcome the present condition of social dissipation and moral decline. Indeed his basilar assumption is that with the advent of modernity, humanity has turned its attention to technological and scientific progress, taking them as valid teleology for action. In his opinion individuals have put aside the spiritual dimension of human existence to be progressively attracted by consumer society values, research for material satisfaction and individualism. In this sense the general improvement of individual welfare has caused a moral and intellectual decline which could lead modern society to collapse. For this reasons Gülen claims for the need to spread anew moral Islamic values all over society.

But in order to accomplish such a duty Islam has to undertake a radical process of renewal. According to him traditional forms of Islam have not been able to realise this transformation. Therefore he criticises both old Islamic schools (*medrese*) and Sufi brotherhoods (*tarikât*). In

4 In Sufism an individual state of spiritual perfection characterised by a total carelessness toward material desire and by a sense of proximity respect to God (Gülen 2004:xx, *Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism. Emerald Hills of the Hearth* (1st published edition 1998), The Light, Inc. & Işık Yayınları, New Jersey.)

his opinion the former were too much concerned with legal aspects of Islam, neglecting the spiritual inner dimension of religious experience. Whereas, Sufism has not been able to confront with the challenges technology and scientific thinking have posed to modern society. According to Gülen it has lost the aspect that has permitted it to survive and to stay close to people, that was its dynamism⁵. Instead he wants to cope with modernity and to advertise for a kind of Sufism that does not limit itself to mystic contemplation of God (Gülen 2004).

Even Gülen arrives at criticising the Nur movement. From the 1920s this movement has always been concerned with the safeguard of Islamic practices within the Turkish Republic. The movement's leader Said Nursi thought that the new national state had taken control of the educational system, strictly reducing the opportunities of the population to learn about Islam. Consequently, its followers' efforts were directed at imparting lessons over correct Islamic practices in private houses. Yet they distinguished themselves from other Islamic groups in the country by approving theological, spiritual and scientific knowledge unity (Aga 2003:53). Indeed Gülen has drawn from Nursi's ideas about the relationship between science and religion, and the role of education in shaping society. Even from the 1960s until the end of the 1970s Gülen took part in Nurcu initiatives. However, he soon realised that confining educational ideals to Islamic circles, the Nurcus would not have success in bringing Islam to shape society. In this way they could not challenge the antireligious leftists' hegemony over state education.

Gülen thinks that in order to spread its beneficial effects, the religious message should reach as many members of society as possible. Anyway he rejects any political use of Islam. He argues religion cannot be yielded to party needs because it cannot be reduced to an ideological instrument. In his words politics "darkens religion's spirit, for religion belongs to everyone."⁶ This does not mean he is refusing secular forms of governance. In his discourses he upholds democracy, which in his opinion is the most fair form of political organisation known to men. He also defends secularism, at least as a political project that should not reject religion but should grant tolerance toward it. In turn he has always awarded a significant historical role to the state in the preservation and defence of Islam⁷. He simply argues religions should not care about power but about human aspects of life.

From this perspective the fact that Gülen does not consider the veil or the beard as essential elements of Islam, is significant. We know that from the mid-1980s onwards, the public use of such outward signs has become an object of dispute between Islamist movements and both the state and secular public opinion in Turkey. Distinguishing himself from other Islamic thinkers Gülen has affirmed he does not consider those signs as indispensable to the accomplishment of Muslim life⁸.

5 Even Said Nursi – one of the Islamic thinkers that more influenced Gülen – had criticised *tarikats*' teaching methods (*sohbet*). He thought they did not leave enough space for individual interpretation because they were based on repetition and memorization of ritualised speech formulas. According to him, *sohbet* mechanically reproduced an a-critical knowledge which was unable to cope with modernity (see Yavuz 1997).

6 Ünal & Williams 2000:168, taken from Rıza Zeylüt, *Aksam*, April 19th 1997.

7 In particular Gülen thinks at Ottoman period as an example of tolerance and coexistence of different believes under the same state.

8 "I see the robe, turban, beard, and loose trousers as details. Muslims shouldn't be drowning in detail. [...] Choosing not to wear [them] shouldn't be constructed as weakening the Muslim Turkish identity. [...] no one should be categorized as a sinner because of such things." (Ünal & Williams 2000:62-3, taken from *Akman*, "Fethullah Hoca Anlatıyor") Therefore responding to a question about the veil he says: "This issue is not as important as the essentials of faith and the pillars of Islam. It's a matter of secondary importance in fiqh." (Ünal & Williams 2000:63,

Many secularists in Turkey argue that hidden underneath the moderate character of Gülen's ideas are the leader and his followers' intentions of changing the country into a Iran-like one. On the contrary, I suggest that Gülen's theories depend on a reconfiguration of the space Islam must have in an individual's life and on new ideas about how a "good Muslim" should act in society.

According to Gülen, renewal of Islamic tradition must occur in order to adapt it to the needs of the time. This is why he criticises other approaches to tradition. If they have tried to re-interpret Islam, they have failed in the moment they have not been able to do it accordingly with the requirements of the modern forms of governance and the present condition of moral decline. Instead, Gülen thinks of Islam as the spiritual dimension of life. Consequently, religion has to furnish a guide for individuals independently from socio-political changing conditions.

In his opinion it is no longer important how strictly a person accomplishes traditional Islamic practices or shows signs of Islamic belonging. What matters is that religion helps people to address the problems of contemporary society. This is why in his thinking Islam must push people to actively operate in society in order to overcome the general situation of moral dissipation. When he blames both traditional Islamic education and Sufism for having not been able to reform itself or political Islam for using Islam as an ideological instrument, Gülen is claiming that religion should have an active role in society.

The Educational Project of the Movement

When he criticises traditional forms of Islamic education for not having been able to adapt to modern conditions, Gülen expresses something more than a simple dissatisfaction with old methods of teaching. Instead he blames other Islamic scholars because they had not understood that the decline of Islam was not solely due to its incompatibility with modern forms of governance, but to the hegemony of Western-inspired secularist ideology. Gülen has realised that the battle is a cultural one, and that in order to oppose Kemalist intellectuals' hegemony it is necessary to challenge their monopoly over education. This is why he thinks the solution to society's moral decline could be in the promotion of a particular kind of education that even if teaching secular subjects at the same time could instil in students Islamic ethics and morals.

Gülen's commitment to educational activities started in the 1980s, when he took advantage of changing political conditions to intervene in the public sphere and in particular in the cultural industry⁹. He utilised both his charisma and his religious authority to attract a wide number of people and capital in educational activities. Indeed he used his web of informal ties to get financial resources and to direct them to the opening of a great number of such ethically-oriented schools.

He began to stress in his discourses that schools concentrating on non-religious subjects could serve religious needs and that Turkey needed elite secular schools rather than mosques

taken from *Özkök*, "Hoca Efendi Anlatıyor")

9 Gülen's access to public life was favoured by the Özal government overture toward Islamic associations in early 1980s. In that period Islamic associations and sufi brotherhoods could take advantage of a 1983 law which enabled the formation of new foundations (*vakıflar*), provided that they had not political objectives. By the foundations system Islamic groups could organize educational, religious and charitable activities around informal networks (Zubaida 1996). Yet, as aforementioned, Gülen differentiated himself from other Islamic groups by investing foundations' money in the opening of state-like schools, rather than *imam-hatip* ones.

or *imam-hatip* schools. He did not simply argue that religion and science were compatible between themselves, as Nurcu teachings did¹⁰. In Gülen's educational philosophy science accomplishes a central role not only because of its connection with revelation, but because it is considered a great instrument in the hands of men to make a better world. From this perspective Gülen shares with Western thinkers the connection between science and the idea of progress. That is why he has never rejected either science or progress, but only the assumption of them as a transcendental teleology¹¹.

But if Gülen considers science a useful instrument in the hands of humanity, at the same time he thinks that it alone cannot constitute a guide for society. In his opinion science is not a positive value in itself. In order to really contribute to the welfare of society it has to be possessed and used by morally-guided individuals. The scope of Gülen's educational project is exactly this: to form individuals with a strong inner Islamic ethics which can guide society toward the correct use of scientific discoveries.

This is the core of the project of the movement. Even if in the schools of the movement teaching is conducted on state-programmed subjects and in environments responding to secular rules of appearance, it is considered a good means to instil people with Islamic ethos. Clearly Gülen has drawn from Nursi ideas about education. Yet differently from Nurcu circles, in Gülen's schools the teaching of Islamic principles and daily practices have completely disappeared. What matters is the transmission of the spiritual dimension of Islam - that is its inner ethics – adding to it the knowledge of “secular” education. This is precisely the scope of what has been called Gülen's “Islamic ethic of education”: to give Islamic-inspired education a new meaning and function (Ağai 2003:51).

In this perspective education becomes a process that is not limited to the transmission of religious knowledge from one person to another (*temsil*). At the same time it cannot be simply reduced to the transmission of notions from a teacher to his pupil. Instead, it must contribute to shape the student's personality. Indeed according to Gülen the goal of education must be to build student's character (*terbiye*) by enabling him to interiorise qualities of self-discipline, tolerance and sense of mission (Ünal e Williams 2000:312, Michel 2003:78).

The importance Gülen attributes to such a kind of education is intimately connected to the final scope of the movement, that is to reform society. Indeed according to him, education will permit to shape a new generation of people (*the golden generation*) which will be able to use scientific knowledge according to Islamic ethics and to lead society along the right path. Armed with the tools of science and religion, this generation shall be able to solve dilemmas of present and future society. Therefore committing to both education of other people and activism in society, these people will shape other individuals' inner ethics and will definitively transform society into a paradise.

10 Effectively Gülen took from Nursi the idea that science is one of the ways that conduct to God, because by showing the complexity of nature it reveals His greatness. For an analysis of the 4 ways to understand the existence of God described in the *Risale-i Nur* (The epistles of Light), the collection of Said Nursi's writings, see Mermer Ali 1997.

11 In Gülen's words the real problem consists in the fact “we have been unable to assign a true direction to science, and thus confused revealed knowledge with scientific theories and sometimes scientific knowledge with philosophy [...]. One result is that the younger generations became alienated from their society. After a while, these inexperienced generations lost their religious and moral values, and the whole nation began to decline in thought, ideals, art, and life [...] and evil aspects of modern civilization were propagated.” (Ünal & Williams 2000: 97, taken from Akman, “Fethullah Hoca Anlatıyor”).

Thus Fethullah Gülen's renewal of Islamic tradition is strictly dependent on his ideas about the role religion should have in the society. Indeed he thinks Islam should constitute a guide for people. But in order to accomplish this duty it has to undermine other dominant ideologies. This implies to change traditional methods of education and to adopt a new educational philosophy which contemplate at the same time both scientific knowledge and Islamic ethics.

Yet it seems to me that here Gülen has done something more than giving Islam a new role in society. By inserting Islam into an educational project he has given it both a new public form and a new aim, and consequently a new life. The emphasis he poses on education as a way of transmitting an Islamic ethos reveals underneath an "essentialised" idea of Islam. As I will discuss further this idea is central in Gülen's conception of the Islamic subject as an ethically-guided agent. Therefore the assimilation of Islam to morals implies a redefinition of those that can be defined Islamic practices. This will be the argument of the next paragraph.

The Sanctification of Daily Life

As it has been observed, contemporary Islamic intellectuals often take certain legal concepts from the Islamic tradition in a selective and arbitrary way (Moosa 1999, Yılmaz 2003). Then they give these concepts new functions and values by inserting them in their personal discursive frameworks. Gülen too has adapted some Islamic traditional concept to activities related to his project. Inserting the life of a vast number of people in Turkey into the educational project of the movement, Gülen has offered them the possibility of embedding their daily work in a transcendental framework.

According to Gülen there are two main ways to take part in the movement's project. People can directly engage in education by becoming teachers in one of the schools connected to the community, or can simply decide to finance the activities of the movement in education and media sectors. The former is the way that certainly indicates a closer engagement to the pattern asserted by Gülen. Indeed teaching is considered by Gülen a holy duty (*kutsi vazife*) that only people with a strong moral can adequately perform (Agai 2003:58). In achieving the aim of building a new society in which individuals will act accordingly with Islamic ethics, teachers have the most important role. In fact they have the duty to instil in students Islamic principles and to shape their character. Overall they have to accomplish this deed following a specific pedagogical pattern.

As I have already said according to Gülen education is not a simple passage of contents from one person to another. Instead, it is a process by which the student incorporates a series of Islamic values by taking an example from his educator. In this perspective the teacher must be a model (*temsil*) for the student. In his daily actions he has to show his pupils how to combine an Islamic moral of action with the study and practice of science. Indeed the role of the teacher consists in assisting his students in acquiring character. In this sense he gives "guidance" (*irşad*). This term usually refers to guide pupils in the learning process of Islamic traditional practices. Yet Gülen has extended its meaning to include teaching in secular schools provided that it is done according to a specific ethics¹². Consequently being a

12 That is why teachers are requested to be of the utmost integrity. In Gülen's words "those who want to reform the world must first reform themselves. In order to bring others to the path of travelling to a better world, they must purify their inner worlds of hatred, rancour, and jealousy, and adorn their outer world with all kinds of virtues" (*The Necessity of Interfaith Dialogue: A Muslim Approach*. Speech given at the Parliament of the World's Religions, Capetown, 1-8 December 1999, quoted in Michel 2003:78). As I have explained elsewhere (*Essere Sufi*

dedicated teacher (in one of the schools linked to the movement) becomes a kind of religious merit (Agai 2003:59).

Instead a person who is not a teacher can take part in the movement's project by working in other activities linked to it, such as journals, foundations, or even school dormitories. Therefore, even people with other occupations can sustain the project by financing its activities. These people participate in the movement only in an indirect way. Yet Gülen inserts their activities in the scope of the movement and make them become "Islamised" as well.

Indeed making use of Islamic concepts Gülen inserts his followers activities - both teaching and working to finance the movement - into a transcendental framework. A central concept Gülen extrapolates from tradition is *hizmet*, which generally refers to religious service. According to his socially-oriented idea of Islam he has extended this concept to every act of serving the benefit of others. Therefore, because the educational project of the movement is finalised at overcoming the present situation of moral decline and transforming this world into a better one, acting in order to support such a project serves the benefit of others. Consequently it becomes a kind of "religious act". At the same time he uses other concepts like those of *himmət* (giving donations and protecting good work) and *ihlas* (seeking God's appreciation for every action) which generally refer to Islamic traditional duties, to define respectively people financing the movement and people acting according to the ethics prescribed by the movement.

Gülen has extended the meaning of different traditional concepts in order that they can include every act that is even indirectly connected with the realisation of the project of the movement. In this way he has given these actions a religious dimension. Therefore, he has strongly widened the number of people who can consider themselves part of the movement. This move can be seen as strategic. Surely it permits the institutions of the movement to obtain money from a large number of wealthy businessmen. At the same time, from Gülen's perspective it can be read as a way of further extending the range of his message and make it accessible to the highest possible number of people. If working can enter into a transcendental framework, many people can start to think of inserting their life in a religious dimension. I suppose this can be considered another manner by which Gülen hopes that Islamic morals can spread all over society.

Aksiyon İnsani: The New Islamic Path

After this introductory – but necessary – dissertation about the project of the movement, I will now focus on the topic of my paper. As I have shown, Gülen has been able to offer the chance to insert their daily life into a transcendental framework to a wide number of people. Recurring to traditional concepts he has "made Islamic" the work of different individuals. Yet I think he has done even more: he has given to religious experience a new dimension which is not solely suitable for modern forms of governance, but also overlaps secular conceptions. Indeed the emphasis he poses on education as a way of transmitting an Islamic ethos reveals underneath an "essentialised" idea of Islam, which is in tune with secular ideas about the space religion should occupy in society. Yet moreover, the idea this ethos should push people to act in society reveals underneath a conception of the "Muslim subject" as an ethically-

nel movimento neo-Nur di Fethullah Gülen, M.A. Thesis at University of Milano-Bicocca) more devoted members of the movement follow a disciplinary pattern of practices directed to incorporate a series of virtues by which they continuously oversee their moral integrity. Yet here I am interested in the effects of Gülen's message over a larger public.

guided agent which recalls the Western concept of moral agency.

Here my scope is to better define the specificity of Gülen's path of Islamic conduct. I will do this by discerning secular ideas that I think the path reveals. Yet, my aim is not to demonstrate that in reality Gülen is a "secular" thinker instead of a "religious" one, but to describe how Western hegemonic discourses have affected local forms of Islamic action.

Gülen says the ideal person taking part in his project must be *aksiyon insani* (man of action). This person is one who must spend most of his time working in order to turn the world into a paradise. Indeed, according to the religious leader a "good Muslim" should be continuously engaged in accomplishing good deeds. This is why he always appeals to people to hurry up in order to accomplish actions that can contribute to the common good. For example, there are statements where Gülen says that people who perform *hizmet* sleep three hours, reserve one or two hours for other necessities and devote the rest of the time to *hizmet* (Agai 2003:61). Now consider this quotation:

Man of service must, for the sake of the cause he has given his heart to, be resolved to cross over seas of "pus and blood". [...] He knows himself first of all to be responsible and answerable for work left undone. He has to be considerate and fair-minded to everyone who comes to his aid and support the truth. He is extraordinarily resolved and hopeful even when his institutions have been destroyed, his plans upset and his forces put to rout. He is moderate and tolerant when he has taken wing anew and soared to the summits and so rational and sagacious that he admits in advance that this path is very steep. So zealous, persevering and confident that he can pass through all the pits of hell that he may encounter on his way. So faithful to the cause to which he has devoted his life that, deeply in love with it, he can sacrifice his life and all that he loves for its sake. So sincere and humble that he will never bring to mind all that he has accomplished.¹³

According to these words, only people who have awareness of the problems of society and of how the world is progressing feel the need of being continuously engaged in work. The followers' will to change the present situation must derive from such an awareness. This view is perfectly in tone with Gülen's ideals of education. Only people whose minds have been enlightened by science and whose motivation derives from faith are able to realise what problems afflict society. Only so moulded people are motivated to act in order to resolve such problems.

Surely awareness here recalls for a particular connection between reason and action. Indeed individuals are requested to rationalise their daily life in order to better accomplish the assigned duty. This is why different authors have affirmed that the activities of Gülen's followers resemble the ideal type of Max Weber's "inner-worldly asceticism" (Özdalga 2000, Agai 2003). According to Weber, in this typology of asceticism "the world is presented to the religious virtuoso as the assigned duty. The ascetic's task is to transform the world in accordance with her/his ascetic ideals." Again, "[...] the order of the world in which the ascetic is situated becomes for her/him a 'vocation' which s/he must 'fulfil' rationally" (Weber 1980:329, quoted in Agai 2003:60).

However, I argue Gülen does not simply prescribe or order the accomplishment of specific actions to his followers. That is, the believer's task is not solely to act in order to follow a determined aim. Awareness requires something more than a simple submissiveness. Indeed Gülen asks his followers to undertake the burden of moral responsibility for the problems of contemporary society. To be a "good Muslim" does not consist simply in a rationalistic accomplishment of a prescribed path. According to him, Islamically-oriented work must be

13 Gülen Fethullah, *Criteria or the Lights of the Way* - Vol. 1.

a consequence of both rational thinking and an Islamic inner sense of ethics. This is why individuals have to feel responsible for work they have left undone. Indeed to sacrifice most of one's proper time in work and to continuously strive in action respond to a sense of responsibility and culpability for the problems of the world.

I argue it is exactly here that Gülen links his Islamic ethics to secular morals. To explain this point better I will draw your attention to the connection Gülen usually establishes between the sense of responsibility and endless activism. Indeed I think the way Gülen conceives responsibility has a lot in common with secular theories about the subject and its agency.

In Western philosophical tradition a "moral agent" is usually defined as somebody that can be held responsible – and consequently credited or blamed – for his decisions and actions. Central to this definition is the notion of responsibility and in particular responsibility toward an authority. This concept implies not only an idea of a person as "a single subject with a continuous consciousness in a single body"¹⁴ and modern scientific ideas about objective knowledge and causality etc., but – what interests us more – the inner capability of feeling guilty for having disobeyed the Law (Asad 2003). In this theory, morality is considered as the intellectual human ability people must have to realise if their actions agree with a specific set of outer-imposed rules and to feel guilty if they are not.

In a similar way according to Gülen, men of action must be conscious of their duties and have to accomplish them in order not to be blamed, by God in the hereafter and by their conscience immediately. Following secular conceptualisation of morality Gülen argues activism is a direct consequence of an inner sense of responsibility that faithful people must interiorise in order to be "good Muslims". This conceptualisation implies that action derives from a moral choice individuals autonomously make on the basis of the awareness they have obtained through to education.

Thus activism is the outcome of choices of educated people who are conscious of the contemporary world's evil aspects thanks to reasoned and faithful thinking. Having embodied through education such a sense of responsibility, morally-guided people are urged to take charge of the world's moral corruption and act in order to overcome it.

By saying this I am not arguing disciplinary aspects disappear from Gülen's view on Islam. Firstly, because Gülen is a strenuous defender of Islamic pillars and the need to accomplish them. Adherents to the movement – overall people who aim at becoming educators – perform *namaz* five times per day and often even perform the meritorious one during the night¹⁵. Secondly, because as I am going to show, volunteers of the movement, by endlessly engaging in activism, really follow a very disciplined life.

At the same time I am not arguing Gülen's proposal is essentially "secular". Instead, the path he prescribes maintains its transcendental character at the moment it is connected to human salvation. However the assimilation of Islam to a particular ethos renders Gülen's path something very similar to the philosophical concept of moral agency. This aspect differentiates this path from others in the Muslim World. But before continuing on this issue, I

14 T. Asad here refers to Locke's definition of a person as a "forensic term, appropriating actions and their merit, and so belongs only to intelligent agents, capable of law, and happiness, and misery. This personality extends itself beyond present existence to what is past, only by consciousness, whereby it becomes concerned and accountable, owns and imputes to itself past actions, just upon the same ground and for the same reason as it does the present" (An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Book Two, Essay XXVII, Section 26) in Asad T. 2003:74:n.14.

15 See Fabio Vicini, *Essere Sufi nel movimento neo-Nur di Fethullah Gülen*, M.A. Thesis at University of Milano-Bicocca

will give a brief example of how Gülen's followers subject themselves to the pattern of action he proposes.

An Ethnographic Excerpt

How do Gülen's discourses really affect community members' lives? How do they put into practice their master's prescriptions? My theoretical assumption is that authoritative discourses construct religion in the experiential world of individuals by defining and interpreting correct meanings and excluding some practices in favour of others (see Asad 1993). What I mean is that patterns of religious action are not simply rules faithful people have to follow, but powerful discourses that make them a specific kind of individuals, with specific emotions, desires and sensibilities (see Asad 1993, Mahmood 2001, 2005, Hirschkind 2001). In line with this approach, I argue that by suggesting a specific pattern of action Gülen constructs the religious experience of his followers.

The members of the movement I met and frequented in Istanbul during my brief fieldwork in summer/autumn 2005, are all teachers in a school linked to the movement. There they prepared high school graduates to the entrance exam to Turkish state university. All of them live in a dormitory not very far from the school. They teach physics, chemistry and biology, that are very "secular" subjects, but the way they conduct their daily life makes this compatible with Gülen's requirements.

They spend most of the time between the dormitory and the school. They usually wake up at 6 a.m. in the morning to perform the *namaz*, and until 8 they prepare their lessons or read a book. Then they go to school, where they spend most of the day giving lessons, individual additional teachings, or optional courses. Usually they go back to the dormitory around 7 p.m., change their clothes, go out again to the mosque, pray and have something to eat. Then if they do not have to attend a collective meeting¹⁶ they return to dormitory. Here they read again, receive students for additional explanations or meet informally. Finally they perform the last *namaz* and go to bed.

In their daily schedule, having a rest, relaxing, or satisfying more vital needs such as eating and sleeping, are some of the less contemplated aspects. The discussions I had with my interlocutors reveals they were trying to eat the least possible. Often they told me they had eaten nothing during the day, or they said that they should not have eaten even the little they did. About sleeping, they told me how Gülen in his writings often recommends one to sleep the least possible, because there are many other things to do instead. Therefore, they were trying to sleep very few hours, around 5, per night¹⁷.

For my interlocutors, being a teacher is a real mission to accomplish. They spend all their time performing this task, continuously looking for something more to do. They do everything they can to be busy and they are very active. If they are not teaching, they are very concerned about learning more in order to perfect themselves and to have more knowledge to pass on to their students.

Dedication and self-sacrifice are central aspects of their daily life, and activism is at the same

16 These meetings are finalized at organizing teachings and other administrative questions relative to schools and dormitories.

17 Komeçoğlu (1997) says that from interview with persons living in the houses of light came they were trying to sleep less and to reduce meals. They even told him they fast two days per week, as it seems the Prophet did according to one *hadith*.

time both the outcome and the way to embody these values. Indeed according to my observations, by being active the members of the community feel themselves fully dedicated to the project of the movement. It is the way they perceive that they are accomplishing a good deed according to Gülen's ideas. Therefore, it is also the way of embodying important virtues such as humility and self-sacrifice, that are central to the constitution of a morally-responsible Islamic subject.

If their striving in action without a rest is the outcome of an embodied sense of responsibility toward society, at the same time it is also a form of discipline by which adherents construct their religious experience. Indeed the virtues of humility and self-sacrifice are central to community members' life because they continuously remind them of their responsibility. In this sense those virtues are at the basis of their religious experience too.

Being Islamic, Being Citizen

Surely volunteers of the movement are pushed by a strong faith in the accomplishment of their daily tasks. However this does not impede their actions to have a very mundane character. What is singular about Gülen's proposal is that the pattern of action he prescribes is not only based on secular ideas of responsibility and morals. Even the scope of these activities is socially-oriented. That is, they aim at improving the welfare of society in its totality and not, as usual in Islamic tradition, only of the Islamic *ummah*. What I suggest is that Gülen movement has a very worldly preoccupation, which is to turn *this* world into a paradise.

From this point of view the movement seems to pay peculiar attention to "secular matters" – where with secular matters here I intend the preoccupation the state has to grant common welfare to its population. These considerations open the possibility for debate over Gülen movement's potentialities in the development of a more civil society. Yet contributions in this direction are not unique to it. Even in other Middle Eastern countries Islam has become a public arena from which to debate over current issues.

For example, some authors have connected the appearance of new Islamic patterns of action to the definitive affirmation of "public Islam", a concept they use to indicate the fact that traditional forms of "Islamic reasoning" have acquired a public dimension. According to them virtuous Muslim subjectivity is no longer connected to the question of soul salvation. Instead Islam has become the subject of public debates about how to conduct a virtuous life under the umbrella of a modern state and how to contribute to both common good and fair government¹⁸. New Muslim intellectuals criticise both the reduction of public dimension to an interacting process between single people's interests and the implicit ban of morality from public space. Instead they suggest how to cultivate and maintain Islamic virtues and how to use them in order to promote positive initiatives for society. Therefore, Islamic public sphere has become the place from which to address new and alternative ideas of civil society and of public virtues both built upon religious legitimising principles and practices (Salvatore A. 1998, Hirschkind 2001, Eickelman D. E. & Salvatore A. 2002).

However according to both Salvatore (1998) and Hirschkind (2001), Islamic public sphere in Egypt is a space that is parallel to the secular one. Indeed it has its own rules, modes and

18 As Salvatore argues Islamic jurisdiction (*fiqh*) has always been interested in a wide set of social issues and has always aimed at the community's prosperity. However, a general discourse in favour of the "common good" and the collective welfare in relation to modern state's institutions has consolidated only with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire (Salvatore A. 1998).

public. These practices of Islamic reasoning “locates themselves within the temporal frame of Islamic *ummah* and in relation to the succession of events that characterise its mode of historicity”. They do not take place within, or serve to uphold, that domain of associational life usually called civil society. In its present form these practices do not play a mediatory role between state and society (Hirschkind 2001:17).

In the Egyptian context Islamic reasoning concerns how to conduct a virtuous Muslim life and how to obtain common good for the Muslim community. Here believers are mostly charged with the duty of overseeing if their own actions and feelings are in line with the requirements of the Islamic authoritative discourses. Even if these discourses become subjects of dispute, the temporal frame and the terms of the discourse remains that of the Islamic *ummah*. Instead for Gülen, religious conduct consists of acting in this world in order to change it. Gülen’s pattern of virtuous Muslim life is concerned with how to spend a life in order to improve the welfare of all society both in Turkey and in the world.

Secondly, Gülen’s view of the subject understands a radically different conceptualisation of the Islamic duty. Individuals must feel themselves responsible for the problems of the world. They are charged with the burden of the problems of society. According to the ethics they have embodied they feel the necessity to strive in action. Here Islam assumes the form of ethics and fulfils the role of inner moral guidance for individuals over how to construct a fair and just society. Usually Muslim Intellectuals charge the components of the Muslim community with the responsibility to preserve Islamic practices against the process of corruption of society (see Utvik 2003). Yet they do not suggest a general programme of reform for all society. Neither do they push individuals to act according to a pattern of endless activism in order to realise such a project.

It is the mix composed of this “essentialised” idea of Islam and the search for the common good for all society that makes Gülen’s proposal very peculiar. Even here I argue that this couple renders this mix similar to the secular concept of “civic virtues”. The connection Gülen places between action and transforming this world into paradise indeed have similarities with the duties of citizenship in modern states.

Even if secularism has located human agency in rational mind, it has left some space for morals into so-called “civic virtues”. According to historian Gordon S. Wood, in the eighteenth century, republics distinguished themselves from monarchies for the fact that therein the law had to be obeyed for the sake of conscience, rather than for fear of the ruler’s wrath. People was persuaded to submit their own interest to the government operating for the collective common good. It was this voluntary submission that constituted the eighteenth century notion of civic virtue.¹⁹ In this perspective citizens of modern states were not only requested to limit their freedom in accordance with the needs of public interest, but even to contribute to the common good by exercising their civil rights. From this point of view voting and discussing political issues was a right that depended on a specific duty of citizenship. Therefore according to classical definition of secular morality, in some cases individuals should renounce their egoistic interests in order to pursue a higher public interest. The modern concept of civil society stands on this basis.

From this perspective it seems to me that Gülen community’s project in some points overlaps the secular one directed at shaping good and responsible citizens. The moment that Islam pushes people to act in society in order to create a better future for everyone, Gülen’s

¹⁹ See Wood, Gordon S., 1969, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*, University of North Carolina Press.

project of education would seem to be effective in instilling citizens with commitment toward society.

From this point of view I argue that Gülen community is not simply contributing to the construction of an Islamic informed public. Instead, I think its aim is to propose an alternative model to the secular project on how to build a modern, democratic and fair society. Post-national states seem to have lost their force in proposing an adequate and coherent project of civil discipline for their citizens. Gülen has seen the consequences of this weakening in the dominance of materialistic and hedonistic inclinations in modern society. This is why he claims for the need to educate society to Islamic ethical values and secular sciences.

Concluding Remarks

After the failure of explicitly “anti-Western” forms of radical Islamism, such as pan Arabism and Islamic nationalism, only a part of the Muslim world continues to see the necessary condition for the constitution of a more fair and good society in the establishment of an Islamic state. Instead, nowadays most Islamic intellectuals underline the need for a bottom-up kind of society reform. Indeed according to them the decline of Islamic values does not depend on modern forms of governance in themselves, but on the spreading of commodity values, new styles of life, and hedonism that accompany them. The emphasis they place over the need of reforming society starting from the individual, seems to be the result of a kind of anxiety in face of such a situation.

Consequently Muslim intellectuals’ first aim has become that of offering patterns of action which permit Muslim people both to revive and maintain Islamic virtues and to be not affected by deviating forces of modernity. Such patterns have the declared common scope of aiming at regenerating traditional Islamic values, but they have different local applications. Indeed how they interact with the dominant secular discourse and have been affected by it, differs from context to context.

As I have shown, Fethullah Gülen has been able to propose a path that does not startle secular sensibilities, at least not immediately and not in its public forms. Adherents are not required to bring any outward sign that marks their Islamic inclination. In places linked to movement’s activities – from schools to dormitories, to administrative centres of foundations – no sign of Muslim faith is present. Rather, there we can find – at least in Turkey – Atatürk busts and Turkish flags. From this point of view Gülen has given to Islam a public form that is suitable for secular rules of appearance.

Yet the fact that Gülen’s proposal respects the private/public divide is not sufficient. By de-linking Islam from the accomplishment of traditional practices and dressing styles, Gülen has transformed it into a kind of moral essence that should push individuals to act in a socially-oriented responsible way. The intrusion of religion into individual choice causes some problems to the secular. Indeed according to classical definition of secularism, religion is seen as inimical to the assignments of modern life. Apart from the forms of its public appearance, it is usually associated with private feelings, emotional and irrational forces. Secularism relegates religion to the private inner self of individuals, that is in the place of morality. However, faith must remain a question of personal belief that must affect neither rational choice nor moral agency. Neither can it address worldly matters, because it would lead to conflict with people with different beliefs. According to this view, in order to be “free” the agents must act only following their reason.

From this perspective Gülen's proposal could be seen by secularists as an unwanted intrusion into the privacy of others, because it allows personal religious beliefs to influence rational choice. The point is that Gülen's call for responsibility and activism subsumes an "essentialised" idea of Islam which overlaps secular notions of moral agency. By assimilating Islam to morals the Islamic leader creates relevant difficulties to the secular project. If as Talal Asad argues "in order to protect politics from perversion by religion, in order to determine its acceptable forms within the Republic, authority must identify religion and police it"²⁰, secularists in Turkey and abroad shall find it difficult "to police" Gülen's proposal. Due to its proximity with morals Gülen's Islam is not only difficult to locate for secularists, it even attempts to take the place of secular moral agency.

Indeed if at the beginning Gülen's primary scope was that of protecting Muslims in Turkey against the prominence of hedonistic values, then he has elaborated a path which shares many values with "modernity". It seems that proceeding along his own way, Gülen has discovered he has more things in common with universal values elaborated within Western tradition, than with other expressions of Islam. Then, inspired by such arguments, he has re-elaborated his thinking in order to offer an Islam that intends to contribute to the building of a more human society.

From this perspective I suggest Gülen is not simply offering an alternative kind of modernity. Rather he wants to take part in the construction of *this* modernity. And, in line with his anxieties and those in general of the religious world, he intends to contribute to the modern project by re-evaluating its moral basis. By putting emphasis over the moral aspects of religion and recalling to civic principles, he is claiming a specific role in society for Islam. That is, of addressing the progress of human beings without lose of their moral dimension. Thus he cuts a specific space to religion and attributes it a role of guide for society.

Clearly here I am not stating religion should and could aim at this role in the contemporary world. This is a problem that concerns more our personal beliefs and convictions than scientific analysis. Yet it seems to me, in Western contexts religions are acquiring a medialisised form. Even there they are progressively dismissing their practical aspects to become something more close to morality. Indeed eminent figures from the Christian and Orthodox world are making efforts to go beyond the boundaries of their traditions and to agree on some common basilar points. Even Gülen has made significant steps in this direction. I think beyond these changes we can see common anxieties about moral decline in the contemporary world. These anxieties are the common basis on which religions seems to agree on claiming more voice over global moral issues.

I think the secularist discourses should be able to renew themselves in order to face the challenges that renewed religious discourses on modernity pose to it. From this perspective, I argue Gülen's example opens up the possibility for such a rethinking. Indeed it permits of reconsidering the basilar dichotomy on which the secularists have founded their discourse on modernity. Looking at compatibilities between Gülen's project and the modern one should lead us to refuse the aprioristic secularists' exclusion of Islam from the modernist project. I think that if religion continues to be marginalized inside modernity it is not because of an intrinsic incompatibility with it, but because the secularists' have founded their idea of modernity on this opposition.

²⁰ Asad Talal, Reflections on Laïcité and the Public Sphere, Keynote address at the "Beirut Conference on Public Spheres", October 22-24, 2004 (Excerpts). Source: Social Science Research Council, Items and Issues, Volume 5, Number 3, 2005. (<http://www.ssrc.org/publications/items/v5n3/index.html>)