

The Second Path to God Revisited; the Reconciliation of Science and Religion in the Gulen Movement

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The basic orientation of the Gülen Movement contains an apparent contradiction. On one hand, it sharply and broadly criticizes scientifically based Western materialism from the standpoint of Sufism, a strongly mystical current within Islam. On the other, it strenuously promotes science and technology—the primary handmaidens of materialism—seeing them as essential to progress and prosperity in the Muslim world. That position was established by its founder and principal inspirer, Fethullah Gülen, who is a firm believer in the transformative capacity of science. He sees no innate danger in scientific discoveries, expresses no doubt about the proper “ends of knowledge,” and largely dismisses the threats posed by religious or ideological distortions of the scientific enterprise. That level of optimism is alien to many educated westerners, whose common historical experience has been studded with disruptive interactions between religion, science, and society.

Our paper examines this matter in light of several closely related questions:

1. Is this apparent contradiction a real one, or does a cohesive theory underlie Gülen’s simultaneous critique of Western materialism and support of unrestricted scientific activity? If Gülen’s arguments do have epistemological underpinnings, what are they?

2. How does an essentially empirical, law bound approach to the physical world conform to a Sufi perspective, which has thoroughly incorporated belief in the miraculous into its value system?

3. What does Gülen’s support for scientific independence imply? Or, more exactly, what are some implications for his apparent assumption that formal guarantees of scientific autonomy are unnecessary? Our approach is quite direct; we outline Gülen’s leading ideas and trace them back, through intermediaries, to their origins. This process will shed considerable light on the questions that we have raised.

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Fethullah Gülen's basic positions are easily summarized. In the first place, he asserts that there can be no conflict between science and religion because the phenomena described by scientists are manifestations of God's characteristics (in Sufi terms, His Names) in the physical universe. Any contradiction is only an apparent, not an actual, one, for science and revealed truth both flow from the Divine Will. Gülen makes this point in an interesting, and thoroughly Islamic, way that leaves room both for the miraculous and for law bound natural processes: "Causality is a veil spread by God Almighty over the rapid flux of existence so that we can plan our lives to some degree." 2

In the case of an apparent conflict science must yield to revelation, for the products of reason and observation merely reflect the limited workings of the human mind while revelation is the product of a boundless, all powerful, and all discerning intellect. At any rate, the passage of time will bring humanity a deepened understanding of the natural world and resolve any perceived difficulty. Therefore, science and true religion are not, and cannot be, rivals; they represent different currents issuing from the same source and guiding humanity to the same end. 3 Using vivid imagery, Gülen has extensively elaborated on that idea:

...there can be no conflict among the Qur'an, the Divine Scripture (coming from God's Attribute of Speech), the universe (coming from His Attributes of Power and Will), and the sciences that examine them. The universe is a mighty Qur'an deriving from God's Attributes of Power and Will. In other words, if the term is proper, the universe is a large, created Qur'an. In return, being an expression of the universe's laws in a different form, the Qur'an is a universe that has been codified and put on paper. 4

Furthermore:

Every order or system is conceived and designed before it is established. Think of the Guarded Tablet [the traditional term for the uncreated Qur'an that has eternally coexisted with God] as a detailed design, and the Qur'an as its verbal exposition. Given this, the universe may be considered a reflection in our world of that final design. We hardly can think of creation as a single universe, let alone conceive of a design and then produce one. Our duty is to read it and seek the full meaning of everything. We do this through trial and error, for that is the only way we can learn. 5

In a sense, then, scientific activity can be seen as an extended type of prayer, producing a deeper involvement with the Almighty—or, as some Christian theologians after the Scientific Revolution expressed it, we can draw closer to our God through a study of Nature's God. 6

Secondly, Gülen maintains that a serious engagement with science and technology is unavoidable. He is quite pragmatic here: if "Muslims want to end their long humiliation," 7 he insists, they must come to terms with modernization:

...It would be incorrect to oppose science and technology with 'idealistic' thoughts; such an opposition is only a form of utopia. No good for humanity can come from ranting at machinery or cursing the factories. The machines will continue to operate; the factory will continue to exude its fumes, even if we heap curses upon it. 8

Besides, Gülen is acutely aware of the benefits that accrue to the members of an advanced technological society. Speaking for Muslims in general and Turks in particular, he observes that the industrial West “undoubtedly has many superior aspects” that could alleviate their problems 9

Thirdly, Gülen has full confidence that the application of deep Islamic—i.e., Sufi— insights will turn science into a reliable servant of humankind. “...What is important here,” he says, “is not this or that technology, but rather who controls science and technology and what purpose they serve.” 10 He strongly believes that these processes are now in the wrong hands: “ ...thought is capital wasted in the hands of people suffering from intellectual poverty; science is a plaything of materialism; and the products of science are tools used in the name of unbelief.” 11 Yet this can be corrected. Since we are:

Created to rule creation, we need to observe and read, discern and learn about our surroundings so that we can find the best way to exert our influence and control. When we reach this level, by the decree of the Exalted Creator, everything will submit to us and we will submit to God [*italics added*]. 12

This is where Gülen’s religious outlook and his emphasis on scientific education intersect, for his movement is, above all, directed to the production of a citizenry that is not only morally informed and values an interior life of the spirit, but is also scientifically orientated. It is not simply concerned to produce Sufis or scientists; it wishes to produce Sufi scientists that can steer advances in science and technology into humane and productive channels. Gülen has pinned his hopes on this developing “Golden Generation” and we can see, from the following quotation, that his appeals can reach a rare level of intensity: “O long awaited generation! Rise, for the love of the Creator, to your sacred task, and replace the choking darkness around us with the light of your love, hope, and nobility! Rise and force back the “monsters” of the age to their dens!” 13

While Gülen’s key ideas, taken one by one, can easily be found in either Muslim or non Muslim countries, their particular grouping and articulation is unusual. It is not simply a rehash of standard Islamic arguments or a splicing together of orthodox Islamic and western viewpoints. Gülen is engaged in broadening Islamic perspectives and therefore must, at some level, be considered unorthodox. Also, despite their obvious relevance, he has not carefully mined western sources on the challenges of modernity. He has occasionally referenced western thinkers from the 17th century onward, but it is generally either because their ideas resonate with his own religious beliefs or because they buttress an Islamic argument. 14

Instead, Gülen’s primary inspiration and the major source of his ideas is Said Nursi’s massive compilation, the *Risalei Nur*. It is well known that Nursi (1874-1960), a powerful rhetorician and noted Islamic reformer, has been an important influence on Gülen, who views him as an original thinker and frequently quotes him. However, the extent of Nursi’s influence only becomes apparent when their core ideas are compared.

Accordingly, we would like to examine Nursi’s positions on the same issues that we examined Gülen’s—that is, on: (1) the relationship between science and

religion; (2) the Muslim world's proper stance with regard to modernization; and (3) the method for directing science and technology toward humane ends.

As is the case with Gülen, Nursi held that science and religion are conjoined because they flow from the same source. Employing imagery that Gülen subsequently borrowed, he described the world as “a mighty embodied Qur'an” that “makes known the Inscraper and Author of the book of the universe together with his infinite perfections. Proclaiming ‘God is Most Great!’ it makes Him known. Uttering words like ‘Glory be to God!’ it makes Him loved.” 15

Also, he left no doubt as to which one occupied pride of place: the Qur'an reveals “the obscure talisman of being and the strange riddle of the creation of the world, before which human science and philosophy have remained impotent....” It “sees reality, is familiar with the Unseen, bestows guidance, and shows the truth.”¹⁶ Finally, Nursi concluded, “...civilization and science and philosophy and European literature, which are the products of the thought and efforts of mankind and the jinn and even satans, remain in the very pits of impotence before the decrees, wisdom, and eloquence of the Qur'an.”¹⁷

Nursi's solution to the problem of causality—that is, the reconciliation of a law bound universe with belief in the miraculous—is similar but not identical to Gülen's, and the differences are important enough to merit closer examination. Both saw causality as a veil cast over existence. To Gülen, it was an organizing grace offered by God for humanity's convenience. But Nursi's reasoning followed another path:

O heedless worshipper of causes! Causes are a veil; for Divine dignity and grandeur require them to be thus. But that which acts and performs matters is the power of the Eternally Besought One; for Divine unity and glory require it to be thus, and necessitate their independence. ...causes have been placed so that the dignity of power may be preserved in the superficial view of the mind...so that power should not be associated with base and lowly matters. For like the two faces of a mirror, everything has an outer face that looks to this manifest world, which resembles the mirror's coloured face and may reflect various colors and states, and an inner face which looks to its Maker, which resembles the mirror's shining face. In the outer face which looks to the manifest world may be states incompatible with the dignity and perfection of the Eternally besought One's power, so causes have been put to be both the source and the means of those states. But in the inner face, that of reality, which looks to their Creator, everything is transparent and beautiful. It is fitting that power should itself be associated with it. It is not incompatible with its dignity; therefore, causes are purely apparent and in the inner face of things and in reality have no true effect [*italics added*]. 18

If Nursi largely anticipated Gülen on the proper relationship between science and religion, he fully anticipated him on defining the proper Islamic stance toward the study of science and technology. “The all wise Qur'an,” he said, “strikes the hand of encouragement on man's back, urging him to the highest peaks, the furthest limits, the final degrees, which he is far behind at the present degree of his progress. It points its fingers at those degrees, saying: ‘forward march!’”¹⁹ Again anticipating Gülen's arguments, he asserted that the physical world is “the abode of wisdom”²⁰ and an investigation of it opens avenues to the Divine:

Through the tongue of allusion, Almighty God is saying... The way is open to you to rise to exalted rank such as holding the highest positions over all beings in the universe, and for vast creatures like the earth to be subjected to you. Come on, step forward, adhere to all My Names, and rise....make your sciences and your progress steps by which to ascend to those heavens. Then you may rise to My dominical Name, which are the realities and sources of your sciences and attainments.... 21

Gülen and Nursi are also in fundamental agreement regarding the third issue, that of control over science and technology. As with Gülen, Nursi relied exclusively on the humanizing power of Islam, urging the scientist to "...work in the name of the True Provider and within the bounds of what He permits, and see yourself as a distribution official giving His property to His creatures." 22 But Nursi was worried that exposure to western learning could lead to the neglect of the faith (a concern that very likely helped prompt the Gülen movement's educational efforts), for he coupled that exhortation with warnings about the dangers of intellectual arrogance and the ultimate futility of rationalism divorced from religious belief:

Know, O friend, who, preoccupied with philosophy and preferring reason to Revelation, comments on Revelation, and thereby rather corrupts it as he cannot comprehend it with his defective reason and because of his vainglory and engrossment in philosophy. 23

...death takes on the form of a mastered horse, a steed to take believing man from the prison of this world to the gardens of Paradise and the presence of the Most Merciful One. ...according to the consensus of those who observe and have knowledge of the Unseen and those who uncover the mysteries of creation, the provisions, light and steed for the long, dark road to post eternity may only be obtained through complying with the commands of the Qur'an and avoiding what it prohibits. Science, philosophy, and art are worth nothing on that road. Their light reaches only as far as the door of the grave. 24

We can easily see that Fethullah Gülen's fundamental positions on the value and application of science closely track those of Said Nursi, but the resemblances run still deeper.

There is a consistent, two tiered subtext that works its way through their discussions. The first is a strong and abiding confidence in the power of reason and of its value in discerning truth. This confidence goes well beyond the norm found in Islam, and is one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Gülen Movement. The second is a pronounced aversion, amounting to odium, toward what they consider the negative, and dominant, cultural and intellectual predispositions of the West. Gülen has described those predispositions as the "lethally polluted atmosphere of materialistic aspiration and ideological fanaticism." 25 Nursi labeled them "the second Europe," and charged it with holding "...a diseased and misguided philosophy in your right hand and a harmful and corrupt civilization in your left...."26 While he admitted the existence of a "first Europe" that still injected humane Christian values into its decisions, that segment clearly was submerged by the "barbarism that disguises itself as civilization:"27

The acceptable humanitarian aspects of the civilization of the unbelievers and the spiritual virtues to be seen in it are either borrowings from the civilization of

Islam or leftovers from the heavenly religions or are owed to the guidance of the Qur'an [being in the world]. 28

Given their hostile attitude toward prevailing trends in the West, both Nursi and Gülen would have deep reservations about adopting any elements of its philosophical systems, including those parts that provide a defense of the rational. 29

However, we can identify an alternative source for Nursi's (and therefore Gülen's) defense of reason, and we are led to it through a very telling observation in Words:

All attainments and perfections, all learning, all progress, and all sciences, have an elevated reality which is based on one of the Divine Names. On being based on the name, which is concealed under numerous veils and has various manifestations and different spheres, the sciences and arts and attainments find their perfection and become reality. They are not some incomplete and deficient shadow [italics added]. 30

That quite unexpected last sentence casts us back at least eight centuries into a universe of necessities, accidentals, and appearances; of substantials and actualities and particulars; of nominalists and realists and conceptionists—into the long vanished age of medieval schoolmen like Peter Abelard (1079-1142) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), who had already acclimated themselves to the works of Plato and were now wrestling with those of Aristotle. That world was also inhabited by the great Muslim theologian Ibn Rushd, known in the Christian West as Averroes (1126-1198), a self-described “lawyer, imam, judge, and unique scholar,” 31 and a foremost interpreter of Aristotelian philosophy.

While a powerful and persuasive thinker in his own right, Ibn Rushd's historical role was also that of an osmotic membrane, facilitating the flow of Greco Roman and early Christian concepts into Islam in ways that could make them acceptable to Muslims. 32 He enjoyed two great advantages in carrying out that task: he was the product of a wealthy and sophisticated Islamic society that bordered newly reinvigorated and dynamic Christian lands, and he had a Sufi's mentality, with all the subtlety and intellectual flexibility that the term implies. Benefiting from his fortunate placement in a region of vigorous intellectual cross currents, he constructed arguments supporting the use of reason and the investigation of the physical world that were echoed almost verbatim both by Said Nursi and Fethullah Gülen.

Ibn Rushd's arguments are concise and pointed. He held that Islamic Law requires the study of nature, quoting the same Qur'anic passages later used by Nursi and Gülen: “Have they not studied the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and whatever things God has created?’ and He said, ‘and they give thought to the creation of the heavens and the earth.’”33 Furthermore, its study should be demonstratively based—that is, empirical—because that is how humans learn and because the study of nature will shed increased light on God's nature: “for beings only indicate the Artisan through our knowledge of the art in them, and the more perfect this knowledge is, the more perfect the knowledge of the Artisan becomes....”34 Furthermore:

Since it has now been established that the Law has rendered obligatory the study of beings by the intellect, and reflection on them, and since reflection is nothing more than inference and drawing out of the unknown from the known, and since this is reasoning, or at any rate done by reasoning, therefore we are under an obligation to carry on our study of beings by intellectual reasoning. It is further evident that this manner of study, to which the Law summons and urges, is the most perfect kind of study using the most perfect kind of reasoning, and this is the kind called 'demonstration.' 35

Ibn Rushd thus established the principle of the second path to God; the first, of course, is through revelation; the second is through a careful examination and consideration of God's works.

For this approach to be effective a sound method of analysis must be followed and, Ibn Rushd continued, that had not yet been properly undertaken in the Muslim world. It has, however, been done by "those ancients who studied these matters before Islam." 36 Accordingly, outside help should be sought "regardless of whether this other one shares our religion or not." 37

But what if the findings of the two paths do not mesh? Which one takes priority? This is where Ibn Rushd's intellectual flexibility and willingness to think symbolically—i.e., his Sufi mindset—comes to the fore. Demonstrative study cannot conflict with scripture, "...for truth does not oppose truth but accords with it and bears witness to it." 38 If the apparent meaning of a scriptural passage conflicts with a sound demonstration, that passage should be 32 Christian contributions remained unacknowledged, probably because of confessional rivalry. St. Augustine is a good example of those unmentioned contributors, for his analysis of the Platonic categories laid the foundations for later Sufi views on the Divine Names and his insistence that pre Christian philosophy had truth bearing value anticipated Averroes' own position by almost six centuries. For an example of this confessional antipathy, see Averroes, p.47.

interpreted metaphorically. The Qur'an, Ibn Rushd continued, has an inner and an outer meaning, so that it can be useful to people of different natural capacities and innate dispositions. Its inner meaning will always accord with demonstrative proofs, and apparent contradictions between scriptural passages exist in order to "draw the attention of those who are well grounded in science to the [more profound] interpretation that reconciles them." 39 Ibn Rushd, then, provided a suitably Islamic and quite sophisticated theory of knowledge based on Aristotelian logic, advancing the proposition that reason and revelation provide reliable, mutually supporting paths to truth.

After tracing the sequence of ideas regarding science and religion from Fethullah Gülen to Ibn Rushd, we can come to a number of conclusions about the Gülen Movement's approach to knowledge. First, it does have an epistemological foundation, one that is both scholastic and Aristotelian at its core. However, it is a tempered Aristotelianism that, through Ibn Rushd's adaptations, has been aligned to Islamic doctrine. Put differently, his successful harmonization of Aristotle's methodology with the Qur'an is a classic, and classically Aristotelian, exercise in rhetorical invention. Both Said Nursi and Fethullah Gulan internalized Ibn Rushd's key arguments and repeated them verbatim. They may well have viewed their

approach to knowledge as being thoroughly Qur'anic in nature, and Ibn Rushd himself may have believed the same thing. But we must not forget that it was so because Ibn Rushd made it so.

Secondly, while not described as such, both Nursi and Gülen retained Ibn Rushd's notion of the two paths to God. Their description of the interrelationship between those two paths differs somewhat from his, for they at least imply that physical laws can be interrupted by Divine action while Ibn Rushd saw God consistently working within the physical laws that he established. A committed Aristotelian, Ibn Rushd probably viewed a miracle as an extraordinary result of law bound physical interactions rather than as an action flowing from their suspension.⁴⁰ Thus, his "two paths" might best be described as one path with two gradients. However, those differences are insignificant from an operational point of view, for the main principle involved—the validity of the use of reason within the context of a revealed religion—is still preserved.

Finally, the medieval source of Gülen's and Nursi's theory of knowledge helps explain a perplexing characteristic of the Gülen Movement—that is, its apparent underestimation of the complexities that face societies transitioning into modernity. Both realized that modernity's impact can generate confusion, but both attributed that confusion to an incomplete internalization of Islamic injunctions.⁴¹ Since their intellectual tradition did not engage the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions and their later offshoots as closely as Western thought did—being more of a distant observer than an active participant—neither showed a full appreciation of the implications of modern Neo Darwinist thought, the often subtle ways in which specialization fragments and disconnects the various sectors of modernized societies, or the way sophisticated interest groups escape effective social control mechanisms. One effect of this pre-modern epistemology is a great confidence that the products of science and technology, which have sometimes escaped the humane control of Christian hands, will be safe in Islamic ones.

Notes

1In this context, "Islamic" refers to phraseology characteristic of Islamic theology. The idea itself dates back to antiquity. For example, it can be found in St. Augustine, *The City of God*, tr. Marcus Dods (N.Y.: The Modern Library, 1993), p. 692.

2M. Fethullah Gülen, *Essentials of the Islamic Faith*, tr. Ali Ünal (Fairfax, Va.: The Fountain, 2000), p. 277.

3Ali Ünal and Alphonse Williams, *Advocate of Dialogue: Fethullah Gülen* (Fairfax, Va.: The Fountain, 2000), p. 81.

4M. Fethullah Gülen, *M. F. Gülen: Essays, Perspectives, Opinions* (Rutherford, N. J.: The Light, Inc., 2002), p. 80.

5M. Fethullah Gülen, *Questions and Answers about Faith* (Fairfax, Va.: The Fountain, 2000), Vol. 1, p. 86.

6 For examples, see John Ray, *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation* (London: Samuel Smith, 1691) and William Paley, *Natural Theology* (London, C. Knight, 1832).

- 7 M. Fethullah Gülen, *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance* (Somerset, New Jersey: The Light Inc., 2004), p.150.
- 8Gülen, *Toward a Global Civilization*, p. 235.
- 9 Gülen, *Toward a Global Civilization*, p. 193.
- 10Gülen, *Toward a Global Civilization*, p. 235.
- 11 M Fethullah Gülen, *Towards the Lost Paradise*, 2nd edition (Konaklızmir: Kaynak, 1998), p. 106.
- 12Williams, *Advocate of Dialogue*, p. 81.
- 13 Gülen, *Towards the Lost Paradise*, p. 107.
- 14 For example, see the discussions on Immanuel Kant, René Descartes, and Sir James Jeans in Gülen, *Advocate of Dialogue*, p 29.
- 15 Said Nursi, *The Words: On the Nature and Purposes of Man, Life, and All Things*, tr. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sözler, 2004), p. 171.
- 16 Nursi, *Words* , p. 416.
- 17 Nursi, *Words*, p. 424.
- 18 Nursi, *Words*, pp. 300301.
- 19 Nursi, *Words*, p. 271.
- 20 Nursi, *Words*, p. 269.
- 21 Nursi, *Words*, p. 270.
- 22 Nursi, *Words*, p. 279.
- 23 Nursi, *Epitomes of Light*, p. 167.
- 24 Nursi, *Words*, pp. 4244.
- 25 Gülen, *Advocate of Dialogue*, p. 78.
- 26 Said Nursi, *The Flashes Collection*, tr. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sözler, 2004), p. 160.
- 27 Said Nursi, *Epitomes of Light: The Essentials of the Risalel Nur* (Izmir, Turkey: Kaynak, A.S. 1999), p. 156.
- 28 Nursi, *Epitomes of Light*, p. 157.
- 29 Nursi maintains that a temporary attraction to western values caused him to experience a “sickness of the heart” and was “the cause of excessive difficulties.” Nursi, *Flashes*, p.159.
- 30 Nursi, *Words*, p, 270.
- 31 Averroes, *On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*, tr. George F. Hourani (Hertford: Luzac & Co, 1967), p. 44.
- 33 Averroes, p. 45.
- 34 Averroes, p. 44.
- 35 Averroes, p. 45.
- 36 Averroes, p. 47.
- 37 Averroes, pp. 4647.
- 38 Averroes, p. 50.
- 39 Averroes, p. 51.
- 40As a general rule, Ibn Rushd avoided the use of the word “miracle.” When he did use it, the clear implication was that it was a startling and unexpected outcome of lawbound natural processes. See Averroes, p. 70.41 Examples of this can be found in Nursi, *Epitomes of Light*, p. 157 and Gülen, *Essays, Perspectives, Opinions*, pp. 2829.

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