

Blessed are the Peacemakers

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“**B**lessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” (Mt 5:9) That’s what Jesus said during the Sermon on the Mount. Throughout the history of humanity there have been those exceptionally inspired individuals who are recognized as “more than.” There are those exceptional peacemakers whose lessons extend far beyond the words that they spoke into the actions that they took and the changes they made in the lives of all who came after. Gautama, the Buddha, Martin Luther King Jr., Mohandas K. Gandhi, and Fethullah Gülen are such individuals.

The Middle Way and Modernity

Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha, was born into the life of a wealthy nobleman and was never permitted to see suffering. One day he left the confines of his protected surroundings to see a person who was aged and ill. Knowing at that moment that his life was an illusion he set forth to discover the Truth for himself. After many journeys ranging from asceticism to self-indulgence he finally attained Nirvana while meditating quietly under the Bodhi tree and gave his first sermon, pronouncing that these two extremes ought not to be practiced. The Middle Way “gives vision, gives knowledge, leads to calm, to insight, and to enlightenment.”¹

Fethullah Gülen practices the Middle Way. He knows that there are fundamentalists who claim to speak in the name of Jesus or of Muhammad (PBUT) but he also knows that any who promote violence and terror cannot be true Muslims or true Christians. The word “Islam” is derived from two other words: *silm* and *selamet* which mean security and safety as well as submission, salvation and peace.² Those who take the words of the prophets out of context and fail to consider the

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anachronistic error of applying those few words to a situation today are guilty of gross injustice to all. In Gülen's own words: "Terrorists are not Muslims, and Muslims cannot be terrorists. Islam and terror are like black and white or spring and winter. They are sharply different from each other, and terror cannot approach Islam."³

When my wife and I found out that we had been invited to travel to Turkey in December, 2005 by the Institute for Interfaith Dialog, we immediately went to the US State Department's website to see what the level of terrorist activity was. We were very relieved to find out that it was nil but many of our friends and family were concerned about travel to a Muslim country. "Suicide bombers are everywhere over there!" Understanding that their misconceptions and stereotypes of Muslims were based only on that evening's news report was easy. Dispelling the myth has been a little more challenging. It's so much easier to believe in one's own righteousness when one sees only the darkness that exists elsewhere. Within the last century Americans have turned a blind eye to savage lynchings of African Americans, discrimination and sexual abuse of women in the workplace, and the internment of loyal Japanese Americans during World War II. Jesus said:

Why do you call attention to the sliver in your neighbor's eye, but overlook the plank that is in your own eye? Or why do you say to him, "Let me take the sliver out of your eye," when, behold, you have a plank in your eye? Hypocrite! First cast out the plank from your own eye; then you will see more clearly when your neighbor asks you to take the sliver out of his eye. (Mt 7: 15)

Only dialogue and education can remove the prejudices from our minds that we may once again love our neighbor as ourselves. (Mt 22: 3639)

On Science and Religion

Fethullah Gülen also knows that modernity is a necessary step in the development of mankind and that the world is constantly changing. God's ways are continuously being revealed to us through discoveries in science and may require that we rethink our previously held concepts of what is true. "Truth," however, "is not something the human mind produces. Truth exists independently of man and man's task is to seek it." ⁴

There are absolute truths that are unchanging, immutable, or incontrovertible. They are truths involving the essence and purpose of our existence. Love is better than hate, peace is better than turmoil; our Almighty Father is a beneficent Father. Absolute truths are not discernable by the methodology and replication insisted upon by science. Science seeks relative truth in that what we "knew" to be true yesterday is not necessarily what we "know" to be true today. Relative truths are our best attempts at understanding the laws that operate within the universe.

Our logic and reason are powerful tools in our exploration of the physical universe, but may fail us when we begin a contemplative examination of the injustice

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that we see about us. “Violence begets violence.” We know this to be an absolute truth. It is also a very reasonable and logical statement. What has failed our leaders on occasion is that their logic and reason did not lead them to the conclusion that they may have wished for. The result is that rhetoric and nationalism has replaced reason and globalism.

Equality for All

“I have a dream,” proclaimed Martin Luther King Jr. “It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed—we hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal.”⁵ King gave his life for his beliefs and was murdered by white supremacists in 1968 at the age of 39. His ministry of nonviolence and equality for all had lasted only 13 years, yet he will forever be remembered as the inspiration for millions who came after.

Fethullah Gülen shares this dream. And not just in one nation or another but for all peoples of the Earth. All men and women are created equal. Gülen states: “In my opinion, women and men should be the two sides of truth, like the two faces of a coin. Man without woman, or woman without man cannot be; they were created together...Man and woman compliment each other.”⁶ How could it be otherwise? From the Qur’an: “O mankind, We have created you male and female and made you nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another.” (49:13)

It has been my great pleasure to be able to discuss openly with my Muslim friends, both men and women, the popular misconception in the uninformed West that a woman’s headscarf is more like a noose or leash worn high on a woman’s head at the insistence of her father or husband. The vast majority of Muslim scholars agree that covering certain parts of the body is a religious obligation for both men and women. The particular form of the covering, however, may be more related to custom. Yet even when it is more customary than obligation, most Muslim women choose to honor tradition. Upon entering the completely secular state operated school in Turkey, a friend who was forbidden by the state to wear her headscarf, chose instead to wear a wig that covered her head and thereby honored her religion and her custom and at the same time obeyed the dictates of the state.

As previously noted, the Qur’an extends equality to all “nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another.” (49:13) Gülen takes this quite literally so as to include all the “peoples of the Book.” That is, the students of Abraham, Jesus, and Muhammad (PBUT) but also followers of the Buddha, the Hindu gods, LaoTzu, or Confucius.

Gülen perceives that all humans are servants of God regardless of their ethnic or religious background. ‘The religion of Islam gives the same value to all humans and calls them servants of the Most Compassionate One.’ It also accepts universalism by which it announces the Prophet’s rejection of superiority on the basis of color,

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nationality, race, geography, or profession. The Prophet of Islam says that there is no superiority of Arabs over nonArabs and of nonArabs over Arabs. 7

Nonviolence

Mohandas K. Gandhi changed the world forever by doing little more than sitting peacefully reading “his Gita.” His most powerful declaration to his followers was “We must be the change we wish to see in the world.” In three brief decades Gandhi came to be recognized as the Father of his Nation. Thirty years of nonviolence “that ended with both sides [Indian and British] allied in respect and friendship.” 8

Fethullah Gülen is the change he seeks. His life is dedicated to peaceful solutions. Even while in prison, accused of violating the Turkish constitution’s prohibition of “religious activities,” (for which he was later acquitted) he encouraged his followers to practice only nonviolence.

[People who share my views] know that when anarchy was everywhere in our country, I have called to calmness and controlling of anger. I had received death threats, yet I requested from my admirers to continue working for peace, ‘If I am assassinated, despite all your angers, I ask you to bury my body and seek for order, peace and love in our society. Regardless to what happens; we believers should be representatives of love and security. 9

Gülen is not alone in the Muslim tradition of nonviolence. His mentor and teacher, Said Nursi, had been poisoned over seventeen times by his opponents but always encouraged his followers to avoid seeking revenge and believed the enemies to peace would answer for their crimes in eternity. The Prophet himself “was a living example of peace and nonviolence.”¹⁰ He taught that unnecessary violence against any of God’s creatures was prohibited. He defended himself when he was attacked but was always quick to return to peaceful ways as quickly as possible.

I enlisted in the United States Marine Corp in 1972. I am a Vietnam Era veteran and feel very fortunate not to have served in a combat zone but I did have the opportunity to speak with many Marines who were not as fortunate as I was. I knew of the horrendous massacre of innocent Vietnamese civilians at My Lai but understood that to be the aberrant behavior of outlaws who had somehow come together in the US Army. After talking with many of these exinfantrymen I knew that it was not. War can make even an innocent boy or a young girl into a barbaric murderer or sadist. Perhaps the presence of the media on the frontline of the war in Iraq and the graphic images of torture and humiliation by American troops will lend its assistance in ending war as a means of conflict resolution.

Education

Gülen encouraged educators and business leaders to invest in education centers and schools around the world. He has been instrumental in the establishment of high

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schools in Moscow, Greece and Armenia. Dedicated teachers work for less than average compensation to promote tolerance, dialogue, and peace; to teach those who may not otherwise have an opportunity to study mathematics, chemistry, art, or music.

The Founding Fathers of this country, having had the experience of intolerance and oppression at the hands of the religious leaders of their time wisely amended the U.S. Constitution to prohibit the formation of a state religion while at the same time guaranteeing the rights of all individuals to practice their own religion free of government oversight or interference. In following the letter of the law, we have, however, deprived our youth of any objective information on the world's religions, spirituality, theology, or interfaith dialogue.

Gülen's priority for modern education centers has been synthetic integration of past and present, spiritual and secular values, as well as art and science.

If the masses in a community are devoid of belief, love, zeal and the feeling of responsibility, if they live an aimless life unconscious of their true identity and unaware of the age and environment they live in, that community cannot be regarded as civilized even if it has changed thoroughly with all its institutions, living standards have risen considerably, and the people have all been 'modernized' in their lifestyle. Civilization is an intellectual and spiritual phenomenon, nothing to do with the technology, dress and finery, furniture and luxuries. The bloodshed, the continuance of colonialism under different names, unending massacres and conflicts, unchanging human attitudes, crudity of manors, unenlightenment of intellectual life, the dominance of materialism in science and world views, all these, together with many other signs of savagery prevailing world wide, show decisively that the 'developed' peoples of the world have not founded a true civilization, nor have their 'developing imitators' been able to do so. 11 [Emphasis added]

I was very fortunate to have visited Fetih High School near Istanbul last January and meet several students and faculty. The grounds were spotless, the students polite and knowledgeable, and the staff well informed and helpful. The campus is a modern beautiful facility with up to date chemistry labs and classrooms.

Interfaith Dialogue

I began to question the effectiveness and mission of the modern Christian church during the 1990s. Something wasn't quite right. I had become dissatisfied with dogma and the rise of Megachurches in the Houston area. Why were they spending so much money on these buildings so full of video and audio equipment? What god were they worshipping? The teachings of Jesus encourage us to help the sick and less fortunate. How were these palatial establishments serving the poor and homeless in Houston's Third Ward? I began to read books on the world's religions with the thought that all religions have something to offer and that if I could find the common thread among them that that would be the Truth. What I found was that

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everywhere on the globe the Golden Rule reigned supreme: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Where would we be today if world leaders were committed to the Golden Rule instead of to money and power? Where would we be today if after the horrifying events of September 11, 2001, while nations mourned in sympathy with our loss, the leaders of this country would have responded with a call for dialogue instead of a call to arms? Perhaps the billions of dollars spent on death and destruction could have been spent on ending hunger in starving nations or in stopping the genocide in Sudan.

It all begins with dialogue. Gülen has stated that:

...the very nature of religion demands this dialogue. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and even Hinduism and other world religions accept the same source for themselves, and, including Buddhism, pursue the same goal. As a Muslim, I accept all Prophets and Books sent to different peoples throughout history, and regard belief in them as an essential principle of being Muslim. A Muslim is a true follower of Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and all other Prophets. Not believing in one Prophet or Book means that one is not a Muslim. Thus we acknowledge the oneness and basic unity of religion, which is a symphony of God's blessings and mercy, and the universality of belief in religion. So, religion is a system of belief

Dialogue is the essential element in the Golden Rule. When we communicate with one another we begin to see the similarities that define "the oneness and basic unity of religion."

Fethullah Gülen follows and teaches the Golden Rule by inspiring others to organize and promote interfaith dialogue and has opened channels to religious leaders around the world. Spiritual leaders include Pope John Paul II, Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew, Turkey's Chief Rabbi David Aseo, and Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi Doron of Israel. Gülen has been known to liken religion metaphorically to

'...a symphony of God's blessings and mercy.' It is, of course, the diversity of a collection of notes and instruments brought together in a collaborative unity that characterizes a symphony. Musical harmony cannot consist of people playing the same notes and a symphony cannot be played by a collection of people all playing the same instrument. 13

Conclusion

Ignorance is our only enemy. Ignorance begets fear and fear begets violence. Education and dialogue help us to understand the world and the other inhabitants around us. But it is not enough to talk about the changes that need to be made in the world; we must follow the example of all these great men and "be the change" that

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we seek. "There is no god but God" and He directs us all to play our own instrument in this symphony of life.

Notes

1 "Questions and Answers," <<http://groups.msn.com/Buddhachurch/questionsandanswers.msnw>> (11 May 2006).

2 M. Fethullah Gülen, "Terror From an Islamic [Perspective]", The Fountain Magazine, JulySept. 2002, Issue 39, <<http://www.fountainmagazine.com/articles.php?SIN=02a5201981&k=87&218814872&show=part1>> 11 August 2006.

3 Ibid.

4 Osman Bakar, "Gülen on Religion and Science: a Theological Perspective," The Muslim World, 95, no.3 (2005): 362. 5 Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have a Dream" in A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., James Melvin Washington, ed., (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 219.

6 M. Fethullah Gülen, "Women and Women's Rights" in M. Fethullah Gülen: Essays, Perspectives, Opinions, (Somerset, New Jersey: The Light, 2004), 122. 7 Zeki Saritoprak and Sidney Griffith, "Fethullah Gülen and the 'People of the Book,'" The Muslim World, 95, no.3 (2005): 338. 8 Eknath Easwaran, "Preface to the Vintage Spiritual Classics," The Essential Gandhi, ed. Louis Fischer, 2 nd ed., (New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 2002), ix.

9 Zeki Saritoprak, "An Islamic Approach to Peace and Nonviolence," The Muslim World, 95, no.3 (2005): 423. 10 Ibid., 413.

11 Thomas Michel, S. J., "Sufism and Modernity in the Thought of Fethullah Gülen," The Muslim World, 95, no.3 (2005): 351.

embracing all races and all beliefs, a road bringing everyone together in brotherhood.

12 [Emphasis added]

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Washington. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991. "Questions and Answers." <http://groups.msn.com/Buddhachurch/questionsandanswers.msnw>> 11 May 2006.

12 Fethullah Gülen, "Introduction to Fethullah Gulen's Speeches and Interviews on Interfaith Dialogue," Fethullah Gülen: A Life Dedicated to Peace and Humanity, November 6, 2003, <<http://en.fgulen.com/content/view/1334/13/>> Accessed October 23, 2006. 13 Lester Kurtz, "Gülen's Paradox: Combining Commitment and Tolerance," The Muslim World, 95, no.3 (2005): 376.