

Fethullah Gülen's Ideas on the Relationship between Science and Religion

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For centuries, the relationship between science and religion is the most debated subject among the Muslim scholars and still there is no consensus. Some orthodox Islamic theologians continue to see any relation between the two. It is also a fact that Muslim scientists have made tremendous contribution to science and technology through out the Middle Ages and that is regarded as “the foundation of modern science.” Bernard Lewis and other Western scholars have said that “Muslim scientists did help in laying the foundations for an experimental science with their contributions to the scientific method and their empirical, experimental and quantitative approach to scientific inquiry.” The early Islamic conquests led by the Muslim Rashidun army conquered Sassanid Empire and almost half of the Byzantine Empire, establishing the Caliphate across Arab World, Central Asia, and North Africa. With the expansion of Islam, the Arab Islamic rulers inherited the vast knowledge and skills from these regions also. Muslims belonging to different civilizations have made significant advances in science, mathematics, medicine, engineering, astronomy, and many other fields. However, science continue to progress in Islamic world till the Mongol invasion of the 13th century. There were many factors for the decline of Islamic science that included the challenge posed by the orthodox school of theology to the more rational school of theology, and invasions by crusaders and Mongol on Islamic world between 11th and 13th centuries, particularly the Mongol invasion of 1258, which is generally understood to have marked an end to the Islamic Golden Age. The Mongol destroyed “libraries, observatories, hospitals and universities, culminating in the destruction of Baghdad, the Abbasid capital and intellectual centre” of the Arab World.

The conservative Muslims in the Arab World believe that decline and eventually fall of the Arab empire was a “divine punishment from God against Muslims” deviating from true Islam. They believe Muslims can achieve glory only by going back to fundamentals of Islam which means literal translation of Qur'an and Sunnah, and create a society as existed till the time of pious Kalifs. The formula which they prescribe is against the law of the nature. You can not go back in time, society has to move forward. The orthodox within the Islamic society are in minority but they are backed by some powerful conservative groups who have been opposed to science or mixing it with religion. They have also found many modern scientific discoveries are not in line with religion . Some have very negative approach and even found that the science is not compatible with religion. Others including Ibn-e- Khaldun believe that the decline was due to “political and economic factors rather than religious factors.” They also see a relationship between science and religion. Besides, these two groups, there are others who follow the middle path and are of the opinion that so long as

science is not challenging the basic tenants of the religion and is helping the humanity at large it should be welcomed.

Fethullah Gülen is a very pragmatic Turkish Muslim scholar, educationist and popular preacher who was trained in the religious sciences and studied modern social and physical sciences. Respected as a religious scholar all over the world, he has fairly good understanding of both religion and science and recognizes the delicate relationship existing between the two. During his student days, Gülen was taught Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's commentary on Qur'an known as Risale-i-Nur which was greatly appreciated in the Islamic World. He was one of the first few Islamic scholars who had written on Islamic belief and modern sciences. Nursi, a late nineteenth century Islamic scholar, had influenced Gülen's initial views on religion and science.

He has adopted a very positive approach towards science. His message consists of joining religious belief and modern scientific education to create a better world. He believes that fusing the two types of education enables a person to better understand the "Creator's revelation of Himself to humanity." He wrote "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." He is of the opinion that "religion does not oppose or limit science and scientific work." Gülen said that science and religion are in fact two definitively separate entities that emanate from same truth: "Humankind from time to time has denied religion in the name of science and denied science in the name of religion, arguing that the two present conflicting views. All knowledge belongs to God and religion is from God. How then can the two be in conflict? To this end, our joint efforts directed at inter-religious dialogue can do much to improve understanding and tolerance among people." The goal of dialogue among world religions is not simply to "destroy scientific materialism and the destructive material world view."

Earlier, we have seen a bitter struggle between science and religion that was mainly because of linkages between atheism and materialism with the science. It has greatly influenced the European Christians more than people of other religions. Gülen is of the opinion that "science cannot contradict religion, for its purpose is to understand nature and humanity, which are each a composition of the manifestation of God's attributes of Will and Power." He believes religion has its source in the Divine Attributes of Speech, which was manifested in the course of human history as Divine Scriptures such as the Qur'an, the Gospels, the Torah and others. He is confident that with the efforts of both Christian and Muslim theologians and scientists would bring an end to centuries old religion-science conflict, or "at least its absurdity will be acknowledged."

Gülen's pioneering work was to introduce modern education "fusing religious and scientific knowledge with morality and spirituality that will produce genuinely enlightened people with hearts illuminated with religious sciences, characterized by all kinds of human merits and moral values, cognizant of socioeconomic and political condition of their time." He said "right decisions depend on having a sound mind and being capable of sound thought. Science and knowledge illuminate and develop the mind." For this reason, "a mind deprived of science and knowledge cannot reach right decisions, is always exposed to deception, and is subject to being misled" he added. Gülen said that

a true human should “learn, teach, and inspire others”. He found it difficult to regard those who are ignorant and encouraged people to “renew and reform”

themselves in order to set an example for others. He has a firm belief that “status and merit acquired through knowledge and science is higher and more lasting than those obtained through other means.” Gülen has given lot of importance to learning and teaching. Therefore, “science and knowledge should seek to uncover humanity’s nature and creation’s mysteries. Any knowledge, even “scientific” is true only if it shed light on the mysteries of human nature and dark areas of existence.” He gave lot of importance to child education and the movement started by him is running hundreds of schools all over the world. He encouraged parents to feed their “children’s mind with knowledge and science before their minds become engaged in useless things,” for souls without truth and knowledge is a devils paradise. In order to further substantiate his point of view, Gülen quoted Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, a well known Turkish Islamic thinker, who stated “there is an understanding of education that sees the illumination of mind in science and knowledge, and the light of the heart in faith and virtue.” Gülen said “it rescues science from materialism.” To emphasis his point of view, Gülen also quoted Einstein in his speeches and articles when he dealt with science and religion and he found him of having more or less similar views on science and religion.

“Fusion between science and religion bridge the gap between rich and poor and there will be equitable distribution of wealth according to “one’s work, capital, and needs; the discrimination based on race, color, language would end and basic human rights and freedom protected,” he said. Religion can put science in proper perspective and can erect a defense against the destruction caused by scientific materialism. But, at the same time we should understand that “religion has not yet escaped the onslaught of disbelief based on science and philosophy, no one can guarantee that this storm will not blow even stronger in the future,” said Gülen. He maintained that “natural sciences should not become a cause of disbelief.” He was equally concern with the religion-science conflict. In his opinion, “this caused religion to split off from science and many people to break with religion. This development eventually led to materialism and communism.” To him, it was the major source of tension and “global exploitation, unending conflict based on (national) interest, two world wars, and the division of the world into two blocs.” He believes this problem is rooted in Middle Ages, “when Europe was living under the theocratic order ruled by the Church or Church-appointed monarchs, it came into contact with the Islamic World, especially through Andalusia and the crusades. In addition to other factors, this opened the door for Renaissance and Reform movements.” This was the period when science and technology was progressing in Arab-Islamic nations and were made available to Europeans. The Islamic scientific developments were not driven by the material factors or greed. These Islamic scientists had established a clear cut relation between science and religion. But, scientific discoveries in the post Industrial Revolution period in Europe were driven by material considerations that detached science with religion. Gülen believes this was due to “land shortage, poverty, the drive to meet growing needs,” of the European people who were divided into several smaller nations which led to “overseas geographical discoveries.” He said: “The primary drive in all these developments was to satisfy material needs” of the people. The Western European powers “held the world under its economic and military control for several centuries.” He saw the occupation, domination and colonization as an immoral act and has no religious sanction.

Gülen has written extensively on religion-science conflict. One of the areas of concern for him was materialism that he believes is a product of this conflict. When scientific materialism has severed itself from religion, it triggered clash of interest that caused exploitation. He said that the accumulation of material only to fulfill human's need is the cause of global environmental disaster. He believes that when science is guided by religion then it puts moral and universal values first in determining its real goal. He further elaborated: "If this truth had been understood in the West, and if this relationship between religion and knowledge had been discovered, things would have been different." In his opinion, science would have brought more profit than destruction and it would not have opened the way for producing lethal weapons. He has also questioned the claim made by some thinkers that religion is divisive and opened the way for killing others. He said that "Islam has not led to the last several centuries of merciless exploitation, especially the twentieth century's wars and revolutions that killed hundreds of millions of people and left behind even more homeless, widows, orphans, and wounded." Gülen is equally concerned with the environmental degradation due to over exploitation of the natural resources. He believes pollution is mainly because of "scientific materialism" which is "a peculiarity of the modern Western thought" that believes, "nature is an accumulation of things that have no value other than meeting the bodily needs." He said that "nature is much more than a heap of materiality or an accumulation of objects: It has certain sacredness, for it is an area in which God's Beautiful names are displaced."

He believes these Western scientific studies were developed in opposition to the Church and medieval Christian scholasticism" and "Europeans were confronted with religion-Science conflict." He observed this caused religion to split off from science and many people to break with religion." It was a major worry for Gülen that "enlightenment movements beginning in the eighteenth century saw "human beings as a mind only." Following that, positivist and materialist movements saw them as "material or corporal entities only." As a result, he said, "spiritual crises have followed one after the other. It is no exaggeration to say that these crises and the absence of spiritual satisfaction were the major factors behind the conflict of interests that developed in the last two centuries and reached its apex during the two World Wars."

Modern means of communication and transportation have transformed "the world into to a large, global village in which every relationship is interactive." In the age of globalization, nations and peoples are inter-dependent on each other that "cause closeness in mutual relations." He said, "The West cannot wipe out Islam or its territory, and Muslim armies can no longer march on the West." In this global era "both sides feel the need for a give-and-take relationship." The West has scientific, technological, economic and military supremacy where as Islam has retained the "freshness of its beliefs, spiritual essence, good works, and morality as it has unfolded over the last 14 centuries." The advances in technology, especially digital electronic technology has brought individual to the fore, making it inevitable that "democratic governments that respect personal rights will replace oppressive regimes." "Democracy," he argues, "in spite of many shortcomings, is now the only viable political system and people should strive to modernize and consolidate democratic institutions in order to build a society where individual rights and freedoms are respected and protected, where equal opportunity for all is more than a dream." Gülen's idea was to establish a true Islamic society that should progress with the time and he believes that science is an important tool for development.

That is why he emphasizes on modern education and his faith based movement has opened hundreds of schools all over the World. He asserts that the new educational setup should “fuse religious and scientific knowledge together with morality and spirituality, to produce genuinely enlightened people with hearts illuminated by religious sciences and spirituality, mind illuminated with positive sciences.”

Gülen’s primary concern is to defend theological positions of Islam where science play a subordinating role. In his view, “religion and science can never be regarded as equal in Islam.” Nevertheless, he gives due recognition to science. He referred to Qur’an and Sunnah to support his contentions. His idea is to establish harmonious relationship between science and religion based on truth. Gülen has written extensively on nature of religious and scientific truths. He believes that “the truth is not something the human mind produces. Truth exists independently of man and man’s task is to seek it.” He divided truth into two types: absolute truth and relative truth. The absolute truth is “unchanging” and the relative truth is “changing, transient, and tentative in nature.” Absolute truth concerns “the essence of existence”, and the science is incapable of knowing it by virtue of its methodological limitations. He believes that “the Qur’an and the Sunnah are absolute truths in nature.” He contented that scientific truth belongs to the category of relative truth because “sciences are in contrast advance and what is regarded today as true may appear tomorrow as wrong or, by contrast , what we see today as wrong, may proved to be true in the future.” therefore “relative truth must be subservient to absolute truth.” (p3 Paper 18-19) In his view the two types of truths are not in contradiction since “their source is one and the same, namely the divine source.”

Gülen believes that science cannot be separated from religion in the contemporary world as long as its limitations are duly recognized and it should not employ to discredit religion. Science guided by religion can lead people to the right path and he sees harmony between the two. “On the contrary” he said “I hold that believers should be well verse in such facts in order to fight back against materialism and atheism.” His idea is to employ science in the service of people and it should “recognize and maintain the superiority of religion to scientific truth.” He suggested “empirical methods are the best and the most appropriate to be employed when dealing with the world perceived by the physical senses” and the modern scientific methodology is simply incapable of knowing “the essence of existence.” Gülen contents that Islam lays emphasis on beneficial knowledge which advances human welfare and it allows utilizing the resources of the universe for the benefit of mankind. In his opinion, one can remain religious and spiritual while enjoying the benefit of science and technology. The notion of beneficial knowledge that contributes to human welfare is encouraged by Gülen and he clearly discouraged promotion of science that inflicts prejudice and harm. Prophet Mohammad advised his followers to seek knowledge from whichever source. Thus a person’s loyalty and commitment to Islam remains unaffected by his or her attempt to seek knowledge from a non non-Islamic source. The best way, in his opinion, is to promote knowledge by popularizing modern education along with the religious education among the masses. Gülen also advocates the notion of beneficial knowledge that contributes to human welfare, but at the same time, he would discourage promotion of science that inflicts prejudice and harm, such as weapons of mass destruction, environmental degradation or human or animal cloning. Actually in his opinion, rationality is a means to knowledge and discovery of truth. He did not find contradiction in

religion and modernity and encourages science and technology for human welfare, accepts the concepts of democracy and secularism for better governance, but, on the condition that they should remain within the domain of religion. His idea is to create a knowledge that based society that would eradicate poverty in Islamic nations.

Gülen, in his numerous speeches and writings has come out in defense of religion and science which he finds are extremely useful for the contemporary Islamic society. His thesis is that science should not be separated with religion rather it should be detached from materialism, atheism and ideological secularism. He also insists that knowledge should be rooted in the teachings of Qur'an that would help in establishing peace through dialogue. Therefore, his views on science and religion are extremely relevant for the Islamic society.

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