

Gülen's Interpretation of Sufism

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Gülen and the movement named after his name has become an interest subject of social scientists in the West. Especially its educational and interfaith activities had attracted their attentions. Movement's interpretation of Islam, its openness to West and its success in combining tradition and modernity have led people who have encountered with the members of the movement as a solution to the conflict between West and Islam. Researchers had tried to define the elements of the movement and its dynamics. Yavuz (2004) sees that the Gülen Movement represents a new model of Islam in Turkey, at peace with democracy and modernity, which also reflects the Anatolian understanding of Islam. . Aras and Caha, (2000) suggested that the Ottoman-Turkish¹ understanding had shaped Gülen's interpretation of Islam, but others tied it to the leadership of Gülen himself. Researchers² who studied the movement agree that that Sufi conception of morality is at the centre of the movement. According to Gokcek (2005) Gülen does not establish a Sufi order in its common meaning³, but he lays down basic principles for a Sufi life in modern world. The relation and the similarities that the movement has with Sufi tradition, but the distinguished characteristics it shows from the Sufi tariqahs led some of the scholars to call the movement as "quasi-Sufi," "Sufi-oriented" (Kim, 2005) or "post-Sufism" (Yavuz,2004). On the other hand, Williams (2005) and Yavuz (2004) define the followers as 'social movement' rather than a Sufi tariqah. Elisabeth Ozdalga (2005) also approaches to the movement as a social network which is different than traditional Sufi lodges. Even though the amount of influence of Sufism differs according to researchers, they agree on Sufism being an important figure in shaping the movement. However, it is impossible for this one variable to define the movement and its dynamics.

1 Aras and Caha (2000) explains the Ottoman-Turkish understanding as follow:

Islam in Turkish political history, during the reigns of both the Seljuks and the Ottomans, remained under the state's guidance and as a matter for the private sphere. The dominant belief was that a truly religious sultan would govern the state according to the principles of justice, equality, and piety. This approach of keeping religion apart from worldly affairs led to a collective memory that regarded Islam as a flexible and tolerant belief system. Thus, it was assumed that religious institutions should adopt flexible attitudes toward the changing situations of their times. In the Ottoman era, there was never a full-fledged theocratic system. While the principles of Shari'a (Islamic law) were applied in the private sphere, public life was regulated according to customary law formulated under the authority of the state (Berkes, 1998). This aspect of the Ottoman political system made religion's role less rigid. Moreover, the empire accepted it would be a multi-religious state, in which Christian and Jewish subjects would continue to be governed by their own laws.

2 Such as John Esposito & Hakan Yavuz (2003), Ihsan Yilmaz (2003), Heon Kim (2005), Zeki Saritoprak (2001), Thomas Michel (2005).

3 Sufi orders were banned in Turkey after the establishment of new secular state, but the teachings live within the culture.

What was this essential figure and how it was defined, and why it has perplexed the minds of researchers who had difficulties to name the movement, needs further investigation. Definition of Sufism vary in western public and Muslim world, it also takes different approaches in the Muslim world. Along with the different approaches to Sufism, Gulen's refusal statements about himself as being a Sufi Sheikh⁴ and his followers being a Sufi tariqah (Özkök, 1995), takes the issue into a more complicated level.

I argue that the difficulty of defining Gulen Movement and its relations to Sufism lays in the definition of Sufism itself. What Gulen means by Sufism (Tasawwuf) differs than the common western understanding of Sufism, and the Muslim critiques⁵ of the term. Due to limits of the paper and the socio-historical differences between the western interpretation of Sufism and Muslim critiques, in this paper, only western interpretation is the main comparison to the Gulen's interpretation⁶ of tasawwuf. (Arabic corresponding of the term Sufism is tasawwuf, which are supposedly mean the same.)

While Sufism had its root in fifteen hundred-long Islamic history, its entrance to the west is considerably new. And this entrance came through a selective, prejudiced and colonial lens. Carl Ernst's (1996) examination of Sufism in western scholarship sheds light into the topic and shows how it differs from the Islamic approach. For Ernst, it is Islamic mysticism rather than Sufism. According to Ernst, it would be a mistake to say that Islamic mysticism is well understood in the West. In early studies of Islamic mysticism, European scholars-meaning mostly British Colonial Orientalists- approached it as a separate category other than Islam by naming it as Sufism. Ernst sees the ending "ism" as a sign of Western intention which suggests an external addition to the stern and legalistic image that they assigned to Islam. He continues to suggest that the colonial prejudices and racial theories of religion during that time encouraged the notion that Islam was a Semitic religion that, like Judaism, was considered to be anti-spiritual. Therefore any genuinely mystical or spiritual notion has to be imported from an external source, such as Christianity, or Buddhism. The tendency that Sufism is viewed in a positive light but understood contrary to Islam, had found its place starting in one of the earliest studies of Sufism by Lt. James William Graham, "A Treatise on Sufism, or Mahomedan Mysticism," Transaction of the Literary Society of Bombay 1 (1819), which was written upon the request of another colonial official and Orientalist, General Sir John Malcolm. In his another work Ernst (1997) goes further and makes his point clear that the actual term Sufism was given by British Orientalists, who wanted a word that would refer to the various dimensions of Islamic teaching that they found attractive and congenial and that would "avoid" the negative stereotypes associated with Islam itself- stereotypes that were often propagated by the same Orientalists (Chittick, 1999). When discussing the origin of the word "sofi" or "sufi" -follower of Sufism- Gulen (1999) also points out this western colonial approach:

4 Gulen even does not accept being a leader of the movement or any group (Özkök, 1995).

5 Sufism has been criticized by mainly Wahabi and Salafi Muslims as being bida- being added to Islam later and not having roots in the practices of the Prophet and his companions-. On the other hand, some seemingly Sufi practices, which do not have anything to do with Sufism, but cultural, non-Islamic practices helped them to justify their claim.

6 It will be clear to the reader that it is not Gulen's unique interpretation; it is the common Islamic interpretation except a few critiques.

Some have argued that sofi is derived from sophia or sophos, Greek words meaning wisdom. I think this is a fabrication of foreign researchers who try to prove that Sufism has a foreign- and therefore non-Islamic- origin. (p. xxiii)

Sufism's mis-presentation to the western public led the common people to a similar approach which they had for Eastern philosophies such as Buddhism and Yoga. Non-Muslim Sufis appeared in western social arena, who meditated on Sufi texts but did not embrace Islam; even some did not have the concept of God. These non-Muslim Sufi structures paved the road for Wahabis and Salafis to justify their claims about Sufism, and raised a cautious approach to Sufism in rest of the Muslims world. But it would not be fair not to mention the changes in the western scholarship. More recent studies of Sufism in western world have taken a more objective and non-colonial direction (such as Ernst, Lings and Chittick).

In order to understand and clarify the role of Sufism and its place in the Gulen Movement, Gülen's understanding of Sufism needs to be well defined starting with the usage of Sufism in Islamic terminology. In his two volume books *Kalbin Zumrut Tepeleri* (translated first as *Emerald Hills of the Heart* and then *Key Concepts in the Practice of the Sufism*) Gulen deals with the topic, but he never uses the term Sufism. The change in the name of the translation of the book could be a practical thought of the publisher, since the English readers are used to term Sufism.

Terminological Dimension:

Sofi, and sufi are words which are used in Islamic terminology to refer to the follower of Sufism. Difference arises from the different claims about the origin of the word. Ones, who claim that the word is derived from *sof*⁷ (wool), *safa* (spiritual delight, exhilaration), or *safwat* (purity) tend to use sofi. Others who believed that the word comes from *suffa*⁸ (chamber) and wanted to distinguish it from *sofu* (religious zealot) use sufi rather than sofi (Gulen, 1999). Nonetheless, any of the roots of the term could be the origin of term *tasawwuf* (Sufism)⁹. But Gulen refuses any relation of Sufism in origin to anything else other than Islam, such as Christian and Hindu Mysticism, or Greek philosophy (Gulen, 1999). As it mentioned above, some claimed that the term derived from *sophia* or *sophos*, Greek words for wisdom. Other than mentioning its intentional misuse, Gulen points out the practical and essential differences between the Sufi way of life and Greek philosophical life:

Prior to Islam, some Hindu and Greek philosophers followed various ways leading to self-purification and struggled against their carnal desires and the world's attractions. But Sufism is essentially different from these ways. For example sofis

7 In reference to cheap and simple wool dressings of Sufis.

8 *Ashab-i Suffa*, is the poor, scholarly companions of the Prophet who lived in the chamber adjacent to the Prophet's mosque. Number of the people in this group was not constant; it was increasing and decreasing due to the number of guests. But, *Ebu Hurayra*- one of the companion of the Prophet and one of the main figure in this chamber community- mentions that he knew seventy people in this group (*Ebu Nuaym, Hilyetu'l Evliya*, v1, p.337)

9 From now on, I will use the term 'Sufism' instead of *tasawwuf* for not to confuse the reader.

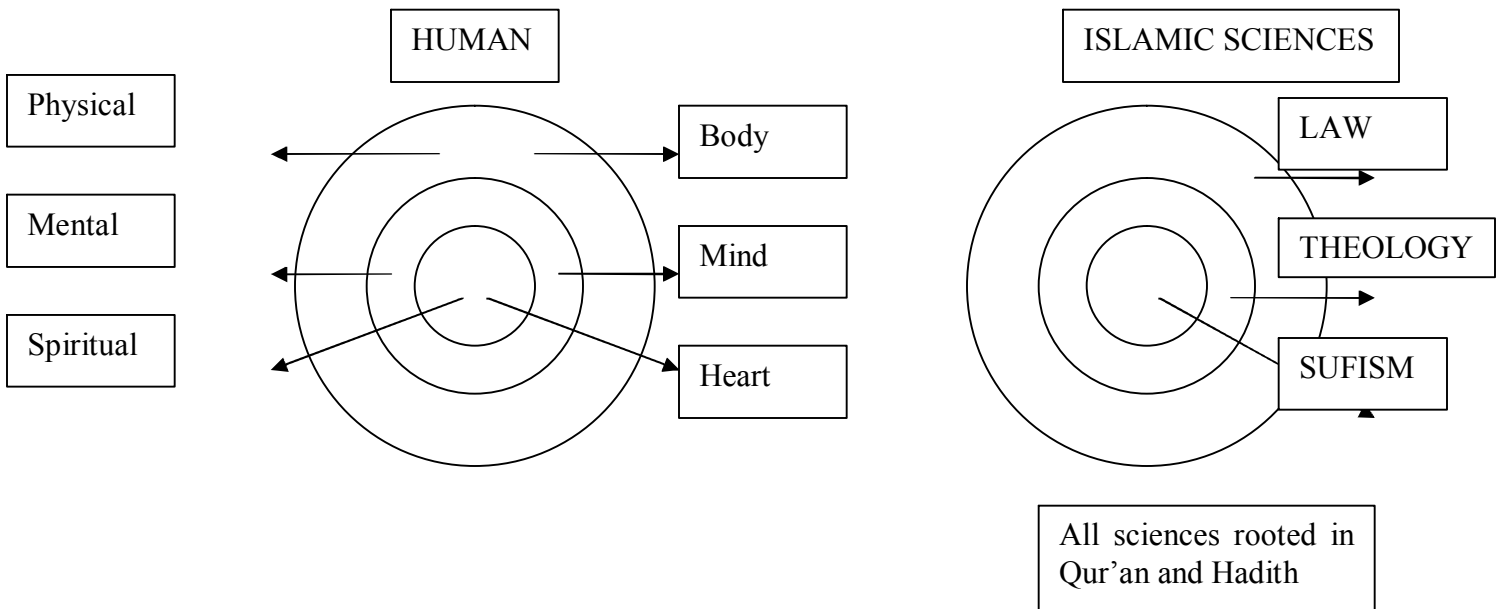
live their entire lives as a quest to purify their selves via invocation, regular worship, complete obedience to God, self control, and humility, whereas ancient philosophers did not observe any of these rules or acts. Their self purification- if it really deserves to be considered as such- usually caused conceit and arrogance in many of them, instead of humility and self-criticism (Gulen, 1999, p. xxv)

Historical Dimension:

Gülen's understanding of Sufism takes its shape in the Islamic historical development, rather than terminology. Gulen (1999) sees Sufism as a discipline in Islam's historical development. In the early days of Islam, religious commandments were not written down, rather, practice and oral circulation of regulation related to belief, worship, and daily life allowed people to memorize them. But eventually, scholars started to compile this oral and memorized knowledge into written texts. By doing so, they gave priority to religious commandments since they were vital issues in Muslim individual and collective life. It was the beginning of Islamic sciences. Legal scholars collected and codified books on Islamic law and its rules, traditionists (referring the tradition of the Prophet) established the Prophetic traditions (Hadith) and way of life (Sunnah), whereas theologians dealt with issues concerning Muslim beliefs, and so on. While some scholars were dealing with these outer activities, Sufi masters concentrated on the Muhammadan¹⁰ Truths' pure spiritual dimensions. Studying with the Qur'anic commentaries, narrations of traditionists, and deductions of legal scholars, Sufi masters developed their ways through asceticism, spirituality, and self-purification, and practice of religion; and established Sufism as an Islamic science with its own method, principles, rules, and terms. In other words, Sufism became the spirit of Shari'a, former regarded as pure esotericism, while latter is exotericism. Gulen (2004) suggests that these divisions should be viewed as the result of the natural, human tendency of assigning priority to that way which is most suitable for the individual practitioner. These divisions can be assigned to different human talents and aptitudes; some focused on practical teaching, some focused more on intellectual teachings, whereas some concentrated on spiritual teachings. But still these divisions are derived from the Prophetic method, which divides the whole religious enterprise, Islam, into three basic dimensions, corresponding to practice, knowledge, and interiority; or body, mind, and heart (Chittick (1999). This could be elaborated to natural human perceptions; physical, mental, and spiritual. Likewise any sciences, each segment has its own related Islamic science. In order to understand these natural divisions and their relation to Islamic sciences I have developed below figures.

Figure: Comparison of natural human perceptions to Islamic sciences.

10 Use of the term Muhammadan is very different than the offensive term Mohammedan in English. While Muhammadan refers to Muhammedi, which is an expression common to Sufi tradition, meaning connected or related to the Prophet; Mohammedan refers to Orientalist approach, meaning Muslim.



Gulen carefully acts in his definitions of Sufism and makes it clear that, although these sciences use different methods (naturally), they all have the same goal "reaching God":

Defining Sufism as the "science of esoteric truths or mysteries," or the "science of humanity's spiritual states and stations," or the "science of initiation" does not mean that it is completely different from other religious sciences. (Gulen, 1999; xxi)

In Gulen's definition, heart plays an essential role in this understanding. As an Islamic science, Sufism concentrates on heart, but also respects body and mind. For Sufis heart is the human truth as the center for all emotions, intellectual and spiritual faculties. Spiritual health of the heart is vital for the health of whole body. A Prophetic tradition, which became a key factor in Sufi understanding, expresses:

There is fleshy part in the body. If it is healthy, then the whole body is healthy. If it is corrupted, then the whole body is corrupted. Beware! That part is heart. (Al-Bukhari, Iman, 39; Muslim, Musaqat. 107)

Sufis sees heart as the perception point of God. One of the greatest Sufi, Ibrahim Hakki of Erzurum, whom Gulen is inspired a lot, puts it as:

The heart is the home of God; purify it from whatever is other than Him. So that the All- Merciful may descend into His palace at night... God said: "Neither the heavens nor the earth can contain Me." He is known and recognized as a "Treasure" hidden in the heart by the heart itself (Gulen, 1999; 22).

Gulen (1999) regards heart as the spiritual dimension of human body, which is the direct, eloquent, most articulate, splendid, and truthful tongue of knowledge of God. In short, heart is the most essential tool in searching God; it is the clean mirror where Divine reflects.

As it mentioned earlier, it was after the second and third centuries, that Muslims started to focus on different aspects of Islam and Sunnah of the Prophet. Different Islamic sciences diverged from these focuses. (i.e. fikh-Islamic law, hadith-tradition of the Prophet, tefsir- interpretation of Qur'an, kalam- Islamic theology, tasawwuf-Sufism, etc.) Each science concentrated on related parts of the Qur'an and Sunnah while trying to practice all. According to all Islamic sciences, Prophet Muhammed is the perfect practitioner and source of all these sciences. He lived and represented all aspects of human life in the perfect form. One needs to understand that there is no conflict between these sciences; it is only the means of priority, or concentration on different subjects. Abu Hashim al-Kufi (d. 772 CE) was the first Muslim, who was called as Sufi. According to Gulen, at that time, Sufism was characterized by spiritual people seeking to follow the footsteps of the Prophet, and his companions by imitating their life styles. Sufis eventually established orders under different scholars, and institutionalized it by establishing regulations and rules in each order (tariqah).¹¹ Gülen's Sufi understanding refers the pre-institutionalized period, mostly to the first and second century of Islam. Sarioprak (2001) calls Gülen "a Sufi in his own way", and points out the parallel Sufi approaches that Gulen has to the early Sufi scholars:

Ealy Sufis had neither orders nor even Sufi organizations. Rabia, Junayd, Muhasibi, Bishr, Ghazzali, Feriduddin Attar, and even Rumi did not belong to a tariqah. However they were Sufis. (p. 6)

Practical Dimension:

According to Gulen, Sufism's practical dimension is more important than its historical or terminological definitions. Sufism, in a nutshell, is the spiritual side of Islam or the spiritual life of practicing Muslims. In Gülen's own definition, Sufism is a life-long process of spiritual development, which demands the individual's active participation. It requires the strict observance of all religious obligations and Prophet Muhammad's example, which enables individuals, through constant worship to God, to deepen their awareness of themselves as devotees of God (Gülen, 1999). The core of Sufism is Qur'an and Sunnah (tradition of Prophet Muhammed), especially the tradition which mostly stresses the "greater jihad" (jihad al akbar)¹² (Yavuz, 2004). After stating different practical definition of Sufism, Gülen summarizes it as following:

Sufism is the path followed by an individual who, having been able to free himself or herself from human vices and weakness in order to acquire angelic qualities and conduct pleasing God, lives in accordance with the requirements of God's knowledge and love, and in the resulting spiritual delight that ensues (Gülen, 1999, p.xiv).

Chittick (1999) explains early centuries of Muslims as who loved God and therefore followed the Prophet and they in turn were loved by God. They did not even name what they were doing. 10th century Sufi master Bushanji points out:

11 For more information see (Gülen,1999) and (Chittick,1999).

12 Greater Jihad is the struggle that one has with the nefis- the ego or the carnal self.

Today, Sufism is a name without a reality (hakikat), but it used to be a reality without a name (cited in Chittick, 1999, p.15)

Ghazali also refers this reality in his *al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*- Deliverance from Error- translated as *Al- Ghazali's path to Sufism* by R. J. McCarthy (2000):

How great a difference there is between your knowing the definitions and causes and conditions of health and satiety and your being healthy and sated!(p.52)

In Gulen's word (1999), 'Sufism' is a life-long journey of unceasing effort leading to the Infinite One; it is a marathon to be run without any pause, with yielding resolution, and without anticipating any worldly pleasure and reward. In practical dimension, Sufism becomes the search of hakikat (reality) and implementation of that reality to one's own life. 'Sufism' is the spiritual life that a Muslim lives,

Conclusion:

Gulen sees 'Sufism' or tasawwuf (in fact) as the spiritual dimension of the Islamic way of life. It is in particular the spiritual life of the Prophet and in general Muslims. Neither it is different than Islam nor does it have any other origin. After all, if it is asked whether Gulen is a Sufi or not, in the consideration of this paper's analysis, it could be said that he is a *mutasawwif*¹³, but 'not in his own way'; he is a *mutasawwif* in a way that the Prophet was and the *salafs*¹⁴ were – companion of the Prophet and the next two generations who followed them-. He is following the example of the Prophets and their followers, as well as sincere devotees. He is after the (hakikat) reality not the name. That is this reality that Gulen is searching for.

In this paper, Gülen's understanding of 'Sufism' is analyzed in comparison to Sufism's western misinterpretation. In this analysis, three aspects of Sufism are the main concerns of this paper: terminological, historical, and practical. I have to confess that this paper is in an introductory level, these three aspects and the principals that Gulen states need to be analyzed in depth and details.

13 One who follows or studies Tasawwuf.

14 Reader needs to be aware that the term salaf and the salafi are not the same. Even though the salafis refer to salaf (group including the companions of the prophet and the first two generation followed them), it is a common phrase used by Muslim scholars to refer the same.

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