Defending Religious Diversity and Tolerance in America Today: Lessons from Fethullah Gülen

The Rev. Loye Ashton, Ph.D., Millsaps College

Much ink has been spilled in American politics about the "culture wars" between the secular left and the religious right. However, the real cultural conflicts in America lie much deeper. They are more often within religious traditions and pit "orthodox" against "progressive", or increasingly, "moderates" against "fundamentalists." In the political discourse in America today, one cannot help but notice a growing vocal objection to the ideals of religious diversity and tolerance. For instance, many conservative evangelical Christians publicly criticize terms such as "tolerance", "diversity", and "multi-culturalism", arguing that these are part of a "politically-correct" liberal discourse biased against evangelical and fundamentalist Christians and their public advocacy of absolute truths. These are truths, which, in the perspective of these Christians, ultimately support the cultural and theological superiority of Christianity. The concern of these Christians is that any tolerance that advocates respect for another's religious beliefs and willingness to allow those beliefs to co-exist alongside the absolute truths of Christianity is anti-Biblical and contrary to the kind of love Jesus sought to impart to his followers (McDowell & Hostetler, 1998). In other words, religious tolerance, according to these Christians, inevitably results in allowing people to follow falsehoods that would imperil their salvation and therefore the loving thing to do is to try and prevent these alternative religious teachings from achieving validity in the public sphere. For them, tolerance is synonymous with decadence, antithetical to true religion. The problem that the United States faces now, for this segment of the Christian population, is that liberality, inclusiveness, diversity, and tolerance with

respect to matters religious pose a greater threat to the social order and Christian identity of America than anything else, including terrorism (Robertson, 2005).

Such views present a challenge for Christian theologians and leaders who do not share this ideology of exclusion and superiority. What are Christians who advocate for openness and dialogue and who see the Gospel as a call to hospitality, equality, compassion, and non-violence to do within this increasingly vocal culture of religious intolerance? While there are many theological resources from within the Christian tradition that can and should be employed to address this challenge, I have also found that one of the many benefits of interfaith dialogue is that it helps us to discover resonant voices outside of our own tradition that are struggling with some of the same problems and questions. One such voice is that of Turkish spiritual teacher, Fethullah Gülen (b. 1938), who has received recognition from the international community for his bold defense of religious tolerance from an Islamic perspective and his criticism of both bigotry and zealotry in the form of religious extremism. The work of Fethullah Gülen demonstrates the rare combination of deep spiritual piety and generous compassion with an astute and commanding intellect.

One need not be Hegelian to believe that history is driven by ideas and, if so, then it might be helpful to explore what lessons and insights may be gleaned from Gülen in his lifelong struggle to appeal for a moderate middle position of religious freedom and plurality within a Turkish context polarized by, on the one hand, a state-controlled secularist fear of religion and, on the other, militant Islamicist fundamentalism imported into Turkey from outside its borders. How does Gülen integrate both commitment to his own faith and tolerance toward the faith of others? There are at least three approaches within his work that are especially rich for exploring this question.

The first is Gülen's insights into the destructive consequences of politicizing religion. These are well known among his followers and are somewhat counter-cultural with respect to the view of many Islamic movements that see that political goals are necessary in order to achieve and secure a society that reflects piety and righteousness. In the United States today, many evangelical and fundamentalist Christians also share this view. Gülen's warning about mixing partisan politics and religion too closely is that politicizing religion ultimately does more damage, and does it more quickly, to religion than to the state (Ünal & Williams, 2000). Gülen says: "Religion is the relationship between people and their Creator. The feeling of religion lives in the heart's depths and on the inner world's emerald hills. If you turn it into a display of forms, you'll kill it. Politicizing religion will harm religion before it harms a government's life" (Ünal & Williams, 2000, p. 36). What Gülen is saying is that politicizing religion is always a reductionistic endeavor: it turns the mysterious relationship of humanity and the Divine into an ideology. Gülen challenges us to move beyond identifying ourselves with such totalizing categories such as right or left. The question, "Am I a liberal or a conservative?" is ultimately unhelpful and anti-spiritual by its superficial (i.e., positivistic and materialistic) move to identify the deep mystery of the human being relating to the Divine with mere ideological membership. Truly spiritual people resist reducing themselves with these labels.

Gülen is not arguing that religious or spiritual people should stay out of the political arena or stop concerning themselves with politics. Indeed, such a recommendation would be no better than quietism and is a withdrawal from the responsibilities and obligations of citizenship and social participation. Rather, the lesson here is that confusing political involvement and advocacy with partisanship and party loyalty, places the need for religion to speak publicly regarding political issues that affect human dignity and welfare, environmental stewardship,

social justice and peace within too narrow a framework of competing power groups that divide, instead of build, communities. Truly religious people who are responsibly involved in their *polis* are not single-issue voters or single-party loyalists.

Gülen's second approach is his analysis of the nature of fundamentalism, and its relationship to dogmatism, which provides useful insight into the rise of religious extremists in the wake of globalized modernism and argues for why there is greater need now for the principles of tolerance, respect, and understanding to be strengthened through inter-religious and intercultural dialogue than ever before. Ironically, atheism and fundamentalism are very similar in one important respect: they both reject the possibility that religion is a phenomenon of life. That is to say, that religious communities and beliefs grow and develop and must necessarily operate imperfectly under the conditions of existence. Authentic religious communities are willing to struggle with the search for truth amid the ambiguities and uncertainties of life. Such an organic understanding of religion is unsatisfactory to the both the atheist's and the fundamentalist's need for absolute and unqualified certainty. For Gülen, atheism and religious fundamentalism, understood as fanaticism, are both created by ignorance, atheism by the lack of religious education and fanaticism by the lack of scientific education (Yavuz, 2003, p. 38). This ignorance is one of the key reasons why education plays such a central role for Gülen and his movement. Bekim Agai (2003) has described this crucial role of education stating that, for Gülen, "education has always been seen as a means to ensure one's own salvation and the salvation of others" (p. 68). Gülen's understanding of fundamentalism is that it is a "fanatical and dogmatic adherence to a belief" (Ünal & Williams, 2000, p. 65). His main point here is that

dogma[1] itself, understood neutrally as religious doctrine, is not the problem so much as dogmatism, in other words, being dogmatic about dogma.

Over the last half-century in America, Christian extremism has had a fertile field in which to grow, sown by fundamentalism (both ecclesial and biblical) and fertilized by religious nationalism. Fundamentalism is, fundamentally, parasitic: it is the flattened distortion of an original religious vision that has been appropriated for political manipulation and repression. Of course we know that, theologically speaking, religious views comprise the entire spectrum from liberal to moderate to conservative. However, fundamentalism chooses to remove itself from this spectrum altogether in its rejection of ambiguity and reconsideration. Within the fundamentalist framework one doesn't arrive at a position through discernment and growth on a spiritual journey. Rather, the believer converts and then retreats from engaging reality, seeking refuge behind a bastion of unmovable certainty. Gülen says something similar when he defines fanaticism as "insisting on false and blind persistence" (Ünal & Williams, 2000, p. 87). Fundamentalism, by elevating politically conditional definitions of community to unconditional importance, not only chokes off life but also commits idolatry. The militant inflexibility of fundamentalism and religious fanaticism leads its followers to inevitably sanction force and violence in the name of protecting the faith. Yet, violence and terrorism are the complete antithesis of what Abrahamic traditions share in the ethical core of their communal understandings of what God intends, namely, the practice of love and hospitality.

Finally, and maybe most importantly, is Gülen third approach: his vision of how the practice of tolerance of the other needs to be a component of one's own religious devotion. Gülen argues that the true marks of religion, as the connection between humanity and God, should be to benefit all people, not sanction discrimination and violence. Here he is at his most

[1] A theologically neutral understanding of dogma would simply define it as "religious doctrine."

poetic when he connects the religious dimensions of love with the ethical obligations of tolerance and concern for the other. For Gülen, dialogue, tolerance, and trust reinforce each other: tolerance is the acceptance of differences that arise from dialogue in order to further the wider goal of cooperation. Tolerance is based on the idea of charity, or love, and therefore is a duty to God (Agai, 2003, p. 64). In the spirit of a Sufi mystic, Gülen will often describe this love as the greatest human power for relating to God and for relating to each other, demonstrating through his own generosity to others how tolerance is seen as a necessary expression of that power and relationship (Gülen, 2004b, p. 4).

Love for Gülen is a self-sacrificing action that is motivated by obedience to God and the desire to promote the welfare of others. Gülen's understanding of devotion is a type of self-cultivation in which tolerance is developed in order to better the community. Gülen connects tolerance with love because both require genuine feeling for the other. Just as love is an expression of empathetic feeling for the other, Gülen's more recent writings emphasize tolerance as a kind of sympathetic appreciation of the difference and uniqueness of the other (Yavuz, 2003, p. 45). Tolerance then, for Gülen, is both a moral demand by God and an invitation from God to a deeper place of devotion. Hakan Yavuz (2003) describes Gülen's thinking this way: "The purpose of religion and religious ritual is to internalize the Islamic concept of morality – that is, to learn to live in the presence of God" (Yavuz, 25). Without tolerance grounded in love, we cannot be moral creatures. Gülen (2004c) writes, "Be so tolerant that your heart becomes wide like the ocean. Become inspired with faith and love for others. Offer a hand to those in trouble, and be concerned about everyone" (p. 39).

In Gülen's thinking there is no greater religious concept than love, there is no greater religious action than love: "Love is the most essential element of every being, and it is the most

radiant light, and it is the greatest power; able to resist and overcome all else" (Gulen, 2004b, p. 1). True religion is therefore how we move from being merely human to in fact becoming humane. In this way, Gülen teaches, spiritual people are open to the flow of the divine. When they allow themselves to become channels of God's grace, they find their rhythm in the rhythm of God.

Gülen's vision of devotion and tolerance is tied with the Islamic understanding of the importance of education as a necessary component of religious commitment. As we also see confirmed in Gülen's work, the goals of inter-religious dialogue are two-fold with respect to education and removing ignorance. Interfaith dialogue helps us to experience how we can learn about the religious beliefs and spiritual identity of the other *while at the same time* learning more about the religious beliefs and spiritual identity of ourselves.

All too often we have turned God's doorways of invitation into our own barricaded gates of self-absorption. In reading Gülen's work the lesson I take away and re-discover in my own faith is that, as spiritual individuals and as religious communities, the purpose of our religious quest is to find the heart of reality and learn to truly live in the presence of the Divine.

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