

Dr. B. Jill Carroll
Summer 2006
Gulen conference paper

Gulen in Dialogue:
Fethullah Gulen's Ideas in the Context of the Larger Humanities

ABSTRACT

An increasing amount of recent research places Gulen's thought in the context of Sufism, the Nursi movement, Turkish Islam, Islam in general, and in the intellectual climate and culture of interfaith dialogue. What has yet to be done is to place Gulen's ideas into the much larger context of general humanistic discourse. Humanism is, among other things, any philosophy, theology or viewpoint that prioritizes human flourishing, development, achievement, beauty, responsibility, and value. Many varieties of humanism have existed for millenia in all parts of the world. These varieties include, but are certainly not limited to, the ideas and writings of: Confucius; the classical Greeks including Socrates, Plato and Aristotle; many medieval theologians and philosophers; Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke, Kant, and Hume; modernist thinkers like Nietzsche and Mill; existentialist scholars such as Jean Paul Sartre; and others. While none of these writers approach their humanistic work from an Islamic perspective, a close look at their work and the ideas of Gulen indicate broad themes of resonance. Specifically, Gulen and several of these other humanistic thinkers, in turn, concern themselves with the importance of education in both skill and virtue, the necessity of freedom in the domain of conscience, the moral value of human dignity to all just and decent society, the individual cultivation of virtues as central to both a happy life and a truly civil society, and the responsibility and possibility of creating an ever progressing humanity for the future. This paper briefly will review two of these topics as they appear in the works of Gulen, Kant and Mill in order to broaden the parameters of the dialogue for which Gulen has become so famous.

Introduction:

This paper is a summary of part of a book length work of the same title currently in progress. The goal of this paper is to explain the basic premise of the book, and then to articulate the analyses found in two of the major chapters of the book. Readers (or listeners, in the case of the conference session) are encouraged to read the entire book for detailed quotes and more in-depth development of the analyses presented here; this paper will provide only a survey of the main points of two sections of the book, and a sense of the general direction of the arguments I have developed.

My task in the book is to place the ideas of Fethullah Gulen into the context of the larger humanities. Specifically, I seek to create a textual dialogue between printed versions of selected articles, sermons or speeches by Gulen, on the one hand, and the texts of selected

thinkers, writers, philosophers or theorists from general humanities discourse, on the other. These individuals from the humanities include: Confucius, Plato, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, and Jean Paul Sartre. My conviction in this paper (and in the book) is that the work of both Gulen and these humanistic thinkers hovers around central issues of human existence. In other words, these thinkers are concerned with basic questions about human life, the state, and morality. Moreover, they reach similar conclusions regarding many of these issues and questions after deliberating about them from within their own traditions and cultural contexts.

In claiming similarity here, I am not asserting "sameness". These thinkers come from a vast diversity of backgrounds, time periods, cultural/national contexts, religious/spiritual traditions and more. They differ from each other in significant ways, to the point that in certain passages of their respective work, they denounce each other (in the case of the more recent writers) or, one could imagine, they would denounce each other on many points if they were in a real dialogue (not merely a "constructed" one). Gulen critiques outright Sartre, existentialists, and other "atheists" many times throughout his work. Mill argues for a kind of freedom that Plato would find abhorrent in his ideal republic; conversely, Mill probably would find Plato's ideal republic an oppressive tyranny in most ways. Sartre's work blasts any notion of a "heaven of ideals", utterly universal and transcendent, whether it be articulated by Plato, Kant or Gulen. Confucius, coming from a sixth century Chinese perspective, has little in common with ideas from Western Enlightenment or post-Enlightenment thinkers like Kant or Mill.

Dialogue between people with vastly different worldviews, however, is what interests me. Moreover, I believe that such dialogue is vital in today's world where globalization, mass communications and technology have pushed individuals and groups of individuals together in ways never before seen in human history. People living in the 21st century interact with and are impacted by other people and groups very different from them more than ever before. We increasingly are confronted by people and groups whose worldviews are utterly different from ours – and these people are our neighbors, co-workers, schoolmates of our children, our in-laws, our clients, our employers, and more. Often, we may try to minimize our contact with these "others" so that we do not have to feel the "stretch" that their very existence requires of us. We may isolate ourselves and craft the arc of our lives into familiar orbits of people who look, think, speak, believe and pray like us. But, such isolation or minimizing of difference is not workable over time – not now, with our weapons of mass destruction, our increased capability to not only end millions of lives, but to end life itself, or life as we know it. In today's world, we must develop the capacity to dialogue and create relatedness with people vastly different from us. Part of that project involves finding ideas, beliefs, purposes, projects, etc. on which we can achieve resonance with each other. Not sameness, but resonance. That is, similar just enough that, for a certain length down the road, we can hold hands as fellow travelers in this life all the while mindful of our differences in myriad ways.

Gulen, in his career as an official imam in Turkey and as an inspirational scholar and teacher to nearly a generation of young people throughout Turkey and beyond, has championed dialogue as a necessary commitment and activity in the contemporary world. Therefore, it is appropriate to place Gulen, via his texts, "in dialogue" with other thinkers and writers coming from very different perspectives than his. Such a project models for us as readers a way of becoming comfortable with difference. More importantly, though, such a dialogue among individuals renowned for their knowledge and gifts can help all of us who care about such things to focus more deeply on the enduringly great issues of human life. While human lives in their particularities change era to era, the deep nature of human life – and the questioning and anxiety it provokes – has not changed. We ask today the same questions as

our ancestors about the meaning of existence, the value of human life, how we are to set up society and what the limits of freedom are. My hope is that this mock dialogue between Gulen and the others listed above provides an opportunity for those of us today, on whose shoulders the future rests, to take seriously our charge to create ourselves, society and the world according to the highest and best possible ideals.

I have organized the dialogues between Gulen and other humanistic thinkers around five major themes that capture central issues and concerns about human life in the world.¹ These themes are:

- Inherent human value and moral dignity
- Freedom of Thought
- Individual cultivation of virtue
- Importance of Education
- Human Responsibility

These themes are well-known to any student of general humanistic discourse, whether from the ancient period or the modern, whether from Europe, Asia or Africa, whether from a religious or secular worldview. In each theme, I have identified a primary thinker to pair with Gulen in a textual dialogue. I have chosen the primary thinkers based on the resonance their particular expression of the specific theme has with Gulen's expression of that same theme from within his Islamic perspective. I could have chosen other humanists and fared just as well probably, in terms of finding powerful expression of classic humanistic ideas and resonance with Gulen. I chose the ones below because I felt they were particularly adept in their expression and, frankly, because of my deep admiration and respect for their work having taught their ideas in college classrooms now for 15 years.

In the remaining pages of this paper, I develop the first two themes listed above as Gulen, Kant and Mill address them in their respective works. These sections, as I indicated earlier, are shortened versions of the chapters of the book. In shortened form, however, they provide examples of the type of "conversations" I wish to construct between Gulen and other humanistic thinkers. Moreover, these conversations discuss themes which I believe are of the utmost importance for our scholarly and civic consideration.

Theme #1: Inherent Human Value and Moral Dignity

The very word "humanism" places the human – the individual, the group of individuals, the species, the form of being – in the center of its concerns. Therefore, humanism's long claim is that human life in general, and human lives in particular, have some form of inherent human value. Moreover, respect for this inherent human value, in many humanistic systems, forms the starting point or grounding for fundamental morality. In my view, no one articulates this more powerfully and coherently than 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. In his *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, first published in 1785, Kant attempts to articulate

¹ I categorize Gulen as a humanistic thinker despite the fact that he perhaps would reject the term for himself. In much of his work he differentiates Western humanism from the vision of Islam, saying the former is a mere ideology or philosophy while the latter is divinely inspired. I view Gulen as an Islamic humanist because Islam, in his iteration of it, is a comprehensive worldview for all of human life and existence. The focus on the human defines both Islam, and Gulen, as humanistic in the broadest possible sense.

“the supreme principle of morality.”² He intends to articulate this principle in completely rational, not empirical, terms in order to prevent moral actions from being dependent on circumstances, human feelings, whims or conditions. Time and space here do not suffice to consider the merits of Kant’s method or conclusions, or to adequately summarize the bulk of his arguments in this work. Therefore, I will simply summarize those points most relevant to his discussion of human beings as ends in themselves and, as such, possessors of inherent value that must not be maligned.

Kant’s argument in the *Grounding* centers on three core concepts: reason, will, and duty. In short, he argues that human beings differ from animals in that, unlike animals, humans have the capacity of reason. Reason is given to us by nature not to make us happy, or to help us secure our welfare or preservation; on the contrary, Kant says, instinct alone in us would provide for those things much better than reason, as it does in animals. Instead, reason’s function in us is to develop the will. The will, particularly a good will, is indispensable to any notion of morality. Nothing good is even possible without a good will, regardless of whatever other talents or capacities a person may possess. The good will is good in itself, and is indispensable for moral action. Moreover, Kant argues, the good will is identified chiefly by the ability to act from duty alone and not according to any circumstances or sentiment. Kant spends most of his treatise explaining these three core concepts of reason, will and duty, and their operation in a metaphysics of morals from which human beings can codify a supreme principle of morality to guide all deliberations and actions. This supreme principle is called the categorical imperative, which takes several forms in the treatise, the most common being “I should never act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law.”³

For Kant, then, humans possess reason in order to develop in themselves a good will that will act from a sense of duty to the moral law regardless of circumstances, sentiment, whim or personal advantage. Humans, as rational beings, are possessors in their nature of the very groundings of morality and, as such, have inherent value. Outside of human beings as rational agents, there is no practical notion of the moral good, since there is nothing that can determine it rationally and apply it universally other than human beings. Kant argues that human beings – as human – possess inherent value, not market value. Human value is not negotiable; it is not a thing bought or sold, or something relative in value depending on market conditions. Kant’s formulation of human being allows the human disposition to “be recognized as dignity and puts it infinitely beyond all price, with which it cannot in the least be brought into competition or comparison without, as it were, violating its sanctity.”⁴ He goes to say “[r]ational nature is distinguished from the rest of nature by the fact that it sets itself an end.”⁵ Therefore, another dimension of the categorical imperative is that “a rational being himself must be made the ground for all maxims of actions and must thus be used never merely as means but as the supreme limiting condition in the use of all means, i.e., always at the same time as an end.”⁶

² Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, third edition. Trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993): 5.

³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

Human beings are ends in themselves, not merely a means to someone else's end. They cannot be used only as a tool to secure another's goal, agenda or ideology. While humans may be employed in those efforts, they cannot be treated as only or merely employees of a project. They are always at the same time an end in themselves, bearers of inherent value and dignity, regardless of any advantage or benefit they provide to anyone else's projects or agendas.

The Western Enlightenment, of which Kant was a part, championed these notions of inherent human dignity, which brought about radical societal changes in the 18th century and beyond. Of course, these ideas are not unique to the Western Enlightenment; thinkers and writers from many parts of the world articulate such notions from within their own cultural, religious, or philosophical rubrics. Islamic scholars, for example, for centuries and from within many parts of the world, have interpreted the Quran as expressing such notions about inherent human value and moral dignity. Gulen's work is an example of Islamic scholarship that emphasizes the Quranic "voice" insisting upon the distinct beauty and worth of human beings. Gulen repeatedly references and expositis such portions of the Quran when fielding questions about jihad, violence, terror, and respect for human life in general (not just Muslim life). In these sections of his work, Gulen's resonance with the ideas of Kant become clear, although they most certainly develop their respective expressions of inherent human value and moral dignity from entirely different perspectives.

Gulen, in a piece entitled "Human Beings and Their Nature," speaks of the transcendent value of human beings. He begins the piece with an extravagant statement:

Humans, the greatest mirror of the names, attributes and deeds of God, are a shining mirror, a marvelous fruit of life, a source for the whole universe, a sea that appears to be a tiny drop, a sun formed as a humble seed, a great melody in spite of their insignificant physical positions, and the source for existence all contained within a small body. Humans carry a holy secret that makes them equal to the entire universe with all their wealth of character; a wealth that can be developed to excellence.⁷

He continues by claiming that "[a]ll of existence becomes a legible book only with their [human] understanding and foresight . . . humans – together with everything in and around them – . . . are the royal witnesses of their Master."⁸ He finishes this line of thinking in the section by saying "[w]hen this entire boundless universe, with all of its riches, components, and history, is connected to humanity it becomes clear why the value of humankind transcends all . . . According to Islam, humans are superior merely because they are humans"⁹ So, in these passages, Gulen claims the greatest, most superior value for human beings because of their capacity as witnesses and interpreters of the universe. As such witnesses, they are the mirrors of God, the reflectors of the divine's book of the universe. Without them, the universe is not known, nor is there anyone to know it.

In another piece, Gulen reiterates that human beings are the center and meaning of the universe and that, as such, they possess value higher even than angels. Humans, through their activities and understandings give life its essence:

⁷ Fethullah Gulen, "Human Beings and Their Nature" *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, Ed. M. Enes Ergene (New Jersey: The Light Publishing, 2004), 112.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

Taking into account all the honor that has been granted to humanity, compared with all the rest of creation, humanity must be seen as the voice that expresses the nature of things, the nature of events and, of course, the nature of the All-Powerful One Who is behind everything, as well as being understood as a heart that encompasses all the universes. With human beings, creation has found its interpreter and matter has been distilled through the cognition of people, finding its spiritual meaning. The monitoring of things is an ability peculiar to human beings, their being able to read and interpret the book of the universe is a privilege, and their attribution of everything to the Creator is an exceptional blessing. Their quiet introspection is contemplation, their speech is wisdom, and their conclusive interpretation of all things is love.¹⁰

So, whereas Kant argues for the inherent value of human beings based on their being rational agents through whom the moral law comes into practical being in the world, Gulen argues for the value of human beings based on their position as the only agents through whom God's book of creation can be known and the wonders of existence expressed. In both instances, human beings – as individuals and as groups – are indispensable to fundamental constituents of existence, in one case morality, in the other all knowledge, wisdom and love.

Moreover, Gulen, like Kant takes human value and dignity as the basis for defining legitimate and illegitimate behaviors toward people in society. In a piece addressing human rights in Islam, he argues that Islam has the highest conception of universal human rights and that it has not been surpassed by any other religion, system or commission. He says, "Islam accepts the killing of one person as if all of humanity had been killed, for the murder of one person allows the idea that any person can be killed."¹¹ Elsewhere, he says that in the Islamic view:

A human being, be they man or woman, young or old, white or black, is respected, protected and inviolate. Their belongings cannot be taken away, nor can their chastity be touched. They cannot be driven out of their native land, and their independence cannot be denied. They cannot be prevented from living in accordance with their principles, either. Moreover, they are prohibited from committing such crimes against others as well. They do not have the right to inflict harm on this gift [of humanity] that is presented to them by God, for they only are in temporary possession of this bounty; God is the true owner of everything . . . Humans are to defend and keep safe this gift. It is holy for them; they will not harm it, nor allow it to come to any harm. When necessary they will fight for it and die for it.¹²

Clearly, Gulen echoes the spirit of Kantian analysis despite coming from a completely different framework, namely, the religio-philosophical worldview of Islam. The inherent value, even holiness, of humanity demands universal protection of it and categorically forbids any

¹⁰ Fethullah Gulen, "The Inner Profundity of Humankind" *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*. Ed. M. Enes Ergene. (New Jersey: The Light Publishing, 2004), 117.

¹¹ Fethullah Gulen, "Human Rights in Islam," *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, Ed. M. Enes Ergene (New Jersey: The Light Publishing, 2004), 169. Gulen qualifies this statement in a way common to most religious and philosophical thinkers, namely, that it perhaps is justified to kill those who are killing others, those trying to destroy society, etc. In these instances, the killing is not murder; it is punishment or self-defense.

¹² "Human Beings and Their Nature," 114.

transgression of it. For both Kant and Gulen, humanity as a form mode of being and human beings and individuals are literally awe-inspiring.

Claims of the inherent value of moral dignity of human beings, whether made by thinkers of the Western Enlightenment, by Islamic scholars interpreting the Quran, or by others from any tradition whatsoever, are vital in today's world. The claims themselves accomplish nothing. When human beings commit themselves, however, to such claims and determine their actions by such claims, culture and society becomes less savage, bloody and brute. History shows us that societies that keep inherent human value at the forefront of their political and cultural existence allow a measure of peace and stability for all residents and citizens. When those same societies fall into persecutions and genocides, most often it is because they have abandoned the principles of inherent human value and moral dignity. May we, with Gulen and Kant, renew ourselves to these claims so as to avoid even greater atrocities than we have already committed in the human family.

Theme #2 – Freedom of Thought

Humanistic thinking, especially in its modern forms, places freedom of thought and expression of ideas as a central plank of its platform, both philosophically and socio-politically. Free press, free and peaceful public protest, the right to assemble and other such institutions all stem from the ideal of freedom articulated in modern humanisms. Philosophically, the ideal of freedom extends back to the ancient world as philosophers challenged themselves and others with all manner of ideas, and sat debating them in the marketplace with anyone who would listen. Some of the greatest of our classical learning in the West comes from these philosophers who, even if put to death or exiled for their ideas eventually, allowed themselves to think and speak freely, refusing to shackle their minds and voices even when the State commanded it.

In the modern West, several philosophers and writers powerfully express this ideal of freedom. In my view, however, none expresses this ideal more exhaustively and more radically than 19th century British social and political theorist John Stuart Mill. In this section, I place Mill into a dialogue with Gulen around the ideal of freedom of thought. Mill and Gulen are vastly different from each other in significant ways. The kind of freedoms Mill would allow in society probably far exceed those with which Gulen would be comfortable. To the extent that each of them articulate a social vision, their respective "societies" would not resemble each other in many ways. On the other hand, both societies, at least theoretically, would be tolerant in matters of religious belief and practice, and both would allow vigorous inquiry and debate on issues related to truth in most, perhaps all, domains. These similarities between their respective "societies" exist because of their common commitment to the ideal of freedom, especially in matters of thought and conscience.

Mill is perhaps most famous for Utilitarianism, his work of ethical philosophy. I, however, wish to focus on another of his important works, *On Liberty*, published in 1859. In this text, Mill sets his project as an articulation of social or civil liberty, that is, "the nature and limits of the power than can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual."¹³ He explains that a recent previous generation in the West concerned itself with the tyranny of magistrates and, therefore, developed representative forms of government that threw off the despotic powers of divine right monarchs and the like. He and his generation are the

¹³ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, A Norton Critical Edition. Ed. Alan Ryan (New York; W. W. Norton, 1997), 41.

beneficiaries of that struggle and, for the most part, no longer struggle against that kind of tyranny.

Rather, Mill asserts, the current generation, that is, his generation in 19th century Britain, must fight another kind of tyranny – the tyranny of the majority. Mills says:

Protection, therefore, against the tyranny of the magistrate is not enough; there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them; to fetter the development, and, if possible, prevent the formation, of any individuality not in harmony with its ways, and compels all character to fashion themselves upon the model of its own. There is a limit to the legitimate interference of collective opinion with individual independence: and to find that limit, and maintain it against encroachment, is as indispensable to a good condition of human affairs, as protection against political despotism.¹⁴

In other words, Mill detects a subtle tyranny that exists in society even when representative government is in place. This tyranny is a social or civil tyranny, a pressure that society exerts on its members to conform to “normal” beliefs and practices in all parts of life simply because those are the “norm” and are practiced by the majority of people in the society. Therefore, so the logic goes, everyone should “tow the line”, or be forced to do so. Mill rejects this tyranny and sets about to determine the principle by which we can determine the legitimate interference of the state or societal agents with an individual’s freedom, since mostly these determinations are made based purely on personal preference or custom. He states his principle of civic freedom early in the essay:

...[T]hat the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant ... Over himself, over his body and mind, the individual is sovereign.¹⁵

This is a radical principle of freedom. It makes direct and measurable harm nearly the only legitimate grounds on which the state or civil authorities can interfere with an individual’s actions. While this principle is undoubtedly far too liberal for Gulen, resonance does exist between Gulen and Mill on this idea of freedom, particularly in the domain of thought and discussion, to which Mill devotes an entire chapter in his essay.¹⁶

Mill unequivocally supports freedom of thought and discussion, even if the ideas expressed and discussed in society end up being false. He says assertions made to the community for consideration are either true, false or somewhere in between – a partial truth/partial falsehood. Regardless, societies’ best interests are served when they allow free expression and discussion of ideas. If the idea is true, people will gain a fresh appreciation for its truth by discussing it, revisiting the arguments for its truth, and defending it against its

¹⁴ Ibid., 44.

¹⁵ Ibid., 48.

¹⁶ Islam, like many religious philosophies, prohibits suicide and other similar actions of self-harm on the grounds that one’s body or self is a gift from God, or is not one’s own to harm.

detractors. In this way, the true ideas remain alive and vibrant for people instead of becoming stale and dormant from simply being accepted as true for generations. If the idea is false, society benefits from the public discussion again. Evidence of its falsehood are reviewed or made clear to everyone involved and the truth is embraced more fully than before. Most likely, Mill says, the idea expressed will be a mixture of truth and falsehood. Truly, no one has the full truth about anything; human minds cannot conceive truth in its entirety about anything because we do not know things in themselves, but only our positional perceptions of things. Therefore, all ideas should be expressed freely in society so that partial truths can be strengthened into fuller truths through the mechanism of civil engagement and debate.

The societal benefits of free thought and discussion are clear enough. But, Mill goes deeper into the actual impact that free thought has on individuals who make up society. Societies most often ban free thought and discussion in an effort to stop heresy, but such bans do not impact the heretics as much as they do everyone else. Mill says:

The greatest harm done is to those who are not heretics, and whose whole mental development is cramped, and their reason cowed, by the fear of heresy. Who can compute what the world loses in the multitude of promising intellects combined with timid characters, who dare not follow out any bold, vigorous, independent train of thought, lest it should land them in something which would admit of being considered irreligious or immoral?¹⁷

Mill's point here is that overweening fears of heresy stamp out not only heretics, but also those who have bold, fresh new ideas to share about anything, including received traditions, even those considered sacred. When the threat of punishment for heresy is so strong in a society, or when a society threatens civil penalties on those who express ideas other than those expressly allowed by the civic "authorities", all of society suffers. Mental strength comes with practice and challenge. A society that clamps down on thought and discussion becomes weak and atrophied. Mill continues:

No one can be a great thinker who does not recognize, that as a thinker it is his first duty to follow his intellect to whatever conclusions it may lead. Truth gains more even by the errors of one who, with due study and preparation, thinks for himself, than by the true opinions of those who only hold them because they do not suffer themselves to think.¹⁸

Again, true ideas become stagnant and weak when not regularly challenged in debate and discussion. Those who espouse true ideas do not hold those truths honestly if they have not allowed themselves to think freely, which may mean questioning long-held truths. Mill claims, however, that the point is not merely to create individual thinkers. He says:

Not that it is solely, or chiefly, to form great thinkers, that freedom of thinking is required. On the contrary, it is as much and even more indispensable to enable average human beings to attain the mental stature which they are capable of. There have been, and may again be, great individual thinkers in the general

¹⁷ Ibid., 67.

¹⁸ Ibid., 67.

atmosphere of mental slavery. But there never has been, nor ever will be, in that atmosphere an intellectually active people.¹⁹

Here we see Mill articulating the ideal of freedom for the most humanistic of reasons in addition to the utilitarian. Here, also, we can bring Gulen into the discussion, for he most often speaks of the ideal of freedom in both humanistic and utilitarian terms. Gulen speaks often in his work of freedom from tyranny. In many contexts, he is referring to the tyrannies various groups of Muslims have endured in recent years under powers of secularism and colonialism. In other contexts, however, he speaks in more universal terms about the freedom each individual has by virtue of being human. He even echoes Mill's stated principle of liberty when he asserts that "[f]reedom allows people to do whatever they want, provided that they do not harm others and that they remain wholly devoted to the truth."²⁰ The last phrase – "that they remain wholly devoted to the truth" – might cause Mill some pause at first, but he might argue that even those lost in or committed to falsehoods are wholly devoted to truth; they are just wrong about the truth. To speak or act in a way not "wholly devoted to truth" could include, for Mill and Gulen both, things like slander, libel or yelling "fire" in a crowded theater when there is no fire.

Gulen's championing of tolerance is inconceivable without a commitment to freedom of thought and discussion, mainly because tolerance is unnecessary if freedom of thought, discussion, personal choices, etc. are not allowed. Tolerance is a virtue precisely because people are free and will choose different beliefs, religion and pursuits. Gulen makes this point many times, often in discussions of democracy alone, or democracy and Islam – between which he sees no incompatibility whatsoever. In a piece on forgiveness, Gulen links tolerance and democracy via the concept of freedom. "Democracy is a system", he says "that gives everyone who is under its wing the opportunity to live and express their own feelings and thoughts. Tolerance comprises an important dimension of this. In fact, it can be said that democracy is out of the question in a place where tolerance does not exist."²¹

Such statements, however, do not carry the radical edge of Mill's claims about the necessity of freedom and the protection people need from social tyranny. Only when Gulen expounds his notions of the ideal human beings, or the "inheritors of the earth" as he calls them in one work, do we see not only the deep commitment to freedom, but also the rationale for such a commitment – a truly humanistic rationale. In *The Statue of our Souls*, he lays out a broad vision for a society – even a world - led by individuals of spiritual, moral and intellectual excellence. He called these people "inheritors of the Earth" and goes into some depth in describing their characters and attributes.²² In his enumeration of their central traits, the fifth trait he identifies as "being able to think freely and being respectful to freedom of thought."²³ He continues:

¹⁹ Ibid., 67.

²⁰ M. Fethullah Gulen, *Pearls of Wisdom* vol. 1. Trans. Ali Unal (New Jersey; The Light Publishing), 55.

²¹ M. Fethullah Gulen, "Forgiveness, Tolerance and Dialogue" *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*. Ed. M. Enes Ergene. (New Jersey: The Light Publishing, 2004), 44.

²² M. Fethullah Gulen, *The Statue of Our Souls*. Trans. Muhammed Cetin (New Jersey; The Light Publishing, 2005), 5-10, 31-42. I will discuss this concept of "inheritors of the earth" as well as Gulen's social vision in more depth in a later section.

²³ Ibid., 38.

Being free and enjoying freedom are a significant depth of human willpower and a mysterious door through which man may set forth in to the secrets of the self. One unable to set forth into that depth and unable to pass through that door can hardly be called human.²⁴

So, freedom of thought is central to being human, to humanity itself. Without freedom of thought, not only as a social or political principle, but also as an ability in oneself, one cannot really be called a human being. In other words, one does not reach human capacity without freedom of thought. Gulen elaborates:

In circumstances on which restrictions have been imposed on reading, thinking, feeling and living, it is impossible to retain one's human faculties, let alone achieve renewal and progress. In such a situation it is quite difficult to maintain even the level of a plain and common man, let alone to raise great personalities who leap with the spirit of renewal and reform, and whose eyes are on infinity. In such conditions there exist only weak characters who experience deviations in their personalities and men of sluggish souls and paralyzed senses.²⁵

Human development and, by extension, societal development and growth – all reform and progress – depend on freedom of thought and living. A society without such freedom does not nurture the people of spirit and vision that lead it forward into new dimensions. Even worse, perhaps, is that it does not nurture common people to attain their fullest human capacities. Here, Gulen echoes Mill in championing freedom for its usefulness to society and for its humanistic value. Indeed, the former is rooted in the latter; that is, freedom is beneficial to society because of the “work” it does in creating and developing human beings as individuals. As we saw in the previous section, human beings are of the highest value. It follows, then, that developing human capacity, or human “being-ness”, is of the highest value as well.

Gulen laments the recent history of Turkey and other Muslim regions where the populations have undergone, and sometimes continue to endure, societal structures in which freedom of thought and learning are forbidden either through outright censure, or through dominant state sponsored ideologies. Regarding the world of Muslim learning in particular, he speaks of a vibrant past of scholarship and learning that was open to different fields of knowledge and scientific inquiry. That spirit of scholarship, however, gave way to narrowness and rote memorization of approved works. At that point, all human potential began its slow decay, easy prey for opportunistic tyrants, ideologues and colonialists.

He longs for a renewal among Muslims so that Islamic civilization can again take a place at the helm of global leadership, as it did in past centuries when much of what constituted “civilization” came from the Islamic world. In order for that to happen, he says,

... we have to be more free-thinking and free-willed. We need those vast hearts who can embrace impartial free-thinking, who are open to knowledge, sciences, and scientific research, and who can perceive the accord between the Qur'an and the Sunnatullah in the vast spectrum from the universe to life.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid., 38-39.

²⁵ Ibid., 39.

²⁶ Ibid. 40. Sunnatullah refers to the unchanging patterns of God's action in the universe.

Without renewing a capacity for freedom of thought, both individually and collectively, Islamic civilization - indeed all civilization – is lost. No possibility of authentic, robust humanity exists without freedom of thought. No possibility of greatness in civilization exists without authentic humanity.

As I stated earlier, Gulen and Mill come from very different social, political and religious contexts and, therefore, envision societies very different from each other. Mill would allow freedoms of lifestyle and pursuit in his ideal society that Gulen would find dangerous and corrosive to society as a whole. Mill would view Gulen’s ideal society as too religiously based and therefore, too susceptible to the “tyranny of the majority” that he is determined to keep at bay. Both of them, however, agree on a point that is, in my view, much more fundamental to human life and flourishing – freedom of thought and expression. People must be able to think freely and express those thoughts in the world without fear of punishment. No harm is done to anyone from the simple expression in speech or writing of ideas. On the contrary, great health and benefit come to individuals and society as a whole when society itself is structured to allow free thought, inquiry and expression. Mill and Gulen are committed equally to this ideal of freedom within their respective contexts primarily because both of them are humanists, in the broadest sense of the term, and the ideal of freedom is central to humanistic thinking. Anyone who loves humanity and believes in human greatness must also, by definition, be a champion of human freedom, especially in the domain of thought, inquiry and expression.

Conclusion:

The above discussion of Gulen’s ideas “in dialogue” with those of Kant and Mill are examples of the type of analysis I provide in the book length work. The book provides the complete discussion of all five central humanistic themes, and places Gulen in dialogue with Kant, Mill, Confucius, Plato and Sartre. I believe these conversations are valuable to scholars in the humanities as well as to concerned citizens in today’s global world. We must find ways for people of divergent views, religions, perspectives and beliefs to peacefully coexist. We will never live in a world where everyone is a Muslim or a Christian, or practices democracy in the same way or even at all, or believes in the same God or in a god at all. Always and everywhere people will differ in their views about myriad things. By honing in on core values vital to human life and flourishing, however, we can find points of contact and resonance amidst our differences that can serve as a the glue that can bind us together as a human family. We must articulate and live inside the domain of these core values – values that I have here identified as broad humanistic values. Our very lives are at stake. Life as we know it is at stake.