

Gülen and Sufism

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Gülen has attracted attention through the activities of his followers mainly in education and interfaith dialogue.ⁱ The media network and other financial and commercial institutions established by his followers have helped publicize his views and make his communityⁱⁱ more publicly visible. While the secular and modern education model which intends to promote cultural tolerance and moral values exemplified in role-model teachers and to grow an international network of Turkish speaking intellectuals raised in Turkish schools, interfaith and intercultural dialogue activities aim to establish connections among various cultural and religious communities emphasizing tolerance, peaceful coexistence and religious broadmindedness. Gülen leads the community by designing and proposing new areas of action for his followers as well as persistently revitalizing Islamic consciousness and spirituality in daily and personal lives of his followers and presenting an understanding of Islam which is practicable in contemporary world. While the political and social implications of the activities of the Gülen community has been dealt with in various scholarly works, the religious aspect of Gülen and his community still needs to be analyzedⁱⁱⁱ.

It is of utmost significance to examine the extent of the impact of Sufism on Gülen's views in order to fully comprehend Gülen's religious philosophy and the actions of his community. It is not in the scope of this paper to find a correct definition for Sufism^{iv}, or to comprehensively analyze Gülen's thought and his community, neither have we enough space to discuss to the fullest extent Gülen's stance on various issues within Sufism. The purpose of this paper is to search for the roots of Gülen's Sufism both in his life and in the historical Sufi tradition. A historical analysis of the factors that shape Gülen's Sufi understanding necessitates looking at Fethullah Gülen's personal background. A review of his Sufi masterpiece *Kalbin Zumrut Tepeleri* (hereafter referred to as The Emerald Hills of the Heart) is essential for a chronological and comparative analysis of his views and for locating Gülen in an historical context within the history of Sufism.

A close study of Gülen's Sufi aspect proves that Gülen is a contemporary Sufi scholar, who, while far from establishing a Sufi order, aims to revive and combine the activism of Prophet Muhammad and his companions, the asceticism of the first generation Sufis, and the Sufi terminological knowledge and consciousness of the later Sufi scholars. At a time when the gap between Sufis and their major critique *salafis* increase, Gülen's main goal is to reestablish Sufism on the basis of Quran and Sunna. Gülen's most significant contribution to the Sufi literature is his emphasis on religious activism. In Gülen's Sufi approach the passivism, asceticism and exclusive focus on inner world under the guidance of the sheikh in many of the early Sufi works are replaced with purification of the self through continuous struggle and action within the community under the direct guidance of Quran and Sunna. This approach offers a new equilibrium within the Muslim world and promotes a peaceful and tolerant understanding of Islam coexisting peacefully with the non-Islamic communities.

An autobiographical interview of Gülen published as *Fethullah Gülen Hocaefendi "Küçük Dünyam"* (or "My Little World") provides many examples of powerful influence of Sufism on Gülen during his very childhood. This should not be surprising considering the first Muslim presence in Anatolia took place thanks to the Sufi dervishes of Central Asia and that Sufi orders have always been influential in Asia Minor. Especially Erzurum, the birthplace of Gülen, is known for its conservative and spiritual atmosphere.

According to Gülen the leading authoritative figure in his family was his great grandfather, Molla Ahmed (Erdogan, 1995, pp. 15-18). The qualities which venerate him in Gülen's memory are all Sufi attributes: asceticism, combining knowledge and piety, living on a few olives a day throughout all his life, never sleeping in bed, and sufficing with a few minutes of nap. Gülen mentions his strong attachment to his grandfather, Samil. Gülen reveres his grandfather for not taking off his turban all his life, respecting the genuine scholars, not laughing at all but rarely smiling. He also emphasizes the influence of his grandmother on himself with her spirituality. Gülen mentions his father with deep respect as having a major influence on himself and recalls his passion for knowledge, love of the companions of the Prophet, and high manners.

While these instances hint the reverence of Sufi qualities in Gülen's family, a local Sufi sheikh Mehmed Lutfi or Alvarli Efe as known by the locals had the most influence on Gülen in terms of establishing Sufi qualities in his life (Erdogan, 1995, pp. 27-29). Lutfi paid frequent visits to their house and was highly respected in the family. Gülen memorized all the poems Lutfi read in his sermons and many of his teachings have remained strong in Gülen's memory. Lutfi passed away when Gülen was sixteen. Therefore, as can be observed in Gülen's writings on Sufism, it can be argued that Mehmed Lutfi did not have much philosophical impact on Gülen. The references to Mehmed Lutfi are only some couplets, poems and sayings, and they are used only to reinforce a meaning and idea that Gülen argues in his works. However, certainly his experiences in Sufi lodges, or *tekye*, in this time period of his life left a deep impact on Gülen and this impact is reflected in Gülen's philosophy. Gülen argues that a perfect community combines three characteristics in itself: the discipline of the army, the knowledge of the madrasa/school, and the manners of the *tekye* (Gülen, 2003, para. 1).

The major philosophical influence on Gülen's thoughts, not only about Sufism but on overall approach to religion and its application in modern life, comes from Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and his works collected as *Risale-i Nur*. It would not be an exaggeration to state here that *Risale-i Nur* forms the philosophical basis of Fethullah Gülen's thought and life. He reminisces when he first met with *Risale-i Nur* as an adolescent at the age of sixteen and shortly after he began praying to be among the students of *Risale-i Nur* all his life. Indeed in his speeches and writings he very frequently makes references to *Risale-i Nur* and often refers to Said Nursi as "our mind maker" (in Turkish "beyin yapıcımız"). In his writings on Sufism too, his stance and thoughts on fundamental issues are shaped by Said Nursi. In many cases even when he does not make an explicit reference to *Risale-i Nur* we find Said Nursi's approach as the overarching stance of Gülen.

In most essential issues of Sufism Gülen follows Nursi's line of thought. One very significant example is his definition of the steps that lead the seeker (*murid*, he who has made up his will) to the right path. In the second volume of The Emerald Hills of the Heart under the title "*Seyr-u Süluk*" (Wayfaring) Gülen describes the stages of mystical journey such as *seyr ilallah* (journeying to God), *seyr fillah* (journeying in God), *seyr maallah* (journeying with God), *seyr anillah* (journeying from God), and several stages of improving the Self (*nafs*) in the classical Sufi understanding (Gülen, 2001, pp. 255-273). Later on under the title "Another Line in *Seyr-u Süluk*" he examines and evaluates the approach of Said Nursi. Nursi's most explicit explanation of his mystical formulation is described in the Addendum of the Twenty sixth Word in The Words collection:

"The ways (*tarikât*) leading to Almighty God are truly numerous. While all true ways are taken from the Qur'an, some are shorter, safer, and more general than others. Of these ways taken from the Qur'an is that of **impotence** (*acz*), **poverty** (*fakr*), **compassion** (*şefkat*), and **reflection** (*tefekkiir*), from which, with my defective understanding, I have benefited" (Nursi, 2001, p. 221).

Besides these four steps, Nursi presents a slightly different list in the Fourth Letter of The Letters collection: "On the way of impotence four things are necessary: absolute poverty, absolute impotence, absolute thanks (*şükür*), and absolute ardor (*şevk*), my friend" (Nursi, 2001, p. 354). Gülen brings these two formulations together and lists six essentials of this alternate path: impotence, poverty, compassion, reflection, ardor, and thanks. He praises this way as "the reflection of the truth of Prophethood and flourishing of the path of the Companions" (Gülen, 2001, p. 288).

It is significant to note here that Nursi did not write out his thoughts on Sufism and Sufi terminology in a separate book. He occasionally makes references to these issues and offers his own position on certain aspects of Sufism. The teachings of Risale-i Nur constitute a part of Gülen's "subconscious attainment".^v Gülen adopts Nursi's ideas on Sufism and through the perspective of Nursi re-evaluates the traditional Sufi literature. Gülen takes on where Nursi left and takes his teachings to a further step of educating his followers in Sufism as a discipline. Thus while Gülen does not deviate from the line of Nursi, his writings on Sufi terminology are definitely distinctive. Gülen follows the example of the earlier Sufi scholars in defining and describing each concept in the terminology of Sufism, and this constitutes Gülen's difference from Nursi.

The historical development of Sufism can be periodized in many ways. The most common periodization is as such: following the Age of Happiness (the time of the Prophet and His companions), the period of asceticism, period of *tasawwuf*, period of "unity of Being", period of *tariqa* (orders), and today (Kara, 1985, p. 77). While in the period of asceticism, the terminology of Sufism was not fully formulated, during the *tasawwuf* period, Sufi scholars described their understanding of Sufism, biographies of major Sufi scholars in the early period, and explained certain concepts and terminology of Sufism. Thus while in the period of asceticism Sufis strived to "live" and refresh the mystical aspect of Islam, in the period of *tasawwuf* scholars started also to "speak" about Sufism. They handled Sufism as a separate discipline, just like *fiqh* (jurisprudence) or

hadith, with its own rules, methodology, and terminology. These scholars did have followers and students; however they did not institutionalize their approaches in the form of orders, which were established after the 12th century. Sufi scholars of the *tasawwuf* period critically analyzed and reshaped the fundamentals of Sufism, while in the period of orders, in most of the cases, imitation prevailed over critical thinking in a strictly structured master-disciple mystical relationship.

The Sufi scholars that Gülen follows in his *Emerald Hills of the Heart* mostly belong to the period of *tasawwuf*. A close study of Gülen's views reveals strong parallels between his approach and the views of leading scholars such as Qushayri, Muhasibi, Tusi, Kelebazi, Ebu Talib Mekki, Hujviri, Gazali, and Ibn'ul Kayyim el-Cevziyye. A common characteristic of these scholars is that they all strive to bring together Sufism and *sharia*. In their works, on the one hand they criticize the out-of-*sharia* practices that start to emerge within Sufi circles and on the other hand they try to defend basic tenets of Sufism by referring to the Quran and Sunna.

Gülen follows the tradition of these scholars in describing and re-evaluating the terms of Sufism. While he does not create new meanings and concepts, he reassesses the Sufi terminology to present a practical approach for the modern day Muslims. He endeavors to refresh spirituality. He sets the aim of writing *Emerald Hills of the Heart* as “raising the believers to the level of the heart and the spirit” (Gülen, 2004, *Bir Demet Yol Mula hazasi*). Thus I argue that by following this group of earlier Sufi scholars Gülen endeavors to promote a Sufi approach within the confines of *sharia* and in strict accordance with the Quran and Sunna. This conveniently protects his approach against criticisms towards Sufism. Gülen makes a connection between Bediuzzaman's line of strict adherence to the Quran and the line of the earlier scholars of the *tasawwuf* period.

How, then, did Gülen develop his Sufi rhetoric? When did he start talking about Sufism? As it is obvious in his personal background Sufism always played a significant role in Gülen's life and thought. However he did not write about it until early 1990s. In 1970s when he first distinguished himself from other Risale-i Nur communities, the focus of his sermons was mostly the basic concepts of faith and Islam, such as oneness of God, Prophethood and the life of Prophet Muhammad, prayers, fasting etc. He did not handle Sufism as a distinct discipline, but the content of his sermons included examples from the lives of earlier ascetic. Sufi conceptualization became much more noticeable in his sermons resumed in 1986. In these sermons which lasted until 1992, rather than the basic concepts of faith, Gülen focused on the spiritual characteristics that an ideal Muslim community should carry. Besides portraying the heroic instances from the lives of Prophet Muhammad and his companions, he presented even more examples from the lives of early Sufis. The themes were more spiritual: love of God and his Prophet, the aspects of the spirit and the heart, piety, hope vs. despair, sacred sorrow, culture of conscience, etc.

The community's monthly magazine *Sizinti*, which is the first publication established by the community did not include any article focused on Sufism until October 1990, when Gülen wrote the first of the series of articles under the general title of “On the Emerald

Hills of the Heart”. These articles were, and are still, published in the middle pages of the magazine on a higher quality paper and with an attractive design that distinguishes them from the rest of the magazine. When these articles make up enough volume the community’s press house publishes them under the title *The Emerald Hills of the Heart*, the third volume of which to be published in 2006.

Since October 1990, every month Gülen has been focusing on a different concept in Sufi terminology. In each one of these articles, more often than not he commences with a generic definition of a concept and explains its meaning in Sufism. He always lists the relevant Quranic verses and sayings of the Prophet. Then he discusses various interpretations of the concept by different Sufi scholars, and elaborates on different stages or aspects of it. Gülen enriches his articles with couplets from famous Sufi poets, most frequently from Rumi, Mehmed Lutfi, and Yunus Emre. Where possible he concludes his articles with a message to the contemporary Muslims and describes how the concept should be understood and practiced in today’s daily life.

In his writings on Sufi concepts, Gülen does not create new approaches nor does he bring new definitions to concepts already discussed in detail by earlier Sufi scholar. Rather Gülen benefits from certain scholars to present a reasonable and practical Sufi way to his followers. Thus I think it is significant to understand Gülen’s choices of views and the earlier scholars that he most refers to. By comparing his views to the approaches of earlier scholar it is possible to situate Gülen within the long historical Sufi tradition. Therefore I will focus on selected concepts and endeavor to find out Gülen’s stance within Sufism.

Gülen titled his first Sufi article in *Sizinti Hal*, “state”. When published in the first volume of *The Emerald Hills of the Heart* it appeared as *Hal-Makam* (State-Station). In this short piece Gülen describes state and compares it with station to present how they are understood within Sufism. These spiritual states and stations are persistently dealt with by all Sufi treatises because of “the fundamental significance of the knowledge of spiritual states for anyone who aspires to pass through them and beyond them to the Divine Presence” (Nasr, 1972, p. 68). On this fundamental issue Gülen’s approach is in line with the classical descriptions made by earlier authorities of Sufism. For Gülen state is the disciple’s experience and consciousness of the divine feelings that appear in the heart beyond his will, and station is the continuity and stability of these feelings through the disciple’s efforts and striving. This definition is very much in line with Qushayri’s description of state in his famous *Risale*: “States are gifts of God while stations are gained by effort. States are from God’s generosity, but stations take place with efforts and striving” (Kuseyri, 1978, p. 150). Jurjani too emphasizes this point: “The states are gifts from God while the stations are acquired” (Jurjani, p.56). Another significant aspect of state that Gülen mentions is its passing nature. While states are like waves that constantly come and go, appear and disappear, stations are unwavering and stable. Qushayri also mentions the argument of some Sufis, such as Muhasibi, that state is not passing but stable and he supports this argument (Muhasibi, p.109). However the overall tendency among the Sufis to define station as passing is obvious and Hujviri presents a detailed description of this tendency (Hucviri, 1982, p. 290). Gazali too makes this distinction

between station and state: “When an attribute settles and becomes stable it is called state, but when it quickly passes it is called station” (Gazali, 1974, V. IV, p. 260). Thus on the issue of station Gülen follows the mainstream Sufi position.

Another issue which is a dividing line among the Sufi scholars is *sekr* (mystical intoxication, drunkenness) and *sahv* (mystical sobriety). Gülen states that in Sufi terminology intoxication is when the wayfarer loses himself in ecstasy upon experiencing divine rays (Gülen, Kalbin Zumrut Tepeleri, Sekr-Sahv). On the other hand sobriety is the wayfarer’s coming back to his/her senses from the state of intoxication. Gülen calls intoxication a “station”, thus it cannot be reached by the will of wayfarer, but it is only a bounty of God. While sobriety is a “state” in which the wayfarer strives to stay. Gülen argues that sobriety should be preferred to intoxication, which is not a path as stable and healthy as sobriety. Preferring intoxication or sobriety has been a major dividing line among the Sufis. Bayezid Bistami and his followers favored intoxication because it eliminates human attributes, while Junayd of Baghdad and his followers considered sobriety as the highest and preferable state (Shimmel, 1975, p. 58). Although Gülen prefers sobriety, he does not criticize being in the station of intoxication. In fact he defends this station against those who argue that it is venerating a concept which is denounced by Islam. Gülen argues that it is an inevitable station which is not controlled by the wayfarer but a gift of God. Therefore Gülen is tolerant towards “theopatic locutions”, the so-called *shathiyyat*, in which the mystic utters words that he should not say, such as Hallaj’s “I am the Truth (God)” or Bayazid’s “Praise be to Me!”. For Gülen in a state of mystical ecstasy only prophetic foresight and will could prevent such lapses (Gülen, 2001, Sekr-Sahv). Otherwise it is natural that the Sufi might overflow at times when he is intoxicated with the rays of divine love. He also mentions that such mistaken utterances should not be taken at face value and should be interpreted within the limits of Quran and Sunnah (Gülen, 2001, Fena Fillah).

Gülen shows the same tolerance towards the adherents of *vahdet-i vücud* or unity of Being. He argues that the idea of unity of Being and the utterances related with it are consequences of a certain mystical station, of a state of ecstasy, therefore tolerable. If this thought is formulized in a sober way as a philosophy, and takes the shape of *vahdet-i mevcud*, unity of existence, then it is unacceptable (Gülen, 2001, Vücut).

One characteristic of Gülen’s Sufism is the emphasis on following the Quran and the Sunna. In each one of his articles he presents Quranic verses and Hadiths relevant to the topic to support his argument. He constantly stresses the significance of taking the Quran and Sunna as the only criterion in deciding the reliability of any argument (Gülen, 1998, Seyr-u Süluk). For him the knowledge of Quran and Sunna is essential for any progress on the Sufi path. Therefore he prefers sobriety to drunkenness, because the wayfarer should be awake in all stations and states to stay away from any deviation from the path of the Quran and Sunna.

Another characteristic of Gülen’s approach to Sufism is his tolerance on issues most criticized by orthodox Muslims. Especially salafis and wahhabis criticize Sufism harshly because of the seemingly deviations from the basic teachings of Islam. The erroneous

utterances of Sufis in ecstatic stations are unacceptable for such Muslims. Even El-Cevziyye, who wrote one of the most significant treatises on Sufism, harshly criticized the adherents of “unity of Being” and even accused some of them of infidelity (El-Cevziyye, 1985, p. 159). Ibn Cevziyye was a student of Ibn Teymiyya, who is known as the father of Salafiyya, and therefore he did not show any tolerance for any deviation from Quranic principles. Gülen, on the other hand, is more lenient towards such errors only if they were consequences of mystical ecstasy.

I argue that Gülen’s most significant contribution to the Sufi literature is his emphasis on action. For Gülen action is as vital as belief and belief can be sustainable only if it is supported with action. Action is an inseparable aspect of Sufism and contemporary Muslims who are willing to live according to the principles of Sufism should be actively involved in the community, share his/her experience with others, strive to help others and bring peace to the community. In his article on *Çile*, Suffering, Gülen first describes in detail the approach of earlier Sufi scholars, that is the dervish’s period of retirement and abstention from all worldly deeds, and fasting which lasts forty days. In the last section of his article, Gülen adds his own understanding and states:

“In fact, instead of the troublesome disciplining of the self which includes retirement, and full devotion to worship, abstention from all comfort and wishing for torment, *çile*, for the inheritors of the Prophetic mission, comprises of being with God (while being) among the people, representing Islam in the best way, and thus initiating religious feelings in others, developing feelings of belief in everyone; this is the way of the Sahabi, companions of the Prophet” (Gülen, 2001, *Çile*).

In one of his recent writings, at the end of a detailed discussion of *kabz* vs. *bast* (strain/spiritual pressure vs. spiritual expansion/relief) he concludes the issue with the following statements: “Today there is need for people who are sensitive enough to be burnt with the fire that falls anywhere in the world. There is need for people who will feel fire in his heart about an oppressed child in some forgotten part of the world” (Gülen, 2002).

Thus Gülen does not foresee a Sufi life as an ascetic, living on the mountains. Today’s ideal Sufi should live among the people and manage to be with God, should strive in the way of God and at the same time represent Islam in the best way.

To conclude, Gülen Sufi approach emphasizes the central role of Quran and Sunna, it has a tolerant and non-rigid style, and it emphasizes activism. This approach can bring about a rapprochement between the Sufi Muslims and the salafi tradition. At the same time this approach could reinvigorate dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims. Thus, Gülen lives as an ascetic, leads his community to the activism of the Prophet and His companions, and draws the framework of a heightened level of spirituality.

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ⁱ Naming the community that acts according to Gulen’s views has proven to be problematic. Naming this community “Nurcu” to refer to the influence of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi is not distinctive enough for there are other smaller communities which more strictly follow the teachings of Said Nursi and who do not agree with Gulen on many of his initiatives, such as establishing a media network and his educational activities. Another word used to identify this community, “Fethullahçılar” (literally “Fethullahists”), is used in a derogatory way and means to label the community as having a strictly ideological and dogmatic attachment to Gulen. Gulen himself has recently started to refer to this movement as “volunteers’ movement”. I find “the Gulen community” the most accurate name.

ⁱⁱ Defining the Gulen community and drawing its borders has also proven to be quite problematic. Not indulging in presenting here the wrong definitions and in any theoretical discussions of “community”, I would define the Gulen community as the group of individuals who accept and internalize the teachings of Fethullah Gulen in totality, and who strive to spread his views and to act accordingly. Thus while some of the professionals, such as teachers, working in the community’s institutions might not be considered members of the community if they do not agree with Gulen’s views, many who are not institutionally attached to the community but entirely accept Gulen’s views and support the community by donations or personal efforts could be considered as members of the community.

ⁱⁱⁱ Enes Ergene’s recent book on the Gulen community and his Introduction to the forthcoming third volume of the Emerald Hills of the Heart by Fethullah Gulen includes some analysis of Gulen’s Sufi aspect. Focusing on the Sufi aspect of Gulen should not mean that Gulen is only a Sufi. While his activist aspect is much more visible, his expertise in other Islamic sciences is evident and needs thorough analysis. However his Sufi aspect is the most convenient to study and analyze, especially because of his books on Sufism.

^{iv} Sufism is the English translation of *tasawwuf* referring to mysticism in Islam. Thus, non-Muslim mystics should not be called Sufis, and expressions such as Islamic Sufism are problematic since Sufism is Islamic mysticism.

^v In Turkish “şuuraltı müktesebatı”. Gulen utilized this concept in his interview with Mehmet Gundem published in the daily *Milliyet*. It means the Risale-i Nur has quite a strong influence on Gulen’s educational and intellectual background. Thus Gulen may employ ideas from Risale-i Nur unintentionally.