

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF GÜLEN'S METHODOLOGY

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Abstract

There is an apparent paradox at the heart of the Gülen approach. On the one hand there is a determination to present a version of Islam that is rational, inclusive, progressive and tolerant. The broad aim is to show Islam to be a universal faith, one that has no difficulties in coexisting with other religions and indeed with those who have no religion at all. On the other hand, Islam is definitely portrayed as the superior form of belief, often because it is seen as incorporating in the best possible ways rational and spiritual virtues present in many other approaches to understanding the nature of the world. Yet how can Islam be represented as one among many and also as the first among many?

This interesting feature of the Gülen methodology is shown to rest on a basic aspect of the *Hanafi/Murji'i* theological approach, which can also be seen as paradoxical. The inability to define precisely the nature of belief and who is a believer suggests an uncertainty about what the Muslim actually believes in. It also implies a difficulty in identifying who is a Muslim and who is not, and that might be regarded as a basic issue in religion.

The lack of definition in the *Hanafiyya* is precisely its strength. This is something taken up well by the Gülen movement. Religious boundaries are often blurred, and believers may wish to hold onto a variety of beliefs not all of which fit neatly into a particular traditional faith. In prioritising Islam the Gülen movement expresses clearly its opinion that within the parameters of Islam is likely to be found the most truth and the best regimen as to how to live. Yet those parameters are not themselves strictly defined and allow for much change and development.

When considering the thought of Gülen it is important to try to classify the sort of approach that he adopts in his writings and speeches. What methodology is he using? This is a question that can be raised about any significant thinker. We need to know how they shape their material, and as we shall see, what sort of audience they design their material for. It is not easy to classify Gülen's thought, in just the same way that his mentor Bediüzzaman Nursi is also difficult to place in a neat category of intellectual life. It is the purpose of this discussion to at least start the process of developing a model of how to understand Gülen, since his work is deceptively simple and direct. It will be shown that despite its attractive and apparently unsophisticated flavour, it embodies a complex hermeneutic, and a very interesting one at that.

Gülen as a Turkish Thinker

One of the observations that people often make about the thought of Gülen is that he is a very Turkish thinker. This is not meant in a narrow sense, but to bring out the fact that he often uses examples from Turkish thought and literature, and of course many of his illustrations come from his experiences as someone religious living in Turkey when the state was constructed in a determinedly secular manner. Another observation follows from this and links him firmly to the *Hanafi/Murji'i madhhab* (legal school). This was the major school of Islamic jurisprudence in the Ottoman period, and as a result has gained considerable traction throughout the Islamic world, and not only in those places that were part of the Ottoman Empire. The status of the Turkish sultan as caliph undoubtedly gave this particular legal approach in Istanbul considerable global force, and this system has continued to be popular as far away from Turkey as Pakistan and beyond.

One of the features of the *Hanafiyya* that immediately strikes a resonance with Gülen is its generally laid back attitude to a whole range of legal issues, and in particular the issue of the nature of *iman* or belief. Some theological and legal schools take a pretty strict line on the nature of belief, and on the status of rulers who have problems with being orthodox, according to those schools. Should or could we be subjects of a ruler who is not a "proper" Muslim, for instance, or would such a ruler debar himself through his beliefs and/or behaviour from political authority? More relevant to us today perhaps is how we should regard other people. Can we know from what they say and/or what they do whether they are really Muslims? The *Hanafi/Maturidi* tradition tends to argue that we cannot really get into deciding such issues, since only God knows how genuine someone's beliefs are, and that knowledge only really comes into play when their lives are finished, since then God can sum up their lives, how they lived and what they thought, and can make an accurate judgement on what their lives amounted to. This is really a position that was acquired through the long-dead theological movement of the *Murji'i*, who based their views as their name suggests on the notion of *irja'*, delay, in judging an individual's religious status.

The Status of Non-Muslims

We find this approach a great deal in Gülen, in the sense that he sees Islam as more of an open than a closed system. Islam encompasses wide varieties of people and beliefs, it is not seen as something narrowly confined to just a few specific forms of belief and action. Non-Muslims, and especially People of the Book such as Jews and Christians, are regarded as believers in something significant, although perhaps not quite as advanced in their religious thinking as might otherwise be accomplished. Alternative views, even views hostile to Islam, are to be tolerated and not persecuted, and their adherents respected, he argues. Violence is

anathema to him and any form of terrorism in support of religious aims is ruled out without reservation.

This is not actually the position of the *Hanafiyya*. Certainly they draw the boundaries of belief less sharply than many alternative schools, but once the boundaries are drawn, and they have to be drawn somewhere, they are to be rigorously enforced and patrolled. Gülen's approach is more Ottoman than *Hanafiyya*, in the sense that a large multi-cultural empire such as that of the Ottomans had to make concessions and allowances to differences unless it was going to be at war all the time with its subjects to ensure a high level of religious conformity. But what is the relevance today of the Ottoman empire many decades after its final demise? The caliphate ended over ninety years ago, and the Empire in its material state is no more than a distant memory.

Education and Empire

The relevance of the Ottoman Empire is that it represents a realm of ideas that has replaced the realm of facts on the ground. Empires today exist more in cultural space than as actual colonies with imperial rulers. Different systems of thought try to affect the thinking of parts of the world, and they no longer have to dispatch soldiers or warships to ensure their dominance. More often, and more effectively they send out ideas and through those ideas they seek to ensure the hegemony of their attitude to the world, and also of course their material along with their cultural products. One of the reasons why empires fall is because their military and political strength wavers and declines, and they become overwhelmed by those opposing them. Yet in the empire of ideas what counts is not physical but intellectual strength, the attractiveness of ideas and how far an audience may feel part of a virtual community with common aspirations and experiences.

We can see how Gülen's approach fits into this notion of empire, with his emphasis on the significance of education, communication and ideas. The new Ottoman Empire is one of brains, not brawn, and extends over a far wider area than its predecessor. There is something very apposite about his approach in the modern, or indeed postmodern, world, and that lies in his presentation of Islam as a rather relaxed religion. Gülen selects *hadith* in particular that go along with his approach to Islam, and of course the Qur'anic passages he quotes also stress the Meccan rather than the Medinan revelations, presenting a view of a gentle, kind and non-coercive faith, one that fits in well with modern Western life in the twenty-first century. This might seem as though Gülen does not really consider the whole range of Islamic texts before arriving at his particular interpretation, which in an internal theological debate would be problematic. It is like coming to a conclusion on the basis of only some of the evidence. But what is at issue here is not a debate between knowledgeable Muslims about the appropriate interpretation of Islam. The debate is more schematic and works from the premises that a particular interpretation of Islam is valid, that of Gülen, and we can work from those premises to certain conclusions. His conclusions are inevitably attractive, and link up nicely with each other in presenting a view of the faith that is coherent, moderate and rational. Here we find the ethos of the Ottoman Empire reborn, this time not as an empire in physical territory, but in virtual space.

The Issue of *Iman* (Faith)

It is worth considering an objection to his approach, and we are more concerned here with his methodology than with the actual conclusions that he reaches, or even the premises

from which he works. The objection is one very much based on the arguments between the *Hanafiyya* and their opponents a thousand or more years ago which dealt with the implications of the view that one could not tell who an unbeliever really is. Those inimical to the *Hanafiyya* argued that surely there are cases where we can know what someone believes through observing his actions. It is one thing to be tolerant, and quite another to accept any sort of behaviour at all as potentially acceptable, even if it is clearly unacceptable. Could people pray in an inappropriate way and yet argue that what they were doing was acceptable since their motives and intentions were honourable, for example? In some cases the answer is obviously yes, yet if the only thing of significance is the intention of the individual, then we would need no religious rituals or laws. If for example any direction I thought was Mecca was Mecca as far as the ritual of the *qibla* is concerned, then I could be facing in any direction to pray. One direction actually is Mecca, but the others are not, yet it does not matter since I think they are, and want them to be. I have the right intention, but get it wrong. Now, it is one thing to say that God will reward us for trying to get it right, and quite another to say that he will reward us for only trying to get it right. If intention is all that matters then I might read the Qur'an and the *hadith* and *fiqh* and try to get my behaviour right in line with what I take Islam to be, but unless I acknowledge some authorities and rules that help me interpret the texts we end up with an extreme antinomianism. That is, we abandon laws and rituals and just do things that seem right to us. This is the main burden of argument between the *Hanafis* and their theological enemies on the nature of belief. It seemed to the *Hanafis* that to insist on a narrow interpretation of belief was to fail to do justice to the idea that God will decide, eventually, who is a believer and who is not. To their enemies this seemed like the creation of Islam Lite, where anything goes so long as we are trying to get it right.

The Islam Lite Issue

Where is Gülen in this debate? A casual acquaintance with his views suggests that he is in the Islam Lite league. He emphasizes tolerance and love, and stresses the gentler side of religion, indeed all religion, not just Islam. The detractors of Islam see it as a violent and vengeful set of beliefs, and they are wrong, he argues, since it is far from that. But it does not follow from his argument that anything goes. Muslims are called upon to do certain things, and forbidden from doing other things. In his response to 9/11, for example, he does not say that terrorism should not be associated with Islam; he argues rather that terrorists cannot be Muslims, that there is a total incompatibility between violence towards innocent people and Islam. This is not Islam Lite but an account of the religion as a fully-fledged lifestyle with rules and demands.

Yet how can he say that a terrorist cannot be a Muslim? Shouldn't that decision be left to God? Only God can see into the heart of the terrorist, and if the latter's actions are determined by noble motives, we may disparage the actions but nonetheless respect what lay behind them. Not according to Gülen, and here we should distinguish him sharply from the *Hanafi* tradition on these sorts of issues. It is not enough for our motives to be correct, Gülen argues, they must also result in the right sort of actions, and that is a profoundly anti-*Murji'i* idea.

On the other hand, there are places where Gülen seems to interpret Islam so broadly that action becomes unimportant, or even inevitable. For example: "Even a person who refuses to believe in God or who follows another religion has to be a Muslim perforce as far as bodily existence is concerned" (*Toward a Global Civilization* p. 223), based on the idea of human beings submitting (*muslimun*) to natural laws which God has established. So then action becomes insignificant since all action is Muslim, and nothing can rule a person out. Yet when

he comes to discussing terrorism he takes an entirely different line “no one - and certainly no Muslim - can approve of any terrorist activity” (*ibid.* p.261). He goes on to say on the same page “No terrorist can be a Muslim”. So breathing and walking is no longer enough to define someone as a Muslim. It looks as though there are actions for Gülen which rules someone out as a member of the *ummah*. Yet he also argues that we should not put the emphasis on actions since everyone could be considered a Muslim anyway, so how could anything debar them?

It looks like we are back to Islam Lite here, but this is not the case. All religions have figures who in a short summary of the religion ignore all aspects of the religion except for what they take its essence to be. The famous rabbi Hillel was asked by someone who wanted to be told “while he stood on one leg” (i.e. quickly) what Judaism was all about, and Hillel replied that it was treating someone else as you yourself would be treated, everything else is commentary (Talmud *Shabbat* 31a). People often forget that Hillel then said the enquirer should go next and study the commentary! Judaism Lite looks like it is all about love and community, but in fact Judaism, like all other religions, is far more complicated than that. Exactly the same remarks may be made about Christianity, where people often pick out a few of Jesus’ sayings and construct the religion around them, a bit like Gülen’s way of using Qur’anic passages, while not taking account of a whole range of sayings from the same text that go in precisely the opposite direction.

Arguing for Islam or for Religion?

What we should notice about Gülen’s strategy is that he is not really arguing for Islam against other religions. He is really arguing for religion against secularism. It is here that the Turkish location for his work is so significant, since of course Turkey has in the modern period been an officially secular country battling internally for the minds of its citizens, who are largely religious. In the world as a whole modernity is supposed to lead to the decline of religion as science and technology progress, but as we know this is not what has happened. Yet at a deeper level perhaps it has, and this is where Gülen and a thinker who was very important for him, Said Nursi, are so perceptive. They sense the creeping secularism of the modern world and how it impinges on the religious consciousness even where secularism acts surreptitiously. Do we really, in a scientific age, believe that God brings things about, or do we ascribe what happens to causality and natural law? We may talk about God but really mean science, we may talk about Islam but really mean our social community, and it is the task of Gülen and others to remind people of their origins in a divinely-created reality and their consequent responsibilities. This is not an entirely intellectual enterprise since it is designed to stimulate our emotions and feelings, and so Gülen often uses Sufi vocabulary and talks in terms of love and passion. What he is trying to do is not present a neat theological argument which proves a particular conclusion, but rather help his audience discover or rediscover their spiritual roots in religion. Although to a degree this way back to religion is rational, to a degree it is not and the language he uses calls sometimes for an emotional response by his audience, a response that will help them see the secular world as the limited environment that it is and reconnect them with their spiritual roots in God.

This connection with Sufism is something that Gülen quite rightly sees as a distinctive Turkish or at least Central Asian contribution to the global appeal of Islam. Certainly it was in the Arabian Peninsula that Islam first became established in Medina and Mecca, but it was the Central Asian milieu and the thinkers who lived there such as *Bukhari*, *Tirmidhi* etc. who did so much to shape the original message into a form that enabled it to become ubiquitous. Here he pointed to the *Hanafi* tradition, especially in its *Maturidi* aspect, and in particular to

its relative tolerance of existing legal and social frameworks, and the notion of *istihsan* or public welfare as a constraining concept in jurisprudence. Once we have a form of Islam that involves both interior psychological states such as Sufism and exterior general conditions of welfare such as we find in the *Hanafi* School, we have a combination of positive factors that really powers a religion along. According to Gülen, this is one of the explanations for the early and continuing success of Islam.

Identifying the Enemy, Identifying the Audience

Within the modern world Gülen rightly identifies secularism as the major enemy of Islam. Of course, he may well have been thinking of his own local context in a Turkey that in the last century set out determinedly on a secular path, on a route to becoming yet another European country. But over time the power of the secular urban elite in Turkey has been weakened by the influx of more religious people from the countryside, and indeed Europe now looks far more Muslim than it did a hundred years ago, with the large-scale immigration of Muslims and their high birth rate into Europe. The main struggle lies over education, something that was grasped immediately by the secular authorities in Turkey when they wrested education away from religious groups and established a dual system of education, forbidding those attending religious schools to participate in general education. The policies of the present AKP government in Turkey are designed slowly and gradually to reverse this divorce between religion and education, and all ideological groups now appreciate the significance of education and its control in a world where knowledge and how it is viewed and utilized have become major rallying points for competing groups in society.

Before we can assess Gülen's methodology, we have to try to understand his audience. If we think of his audience as theologians then his material is often unsatisfactory, since it skirts a great deal of theological complexity and detail, and appears rather naive in its directness. Theologians require far more of an argument, and a real attempt to show why alternative points of view are invalid. If we think of his audience as committed Muslims who are deeply within a particular Islamic school that rejects his approach, we are also going to be unimpressed by his arguments. To argue with a *Hanbali*, for instance, one needs to compare and contrast their use of *hadith* and what implications may be drawn from those *hadith*. We would need to discuss which notion of *iman* or faith was better, the strict *Hanbali* notion based on action or the looser *Hanafi* notion based on the intentions of the individual. One could see how this argument might go, and of course within the tradition of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) there are many such arguments on both sides. Gülen does not really enter this sort of debate in most of his works.

The audience he sees himself as confronting are those who have an interest in religion and perhaps think they are Muslims but have difficulty in seeing how to make religion part of their daily lives in a world of science and technology. Or they might be people in no religion at all who hear vaguely hostile comments made about Islam and wonder if it is as bad as it is made out to be. Or they are people who regard themselves as interested in spirituality but not in any specific faith, a very common attitude of Europeans today. As the Catholic writer G K Chesterton is said to have remarked, when people lose faith in God they do not then believe in nothing; they believe in anything. Gülen wants to show such an audience that there are good reasons for respecting the contribution that Islam can make to what is sometimes referred to as our modern spiritual crisis, and the way to do this is to concentrate on those aspects of Islam that are in tune with contemporary democratic life. This means stressing the role of tolerance and freedom of thought, the equality of the sexes and love, all ideas that are

widely popular and can be shown to have links with aspects of Islam. These ideas are also not those generally associated with Islam in the mind of the public, and Gülen wants to show that there is nothing essentially stern and forbidding about Islam. On the contrary, it is a faith quite capable of reinventing itself and adjusting to modern times and new situations, although this is certainly not how he phrases it.

I think Gülen has another audience in mind, and this is a specifically Turkish audience, but one that has parallels elsewhere. This is an audience that is secular in the sense that it finds no place for God in its heart. This audience is not confined to those without religion, for plenty of nominal believers do not really act as though God were of significance, and their thought processes are not clearly different from those without faith. Like his mentor Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, Gülen is set on creating an *ihya'*, a revival of enthusiasm for religion and Islam in particular, to re-establish religion and God in particular at the centre of our daily life and thought. This is difficult to do since so much in modern life conspires to drive God away from our thinking, and we are often particularly resistant to acknowledging His role in our lives. So in the appropriate Sufi way so popular in Turkish Islam Gülen assembles reminders (*dhikr*) of the role of God designed to return us to an understanding of this very basic notion.

The modern *Ummah* (Community)

In the past the community (*umma*) of the believers was often a stable and geographically proximate group of individuals. Behaviour was regulated by tradition and parents and grandparents passed on their traditional ways of doing things to their descendants. There were other people around who did not share each other's precise customs, but they often lived in their own communities and did not interact much with those of different beliefs and behaviour. It was not then difficult to continue with the traditional way of doing things, since there were few alternatives and huge social costs in choosing them. But this is not the situation in modern times, and has not been for some time. People move around a lot, the old stable communities have often been uprooted and links with the past severed. The implications of this are everywhere to be seen in Turkey, for example, where many people have moved from the countryside to the city, bringing their traditional beliefs with them, but also raising the possibility that without the support of their rural social environment they will stray from religion. This possibility is only magnified by the phenomenon of migrating away from Turkey entirely, sometimes to a different continent and environment. Within this new situation the individual may feel that new ways of thinking are appropriate, and so abandon what had previously been done in a natural and automatic manner.

Although the Turkish example is important, what is important about it is that it is not limited to Turkey and its citizens. We all live in a context in which we may have left our homeland and travelled far away to set up lives elsewhere. Globalization is a phenomenon which today affects everyone, not just people in one or two countries. So we are all potentially deracinated in the ways that Gülen think of his audience. Once we understand his view of his audience, we can understand how he structures his arguments. He is trying to remind people that wherever they live, they live under the watchful eye of God, that however successful they feel themselves to be, their success is ultimately in the hands of God and not themselves. Gülen wants to remind those who call themselves Muslims of the importance of valuing life and democracy, and of how Islam is a religion based on love and peace. Again, people who live in a new environment may be thrown back on a simplistic approach to Islam which divides up the world into believers and their enemies, and which allows the former to carry out gratuitous acts of violence and terror on the latter. They need to be reminded that this is not in fact

what Islam is about, and so we see him highlighting those aspects of Islam which regulate behaviour in socially acceptable ways.

But is not this a poor sort of argument? After all, there are theological views in Islamic culture that go in different directions, and Gülen surely does not refute those views merely by quoting and emphasizing alternative interpretations and Traditions (*ahadith*). This was the approach that we characterized above as that of defending Islam Lite, where we interpret Islam as a rather wishy-washy religion unable to take a strong line on any issue.

Gülen is not guilty of defending such an anodyne version of Islam, though. Here we need to take seriously the recourse to the language of Sufism which is so significant for him. The language of Sufism does not operate by presenting a fully-fledged version of religion. Rather, it brings to our attention important aspects of our lives and our relationship with God, in much the same way that Wittgenstein characterizes philosophy as “assembling reminders for a particular purpose” (*Philosophical Investigations* para.127). These reminders do not in themselves establish a detailed and final view of anything, and certainly not of a religion. What they do is bring out some core facts and experiences which Gülen thinks we are aware of despite the veneer of modernity and secularism that may hide them from us. We may need a nudge in the right direction, and that is the point of his writings. Sometimes the nudge is provided by an argument, or part of an argument, and sometimes by an example, something that grabs our imagination and moves us in a certain direction. Here he confirms to a very traditional pattern of literary work in Islamic thought, yet now transformed and made appropriate for a very different modern audience. For a new sort of world we need a new sort of rhetoric, Gülen suggests, yet the ideas which are presented are not new at all. They are the traditional principles of faith, and although the world and the audience may change, the principles themselves stay the same. Gülen is very effective in reconciling these two ideas that seem to pull in opposite directions, and it is here that his main contribution to the rediscovery of religion in modern times lies.