

Keynote speech for the International Conference on Fethullah Gülen at UI

by Prof. Dr. Gumilar R. Somantri on 19 October 2010. Posted in Gülen Conference in Indonesia

Dear Friends and Colleagues, thank for the opportunity to address you today. I am very pleased to be here at this conference whose purpose is to honor and explore the ideas of Fethullah Gülen.

What does it mean to be a **'good' person**? This question is of universal importance. It is something that has occupied people of faith down through the centuries, and it is something that has concerned Fethullah Gülen deeply. Fethullah Gülen is an Islamic scholar, born in Turkey in 1941. He is a thinker, a prolific writer and poet. Though he comes from Turkey and is a Muslim, much of what he is talking about is universal. I'd like to focus on these universal aspects.

At the core of his ideas are some very valuable lessons: the call to **love**, the importance of **tolerance**, the rejection of violence and coercion, the **respect** for others and in particular for minorities (Gülen, 2009: 4-5). Fethullah Gülen also has a dream that through these means, we will create a world where different peoples and cultures and faiths live together in **harmony**. The latest expression of these core themes can be found in his new book *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance* (Gülen, 2010). All of these ideas are valuable for us in Indonesia which is so diverse.

Gülen has also seen that in the modern world we need to embrace **science** and **rationality**. In his book *Pearls of Wisdom*, first published in English in 2000, he said:

Avoiding the positive sciences fearing that they will lead to atheism is naivety, and seeing them as contradictory with religion and faith and as a vehicle for the rejection of religion is prejudice and ignorance (Gülen, 2006: 49).

The relationship between **religion** and **science** is one of the key themes that is being explored in this conference.

Also covered are a number of other themes, importantly, **education**, and in particular, Fethullah Gülen's own educational philosophy, education and peace, comparative studies and education in practice. Other than this, there are papers on **spirituality**, **rationality** and **enlightenment**, **democracy**, **globalization**, and the potential of Fethullah Gülen's ideas for **social revitalization**. Also covered are the place of Muslim **minorities** and the relevance of Fethullah Gülen's ideas to Indonesia, and to other places like the USA, Australia, Singapore, Japan, India, Thailand and others.

However, I want to address briefly here one other issue, that of **leadership**. The word 'leader' or 'leadership' doesn't actually appear in the index of any of Fethullah Gülen's books which I referred to for my talk. However, Fethullah Gülen's ideas are relevant to *leadership* in that he sees that we should aspire to make ourselves into people who, spiritually, ethically and socially would be recognized as leaders. A leader for Fethullah Gülen is someone who can be said to be a **role model**, someone who can be an *example* to others and in particular, a *force for the good*, someone who can *contribute to human civilization*.

An example of leader as *role model* could be a wealthy person who is also a **philanthropist**. Let's think, for example, of Bill Gates. I think this is worth bringing up because Bill Gates might seem a questionable choice as he is no saint. He did not build Microsoft Corporation into the behemoth it is today by being nice and critics have claimed that there was an element of ruthlessness or unfairness in the way it used its dominant position against competitors. However, I think these things don't stop him from being a leader when it comes to helping humanity today. Bill Gates, now retired from Microsoft, has given away around 95% of his personal wealth. Now that is a good deal more than the stipulatory amount that Muslims are urged to give as charity. He has given this money to very worthy causes such as health and education and the elimination of poverty. Not only that. He is urging others to do the same. He and Warren Buffet, the hugely successful investor, have teamed up and are now approaching other wealthy individuals, urging them to give away their wealth for the benefit of others. The scale of the giving is impressive, in the many billions of dollars. That is a lot of good and it could help start a new golden age of philanthropy.

Another example I would like to mention, also on the subject of philanthropy, we can see in a reality television program called 'Secret Millionaire'. In it, millionaires go 'under cover' and their own money to disadvantaged people in the UK. The beauty of the under-cover approach is that people don't know they are dealing with someone powerful or important. The millionaire is thought to be a job seeker, someone like them. This approach means that the millionaire has empathy for those in need. It also means that the people are not modifying their behavior with the hope of getting something. The millionaire, meanwhile, is demonstrating that they are not doing it to get people to praise them. They are good leaders because they have empathy and sensitivity. They don't make people feel obliged. No one wants to be indebted to someone else. A good leader understands this. They treat people with dignity. This action orientation, enabling others with charity and doing it with sensitivity, is something, I believe, that Fethullah Gülen would approve of as altruism he frequently describes as important and noble (Gülen, 2009: i, 35, 49, 2010: 2, 218).

If I may, I'd like to draw your attention to some issues that it might be interesting to explore in discussions during the conference.

The first is related to education, which, as I mentioned earlier, is one of the key themes of this conference and it also forms a core theme in Fethullah Gülen's writings. I believe that we should develop, through **lifelong learning**, a **broad understanding** of all kinds of issues. We shouldn't limit ourselves to narrow specialization. A leader needs to be something of a generalist. A leader is someone who understands enough about a wide range of issues so that he can let the specialists

get on with it and not get in their way. We need to be well read so we can be interesting in our conversations with people from all disciplines.

This brings me to another important quality that a leader should have, and that is being **open-minded**. An open minded person is able to listen to others. They don't come with a rigid set of predetermined values or ideas. An open minded person is more flexible and better equipped to get new knowledge for new problems. They are also more realistic in their position as one person in a large, connected society. Open minded people can appreciate that others are different. They don't spend a lot of energy trying to get people to be like them. They value otherness. When it comes to philosophies, or ideologies, they appreciate and respect the views of others. This means that they are **tolerant**. They value **human rights**. They demonstrate in their actions **respect for minorities**. They shun the triumphalism of leaders of majorities who trample the rights of minorities. Good leaders protect the weak. They use their moral force rather than coercion to bring about change. A leader has enough inner strength so that he or she is not dependent on others following or subscribing to their views. There is so much here that is relevant to us all.

Although I was lucky enough to meet and talk with Fethullah Gülen personally, I cannot claim to be an expert on his ideas. I will have to leave the expert opinions to you. I do, though, very much look forward to learning about the interesting presentations and the lively discussions that are going to take place during the conference. On behalf of Universitas Indonesia, I would like to welcome you all and wish you all the best in the coming conference. Thank you.

References

Gülen, M. Fethullah. 2006. Pearls of Wisdom. Translated by Ali Ünal. New Jersey, NY: The Light.

Gülen, M. Fethullah. 2009. M. Fethullah Gülen: Essays, perspectives, opinions. New Jersey, NJ: Tughra Books.

Gülen, M. Fethullah. 2010. Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance. Translated by Mehmet Ünal et. al. New Jersey, NJ: Tughra Books.