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M. Fethullah Gülen's Blueprint for World Peace

Richard Penaskovic

This article attempts to sift through the writings of Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish intellectual, in order to make explicit his blueprint for world peace. Gülen argues that today's world has succumbed to materialism and hedonism. The antidote consists in the development of one's interior or spiritual life, adorning oneself with such virtues as humility, love, and self-sacrifice. He also calls for an education that involves the whole person: body, mind, and spirit. Acceptance of others and dialogue between East and West, Muslims and Christians is essential if there is to be peace on earth.

Introduction

Christians and Muslims make up one-half the population of the world. The relationship between the two represents the single, most important factor contributing to world peace. If one reads the voluminous writings of Fethullah Gülen carefully, one can detect a blueprint for world peace. Gülen, of course, does not articulate this blueprint explicitly, but it can be pieced together by taking a long or macro view of his various works. In this essay I shall attempt to sift through Gülen's writings in hopes of making explicit Gülen's blueprint for world peace, which may be understood as Gülen's plan for an “alliance of civilizations,” in contradistinction to Sam Huntington's “clash of civilizations” thesis (Penaskovic, 2007b, p. 411).

Not only was M. Fethullah Gülen born in Turkey, but he also has deep intellectual roots there as well. He has been decidedly influenced by his teacher, Said Nursi (d. 1960), but also by such Turkish scholars as Mevlana or Rumi (d. 1273), Ahmed Yeşeyi (d. 1166), Yunus Emre (d. 1321), Haji Bayram-i-Veli (15th century), and Aksemseteddin (15th century). It strikes even the casual reader of
Fethullah Gülen that he thinks imaginatively, writes creatively, and has a vision of the future. Although Gülen speaks to his contemporaries, he seems to have one eye on the future. If one reads the voluminous writings of Gülen carefully, one can detect a blueprint for world peace.

I begin by giving an analysis of our current situation according to Gülen. Today's world has succumbed to scientific and practical materialism and hedonism. The antidote consists, says Gülen, in developing a rich interior or spiritual life. Gülen asks each of us to become “heroes of love” or “people of service.” We are to adorn ourselves with such virtues as humility, piety, love, and self-sacrifice. In contrast to Sam Huntington who believes there will be a “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West, Gülen has a different view of the matter. He believes that love, tolerance, and dialogue will win out, thus averting any clash of civilizations. The linchpin of Gülen's blueprint for world peace revolves around his understanding of education. Education involves the whole person: body, mind, and spirit. It is a process that takes an entire lifetime to achieve. Gülen is particularly interested in building character and in encouraging others to develop a spiritual or interior life. Finally, I speak to the necessity of dialogue in a globalized world, and then offer some concluding observations.

Spirituality: An Antidote to Materialism

Many of the evils confronting us today have their source in materialism, a philosophy that denies the existence of anything immaterial or spiritual. Gülen takes a wide view of materialism. For him materialism describes a life style built on hedonism or the pursuit of pleasure, while simultaneously ignoring the spiritual side of human nature. Gülen takes the view that the natural sciences deal with the sensory world, take an experimental approach to reality, and accept only those conclusions resulting from the use of the inductive method. Hence the modern approach to the hard sciences tends to be materialistic. Gülen has no quarrel with the natural sciences as such, though he does want them to realize their limitations. Over against the world of science there exists the soft sciences of metaphysics and religion which deal with the intelligible world and the world of spirit (Gülen, 2000a, p. 28).

Gülen feels that scientific materialism and its concomitant, practical materialism are the cause of the erosion of spiritual and moral values around the globe, crime, and drug addiction, and the exploitation of the weak and defenseless. Gülen notes that the products of science are often exploited by the superpowers to consolidate their grip on the world. In this connection we see the influence of Said Nursi on Gülen. Nursi argues that modern civilization has five negative principles as its foundation: 1. Power to oppress the less fortunate;
2. Self-interest and the desire to chase after material possessions; 3. Internal and external conflict; 4. Racism which sets people at one another's throats; and, 5. The satisfaction of basic drives which brutalizes people (Nursi, 1995, p. 310).

Gülen also decries the economic philosophy that preaches consumerism. Today's world, says Gülen, reduces both the individual and the community to the functions of making money, consuming ever more of the world's resources, and material success (Gulen, 2000c, p.30). In the past people did not need a plethora of gadgets to have a happy life. Today many individuals feel they need almost a new plaything every day such as a cell phone, an expensive watch, an MP3 player, etc. This drive to possess leads to burglaries, competition, and a cruel rivalry between peoples. In such an environment, "might makes right" and only the powerful can survive. In today's world homage is paid to movie and sports stars rather than to holy people, e.g., the prophets of revealed religions. Very little thinking goes on among the masses, many of whom resemble robots programmed by advertisements and the mass media. Nightclubs, astrodomes, and cinemas are the temples in which people worship. One's value as a human being is measured by the size of one's bank account. Thus we have in a nutshell Gülen's analysis of our situation today.

What can be done to offset this hedonistic, egotistical, and materialistic mentality? Gülen believes that human beings have the capacity to change their own lives. Gülen would say that if one desires to start a revolution, one must begin by reforming oneself. In order to change the world for the better we humans are called to purify our inner world of hatred, jealousy, and resentment. In this connection Gülen speaks about "ideal people" who are "people of service" or "heroes of love" (Gülen, 2000b, p.91). These are the people who are attentive to the needs of others, work to support the truth, and are extraordinarily hopeful when their plans are suddenly changed, or their institutions destroyed. These heroes of love gratefully and cheerfully sacrifice their own desires for the sake of others. Although they may walk through the valley of death, they do not engage in self-pity but instead endure every hardship so that future generations will be happy. These are self-sacrificing individuals who never remind others of their accomplishments but are always aware of their own real position in the sight of God. Such individuals can say with Muhammad Lufti Effendi, "Everybody else is good but I am bad; everybody else is wheat but I am chaff." (Gülen, 2004a, p. 76). These heroes of love who are concerned about others have such a well-developed interior or spiritual life that they are like guardian angels. Like Bediuzzaman they can say, "We are devotees of love; we do not have time for antagonism" (Gülen, 2004b, p. 91). Gülen believes that there should be no room in our hearts for antagonism and hostility toward others. Instead, our hearts should overflow with genuine affection and love for all we meet on our journey through life (Gülen, 2004b, p. 93).
Heroes of love like Yunus, Rumi, Yesevi, and Bediuzzaman were greatly attached to God and had to face much suffering and terrible treatment at the hands of others. Some, like Bediuzzaman, were treated like they were criminals, banished from town after town, facing constant surveillance. Bediuzzaman said that while my body is burning, my heart will indeed blossom like a rose garden (Gülen 2004b, p. 93). Such heroes of love never expected any material compensation or spiritual comfort in return. They scorned wealth, success, comfort, and celebrity status. They lived for God alone, not for any material or worldly success. These individuals devoted their lives to enlightening others. They had an inner richness which did not allow them to boast about their achievements. They aimed only to please God and lived mindful of spiritual realities. Their lives were spent in the remembrance of God. Gülen writes that these heroes of love could breathe the same air as the angels while fulfilling their duties on this earth. They led a life the Life-Giver demands with one hand on the doors of people’s hearts and the other on God’s gate. Heroes of love are eternity-oriented spirits, completely detached from this earthly life, while simultaneously setting their sights on the eternal world (Gülen 2004b, p.104).

Finally, in many of his writings Gülen reflects on the importance of developing an interior or spiritual life, pointing out that real life occurs at the level of spirit (Michel, 2003, p. 76). For Gülen the entire world reflects the beauty of its Creator. Over and above the material or phenomenal world we have the world of spirit. Nothing happens by chance or by accident on planet Earth. The proper response of all creatures to the Creator God is obedience. Every one born into the world becomes de facto a Muslim or one called to submit to the Divine.

**Education: An Antidote to Ignorance**

Education occupies a lot of space in Gülen’s thought-world and to some extent may be seen as the centerpiece of his blueprint for world peace. Gülen believes that educational systems need to be comprehensive and universal. To be universal an educational system must appeal to people of diverse backgrounds, intellectual levels, and age differences. It must find ready acceptance among all kinds of nations, ethnicities, and religious backgrounds. Judged by these criteria, the educational system initiated by Gülen and his followers has been an outstanding success. To date, Gülen’s loyal followers have set up over 500 secondary schools and universities throughout the world from Brazil to Denmark to Kyrgyzstan (Michel, 2003, p. 79).
Why does Gülen believe so strongly in the value of a sound education? He feels that the future of every nation depends on its youth. Parents ought to be judged on how well they have raised their children. This is the quintessential duty of parents. Nations must not fail their youth by abandoning them to foreign cultural influences such as “Always look out for number one,” or the philosophy of “Shop until you drop.” Gülen holds teachers accountable for the vices and virtues of their students 25 years down the road. A nation's entire future depends on how well it educates its youth. He writes that we are human only to the extent we learn ourselves, teach others, and inspire them to do their level best (Gülen, 2000a, p. 309; Aslandogan & Cetin, 2006, p. 31).

Gülen takes the view that a school may be thought of as a laboratory that can give students an elixir that can heal or safeguard them against life's ills and poisons. He also speaks of a school as holy ground where its holy people are its teachers. Why so? A school can open students' minds to the deeper meaning behind the events of daily life, leading its students to contemplation that is, whisking them into the presence of the unseen world of the spirit. Though Gülen views education as a most sacred task, he also knows that this may be the most difficult task in life for both parents and teachers. Teaching demands an extraordinary amount of patience on the part of teachers. It also requires them to address the needs of the whole person, heart, mind, and feelings. Every student has different needs and teachers must remember that each student lives within his or her own unique world. It should be noted that religious education, as such, does not form part of the curriculum in the schools set up by Gülen's followers. They are, on the contrary, based on the model of Anadolu high schools in Turkey that are run by the state where classes in the hard science are taught in English (Agai, 2003, p. 61).

Gülen sees education primarily as a process of growth that extends from birth to death, cradle to grave. Infants are born helpless and extremely needy. It takes them a year or more until they can walk on their own two feet. Animals, on the other hand, come into the world as if already perfected. Bees and sparrows acquire the physical and social skills they need to thrive within 20 days, whereas humans require 20 years to acquire a similar level of maturity (Gülen, 2002, p. 58).

Moreover, it takes humans a lifetime to achieve spiritual and intellectual perfection. Gülen regards one's home as the first school in which children receive the necessary education to be perfected. Parents are the principal architects of the home environment. They set the tone so that the impressions, for good or bad, children receive at home cannot be easily be deleted later on in life. Their home life tends to stay with them. If children are to thrive, there must be a healthy family life. Gülen believes that marriage should be entered into with a view to forming a healthy family life, in which parents love and respect each other and
are compassionate toward their children while sensitive to their feelings and emotional development. In choosing a spouse or soul mate for life one should not marry for wealth or beauty which is only skin deep. Instead, one should consider as a soul mate those who have a sterling character, high moral standards, and virtues like humility, chastity, and a loving heart. When parents do not raise good children with high moral standards, they are guilty of releasing scorpions into the community. Gülen observes that children raised in a dysfunctional home will bear their wounds for life and will be a burden to society (Gülen, 2000a, p. 311).

Gülen takes a holistic view of education, arguing that we must educate the whole person in body, mind, and spirit (Mohamed, 2007, p. 557). One must pay attention to the emotional needs of students. Their feelings must be respected. Physical training is the easy part of education. Moral and spiritual training are much more difficult. Gülen recommends that parents and teachers set a good example for their children/students. Values are caught rather than taught. Students must see the value of advancing spiritually, that is to be mindful of God and to submit to God's will. In short, students are called to seek after perfection.

To achieve such perfection is the principal duty and responsibility of every human being. In doing so, we become fully human, worthy of eternal life in the next exalted life (Gülen, 2000a, p. 306). While most individuals can properly train their bodies, only the few and the strong can properly educate their minds and their spirits and in the process become spiritual people (Gülen, 2000a, p. 306). We humans have both a good self and an evil-commanding self. The good self inclines us to do good and be concerned about others. The bad self, on the contrary, wants students to disregard their God-given talents and abilities. By means of worship and discipline the good self can rise above the evil-commanding self to the point where it regrets its evil shortcomings and says to God, "O self at peace. Return unto your Master, well-pleased and well-pleasing" (Gülen, 2005, p. 189).

How does one achieve spiritual satisfaction? To perfect our spirit and to become spiritual ourselves we need to both know and believe in God. Rather than denying our lower selves, i.e., our libidinous drives, we must sublimate them and turn them in a positive direction, that is to say, we must become virtuous. For example, to become chaste, we are called to discipline our passions. To gain the virtue of self-control, we must learn to channel our anger. Gülen in his understanding of the virtues would agree with Aristotle that "Virtus in medio stat," which means virtue stands in the middle between two extremes: excess and deficiency. It may be nice to have a glass of wine with one's meal. However, to consume three bottles of wine with one's meal on a regular basis may be a sign of excess or, perhaps, alcoholism. The virtuous person achieves a balance between two extremes (Gülen, 2000a, p. 308).
The human spirit is capable of rising ever so high until it becomes perfectly purified and near to God. The soul of such a person helps others remember God. Such souls are polished mirrors, reflecting the divine attributes. The Companions of Muhammad achieved this degree of perfection. However, such a state is not reserved for the few. Rather it is attainable by millions of ordinary people (Gülen, 2000a, p. 189).

**Dialogue in an Age of Globalization**

For Gülen globalization functions as a term that has a very wide extension. It applies to interdependence and connectivity on various levels: political, social, economic, cultural, technological, and ecological. We see a glaring example of globalization today in the financial markets. The banking crisis, for example, that began in the United States has hit other countries from Iceland to China like a gigantic tidal wave. Gülen believes that advances in technology, science, and communication (think of the Internet or the cell phone) have turned the planet into a global village. What happens in one part of the world, for example, the swearing in of Barack Obama as President of the United States or the Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip, becomes known throughout the world instantaneously (Penaskovic, 2007a, p. 194).

For nations to survive we desperately need a dialogue across civilizations and cultures. Dialogue can offset the negative ideas the Western media have about Islam (Smith, 2007, p. 158). There is a multiplicity of problems that can only be solved by many nations working together in concert with one another. In this connection I am thinking of such trans-national problems as global warming, water pollution, overfishing of the seas and oceans, hunger in Zimbabwe, the Congo, and sub-Saharan Africa, and the tensions today between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, the Sudan, and Indonesia, to name but a few.

To get a handle on such trans-national problems countries around the world must work together harmoniously and engage in a constructive dialogue. Gülen argues that for dialogue to succeed we must forget the past, ignore polemics, and focus on the areas of agreement nations and religions have in common. Where did Gülen derive his ideas on the importance of dialogue? Thomas Michel points out that Gülen took his inspiration on the importance of dialogue from Jalaluddin Rumi, known by Muslims as Mevlana, meaning “our Master” (Michel, 2003, p. 183). Rumi was a compass with one foot firmly planted in the center, while the other foot turns in a broad arc to complete a circle. The foot planted in the center represents one’s faith-conviction as a devout Muslim. The foot that turns in a broad arc to complete a full circle, then, stands for the dialogue that embraces all those who are people of faith. Though separated by centuries Rumi
and Gülen both share an interpretation of the Qur'anic message as well as a desire to communicate with believers of all stripes and shades (Michel, 2003, p. 184).

In regard to dialogue we must bear in mind that the days of forcing one's views down the throats of others are over. Brute force and might do not work. We are compelled to convince others by means of sound arguments and hard data or evidence. Conflict need not break out merely because individuals and nations have differing opinions on a subject. Those who march to a different drummer should be allowed their space or freedom. Gülen espouses the notion that when others disagree with us, they have something to give us. We are to seek out ways in which we can profit from the ideas of others and use our differing perspectives as a point of departure for a common dialogue. Does it make sense to discount what others say? By no means. We need to take seriously the views of experienced others who often have a different take on reality than we do (Gülen, 2000b, p.73).

Compassionate Love

Gülen regards love as an essential aspect of being human. Love acquires its distinctive nature and color when it becomes transformed into love of the Creator. It may be viewed as the safest and most direct way to perfection. Love may be compared to a mount that carries us on its back toward Paradise (Gülen, 2000b, p. 18). Love makes us selfless by making us die to our carnal self in order to live for God alone. The lover sees the beloved in the beauty of the cosmos, that is, in the falling rain, the shooting star, and the gurgling stream. Love views actions unrelated to God as futile and disloyal (Gülen, 2000b, p. 19). The one who loves God overflows with joy, feeling the breath of the Beloved in every breeze. Lovers become intoxicated with the love of God and find it impossible to express their love verbally (Gülen, 2000b, p. 20).

In speaking about love a word needs to be said about ma'rifat (knowledge of God) best understood as the culture of the heart. Ma'rifat does not mean simply theoretical or abstract knowledge of God as when philosophers of religion speak about God conceptually. Rather, ma'rifat bespeaks an experiential knowledge of God. In short, knowledge of God slips effortlessly into the love of God. Gülen argues that God does not appear to us in the phenomenal world as an object we can hold from us at a distance, like a problem in statistics or mathematics. We cannot remain indifferent to someone we believe in and know, hence, love very much, such as God. Gülen looks upon love as the crown of belief in God (Gülen, 2000a, p. 358; Gülen, 2004a, p. 146).

As our knowledge of God increases, so does, correspondingly, our love of God increase. Gülen quotes Gedai's adage, "The more I put my finger in the honey of
love, the more I burn; give me some water" (Gülen, 2000a, p. 358). Once we taste God's love, the more we desire it. Love always walks the way of increase asking questions like, “Isn't there more” (Gülen 2000a, p. 358)? The Sufis speak of the love of God using the term, ‘ashq, meaning an “intense, ecstatic love,” one that takes us out of ourselves so to speak. ‘Ashq may be viewed as a wing of light, granted us by God so that we can reach the shores of the Infinite One. We, humans, are akin to moths attracted to the light (Gülen, 2000a, p. 152). ‘Ashq has its source in God, not in us. Gülen calls it the final step leading to God (Gülen, 2004a, p. 153). Those who have attained ‘ashq both feel and observe God’s essential oneness (tawhid). The outer dimension of human existence perishes in due time, that is, their souls are dead to their carnal self and seek God alone. When souls reach the level of ecstatic love or ‘ashq, their hearts overflow with love of God and yearn ever more for their Creator. Their joy completely transcends the phenomenal world, the world of tears and suffering (Gülen, 2004a, p. 155).

For Gülen love of God cannot be separated from love of others. Gülen encourages us to be accepting of others. Our hearts should become as wide as the ocean. This adage applies both to believers and non-believers. Gülen counsels us to approach non-believers with gentleness and kindness. In this way their hatred and rancor will melt away like snow on a winter’s day. Gülen would have us disregard discourteous treatment at the hands of others. Instead, he advises us to practice the golden rule of returning good for evil. We ought to have no limits set on our willingness to do good to others. (Gülen, 2000b, pp. 50 and 61). Gülen admonishes us to judge ourselves on the basis of how well we treat others. He lays down these two criteria vis-à-vis our relationship to God and to others, viz., how much space does God occupy in our heart and how do we treat our neighbor (Gülen, 2000b, p. 62)?

The Horizon of Hope

The horizon of hope means to transcend the phenomenal world of existence by seeing life as an interrelated whole apart from which events cannot be seen as they truly are (Gülen, 2000a, p. 355). Gülen argues that the best way to gain insight into existence involves perceiving the world from the vantage point of metaphysics and spirituality. We must bear in mind that the ancient world found as formative such texts as the Bible, the Hindu Vedas, and the Qur'an. These sacred texts deal with spiritual realities and metaphysical truths.

Gülen faults Muslims for being remiss in developing a concept of science derived from the Qur'an and the hadith or the Prophet’s practices (Gülen, 2000a, p. 356). To catch up with the West in terms of scientific achievement, Muslims must substitute their own ideas and inspirations for their obsolete, materialistic,
and positivist views of science (Gülen, 2000a, p.356). Gülen can be quite blunt at times, arguing that we cannot build a community on a solid foundation without metaphysics and spirituality. He would have everyone look at the revealed religions in order to construct a new world, one in which human values and virtues are respected and are effective in shaping human aspirations and policies. To do so would give us the ability to see existence as one integrated system and to transcend the phenomenal world, thus grasping the noumena, or reality itself, that is, the world in its deepest dimensions (Gülen, 2000a, p. 357).

Gülen is very optimistic about the future. Why so? He believes in the resurrection of the dead and the afterlife. This enables Gülen to view the world in a qualitatively different way than an atheist or non-believer might. In fact, Gülen would feel more comfortable speaking about an alliance of civilizations rather than in terms of a clash of civilizations between Islam and the West as Sam Huntington and Bernard Lewis do. Gülen takes the position that life on this earth serves merely as a preparation for a life lived with God in paradise. For Gülen, hope serves as a reservoir of energy for those gallant souls (whom Gülen calls the Golden Generation), who are other-centered (Hermansen, 2007, p. 70; Saritoprak, 2007, p. 636).

Conclusion: Four Observations

One

Unfortunately, many Americans and Europeans see the Muslim world as a threat, believing that terrorism has deep roots in the teaching of Islam itself. Nothing could be further from the truth. Gülen would say that a true Muslim, that is, one who submits to Allah, cannot be a terrorist because that would totally go against the Qur’an. Muslims and the West must fight against all terrorist organizations, bearing in mind that al-Qaida is merely the tip of the iceberg. Also, the Western powers must fight the prevalence of poverty and injustice globally. For starters, the West should be consistent in regard to the implementation of human rights, democracy, and pluralism in order to prevent the rise of more misperceptions of the West in the Muslim world (Sammak, 2002, p. 9).

Two

Writers such as Sam Huntington speak of Islam as if it were a monolithic entity. I would note that there are as many Islams as there are ethno-cultural groups. One may distinguish at least eight cultural areas within Islam: the Arabian, the Persian, the Turkish, the Black African, the Indian sub-continent, the Malayan-
Indonesian, the Chinese-Islamic, and the Western hemisphere (Azra, 2008, p. 149). Among Muslims there are a multiplicity of views in regard to religious pluralism and every other disputed question. Moreover, the text of the Qur'an itself justifies differing opinions and interpretations among Muslim scholars (Qur'an 49:13; Azra, 2008, p. 149).

Three

In order to successfully deal with intolerance and discrimination in the post-9/11 world, we need to take a hard look at the issue of immigration on both the national and international levels. Immigration has dramatically changed the cultural and religious landscape of the world. For example, the passage of the Hart-Celler Act in 1965 abolished restrictive quotas on immigration to the United States from countries other than Europe. Hence a record number of Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans have landed in the United States, making it the world's most diverse nation, religiously speaking (Phan, 2004, p. xix).

Immigration has become a structural element of many societies forever changing their cultural and religious makeup. Item: In Brussels 20% of the population is Muslim and by 2050 circa 30% of Europeans will be Muslim (Sanneh, 2008, p. 145). Immigration requires cooperation between immigrants and the community that receives them. The basic freedoms and human rights of all must be respected (Celata, 2007, p. 227).

Four

Imagine what the world would be like if Gülen's blueprint for world peace were implemented globally. The relationship between Islam and the West would be dialogical rather than conflictual. Instead of operating with a "friend" or "foe" attitude toward Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and Christians would strive to understand Islam as Muslims understand it, namely, as a religion of tolerance, acceptance, and peace. Instead of making alliances with unpopular governments that serve U.S. interests in the Middle East, the United States would initiate a culture of peace among religious communities grounded in the culture of a true and open dialogue in the spirit of Fethullah Gülen.

References


