

## **The influence of Fethullah Gulen in the Australian Experience of Interfaith Dialogue**

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Our interest in our environment and our love for humanity – that is, our ability to embrace creation – depends on knowing and understanding our own essence, our ability to discover ourselves...In parallel with the ability to discover and feel our inner depths and hidden potential within our essence, we will also be able to appreciate that others also possess the same potential...In reality, the level of our understanding and appreciation of one another depends on how well we recognise the quality and riches that each person possesses.<sup>1</sup>

These words belong to Gulen and lay the groundwork for the important task of discovering the essence of humanity – both within ourselves and of those around us.

Gulen has been a prominent figure in Turkey for more than four decades. As Turks decided to leave Turkey due to the political and social turbulences of the 60s and 70s, they took with them the ideals that they had held deep respect towards. The seeds of love and tolerance that had been ingrained in the Turkish psyche through the likes of Yunus and Mevlana were waiting in the hearts – waiting to flourish at the hands of a caretaker that would care and encourage such ‘seeds’ and to help nurture the ‘fruit’ of social harmony, respect and action. This ‘caretaker’ arrived in the thoughts and ideals of Fethullah Gulen who was known to the Turkish Diaspora of Australia. But it was not until Gulen met with Pope John Paul II that the Turkish community rallied together and the momentum for interfaith activities increased.

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In the year 2000, concerned members of the local Melbourne Turkish community came together to increase the understanding between faiths; they were encouraged by the activities and the example that Gulen had set. These second generation Muslims did not have the language problems of their elders or the cultural and historical baggage of some communities regarding the 'other'. The pretext for the formation of the Australian Intercultural Society (AIS) had been established. Concerned members formed the AIS in the hope that the misinformation and prejudice that existed between groups and faiths needed to be rectified. The Melbourne based AIS became a role model for similar activities in the following years to commence in other capital cities around Australia by the formation of similar intercultural organisations.

The AIS based its activities on two important themes. One was education and the other was social interaction. Both are important for people to have meaningful discussions and to learn about each other at a personal level. The AIS has encouraged both of these in all of its activities – particularly in regards to overcoming the common enemy to all mankind – ignorance. And ignorance lies at the centre of the difficulty to perform come together.

As a result of this, the ecumenical call of the Quran espoused by Gulen was set into action:

O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you. (Quran 3:64)

This coming together around common terms became all the more important before the imminent 9/11 attacks. Similar to what was being experienced throughout the rest of the world, heightened sensitivities towards Muslims increased antislamic rhetoric in the community.

The Australian Intercultural Society has been pivotal in putting into practice the thoughts and ideas of Gulen. First and foremost it was a duty upon all Muslims and a common thread that weaved together in unison all those that had even the slightest concern for humanity.

What follows is the remarkable journey that the AIS has taken with the concerned citizens of Australia through a new awakening into a vision that will benefit all and encourage “understanding and appreciation of one another” and “recognise the quality and riches that each person possesses”.

### **The International Abraham Conference (IAC)**

One of the most awaited events on the interfaith calendar, the International Abraham Conference, brings together academics, community leaders, government representatives and all those interested in interfaith relations. The concept behind

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this conference is to bring together those who value the personality of Abraham as both a role model and Prophet of God  
a unifying personality that can bring together 'People of the Book'.

The management committee consists of members from various universities and NGOs representing the three monotheistic faiths. A contemporary theme is selected by the organising committee; in 2006 it was Religious Freedoms and Civil liberties. The general outline of the program includes an international speaker chosen on a yearly basis – rotating between the three faith traditions. Responders from the others faith have the opportunity to put forward their opinions. During the second session, either a panel discussion by community leaders, or numerous workshops based around a particular theme takes place. Audience members have the opportunity to ask questions throughout the two sessions.

The Abraham Conference brings together not only universities together to collaborate in the organising of the event but also creates great discussion amongst and between faith communities in the lead up to the conference. The attention that the IAC has brought to interfaith dialogue through community discussions and recently through the media has shed a positive light upon the participating communities and the warm relations that have been established. For many people, it is their first step towards interfaith dialogue and the Abraham Conference's very public status helps to shine a positive light upon the working relations between the organisers and their respective members.

### **Ashure – Noah's Pudding**

The concept of Noah's pudding came to the modern Muslim from the landing of Noah's famous ark. As a sign of celebration that the believers were successful through their faith in God and in rejoicing, they made a pudding from the dried goods within the boat. These included nuts, dried fruits, barley and wheat. To commemorate the success of the believers, Muslims traditionally make this pudding and share it with their neighbours to increase friendship and neighbourliness.

The AIS has taken this one step further by organising a large amount of these puddings and increasing friendship with other organisations. These organisations have included universities, the Police department, the Immigration and Multicultural Affairs Department, youth groups, schools and Christian and Jewish community groups. We have seen great interest develop as a result of this initiative with new doors opening for the development of personal relationships and organisational links being developed. Like Prophet Abraham, Prophet Noah and his community represent a common spiritual lineage that we share as believers. The positive feedback that is provided is encouraging, and becomes the catalyst for other opportunities to meet and develop new projects. In particular, the concept of food becomes a great catalyst for conversation and relationship building. During the sharing of Noah's pudding many participants admitted to never haven spoken to a

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Muslim after sharing ideas and conversing, many people saw the importance in discussion and the need to further develop relationships.

### **Ramadan Iftars – Breaking of the Fast meals**

The AIS has developed a strong reputation for bringing together people that have normally never had the opportunity to meet a true social catalyst. The concept of Iftar holds a special place in the annual month of Ramadan both in terms of spirituality and worship. The pretext for such meals is to come together to share a meal, discuss worship and socially interact – to see Muslims at a personal level.

These Iftars have been planned at two different levels. The first is the organisation of Iftars at a communal level. This usually entails an organisation hosting the event with the AIS providing support. These Iftars have been held at very prestigious centres and through many localities. These include: The Federal Parliament of Australia, State Parliament of Victoria, Shepparton Council (rural municipality), Moonee Valley Council (metropolitan municipality), Victoria (State) Police, Jewish organisations, universities and Christian groups and churches. The invitees come from a broad spectrum of backgrounds including politicians, academia, community leaders, interfaith advocates and business people. The size of these events range from 200 to 400 people. For many participants, it is their first encounter with Muslims during Ramadan. The program includes the Adhan (Call to Prayer) which marks the end of the fast and beginning of the Iftar (Fast breaking Meal). The significance of the fast is described and Christian and Jewish speakers also offer insight into the importance of fasting and worship from their respective traditions.

Such grand events show the importance that is placed not only on the tradition of fasting and worship but the importance shown by everyone to come together around a common cause and to be positive role models to others regarding interfaith dialogue. The publicity that such events have gained have had a ripple effect throughout the commun

The second level of Iftars takes place at a more family and personal level. Host families from the pool of AIS members invite various community leaders to their homes in small groups. This is starkly different from the first level which is grand and impersonal to a meal that becomes a lot more personal and humbling. The guests are treated to a traditional meal in the auspices of a Muslim home and see in detail the practises that take place in an average family. This year in what can be said to be a historical event these home iftars were publicised in the Melbourne daily newspaper, The Age with over 300 people – complete strangers to AIS registering via the AIS web site. They included atheists, Christians, Buddhists, Jews and humanists. Each one a stranger being invited into a stranger's home. Both the guest and the host were courageous enough to take the leap of faith and accept this offer of coming together. Each one leaving the other with a greater respect and understanding.

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The bonds of friendship that are formed can become quite strong. One story may depict the closeness that was formed during such Iftars.

Over a period of gatherings through the AIS series of annual events a Turkish family's and Jewish family's closeness grew. On one occasion when during an Iftar gathering the Turkish man mentioned the importance of Iftar but that this was not the only meal that was important to the Muslim. Another meal known as the Sahur (early prefast meal) played an important role. The Turkish friend decided to invite his Jewish friend and upon approval from the rest of the family, they accepted. The Jewish family lived a distance of one hour's drive. The sun was to begin to rise at 4:00am. The Jewish family awoke at 2am, drove for an hour and accompanied the Turkish family during the Sahur meal. After a warm conversation and completion of the meal they returned home. These are the friendships that we see being formed. It should be also noted that the Turkish family were invited to their first Jewish engagement some time after. The concept of social interaction and discovery through conversation cannot be underestimated as we have seen serious and meaningful friendships been formed. As a further note to this story, this year the same family attended the Sahur and invited members of two other families who also attended.

### **Mosque Open Days and 9/11 Tribute**

Alongside relationship building with other believing communities and the wider community, the AIS has taken the lead in encouraging Muslim communities to partake in interfaith activities. The best example of this is seen through the seasonal mosque open days that take place. Mosque Open Days occur four times a year and rotate throughout the various Muslim communities in the Melbourne metropolitan areas. Mosque communities that did not generally have the courage to host such events – in particular as a result of the negative public sentiments that were displayed towards Muslims – needed some convincing.

The initial difficulties have been transformed into a willingness to hold mosque open days by the mosque – some times independently of AIS. This in turn has led to a domino effect whereby more mosques have taken heart from the success of other mosques and have used the model that the AIS have put in place. This model revolves around tours of the mosques and questions. So popular have these mosque open days been that recently a Mosque Open Day in the northeastern suburbs of Melbourne was covered by twelve different media outlets – including two commercial television stations that screened the event at prime time on the same day – reaching possible audiences in the millions, again showing the good work of the AIS and the various leaders from the other faith organisations that would encourage their members to attend.

One of the aforementioned Mosque Open Days has, for the past three years, also included holding a 9/11 tribute, at around the same date. This gives not only the

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wider community an opportunity to inspect a mosque and socialise with Muslims but also provides an opportunity for Muslims to be proactive in dealing with the challenges that have come with September 11 including prejudice and ignorance – two enemies common to all communities. The program includes comments from diplomats, various faith and interfaith leaders with concluding workshops on current topics such as “How do we prevent another 9/11?”

It should be noted that the AIS has encouraged most of the mosques in Melbourne to partake in such events – sometimes it is not easy, but the positive image that it has developed and the relations that have formed make it easier for older generations of Muslims to join the Umit Kervani the Caravan of Hope. Many mosques have now made it a yearly event and have so become confident with the organisation and the running of such programs that the AIS has become a guest to such events while continuing to encourage those that have not taken the initiative. A great legacy has been left behind for others to follow.

#### School Activities

As a result of the success of the projects that it has been a key player in, the AIS has gained a positive reputation in the community as an experienced organisation in interfaith activities. This has led to many schools approaching the AIS for joint programs both within schools and outside of the classroom. Many schools approach AIS to assist in their ‘Studies of Religion’ subject to help dispel the prejudices that exist about Islam; typical themes would include women and terror. Further to this, schools have now taken steps to incorporate visits to places of worship and interaction with other schools. The AIS has played an important role in facilitating such ‘first steps’. Schools spend a day out in a Muslim community. This would usually include a visit to a mosque, lunch at a Turkish restaurant and finishing the day with meaningful learning activities with other students from different cultural and faith traditions. This would usually then lead to a reciprocal visit by the host school. In fact, so successful have been the bonds that have formed that mothers and fathers that have seen their children take part in dialogue are themselves being encouraged to follow suite. Monthly gatherings have commenced with the AIS Ladies’ Network formed to help cater for the particular interest from ladies who have shown great eagerness to get involved. The Inaugural AIS Ladies Dinner that was held earlier this year was planned for 200 people. The evening of the event the number of attendees swelled to more than 420. This was a great sign of the support that had been shown to this new and important initiative

The AIS consults with and advises teachers on meaningful activities that will encourage further learning within the classroom and stimulate a respect for the ‘other’. Further plans are currently under way to bring together Muslim and Catholic teachers to begin working together in some sample schools on curriculum planning and educational resources with teacher and student committees being formed to evaluate such programs.

#### **Professional Development and Educational Seminars**

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The AIS, following the principals of education, have developed Professional Development Seminars that are being taken advantage of by various government agencies and educational institutions. Following on the theme of 'education overcoming ignorance', many organisations lack the knowledge to deal with the cultural and religious sensitivities of Muslims. Such insensitivities and ignorance, though unintentional, may hinder the progress of any activities that are directed towards the target group. The AIS has encouraged the wider community to gain an understanding of Muslims and their beliefs and practices – this is also crucial for organisations which work with Muslims, particularly schools where students can feel oppressed due to the already present stresses of school life and peer group dynamics, where teachers need to ease them into the wider community and help the wider school community to show respect and understanding through meaningful educational activities. Of course the first step in improving the students' knowledge of the 'other' is to help the leaders and teachers within the school and in particular to encourage the Education Department to play a leading role in the education of teachers.

Another means of educating the community is through various forms of Seminars that are presented by AIS. The AIS has developed 'Islam in the Modern World and the Australian Context' Seminars that helps bring modern issues into context and to dispel widely accepted prejudices about Muslims and Islam. This has been particularly fruitful in regional centres where there are no Muslims for people to know or to interact with – the only way that such people learn about others is through the media.

Recently through such activities in regional centres, people were astounded by the similarities between Muslims and Christians. Of a town with a population of 1000, 50 people attended with many people turned away due to limited seating and the unexpected interest. This is now leading to further gatherings, with AIS members and executives travelling great distances to share in the hospitality of people from such regional centres – hospitality being a common and very important value to all humanity.

### **Temples, Synagogues and Churches**

Teaching and learning play an important role in the activities of the AIS. As much as it is important for Muslims to educate others about Islam and Muslims, so too, Muslims need to learn about others. Dialogue is a two way form of communication. Many Muslims unfortunately carry with them cultural and historical baggage that needs to be dispelled. To help in this the AIS jointly organises programs that allow its members to visit various places of worship. Muslims have also learnt about Passover, Sukkot, Easter and Christmas as a result of their interactions with Jews and Christians. This last Easter, AIS and its members visited eight churches and participated in the early morning predawn mass as well as others held during the day. In one Church, the AIS was given the opportunity during Easter Mass to

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address the 500 member parish about the concept of the Virgin Mary and the necessity of Interfaith Dialogue – such words have led to great interest and new relations being formed. I should note at this stage that each activity that the AIS has been involved has borne many fruits, both in the form of new friendships and new activities.

During one such visit to a service at a Synagogue, the Rabbi acknowledged our presence and mentioned our concerted efforts in interfaith dialogue. After the service our members, in particular the young, intermingled with the congregation. We gathered with the Rabbi and the female president of the organisation. A female member of AIS recounted an early interaction with the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and Christians whereby the Prophet sent the early Muslims to Abyssinia, the land of the just and kind Christian King, to escape persecution in Mecca; King Negus, after hearing the plight of the Muslims and the troubles that they had suffered at the hands of the Meccans and having heard the description of Mary and Jesus in the Quran said, “The only difference between you and us is this line” while drawing a line in the sand with his staff. This AIS member then symbolically drew that same line in the synagogue and said, “I too draw this line – this is our only difference”. The president, moved by these words, said, “I am stepping over this line as there is no difference” and crying she embraced the AIS member.

A few days later, the AIS received a card from one of the Synagogues members recalling how they too were moved by our presence and the conversations that had taken place by both young and old, recalling and writing on the card a verse from the holy texts:

Behold how good and how pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity.  
(Psalm 133:1)

The AIS has organised visits also to Sikh Temples and Hindu Retreat Centres. Currently projects with various nonAbrahamic faith groups are being discussed that will incorporate the spirituality that is common to the Eastern traditions. These will include spiritual retreats, seminars and social interactions through the sharing of a meal.

### **Building Bridges and Embracing Youth**

Australia has been a great advocate of multiculturalism and in recent years has founded various grants programs to support both intercultural and interfaith activities. One such program is the Living in Harmony initiative. This gives NGOs the opportunity to apply for grants for worthwhile and meaningful projects. The AIS partnering with the B'nai Brith Anti Defamation Commission was successful in obtaining grants for two projects.

The first project title Building Bridges brought together 15 Muslim and 15 Jewish families over 10 months. The project began with introductory lessons in social

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etiquette and sensitivities that everyone should know about regarding the other faith tradition. This then led to an informal meal where families introduced themselves and their interest in the project. The second gathering was a picnic that was held on the public holiday Australia Day. Such a gathering brought together families on a very social basis – people got to know one another, played sport together and ate together. The program of events then led to monthly gatherings in four houses across Melbourne – two Jewish homes and two Muslim homes, with equally mixed groups in each of the houses. A structured program was developed so that all participants would have the opportunity to talk and ask questions. A topic was chosen for each month's discussion including family, youth, rites of passage and festivals. After the initial gatherings families were encouraged to visit each other's homes to further develop relationships in an informal setting. During the project, members were able to visit a Mosque, a Synagogue and the Jewish Museum. They broke bread together over a Passover meal and shared in the importance of Iftar during Ramadan.

The project's lasting legacy is the concrete friendships that have been formed. We continually hear of the families visiting each other for festivities, weddings and Bat and Bar mitzvahs. The influence that these families had was profound both within their own communities and the wider community. Broadsheet newspapers published full page articles regarding the project and many families were envious of the fact that they had missed out on such a historical series of events.

As a result of the success of the first project, a similar project titled Embracing Youth was implemented. It was to bring together ten youth organisations from the Jewish and Muslim communities. The first project provided a skeleton on which to base this project upon. Initially a cultural picnic was organised with cultural performances. The second event centred on a conference "The importance of Interfaith Dialogue in a multicultural society", with speakers from the respective faiths and youth representatives presenting their opinions. The third phase of the project included a series of visits to the various youth organisations' head quarters. During this phase, participants were encouraged to visit each other; because many were at university, they organised gatherings on campus. They also invited each other to various events run by the respective youth groups including dinners and camps. The final event – which concluded recently – was an end of dinner project which was run to coincide with Ramadan and Sukkot, giving representatives of each respective faith tradition the opportunity to explain the significance of these two special events. We look forward to hearing of the development of relations between these organisations and individuals.

### **Multifaith Noble Birth Commemoration**

Prophet Muhammad's birth (pbuh) plays an important part in the calendar of the Muslim. To help ensure that the birth date and the character of Prophet Muhammad is understood and his universal message remembered, a historical activity to commemorate the event took place in a 150 year old church. To make sure that it was a multifaith event a theme was chosen – this year it was Compassion of the

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Prophets – and each respective faith leader – Rabbi, Bishop and Imam spoke respectively about the compassion of Moses, Jesus and Muhammad (pbuh). This was the first time this event was held and more than 300 people attended. It was not only a commemoration but also an opportunity to meet, mingle and interact with others and at the same time learn about all the Prophets from each respective faith leader and reflect on our common heritage.

### **Final Remarks**

Many other projects are currently running at the AIS. These include the publishing of the only Dialogue Asia Pacific (DAP) Magazine, produced for the wider community, with people from students to academics valuing this periodical, both as readers and as contributors.

Annual study tours of Turkey are also organised that showcase to visitors the grand history of interfaith relations in a leading Muslim society – where the theory put into practice and possibly the most important rolemodel for both Muslim societies – in terms of its attitude towards and treatment of nonMuslims currently and as passed on through a rich history – and as an example to the wider world community; Turkey is a ‘living’ model providing current and past examples of how Muslims treated minority groups and illustrating the spiritual richness that the Turks have inherited from the likes of Prophet Abraham, the Virgin Mary and Rumi, who all walked the soils of Anatolia.

People have also had the opportunity to witness the Sema of the Whirling Dervishes, reflect upon Rumi’s words that bring together all humanity and invite them to share and learn from each other about the ‘common word’ through our Sufi Nights.

With recent developments, the formation of the AIS Ladies’ Network and increased youth activities, the AIS has seen the fruits of its labours yield flowers – flowers that reflect the essence of:

O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you. (Quran 3:64)

And this is the common term that Gulen refers to:

For interfaith dialogue to succeed, we must forget the past, ignore polemics, and focus on common points, 2

Common points include belief in God and the Holy Messengers and also love of humanity and creation in general. Gulen states:

Love is a person’s most essential element. It is a most radiant light, a great power that can resist and overcome every force.... Those who make contact with eternity through love seek to implant in others what they receive. 3

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He continues:

Altruism generates love. Whoever has the greatest share in this love is the greatest hero of humanity, one who has uprooted any personal feelings of rancor.

Such heroes continue to live even after death, and during life are welcomed and loved by people. 4

It is this altruism that the AIS has shown towards all who have crossed their path, they have gained the respect, admiration, support and love of people, families, organisations and religious institutions and have set the benchmark for coming together and set a high standard for interfaith activities in Melbourne and the wider region of the state of Victoria.

And, as Gulen reminds us:

As we are all limbs of the same body, we should cease this duality that violates our very union. We should clear the way to unite people; this is one of the greatest ways in which God grants people success in this world, and how he transforms this world into a Paradise. It is in this way that the doors of Heaven will be opened wide in order to give us a warm welcome. Hence, we should remove all ideas and feelings that pull us apart, and run to embrace one another. 5

#### **Notes**

1 M.F. Gulen, Towards a Global Civilisation of Love and Tolerance, The Light Inc., p.6.

2 M.F. Gulen, 'The Necessity of Interfaith Dialogue', The Fountain , JulySeptember 2000, Trustar Inc., p.5.

3 Ibid

4 Ibid 5 M.F. Gulen, Towards a Global Civilisation of Love and Tolerance, The Light Inc., p.7.