

# An Evangelical Perspective on the Religious and Political Views of M. Fethullah Gülen and the Gülen Movement<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *At a time of great tumult within the Muslim world, M. Fethullah Gülen, a retired Turkish cleric and widely-known public intellectual who lives in the United States, leads an influential group of Sunni Muslims in the Sufi tradition, who comprise the Hizmet (Service) Movement. Known for denouncing terrorism, for advocating love, tolerance, and interfaith dialogue, for advocating democracy, and for promoting education and sponsoring educational institutions, Gülen and his followers emphasize many of the same themes as American Evangelical Christians, and sometimes engender similar suspicions among secularists. Although the theological views of Evangelicals and Gülen on the nature of Jesus and the reliability of Christian and Muslim scriptures are ultimately irreconcilable, other points of agreement provide the basis for continuing dialogue, for cooperation against secularism and materialism, and for opposition to terrorism. The extent of this cooperation may largely depend on whether Evangelicals accept the sincerity of Gülen's own commitment to democracy and whether Gülen and his followers now recognize that state laws or private violence against those who have committed perceived acts of blasphemy and apostasy are inconsistent with the Quar'anic principle that "there is no compulsion in religion" and vest dangerous power in the hands of religious majorities.*

Events in the Middle East and the rest of the Muslim world connected with the "Arab Spring" are among the most dramatic in the world since

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the fall of the Iron Curtain. Most media attention is focusing on the bravery of individuals engaged in popular demonstrations, on continuing acts of violent governmental repression, and on the possibility of further regime changes. The direction of the Muslim world, and especially the manner in which it adopts and balances ideals of democracy and human rights, may well ultimately be decided by less dramatic forces with stronger institutional roots.

These may well include the influence of a movement by M. Fethullah Gülen a prolific Muslim author from Turkey who has been recognized as one of the world's top intellectuals.<sup>2</sup> Many of his best-selling books advocating love and tolerance have been translated into English. His group sponsors numerous trips by American educators and others to Turkey, including one in which this author has participated, and Gülen has held numerous conferences bringing together scholars from diverse disciplines. Gülen was influenced by Said Nursi (1873-1960), the author of volumes of Qur'anic exegeses called *The Epistles of Light*, who was associated with the Nur movement, which emphasized the unity between religion and science. The Nur movement was itself inspired by Mawlana Jalal al-Din al Rumi (1207-72), a follower of Sufism, a mystical strand of Sunni Islam that emphasizes intense personal religious devotion, love, and kindness and is positively tied to the recognition of human rights (Muedini, 2010).

This article seeks to fill the void in current literature by evaluating Gülen's religious and political views, and those of the Hizmet (Service) Movement that he has inspired, from an Evangelical Christian perspective (See Marsden, 1991). It therefore hopes to help members of both groups as they seek to understand, and as they engage in dialogue with, one another.

Citing Johnston (1991:260-263), Kellstedt et al. (1996, 246) associate Evangelicals with four key beliefs. These are the following:

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, an article in *Prospect Magazine* lists him as the world's top public intellectual. See Christopher Hitchens, "The Top 100 Public Intellectuals" in "Meet the World's Top Public Intellectual," Reprinted from *Foreign Policy* # 166 (May/June 2008).

(1) The importance of witness and mission (spreading the evangel's message), (2) a high view of biblical authority (the source of the evangel), (3) the belief that salvation comes only from faith in Jesus Christ (the mechanism of the evangel), and (4) an emphasis on personal acceptance of salvation.

Largely ignoring the intra-faith differences within Evangelicalism, this article concentrates on the similarities and differences between evangelical Christianity, especially its conservative manifestations, and Gülen's branch of Islam. These comparisons should illumine the influence on politics and religion that Gülen and his followers might have not only in Turkey but also within the U.S. and other parts of the world and might point the way to future areas of dialogue and cooperation.

#### *BRIEF SKETCH OF GÜLEN*

M. Fetullah Gülen was the son of an imam named Ramiz Efendi in the Pasinler district of Erzurum in northeast Turkey in 1938 (some sources say 1941). He spent only a few years at religious schools (*madrassa*) before passing an exam given by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs in 1958 or 1959 and beginning a career as a traveling preacher, or imam, during which he honed his oratorical abilities (Ergene, 2008, 6-14). He acquainted himself with the writings of major European philosophers during service in the military that began in 1961 and later established his reputation through delivering sermons that answered parishioners' questions and through religious talks in Turkish coffee-houses (Muslim thinker, p. 8). He retired from formal teaching in 1981 and left Turkey after encountering opposition from leaders of a "soft" military coup in 1997 (he had been imprisoned for six months in 1971 for allegedly threatening the Turkish conception of separation of church and state), and he has lived in Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania since 1999, where he is close to needed medical care. He founded the Journalists and Writers Foundation in 1994, which has issued Avant Declarations on "Islam and Secularism," "Islam and Democracy," and on "Pluralism" (Yavuz and Esposito 2003, 251-256).

Despite his own austere lifestyle, Gülen's writings and contributions from his followers have generated considerable revenue, which he has used to purchase media outlets and to found hundreds of educational institutions throughout Turkey, former Soviet republics, and even in North America (Park, 2008; Oktem, 2002, 392-93). He renounced the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in full-page newspaper ads and in subsequent speeches (Gülen, 2002, 95-100), has supported democratic institutions through the Avant Declarations, and has engaged in dialogue both with fellow Muslims and with Western religious leaders.

Like Evangelicals, Gülen ties political and social reform to individual reform. He thus observes that "Those who attempt to reform the world must first reform themselves" (Gülen, 2009, 91). He notes that "The Islamic community needs a resurrection; it needs a serious reform in its mental, spiritual, and intellectual faculties" (Ergene, 2008, quoting Gülen's *The Stature of Our Souls*). Reform cannot come "from the tatters of capitalism, or the fantasy of communism, or the debris of socialism, or the hybrids of social democracy, or old-fashioned liberalism" (*Ibid.*, 102).

Gülen believes that schools can be as influential as mosques in shaping the future of civilization. He seeks to educate a "golden generation" whose religious faith will reinvigorate Turkey and the entire world (Yavuz and Esposito, 2003, 58). He envisions a new millennium that "will produce genuinely enlightened people with hearts illumined by religious sciences and spirituality, minds illuminated with positive sciences, characterized by all kinds of humane merits and moral values, and cognizant of the socioeconomic and political conditions of their time" (Gülen, 2002, 30).

### *SIMILARITIES*

Samuel B. Huntington has emphasized the radical differences among worldviews, which he associates with the "clash of civilizations" (1998; also see Penaskovic). Although some world views are ultimately irreconcilable and incompatible, false perceptions can sometimes pose imaginary obstacles or exaggerate perceived differences. In visiting

Athens (Acts chapter 17), St. Paul attempted to bridge gaps between Christianity and the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers of his day. Contemporary evangelicals should be willing to do no less. An overview of M. Fetullah Gülen's interpretation of Islam and that of evangelical Christianity reveals many points of agreement, some true of Christianity and Islam in general and others fairly specific to Evangelicals and the followers of Gülen.

### **Monotheism**

The most obvious point of similarity between the Gülen movement and Evangelical Christianity is that both are monotheistic. In contrast both to polytheists, who worship many gods, and pantheists, who view God as pervading all things, both religions believe that one God is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe and of its people. While the faiths are dominant in different areas of the world, both proclaim themselves to be world religions, and both have at times directed their messages to, and have interacted with, the others' adherents (Gartenstein-Ross, 2005).

In addition to being monotheistic, Christianity and Islam, like Judaism, are Abrahamic religions (but see Levenson, 2010), and all three faiths share the belief that Hebrew scriptures contain revelations from God. Both modern Judaism and Islam reject Christians' identification of Jesus as the Son of God. Some Muslims associate Christian trinitarianism with the view that there are three gods. Christians, in turn, sometimes interpret the birth of Islam as a reaction to Christian heresies that portrayed Jesus as a separate God rather than as part of what Christians understand to be the Trinity (George, n.d.).

### **Opposition to Secularism, Materialism, Positivism, and Historicism**

Gülen and Evangelicals recognize the enduring importance of human spirituality. Both reject the idea that increased modernization and enlightenment must bring about increased secularization (See Ergene,

2008, 28).<sup>3</sup> Pointing to such similarities, Kreeft observes of Islam generally that few Muslims are “indifferentists, moral pragmatists, hedonists, utilitarians, materialists, subjectivists, relativists or libertines” (1010, 12). Interestingly, Gülen associates the birth of modern skepticism with Christianity (1998, v), just as conservative Evangelicals often associate such skepticism with religious liberalism.

Like Evangelicals, Gülen rejects logical positivism, which seeks to reduce reality to that which human senses can observe and measure, and legal positivism, which believes that all law is man-made. Because some laws, indeed those that are most foundational, are revealed, humans do not have an unlimited right to change them. Like Evangelicals, Gülen has a high view of truth and does not, like some postmodernists, put the word truth within quotation marks or view it (like Karl Marx) as a mere product of history.

### **A High View of Humanity and Human Destiny**

Both Gülen and Evangelicals share the view that God created man in His image (Gen. 1:26). Evangelicals would agree with Gülen that “Humanity has always been the crown of creation” (2009, 117). The two divisions of the Ten Commandments are complementary. To serve humanity is thus to serve God. Though nothing will take the place of houses of worship, members of the Gülen movement and Evangelicals have both founded numerous other organizations, including educational institutions, hospitals, and charities to serve the wider humanity. Evangelicals could easily adapt Gülen’s statement that “all human beings are one’s brothers and sisters. Muslims are one’s brothers and sisters in religion, while non-Muslims are one’s brothers and sisters in humanity” (Quoted in Ebaugh, 2010, 37).

Jesus taught that those who believed in Him would have eternal life with Him in heaven (John 14). Evangelical Christians believe that Jesus rose bodily from the grave and that their own spirits will one day be reunited with resurrected bodies. Similarly, Gülen, like Muslims

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<sup>3</sup> In an interesting twist, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, believed that secularism was a prelude to modernization. See Kuchkan (2003, 486).

generally, places great emphasis on the resurrection of the body. Like most Evangelicals, he believes in both a literal heaven and a literal hell. Gülen's own view is arguably even more corporeal than that of some Evangelicals:

God will rebuild the women of Paradise without defect and as virgins, and they will excel Paradise girls in beauty. The people of Paradise will live in magnificent palaces set in gardens full of splendid trees, beneath which will flow rivers of honey, pure water, milk, and other beverages. On the other hand, the people of Hell will suffer great remorse and burn in fire (2006a, 159).

### **Reason and Revelation**

Evangelicals and Gülen both take high views of divine revelation. Using Fundamentalists rather than Evangelicals for a point of comparison, Toby Lester has observed that:

The orthodox Muslim view of the Koran as self-evidently the Word of God, perfect and inimitable in message, language, style, and form, is strikingly similar to the fundamentalist Christian notion of the Bible's 'inerrancy' and 'verbal inspiration' that is still common in many places today. (1999, Part I)

Gülen proclaims that the Qur'an "is entirely reliable" (Gülen, 2000, 74). He claims that "The Qur'an is absolutely different from any human product in the transcendence of its perspective and viewpoint" (Gülen, 2000, 76). He continues: "In the Qur'an, every syllable carries this impression of sublime intensity belonging to a message from One who is All-Knowing and All-Merciful" (Gülen, 2000, 76). Like Christians who portray revelation as progressive, so too, Gülen notes that "The Revelation [Qur'an] began when it was time for humanity to reach maturity" (Gülen, 2000, 83). In a fairly extraordinary statement, Gülen says that Islam is superior to Judaism and Christianity in part because: "These religions do not contain in their books the religious systems that came after them. In contrast, Islam contains all religions" (Quoted in Sevindi, 2008, 40).

Evangelicals believe that Scripture provided the basis for the investigations of natural scientists into the created world, and that

reason and revelation are therefore complementary. Gülen espouses a similar view. Quoting Bediüzzaman, he observes that “Allah has two books: One is the book of the universe, the other the Qur’an” (quoted in Sevindi, 2008, 23). Significantly, Gülen immediately follows his discussion of the Qur’an with a discussion of its relation to science (Gülen, 2000, 99ff).

Despite such emphases, scientific understandings on the part of both Evangelicals and Gülen are sometimes superficial. Despite far less dogmatism than in the past (See Ostling, 2011), some evangelicals continue to espouse a “young earth” theory that has little scientific support but that has been widely copied and embraced by conservative Muslims in Turkey (Edis, 2008). Similarly, Gülen often argues that the Koran embodied knowledge that modern scientists have only recently discovered or that the Koran preternaturally predicted various modern scientific advances (Gülen, 2006a, 239-246). Gülen’s view that “If a new-born could lead a completely isolated life free of environmental effects, he or she would remain a natural Muslim” (2000, 40) seems particularly parochial and naïve.

Just as Evangelicals strongly oppose communism and atheism, Gülen is particularly opposed to “scientific materialism” (Gülen, 2002, 81) and to atheistic views of evolution that suggest that humankind developed without divine intervention. Like Phillip E. Johnson (1990), a prominent evangelical writer, Gülen has attacked those who have presented Darwinian theories of evolution as “fact instead of theory” (Gülen, 2000, 191).

### **Pietism and Virtues**

Gülen has written about (2006c) and is often associated with Sufism. This branch of Islam emphasizes both mystical union with God and ethical living. Like pietistic Evangelicals, most Sufi orders eschew alcohol; condemn sex outside of marriage; oppose pornography and easy divorce; and emphasize the importance of moderation and the value of family life. Gülen’s supporters report that he never smoked “or indulged his pleasure-oriented passions” (Yuvuz and Esposito, 2003, 20). He has never been married and reportedly spends most of his day meditating, teaching, and writing (Yucel, 2000, 4-5). Gülen



comments that “Sufism requires the strict observance of all religious obligations, an austere lifestyle, and the renunciation of carnal desires. Through this method of spiritual self-discipline, the individual’s heart is purified and his or her senses and faculties are employed in the way of God, which means that the traveler can now begin to live on a spiritual level” (Gülen, 2009, 165).

Gülen envisions building a global civilization on love and tolerance.<sup>4</sup> Gülen understands love to be self-giving. Like St. Paul (I Cor. 13), Gülen portrays it as the highest virtue (Gülen, 2009, initial chapter on love). Penaskovic ties Gülen’s views to “the Qur’an itself, the hadith or stories about what Muhammad did, and . . . his reading of the Sufi tradition” (n.d., 414). Gülen, in turn, links love to mercy and forgiveness. Christians believe that Jesus embodied these virtues, which are essential to their own salvation. Like Evangelical Christians, the Gülen movement encourages its members to meet regularly together in small discussion and study groups (*cemaats*) and to give generously to its causes and charities (Ebaugh, 2010, 54).

Both conservative Evangelicals and members of the Gülen movement believe that women share with men in their accountability to God but are more likely than more liberal adherents of the faith to view them as subordinate to their husbands and to male leaders. Both groups value modesty and stress women’s roles in family life. Both are less likely to promote women to teaching and leadership positions within their faiths and more likely to encourage them to meet in their own groups (Ebaugh, 2010, 120).

Gülen’s view of ethics is teleological in that it ties human behavior to human destiny. Gülen further describes proper ethical

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<sup>4</sup> I suspect that there are parallels between Gülen and American postmillennialism, which, as described by Noll and Harlow, “taught that Christ’s Second Coming will occur at the end of the thousand years of peace foretold in scripture” and thus “implied that human efforts on behalf of social justice form part of the divine plan to bring about the day of the Lord” (2007, 133). My overall impression is that Gülen does not have a belief equivalent to the Christian notion of original sin, which can serve to limit expectations of human nature. He is quoted as saying that “The nuclei of goodness and beauty are always within man. There are no nuclei of evil and ugliness.” See Sevindi, 2008, p. 6.

behavior as that of a mean. He thus observes that “Every virtue therefore has innumerable vices, since there is only one center in a circle but an infinite number of points around it.” Similarly, he writes that “There are two extremes related to each moral virtue: deficiency or excess” (Gülen, 2002, 60). Both aspects of Gülen’s teaching are compatible with evangelical thinking. Evangelicals employ the teleological approach when they affirm the Westminster Catechism’s statement that “Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever” (“The Larger Catechism,” 1990, 3). Similarly, Evangelicals emphasize the importance of moderation and endorse Paul’s exhortation to “Let your moderation be known to all men” (Phil. 4:5).

### **Evangelism and Education**

Evangelicals take Jesus’ Great Commission, to “make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 18. 19-20) seriously. Evangelicals own many radio stations and some television networks in the U.S. Evangelical sermons and publications detail strategies for effective witness (sometimes to Muslims, see McDowell and Zaka, 1999 and Adeney, 2000), and Evangelicals send missionaries and sponsor humanitarian aid programs throughout the world. Evangelicals have supported home schooling, charter schools, and Christian colleges and universities both to shelter their children from worldly influences and to combat the increasing secularism of public education.

Like Evangelicals, Gülen has adapted modern technology to spreading his message. In advising believers how to win others to faith, Gülen counsels that “One should seek and find ways to win entry into the heart and soul of the person addressed” (Gülen, 2000, 79). He says that Muslims should be knowledgeable not only about their own faith but also about their culture. He advises generosity, open-handedness and benevolence (Gülen, 2000, 90) and believes that education can play as important a role as preaching.

Like Evangelicals, Gülen is genuinely concerned about, and arguably perplexed by, the eternal fate of those who do not know God or who learn what they know about Him through another faith. He addresses this issue in answering, “What happens to people born and

living in non-Islamic countries?” (Gülen, 2000, 147; also see Gülen, 1998, 149-160; for Christian equivalent, see Kreeft, 2010, 94-106). Noting that “there is no general statement or decree in Islam that those who live in non-Islamic countries will go to Hell” (Gülen, 2000, 147), Gülen observes that Islamic scholars are split on the subject and, with a missionary emphasis that would be familiar to most Evangelicals (and that assumes the truth of his own faith), that the issue would be largely moot if modern Muslims were as committed to spreading their faith as the early companions of Muhammad: “We have failed to take Islam to them. Even in our own countries we have been unable to exert enough effort or support the cause of Islam to make our own people know it properly” (*Ibid.*, 156).

### **Religion and the Public Sphere**

Through long periods in history, both Christianity and Islam were joined to, and supported by, ruling state powers. For Christianity, this development began with the Emperor Constantine and continued up to, and in some cases beyond, the Protestant Reformation. The ties between mosque and state go back to the time of Muhammad. A majority of nations with Islamic majorities still mix secular and religious laws, as Turkey did during the Ottoman Empire, and, while typically upholding separation of church and state, Evangelicals often stress connections between the Founding Fathers and Christianity.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938) built modern Turkey on six principles: “nationalism, secularism, republicanism, statism, reformism, and populism” (Yavuz & Esposito, 2003, xx-xxi; Also see Thumann, 2010). Turkish secularism is closer to the French idea of laicism than to America’s disestablishment as expressed in the First Amendment (Yavuz & Esposito, 2003). The Turkish idea is more anti-clerical and expresses a “Jacobin faith ‘in the primacy of politics and in the ability of politics to reconstitute society’” (Yavuz & Esposito, 2003, xvi, quoting Eisenstadt 1999, 93). Gülen thus reacts to the Turkish separation of church and state much as American conservative evangelicals sometimes react negatively to court decisions limiting the display of religious symbols on public property or religious exercises in public schools that they believe not only separate, but actually

disadvantage, or denigrate, religious. Ahmet T. Kuru (2009) accordingly distinguishes what he believes to be Gülen's "passive" secularism with the Kemalists "assertive" secularism" (for possible positive connections between democracy and favoritism to religion, see Driessen, 2010). A pro-Gülen columnist has noted that "The Nursi-Gülen tradition doesn't envision an 'Islamic state.' It rather seeks a liberal-democratic state that will be tolerant to its missionary work" (Quoted in Strauss, 2011).

Both Evangelical Christians and Moslems bring their religious convictions to the public square (Neuhaus, 1984). In the U.S., conservative Evangelicals often oppose abortion, pornography, and gay marriage; seek to teach abstinence in public schools; and favor vouchers for the support of parochial schools while more liberal Evangelical counterparts seek to use government to reduce poverty, prohibit discrimination, and bring about social justice. Although revealed religions stand against dictatorial governments whose rulers set themselves up in place of God (Wildavsky, 1984), neither evangelical Christians nor Gülen believes that scriptures mandate a particular political system, and both now commend democracy.

In a study of groups on the Christian Right, that includes Evangelicals, Nathaniel J. Klemp argues that they sometimes encourage an "*ethos of intolerance*" by emphasizing democratic participation over democratic deliberation (2010, 15). Evangelical associations between Christianity and Americanism and attempts to return America to its putative Christian roots, sometimes encounters opposition from those who believe they are improperly forcing their views on others.

Such tension may also be implicit in Gülen's thought. In describing the Gülen movement, M. Hakan Yavuz thus observes that "Islam remains the basic criterion of national identity and loyalty. Being a Muslim becomes a *sine qua non* for being a Turk, and there is no difference between a Bosnian and a Kazak" (2003, 24; See also Kucukcan, 2003, 489). Although the attempt to expand citizenship beyond ethnic identities is commendable, from an evangelical perspective, this substitutes one false form of national identity (religion) for another (ethnicity). Such an approach poses problems for Christians, Jews, and even non-Sunni Muslims in Turkey who seek to

be good citizens (See Tasch, 2010), much like arguments sometimes made by conservative Evangelicals that the U.S. is a Christian nation threaten full citizenship for Muslims and other non-Christians.

Ran Hirschl has argued in a recent book (2010) that many nations have adopted constitutional theocracies that have simultaneously enshrined some form of religious recognition (or theocracy) with constitutionalism, often enforced through judicial review. He paints a relatively hopeful picture of the manner in which constitutionalism can moderate religious enthusiasm and repression. Turkey is one of the nations that he highlights. Despite a less than perfect human rights record, Turkey's desire to enter the European Union continues to be one factor that encourages protections connected to constitutionalism. Hirschl's analysis suggests that a state somewhat more sympathetic to public religious exercise than Turkey's secularist regime might still remain largely compatible with democratic values (Also see Sterling, 2011).

### DIFFERENCES

Evangelical Christianity and the Gülen movement developed from different historical circumstances, and they emphasize different, and sometimes, contradictory beliefs. Many such beliefs involve matters of fundamental theological importance. It is, of course, important to recognize that not every *doctrinal* difference necessarily implies a *political* difference or serves as an obstacle to dialogue or cooperation.

### Views of Christ and Muhammad

Evangelicals believe that Jesus was both a Son of Man (fully human) and the Son of God (fully divine).<sup>5</sup> They believe that Jesus is God

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<sup>5</sup> By contrast, the Monophysite view (later identified by the dominant Christian group as a heresy) stressed the divinity of Christ over his humanity, and the Nestorians stressed his humanity over his divinity. See Christopher, 1972, 11. Needless to say, Christians in general and Evangelicals in particular do not believe that the Sonship of Christ was the result of a physical relationship between God and Mary. Evangelicals continue to debate the appropriateness of attempting to avoid this misunderstanding by substituting terms for the "Son of God" in Bible translations for Arab countries (See Hansen, 2011).

incarnate in human flesh (John 1:1) and that he came from heaven to earth to reveal the nature of God to mankind. They further believe that He voluntarily laid down His life on the cross to secure salvation that humans could not secure for themselves and that God vindicated His Sonship by raising Him from the grave.

By contrast, Gülen does not believe that Jesus or Muhammad was either God, or the Son of God (Gülen, 2000, 18); he observes that God “does not countenance associating any partners with Him, whether in the form of something created, a person, or a concept” (2006b, 201). Gülen states that Muhammad is the ultimate example of proper human conduct: “He [God] created Muhammad to describe the meaning of creation to humanity.” Similarly, Gülen calls Muhammad “the unflinching, unerring guide, the exemplar to be taken as a model by all, and the one who leads to the Right Path” (Gülen, 2008, 99). He does, however, note elsewhere that “There is a clear space between the Messenger and the Message revealed to him, as clear as between a person and his or her Creator” (Gülen, 2000, 81).

Christians recognize that Christ was in a long line of prophets (Heb. 1:1). Whereas Evangelical Christians see Jesus as having fulfilled the prophetic tradition, Gülen cites passages that they interpret as referring to the Holy Spirit as references to Muhammad (Gülen, 2006b, 12-13, interpreting John 16:7-8). Few Evangelical Christians would be likely to write a heading, as Gülen does, entitled “Following Prophet Muhammad” (Gülen, 2006b, xxiii), or anyone other than Jesus Himself.

### **Views of One Another’s Scriptures**

Although they sometimes required them to pay special taxes, countries governed by Muslims traditionally protected Jews and Christians as “People of the Book” who were superior to pagans. In addition to tracing the roots of their faith through Abraham, all three religions partly rely on Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament); additionally, Christians and, to a lesser degree Muslims, accept the veracity of the New Testament. Evangelicals have a particularly high view of scriptures. Many Evangelicals believe them to be “inerrant,” and many further insist on the historicity of the Garden of Eden, the flood, the

story of Jonah and the whale, and other stories that more liberal Christians interpret allegorically. Both Evangelicals and Muslims believe that God can suspend ordinary laws of nature to permit miracles.

Few Evangelical Christians have probably read the Qur'an and other Muslim writings, and fewer still would accept their authority. Islamic Scriptures present orthodox Christians with issues similar to those that the New Testament poses for orthodox Jews. Additional written revelations, especially those that conflict with existing texts, suggests that the former are either flawed or inadequate.

Thus, although Gülen says that "Islam accepts Christianity and its holy scriptures," (Quoted in Sevindi, 2008, 76), he refers to "the questionable authenticity" of the "current versions" of the Old and New Testaments (Gülen, 2006b, 14), and he interprets, and often dismisses, Jewish and Christian scriptures on the basis of the Qur'an.<sup>6</sup> He observes that "If, one day, the original copies or the least altered copies of the Torah and the Gospel are discovered, they will contain explicit references to the last Messenger [Muhammad]" (*Ibid.*). He notes that "Contrary to the Biblical account that he cursed the day of his birth (Job 3:1) and God openly (Job 7:20-21), and justified himself rather than God (Job 32:2), Job bore his afflictions for years with any objection." He says that:

The Qur'an frees Jesus from his followers' mistaken deification of him and from his own people's denial of his Prophethood, and explains that God had no sons and daughters. It also clears the Israelite and non-Israelite Prophets of their supposed 'sins' mentioned in the Bible. It presents Jesus as a spirit from God breathed into the Virgin Mary" (*Ibid.*, 128).

Further, in comparing Islamic and Christian Scriptures, Gülen states that:

Since we have only the translations of the Old and New Testaments, in which so many changes have been made, if the Qur'an had not

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<sup>6</sup> An unidentified reviewer of this article observes that Muhammad did not indulge in similar criticisms of Christian Scriptures.

been revealed, we would not have true knowledge of the Israelite Prophets, especially Prophet Jesus, and the original beliefs of Christianity and Judaism. (Gülen, 2006a, 186-87).

Elsewhere he observes that “even if the earlier Scriptures and Law had not been corrupted, they could not have retained legitimacy, since their authority from God was abrogated by the advent of Islam” (1998, 38).

Gülen clearly subordinates Christian scriptures to the Qur’an, and the Jesus of the gospels to that of the Qur’an. Believing that Islamic texts came directly from God in their current language, Gülen has even less interest in either higher or lower criticisms of such texts than conservative Evangelicals (who generally reject the former as the product of liberal skeptics but sometimes accept the latter as a means to ascertain the best extant texts) have in such analyses of the Old and New Testaments.

### **Different Views of the Prophets**

Evangelical Christians strive to imitate Christ, whom they believe to have led the only perfect life. Paul says that all others “have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). As fallen creatures, Evangelicals believe that God needs to change human hearts. Christians rely on the presence of the Holy Spirit to achieve the virtues of “love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, meekness, [and] kindness” (Gal. 5:22). Christian scriptures encourage followers to strive toward perfection but warn that they will never attain it in this life. Indeed, the apostle John warns that “If we say we have no sin, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us” (I Jn. 1:9).

By contrast, Gülen believes that “Prophets have no bodily or mental defects” (Gülen, 2006b, 154). He specifically says that “like every other Prophet, God’s Messenger has no blemish and is innocent of what they accuse him. Nor can his infallibility be doubted” (*Ibid.*). Gülen challenges Old Testament accounts of David by rhetorically asking, “Could such a noble Prophet ever commit adultery with a married woman, plot her husband’s death and then marry her?” (*Ibid.*, 127). Apparently, Gülen distinguishes between “mistakes” that prophets might from time to time have made to serve as lessons to their



followers, from more serious “sins,” and he devotes much of his apologetics to defending Muhammad against criticisms.

Responding to criticism of Mohammed’s family life, Gülen notes that Muhammad was faithful to his first wife, Khadija, a woman older than he, until her death, and he does not believe Muhammad’s example is a justification for others to engage in polygamy. Gülen observes that some godly men in the Old Testament, including Abraham, David, and Solomon, were polygamists. Gülen further argues that Muhammad’s ability to please all his wives simultaneously is actually an indication of his perfection (2006b, 160-61).

Gülen believes that Muhammad had to assume military leadership in order to assure the survival of his faith against hostile elements and that war is not an element of the faith for modern Muslims to emulate. Gülen stresses that Islam “literally means ‘peace, salvation, and submission’” (2006b, 209), and that the greatest jihad is “fighting to overcome carnal desires and evil inclinations” (2006b, 203).

### **The Way of Salvation**

Despite the importance of eternal life, Christians are far from unanimous about the means of salvation. Protestant Reformers accused Catholic authorities of teaching salvation by works. They were particularly critical of the church’s sale of indulgences for sins and the church’s view that individuals could not be saved apart from partaking of church-administered sacraments.<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther and other reformers emphasized with the prophet Habakuk (2:4) that “the just shall live by faith,” and most subsequent Protestant theology, including Evangelicalism, is based on this premise.

Some of the excesses against which Protestants were reacting were not orthodox Catholicism. The Church has acknowledged abuses in the issuance of indulgences. While continuing to value the sacraments, modern Catholics would view such sacraments as an act of

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<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in what Protestants would consider to be an improper form of works-righteousness, the pope had promised individuals who died in the crusades that they would achieve eternal life through this sacrifice. (See Asbridge, 2004, 75).

“faith” than as a “work.” In any case, Evangelicals are relatively unanimous in their belief that “by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works lest anyone should boast.” (Eph. 2:8-9)

Evangelicals are equally persuaded that such faith should result in good works. One is saved by faith, unto good works, which is its logical fruit. Calvinists, who are a prominent offshoot of the Reformation, embodied a “work ethic” that stemmed from a belief that they should attend to earthly tasks with the same fervor that they applied to eternal ones; alternatively, some think that they sometimes sought to “prove” their “calling” by working to attain signs of God’s favor (for note on parallels, see Fuller, 2008, 57).

Gülen and the wider Islamic community believe that one is saved by a combination of faith and good works rather than by the former alone. Much of Gülen’s own good works appear to be motivated by the belief that he needs to do the best that he can in this life to assure his existence in the life to come. Ahmet T. Kuru (in Yavuz and Esposito, 2003, 125) observes that “Up until one’s death, activity has to continue because no one has a guarantee of salvation, and good deeds are the only capital for the hereafter.” Similarly Bekim Agai, observes that Gülen ascribes such importance to education that “being a dedicated teacher becomes a kind of religious merit and a way to ensure that individual’s religious salvation” (*Ibid.*, 59). Although such a high view of education and its resulting good works is commendable, from an Evangelical perspective, it inverts the relationship between faith and works and imposes a burden on believers that they cannot fulfill.

### *CHRISTIANITY, ISLAM, AND VIOLENCE*

America has established that people with diverse theologies can live peacefully together. When laws prohibit the establishment of religion and permit its free exercise, religious differences do not need to breed violence and conflict. Still, the American experience has chiefly, albeit not exclusively, been chiefly with Christian and Jewish groups, and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, fanned suspicions among many American Christians, including Evangelicals, that Islam is inherently violent in a way that other Abrahamic religions are not.

At a time when American leaders of both major political parties have described Islam as “a religion of peace” and attempted to tamp down fears of religiously based conflicts, the evangelist Franklin Graham, who is in the Evangelical camp, thus responded to a question by CNN’s Campbell Brown on December 11, 2009, by describing Islam as “a violent religion” (for similar descriptions from other Evangelicals, see Esposito and Mogahed, 2007, 137; also see Spencer, 2006).<sup>8</sup> Although U.S. military authorities reacted by withdrawing Graham’s invitation to the National Prayer Breakfast, he continued to stand by his position, which may well have reflected the views of many conservative Evangelicals.

Gülen and his followers belie the violent profile that some Evangelicals attribute to Muslims. They demonstrate that a substantial body of Muslims would rather lead by example, dialogue and reason than by violence and force of arms. Moreover, Evangelical Christians should be open to the possibility that deeper knowledge of Islam might help clarify certain Christian teachings -- see Bailey (2008), Kreeft (2010), and Messier (2010) for particularly good examples of such an approach; but also see McDowell and Zaka, 1999, 85, for reservations about using the Bible and the Koran for interpreting each other).

The Ku Klux Klan and other ultra-nationalist groups that exhibit racism, xenophobia, and violence describe themselves as “Christian.” Indeed, Esposito and Mogahed observe that “The vast majority of terrorist attacks on U.S. soil have been perpetrated by Christian terrorist groups in the past 15 years. Catholic, Lutheran, and Presbyterian

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<sup>8</sup> Esposito and Mogahed (2007, 137) observe, however, that “Not all evangelical leaders share this view [that it is necessarily violent] of Islam.” They note that Dr. Richard Land, president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention observed that “I disagree with those statements, as do many evangelicals.”

Christian criticism of Islam has hardly been limited to Evangelicals. Esposito and Mogahed (149), thus say that in his September 12, 2006 address at a university in Regensburg, Germany, Pope Benedict XVI (incorrectly in their view) associated the Qur’anic passage, “There is no compulsion in religion” with the period “when Mohammed was still powerless and under [threat],” rather than as Islamic scholars claim (*Ibid.*, 150) during “the political and military ascendance of the young Muslim community.”

activists have bombed gay bars, shot or killed abortion staff, and bombed their clinics” (2007, 76). Evangelicals rightly view such terrorist actions as perversions of their faith and would justifiably question the objectivity and good faith of Muslims who insisted that such groups were the “true” expression of Christianity.

Similarly, Muslims are better situated than Christians to decide which version of their faith is more authentic. Christians can hope that those strands of Islam that emphasize love, tolerance, and dialogue will prevail over those that do not and will indeed be nurtured and further moderated by American freedoms. If such groups or their adherents govern, they are more likely than many others to extend greater freedoms to Christians within their own nations and to work cooperatively with Western nations in international affairs.

#### *A FINAL CAVEAT: BLASPHEMY AND APOSTASY LAWS*

Violent times breed suspicions. It is always possible that Gülen’s support for the current Turkish government and his emphasis on love and tolerance is a *strategy* for soliciting support in Western democracies and building political support within Turkey – a form of *taqiyya*, or dissimulation, to hide one’s true beliefs -- rather than the articulation of settled principles that he would put in practice were he or his followers to gain full control.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the years, Gülen has had his detractors (for a summary, see Ebaugyh, 2010, 115-128; also see Strauss, 2011). Rachel Sharon-Krespin, the director of the Turkish Media Project at the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), in Washington, D.C., is among them. In a 2009 article, she argued that Gülen’s philosophy and movement is far less democratic and tolerant than it may appear (for similar views, see Mizell, 2008); for a critique of Sharon-Krespin, see Barton, 2009). Sharon-Krespin has concluded that Gülen’s followers

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<sup>9</sup> Nevval Sevindi (2008, 127), observes that “There are people who believe that he [Gülen] engages in ‘justified lying.’” Somewhat exasperated by the charges, she notes: “My response was: ‘What kind of reason could he have? If he sets out to become president or founds a political party, those might be reasons. But he tells everyone to stay away from politics’” (*Ibid.*).

do not simply want to influence Turkish society but that they (and, presumably, Gülen himself) actually want Turkey to enforce Shari'a (Islamic) law. She cites footage of a speech Gülen gave in 1999, which she interprets as encouraging followers to gain the levers of power until they could carry their plans into effect. She further associates Gülen and his supporters with: increased media censorship, persecution and violence against Christians within Turkey; the current Turkish rapprochement with radical Iranian leaders; and other negative foreign policy developments. Like some who express near apocalyptic concerns about possible evangelical dominance in the U.S. (See Atwood 2006), Sharon-Krespin views Gülen's commitment to tolerance and democracy as only skin-deep.

The only passage this writer has discovered in Gülen's writings that supports Sharon-Krespin's view is his summary of blasphemy and apostasy laws (Gülen, 2000, 22-25), which could put Muslims who converted to Christianity (and possibly missionaries who sought to convert them) in great danger. Thus, in interpreting (or misinterpreting) the Qur'anic verse that "There is no compulsion in religion," (2:226), he contrasts the "space for individual religious freedom" in the West with "collective and communal religious freedom" within Islam (Gülen, 2000, 22). He further says that laws against blasphemy are necessary "for successful religious pluralism" (*Ibid.*, 22), equates apostasy with treason (*Ibid.*, 24), and prescribes capital punishment for Muslims, albeit apparently not for Christians, who convert to another faith:

Under Islamic law, apostasy is regarded with the same gravity as treason is regarded by most states and all armed forces. The hope must be to prevent, by pleading, prayers, persuasion, and all other legitimate means, such a crime from becoming public and offensive to society. Those who insist on pursuing this path must be asked to reconsider and repent. If they reject this opportunity, the penalty is death. No lesser penalty could express society's abhorrence of breaking one's covenant with God. The *shahada*, by which the individual enters Islam, is a most weighty affair. To overturn it is to insult the whole balance of creation and its relationship with the Creator. If apostasy were regarded as an individual affair only, personal conscience would be tantamount to degrading religion to a

plaything, a literary toy – now a pleasure or convenience, now a displeasure or nuisance, according to the whim or caprice of the moment (*Ibid.*, 24).

If Gülen is advocating such laws, this would starkly contradict Gülen’s own views of free will and toleration expressed just pages earlier and would indicate that his advocacy of toleration falls far short to the U.S. commitment to the free exercise of religion. Moreover, such a view would empower governments or religious leaders to make determinations of orthodoxy that might threaten the freedoms of minority Muslim groups.

Apparently unaware of this passage, which was published in 2000 and which thus somewhat undercuts his argument,<sup>10</sup> Ozcan Keleas (2007) has found only one case, a transcript of a response to a question in the late 1970s, in which Gülen “passingly refers to the issue of temporal punishment for apostasy.” He notes that Dr. Ahmet Kurucan, one of Gülen’s students, explained in 2006 that the death penalty for apostasy was announced at a time when apostates from Islam were fighting directly against it and was thus the product of “an *ijtihad* [an independent legal interpretation] itself, not a definitive commandment of Islam and that therefore it could be superseded by another *ijtihad* today.” Keleas further believes that “it is unthinkable that Kurucan would take such a stance without Gülen’s prior approval” and that Gülen is guiding his followers into a more tolerant and pluralistic position.<sup>11</sup>

Gülen’s followers present themselves as idealistic (indeed almost, utopian) and humanitarian rather than as authoritarian. They seem far more intent on individual reform and education than on direct political action, and many specifically note that Gülen has largely

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<sup>10</sup> Since this is a translation and the first of four volumes, it may represent Gülen’s early work. Still, it continues to be published under his auspices.

<sup>11</sup> In a somewhat analogous situation, in his *Letter Concerning Toleration*, the British philosopher John Locke expressed unwillingness to extend the same freedoms to Roman Catholics that he was to others, in part because he considered them to be allied with Britain’s foreign enemies (See Romanell, 1950, 10).

eschewed such political action and discouraged his followers from political participation. He could further assure Evangelicals and others that he more fully embraces U.S. conceptions of religious liberty if he specifically repudiated the view that governments should punish apostates and blasphemers.

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