The Islamic Scholarly Perspectives of Interfaith dialogue, Religious Pluralism and Tolerance: A comparative Analysis of Fethullah Gulen and Abdul Karim Soroush's Ideologies.

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Abstract

Contemporary Muslim scholars hold different positions on religious pluralism and tolerance; some (so-called 'fundamentalists') are exclusivist and regard Islam as the only true religion and reject religious pluralism and tolerance, others (so-called 'traditionalists' and 'modernists') believe that religious pluralism and tolerance are acceptable in Islam. Traditionalists mainly rely on Islamic concepts and Sufism and generally do not emphasize or explicitly endorse pluralism, preferring to promote only the religious virtue of religious tolerance. The modernists on the other hand use modern Western philosophical theories and explicitly espouse religious pluralism. This article discusses the approaches, sources and arguments of Fethullah Gulen and Abdul Karim Soroush as contemporary Muslim scholar's n religious pluralism and tolerance. It concludes that both thinkers emphasize the necessity of peaceful communication with the followers of other religions, as well as with secular groups, and also both use theological and Sufi sources. However there are some differences between them. While Soroush mainly relies on epistemological arguments, Gulen reasons as a pragmatist. Also, Gulen, adhering to the traditional interpretation of Islam, believes in Islam's superior position. Soroush departs from the traditional interpretation of Islam and admits to the same truth of other religions. Perhaps because of his adherence to the traditional interpretations of religion, Gulen has been more successful than Dr. Soroush in winning a following among people of his own country and around the world. Nevertheless, the practical outcome of both thinkers' positions is the same and both espouse tolerance and peaceful co-existence with the followers of other religions.

1.0. Definitions of Key phrases.

1.1 Interfaith Dialogue.

Ozalp Mehmet (2004) states that interfaith dialogue occurs whenever members of participating religions come together to discuss matters concerning their religions in order to improve understanding among each other. Ozalp had also identified interfaith dialogue as a solution to certain contentious problems and obstacles. The scope of dialogue therefore, centered on mutual recognition and acknowledgement of "each religion by the other as a divinely ordained path for salvation in the strictly religious sense of the term," Oz,alp Mehemet,(1998). However, Swidler (1990) defines dialogue as a "conversation between two or

more persons with differing views, the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that he or she can change and grow". Barker (1998) distinguishes interfaith dialogue from debate and evangelism. According to him, interfaith dialogue involves a meeting or a series of meeting between scholars form two or more religious communities. The meetings involve the discussion on key components of the religions that need to be clarified to the communities.

Even though a discussion of religions is included in this meeting, conflicting claim of truth are not debated. Held separately, from dialogue, religious debate is a form of evangelism which is targeting to convince the audience of the superiority of one's religious position. Evangelism on the other hand is aimed to convert others to one's religious position and it always occurs in an informal circumstance unlike dialogue and debate which are more formal and highly structured.

In a deeper understanding of interfaith dialogue, both Nursi, (1996) and Gulen, (2004) introduce the concepts of institutionalization and collaboration. They argue that interfaith dialogue needs to be institutionalized and collaboration must take place through joint projects for there to be any effective dialogue in the atmosphere of skepticism. They continue to state that, dialogue occur at a local level with small projects on part of other Muslim organizations, but larger-scale programs and projects that attracts public attention are needed. That's why Gulen suggested joint divinity schools and joint trips to the holy sites.

1.2 Religious Pluralism.

Religious pluralism according to Ayoub, Mahmud (2004), is an attitude or policy regarding to the diversity of religious beliefs systems co-oexixistance in society. It is the acknowledgement that at least there is some truth and values in others religions. But many writers use the phrase as a synonym for ecumenism which in common terms represents: the promotion of some level of unity, cooperation, and improved understanding between different religions of different denominations within a single religion. Religious pluralism aim to reach a wider understanding of religions rather pushing the different beliefs into one box. It reveals the common goal between religions in their interpretation of truth related to spiritual ethical or political issues. According to Heak, (2005), and Friedman Adina, (2009), pluralistic perspectives search for the common

ground between religions. And that Religions are not classified as objects, but rather "dynamic actors) on a common stage.

1.3 Religious Tolerance.

Religious tolerance according to Ahmad Hosni Hajji Hassan, (2011), is an attitude or mind that implies non-judgmental acceptance of different religious beliefs or life styles. In simple terms religious toleration is the appreciation of the practices and permitting of religious actions and cultures that don't belong to ones faith. To Ayoub Mahmud, (2004, toleration is to bear and to endure, sustain or preserve and that toleration means bearance of the adherent dominant religion to accept the practicing of a minority religion.

2.0 Introduction.

Religious pluralism and tolerance is one of the basic foundations of a plural civil society. It is the belief that no religion singularly has a monopoly of the truth or of the life that leads to salvation. Religious pluralism establishes the possibility of tolerance and co-existence of followers of different religions and cultures (Hick 1993).

Islam, one of the main religions of the world, is often labeled exclusivist and accordingly intolerant (Mesalmany 2006). Here it is important to examine what is the real attitude of Islam towards pluralism and tolerance? Is there a pluralistic interpretation of Islam?

Muslim scholars have different views on this subject. Among the three main intellectual movements in Islamic world (Kurzman 1998:3), fundamentalists reject religious pluralism and tolerance, and consider it as an aspect of the ideological war of the western world (Mesbah Yazdi 2002.14) but both traditionalists and modernists accept it, though traditionalists generally do not emphasize and specify pluralism and prefer to accept solely the religious tolerance.

Traditionalists mainly rely on Islamic transcripts and Sufism, but modernists use modern western philosophical theories such as Kant's noman-phenomena theory and John Hick's religious pluralism theory.

This article is a short review of the approaches, sources and arguments of Fethullah Gulen and Abdul Karim Soroush as two contemporary Muslim scholars on religious pluralism and tolerance.

Leading Muslim thinker and global movement spiritual leader, Fethullah Gulen, studied Nursi's approach to other religions, specifically Christianity, and applied Nursi's philosophy beyond *Nostra Aetate*. In 1986, Gulen asked his followers to engage in dialogue with people from all different segments of Turkish society, from the left to the right wing, and secular to the agnostic or atheist. He inspired his followers to establish the journalists' and Writers' Foundation in 1994 and other dialogue centers with this aim, thereby becoming the first leading person behind the institutionalization of dialogue in Turkish context.

Gulen has been called "one of the most persuasive and influential voices in the Muslim community" calling for dialogue. Gulen regards interfaith cooperation as "compulsory for Muslims to support peace," relying on the basic Islamic sources to affirm this point. Enes Ergene, a pupil of Gulen's study circle, writes that Gulen does not rely on theological sources alone. "These two concepts (tolerance and dialogue), first developed on a small scale, have turned into a search for a culture of reconciliation on a world scale …..Gulen strengthens this search with religious, legal, and philosophical foundations. In his views, a human is related to everything in the cosmos; therefore, to engage in dialogue with the related beings is part of human nature.

Gulen met with Rabbi, Armenian Patriarch Mesrob Mutafyan, Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron, Christian Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomeos in Istanbul in 1996, and Vatican Representative Monsignor George Marowich, who then arranged Gulen's meeting with Pope John Paul 11 at the Vatican in 1998. During his meeting with the Pope, Gulen proposed that a joint school of Divinity be established in Urfa, Turkey, the birthplace of Abraham to disprove the idea of "a clash of civilization". While such meetings may be welcomed today, it was almost taboo during the 1990s in the political and religious atmosphere in Turkey. Both meetings were harshly criticized by ultra-secularists and Islamists. A group of young Islamists argued that he should not have humiliated himself to the extent of going to the Vatican and meeting with the Pope. Gulen, however, responded to this kind of reductionism by saying that humility was an attribute of Muslims.

In 1999, Gulen travelled to the US to seek medical attention, and remained there due to the political conditions in Turkey. His followers in the US have been active in realizing his vision, especially after 9/11. With his encouragement, over 50 dialogue centers were established in North America by his followers

and supporters. Although no official count has taken place, it is possible that the number exceeds 100 in the Americas, Europe, and Australia. Other Muslims organizations or groups have put effort into interfaith relations, but Gluen's followers and supporters actually established dialogue centers and given more time, funds, and efforts to this sector.

3. 0 Fethullah Gulen's Views on Interfaith Dialogue, Religious Pluralism and Tolerance.

3.1 Background.

Gulen believes in religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue and has several important activities and achievements in this field. In 1999, his paper "The Necessity of interfaith Dialogue" was presented to the Parliament of world's Religious in Cape Town. He maintains that "dialogue is a must "and that people, regardless of nation or political borders, have far more in common than they realize (Gulen 2005b: IX).

He suggests tolerance and dialogue as two keys to provide peace in society. And in his view, "no one should condemn another for being a member of a religion or scold him for being an atheist" (Bulent and Omer 2000). He personally visited religious leaders, including Pope John Paul 11, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomeos, and Israeli Sephardic Head Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron.(Wikipedia, Fethullah Gulen) and (Gulen 2004:XIII)

Gulen realized a very important progress in interfaith dialogue by establishing "Foundation of writers and journalists" which he is its honorary chairman. This foundation, by its activities including annual meetings, has reconciled different intellectual movements in Turkey. In the meetings the representatives of different movements are invited.

3.2 Arguments.

3.2.1 Saving Modern Humanity from Materialism.

The first reason of Gulen for interfaith dialogue is cooperation among religions in saving modern man from materialism which has deprived human from the original, natural, and harmonic life. He believes that materialist world view which limits religion's influence in contemporary social life, is the main cause of modern human's problems. According to Gulen's view social harmony and peace with nature, between people, and within the individual only can come

about when the material and spiritual realms are reconciled. Peace with nature, peace and justice in society, and personal integrity are possible when one is at peace with Heaven. Religion reconciles nature-Divine Books, the material-the spiritual. (Gulen 2000:4-9)

3.2.2 The Same Source and Nature of All Religions

The second reason of interfaith dialogue from Gulen's point of view is the very nature of religion. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and even Hinduism and other world religions accept the same source for themselves, and including Buddhism, pursue the same goal. He states: 'as a Muslim, I accept all prophets and Books sent to different peoples throughout history, and regard belief in them as an essential principle of being Muslim. A Muslim is a true follower of Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and all other Prophets. Not believing in one Prophet or Book means that one is not a Muslim. Thus we acknowledge the oneness and basic unity of religion, which is a symphony of God's blessings and mercy, and the Universality of Belief in religion. So, religion is a system of belief embracing all races and all beliefs, a road bringing everyone together in brotherhood."(Gulen, 2004:376)

Gulen argues that regardless of how their adherents implement their faith in their daily lives, such generally accepted values as love, respect, tolerance, forgiveness, mercy, human rights, peace, brotherhood, and freedom are exalted by religion. Most of them are accorded with the highest precedence in the messages brought by Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, as well as in the messages of Buddha and even Zarathustra, Lao-Tzu, Confucius, and the Hindu scholars.

Gulen's metaphor is very helpful to understand his true belief in diversity. He likens the diversity of religion to a symphony and names all religions as "a symphony of God's blessings and mercy." Of course, the diversity of a collection of notes and instruments brought together in a collaborative unity that characterizes a symphony. Musical harmony cannot of people playing the same notes and a symphony cannot be played by a collection of people all playing the same instrument (Kurtz 2005:375).

3.2.3 Qur'an's call to Interfaith Dialogue.

In addition to rational reasons for the necessity of interfaith dialogue, Gulen refers to Verses of Qur'an and Prophet's deeds: "Fourteen centuries ago, Islam made the greatest ecumenical call the world has ever seen. The Qur'an calls the

people of the Book (Christians and Jews primarily): Say: "O people of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with Him; that we take not, from among ourselves lords and patrons other than God ." if then they turn back, say you: "Bear witness that we are Muslims (i.e., those who have surrendered to God's Will). (Qur'an 3:64) This call comes in the ninth year of the Hijra. A very important point is that in case this call was rejected, Muslims were to adopt the attitude expressed in another Sura: (Quran 109:6) "Your religion is for you; my religion is for me. "That is, if you do not expect this call, we have surrendered to God. We will continue on the path we have accepted and leave you to go on your own path" (Gulen 2000:5).

3.2.4 Religious Tolerance as the Request of Human Life.

Gulen believes that diversity is a necessary part of human life and if we do not respect the diversity and unlikely desire to unify all people under one religion we will be engaged in an unlimited net of conflicts: "Different beliefs, races, customs and traditions will continue to cohabit in this village. Each individual is like a unique realm unto themselves; therefore the desire for all humanity to be similar to one another is nothing more than wishing for the impossible. For this reason, the peace of this (global) village lies in respecting all these differences, considering these differences to be part of our nature and in ensuring that people appreciate these differences. Otherwise, it is unavoidable that the world will devour itself in a wed of conflicts, disputes, fights, and the bloodiest of wars, thus preparing the way for its own end." (Weller 2006:77).

3.2.5 Love as the Essence of Being Requests Tolerance.

 Inspired from Sufism as the inner side of Islam, Gulen insists on love as the essence of being; "Love is the most essential element of every being, and it is most radiant light, and it is the greatest power; able to resist and overcome all else." (Gulen, 2004:1) Sufism emphasizes on love as a central attribute of a believer and focuses on love for others. Gulen especially is influenced by Turkish Sufis and he follows a line that stretches from Yesevi to Rumi, then from Yunus to Haci Bektas-I Veli. Gulen, following this very basis, re-generates this tolerant interpretation and understanding of Muslim-Turkish Sufism within contemporary circumstances. He insists that "Love is the most essential element in every being, and it is a most radiant light and a great power which can resist and overcome every force." (Gulen 2004:1X). Gulen uses the

metaphor of the famous Sufi poet Mawlana Rumi to explain how one can be both rooted in one's own tradition, but open to others: "such a person is like a compass with one foot well-established in the centre of belief and Islam and the other foot with people of many nations."(Kurtz 2005:375-7)

Gulen in his book, "Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance" argues on the necessity of love in the words of the famous Turkish poet Yunus, "loving the created simply because of the Creator." He explains that every creator, for example, a painter loves his/her creatures, so God loves all creature especially humans, and we must love humans at least as the God's creatures. (Gulen, 2004:46)

Gulen is himself a true Sufi when says: "Applaud the good for their goodness; appreciate those who have believing hearts; be kind to the believers. Approach unbelievers so gently that their envy and hatred would melt away. Like a Messiah, revive people with your breath."(Gulen 2005a:75)

4.0. Dr Soroush's Views on Religious Pluralism and Tolerance.

4.1. Background.

Dr Soroush, the Iranian contemporary religious thinker and theorist, is considered as one o the most significant religious intellectuals of the Islamic world. In spite of his fundamental thoughts and activities during the 1970s-80s, as well as his close cooperation with Islamic Republic of Iran, Dr. Soroush has become one of the modern critical interpreters of religion and Islam. He has written several books on interpretations of religion and Islam in modern times up to now. Dr Soroush started his movement in the field of intellectual religious thoughts by introducing *The Theory of Education of Religious Knowledge Or- Text in Context* in the late years of 90s he started to emphasize on pluralism and religious tolerance in the middle of the closing decade of the twentieth century (Hashemi 2006:123). In the recent decade he has become one of the most critical advocates of religious pluralism and tolerance in Iran, as well as in the Islamic world. Writing several books and articles, as well as participating in national and international conferences and meeting the scholars and thinkers of other religions is just a part of his activities in relation to religious pluralism.

Dr. Abdul Karim Soroush was chosen by Time Magazine (April 2005) as one of the 100 most influential people of 2005 in the world. Scott MacLeod has

introduced Dr. Soroush as the Iran's democratic voice. He also received the Erasmus Prize (2004) of the Premium Erasmianum Foundation.

4.2. Arguments.

Dr Soroush in clarifying and classifying the theory of pluralism used mainly four sources and characters including: first of all Emanuel Kant the 18th German philosopher and his theory of noman phenomena, second, Jalal-al-Din Rumi and his mystical and sufistic world view which pluralism and tolerance are a significant part of it, third, Karl Popper the science and political philosopher of the 20th century and his critical realism theory, and fourth, John Hick, the contemporary theologian and religious philosopher who puts the theory of religious pluralism in the modern era.

Dr Soroush's reasoning and argumentations can be mentioned briefly as follows:

4.3 Epistemological Argument.

The basis of Dr. Soroush's argumentation in believing in religious polarity is his belief in diversity of religious knowledge and epistemology. In his opinion religion has two major sources: religious texts and religious experiences, since these two sources are silent, and people are influenced by their outer side and by their interpreters, therefore none of these two, religious knowledge and religious interpretations, might be definitely regarded as the monopolistic and exclusive authority. Consequently, there is no way out of accepting religious plurality and tolerance. This argument can be explained and clarified through the following arguments (Jhanbakhsh 2004:231).

- Religious texts and experiences are the primary sources for gaining religious knowledge. Therefore human does not have access of religion itself. In fact religion is nothing but various interpretations of it, throughout history.
- Religious texts and experiences are silent; human beings interpret them.
- In interpreting religious texts, interpreter employs his/her own expectations, questions, and presuppositions.
- These expectations, questions, and presuppositions come from somewhere out of religion.
- Out of religion is changeable, variable, and indeterminate. Science, philosophy, and human properties are constantly increasing and changing.

- Inevitably interpretations that come out of such expectations, questions, and presuppositions would be also variable and changing.
- Considering the fact that human being is always liable to err, therefore not an interpretation can be claimed as the single and definite authority.

4.4 Mystical Argumentation.

Dr. Soroush also employs other reasoning mainly derived from mystics and Sufism, especially from Rumi that can be summarized as follows: according to mystical trainings there is an obvious difference between the internal (Baten) and external (Zaher) world. What human see of religious diversity is just the apparent and outward of religion, the shell of it, and the essence is hidden in all religions. Although the followers of different religions are worshiping different names, they are in fact in search of one single essence. The external diversity is caused by the limitation of materialistic world.

4.4.1 Incompatibility of Religious Exclusiveness with God's Guidance and Conduct.

If just as the exclusivists, for instance, just 70-80 millions *Twelve Imam Shiite* Muslims have been guided, or if just 12 millions of Jews are guided, this would contradict Divine attributes of conduct and leadership. It definitely contradicts divine attributes of mercy, wisdom, and conducts, if most of human beings are not guided and remain misled and imperfect.

4.4.2 Hereditariness of Religious Believes Among the Pious.

It is not always like this that followers of all religions, for instance Christians, all choose their religion based on reason and research, but people become Muslim, Christian, or Jew on the spur of family and society demands. In other words human beings' religion has some "cause" rather than "reason". Therefore, is that logical or compatible with God's wisdom to say that human's salvation or tribulation is a result of something hereditary and unintentional? (Soroush 2001:50-51).

5.0 Comparison and conclusion.

According to the comparison made on Fethullah Gulen and Dr. Soroush's views on pluralism and religious tolerance, some similarities and some differences between the two views are recognizable. Both of the thinkers emphasize the necessity of peaceful and positive communication with the followers of

different religions, as well as with secular groups. Furthermore, they reject the fundamental, violent, and exclusivist interpretations of religion. Both put emphasis on the comprehensive tolerance and do not restrict it to some religions (for example, those having heavenly books). Concerning their sources and arguments, both of them use mystical, especially Rumi's heritage, and theological sources and arguments. Their books and activities prove this claim.

However, in spite of their major common point of view they are different in their approaches, arguments, sources, results and achievements. While Dr. Soroush employs mystical and theological (Shiite-Mu'tazeli) sources as well as western sources, Fethullah Gulen mainly uses theological (Ashari-Hanafi) and mystical sources. Soroush uses theological (Divine conduct), mystical (distinction between shell and essence of religion), experimental (hereditariness in religion) reasoning and epistemological argumentations. Gulen uses mystical (comprehensive love), theological (referring to Qur'an and prophet's tradition) and pragmatist (common goal of all religions). Consequently, it is possible to conclude that Soroush mainly has an epistemological approach and with an emphasis on religious diversity, ends up in pluralism and religious tolerance. Gulen emphasizes on pragmatist reasoning (to help the common goal of all religions that is to fight materialism and to revive the existence of God in people's lives).

In sum, Fethullah Gulen is seriously concerned with religion and in order to improve the religious life of contemporary human being suggests tolerance and interfaith dialogues. To achieve this goal he maintains his traditional interpretation of Islam, which is to believe in Islam's superior position and tending to reject other religions' truth. But Soroush because of epistemological necessity and probably because of his concern with modernity chooses the path of religious pluralism. And because of this closeness and fairness to traditional interpretations of religion, Gulen has been more successful than Dr. Soroush, not only, in the eyes of the people of his own country, but also among the people throughout the world. Nevertheless, the practical results of both points of views are the same and both of these thinkers suggest tolerance and influential communications with the followers of other religions.

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