

# Interfaith Dialogue and Religious Tolerance in Contemporary Islamic Thought: A Comparative Study of Fethullah Gülen and Abdul Karim Soroush

by Heydar Shadi on 22 November 2007. Posted in Peaceful Coexistence

## Abstract

Contemporary Muslim scholars hold different positions on religious pluralism and tolerance; some (so-called 'fundamentalists') are exclusivist and regard Islam as the only true religion and reject the religious pluralism and tolerance, others (so-called 'traditionalists' and 'modernists') believe that religious pluralism and tolerance are acceptable in Islam. Traditionalists mainly rely on Islamic concepts and Sufism and generally do not emphasize or explicitly endorse pluralism, preferring to promote only the religious virtue of religious tolerance. The modernists on the other hand use modern Western philosophical theories and explicitly espouse religious pluralism. This article discusses the approaches, sources and arguments of Fethullah Gülen and Abdul Karim Soroush as contemporary Muslim scholars on religious pluralism and tolerance. It concludes that both thinkers emphasize the necessity of peaceful communication with the followers of other religions, as well as with secular groups, and also both use theological and Sufi sources. However there are some differences between them. While Soroush mainly relies on epistemological arguments, Gülen reasons as a pragmatist. Also, Gülen, adhering to the traditional interpretation of Islam, believes in Islam's superior position. Soroush departs from the traditional interpretation of Islam and admits to the same truth of other religions. Perhaps because of his adherence to the traditional interpretations of religion, Gülen has been more successful than Dr. Soroush in winning a following among people of his own country and around the world. Nevertheless, the practical outcome of both thinkers' positions is the same and both espouse tolerance and peaceful co-existence with the followers of other religions.

## 1. Introduction

Religious pluralism and tolerance is one of the basic foundations of a civil society. It is the belief that no religion, singularly, has a monopoly of the truth or of the life that leads to salvation. Religious pluralism establishes the possibility of tolerance and co-existence of followers of different religions and cultures (Hick 1993)

Islam, one of the main religions of the world, is often labeled exclusivist and accordingly intolerant (Mesalmany 2006). Here it is important to examine what is the real attitude of Islam towards pluralism and tolerance? Is there a pluralistic interpretation of Islam?

Muslim scholars have different views on this subject. Among the three main intellectual movements in Islamic world (Kurzman 1998: 3), fundamentalists reject religious pluralism and tolerance, and consider it as an aspect of the ideological war of the western world (Mesbah Yazdi 2002:14) but both traditionalists and modernists accept it, though traditionalists generally do not emphasize and specify pluralism and prefer to accept solely the religious tolerance.

Traditionalists mainly rely on Islamic transcripts and Sufism, but modernists use modern western philosophical theories such as Kant's noumenon-phenomena theory and John Hick's religious pluralism theory.

This article is a short review of the approaches, sources and arguments of Fethullah Gülen and Abdul Karim Soroush as two contemporary Muslim scholars on religious pluralism and tolerance.

## **2. Fethullah Gülen's Views on Religious Pluralism and Tolerance**

### **2.1. Definition and Background**

Gülen believes in the religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue and has several important activities and achievements in this field. In 1999, his paper "The Necessity of Interfaith Dialogue" was presented to the Parliament of World's Religions in Cape Town. He maintains that "dialogue is a must" and that people, regardless of nation or political borders, have far more in common than they realize (Gülen 2005b: IX).

He suggests tolerance and dialogue as two keys to provide peace in society. And in his view, "no one should condemn another for being a member of a religion or scold him for being an atheist" (Bulent and Omer 2000). He personally visited religious leaders, including Pope John Paul II, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomeos, and Israeli Sephardic Head Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron. (Wikipedia, Fethullah Gülen) and (Gülen 2004: XIII)

Gülen realized a very important progress in interfaith dialogue by establishing "Foundation of Writers and Journalists" which he is its honorary chairman. This foundation, by its activities including annual meetings, has reconciled different intellectual movements in Turkey. In the meetings the representatives of different movements are invited.

### **2.2. Arguments**

In Gülen's opinion interfaith dialogue has five main reasons:

#### **Saving Modern Human from Materialism**

The first reason of Gülen for interfaith dialogue is cooperation among religions in saving modern man from materialism which has deprived human from the original, natural, and harmonic life. He

believes that materialist worldview which limits religion's influence in contemporary social life, is the main cause of modern human's problems. According to Gülen's view social harmony and peace with nature, between people, and within the individual only can come about when the material and spiritual realms are reconciled. Peace with nature, peace and justice in society, and personal integrity are possible when one is at peace with Heaven. Religion reconciles nature-Divine Books, the material-the spiritual. (Gülen 2000: 4-9)

### **The Same Source and Nature of All Religions**

The second reason of interfaith dialogue from Gülen's point of view is the very nature of religion. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and even Hinduism and other world religions accept the same source for themselves, and, including Buddhism, pursue the same goal. He states: "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 embracing all races and all beliefs, a road bringing everyone together in brotherhood." (Gülen, 2004: 376)

Gülen argues that regardless of how their adherents implement their faith in their daily lives, such generally accepted values as love, respect, tolerance, forgiveness, mercy, human rights, peace, brotherhood, and freedom are exalted by religion. Most of them are accorded with the highest precedence in the messages brought by Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, as well as in the messages of Buddha and even Zarathustra, Lao-Tzu, Confucius, and the Hindu scholars.

Gülen's metaphor is very helpful to understand his true belief in diversity. He likens the diversity of religion to a symphony and names all religions as "a symphony of God's blessings and mercy." 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 (Kurtz 2005: 375).

### **Qur'an's Call to Interfaith Dialogue**

In addition to rational reasons for the necessity of interfaith dialogue, Gülen refers to Verses of Qur'an and Prophet's deeds: "Fourteen centuries ago, Islam made the greatest ecumenical call the world has ever seen. The Qur'an calls the People of the Book (Christians and Jews primarily): Say: "O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with Him; that we take not, from among ourselves lords and patrons other than God." If then they turn back, say you: "Bear witness that we are Muslims (i.e., those who have surrendered to God's Will). (Qur'an 3:64) This call comes in the ninth year of the Hijra. A very important point is that in case this call was rejected, Muslims were to adopt the attitude expressed in another sura: "Your religion is for you; my religion is for me." That is, if you do not

accept this call, we have surrendered to God. We will continue on the path we have accepted and leave you to go on your own path" (Gülen 2000: 5).

### **Religious Tolerance as the Request of Human Life**

Gülen believes that diversity is a necessary part of human life and if we do not respect the diversity and unlikely desire to unify all people under one religion we will be engaged in an unlimited net of conflicts: "Different beliefs, races, customs and traditions will continue to cohabit in this village. Each individual is like a unique realm unto themselves; therefore the desire for all humanity to be similar to one another is nothing more than wishing for the impossible. For this reason, the peace of this (global) village lies in respecting all these differences, considering these differences to be part of our nature and in ensuring that people appreciate these differences. Otherwise, it is unavoidable that the world will devour itself in a web of conflicts, disputes, fights, and the bloodiest of wars, thus preparing the way for its own end." (Weller 2006: 77).

### **Love as the Essence of Being Requests Tolerance**

Inspired from Sufism as the inner side of Islam, Gülen insists on love as the essence of being; "Love is the most essential element of every being, and it is the most radiant light, and it is the greatest power; able to resist and overcome all else." (Gülen, 2004: 1) Sufism emphasizes on love as a central attribute of a believer and focuses on love for others. Gülen especially is influenced by Turkish Sufis and he follows a line that stretches from Yesevi to Rumi, then from Yunus to Haci Bektas-i Veli. Gülen, following this very basis, re-generates this tolerant interpretation and understanding of Muslim-Turkish Sufism within contemporary circumstances. He insists that "Love is the most essential element in every being, and it is a most radiant light and a great power which can resist and overcome every force." (Gülen 2004: IX). Gülen uses the metaphor of the famous Sufi poet Mawlana Rumi to explain how one can be both rooted in one's own tradition, but open to others: "such a person is like a compass with one foot well-established in the center of belief and Islam and the other foot with people of many nations." (Kurtz 2005: 375-7).

Gülen in his book *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance* argues on the necessity of love in the words of the famous Turkish poet Yunus, "loving the created simply because of the Creator." He explains that every creator, for example, a painter loves his/her creatures, so God loves all creature especially humans, and we must love humans at least as the God's creatures. (Gülen, 2004: 46)

Gülen is himself a true Sufi when says: "Applaud the good for their goodness; appreciate those who have believing hearts; be kind to the believers. Approach unbelievers so gently that their envy and hatred would melt away. Like a Messiah, revive people with your breath." (Gülen 2005a: 75)

## **3. Dr. Soroush's Views on Religious Pluralism and Tolerance**

### **3.1. Definition and Background**

Dr Soroush, the Iranian contemporary religious thinker and theorist, is considered as one of the most significant religious intellectuals of the Islamic world. In spite of his fundamental thoughts and activities during the 1970s -80s, as well as his close cooperation with Islamic Republic of Iran, Dr. Soroush has converted into one of the modern critical interpreters of religion and Islam. He has written several books on interpretations and understanding of religion and Islam in modern times up to now. Dr Soroush started his movement in the field of intellectual religious thoughts by introducing *The Theory of Evolution of Religious Knowledge Or-Text in Context* in the late years of 90s he started to emphasize on pluralism and religious tolerance in the middle of the closing decade of the twentieth century (Hashemi 2006: 123). In the recent decade he has become one of the most critical advocates of religious pluralism and tolerance in Iran, as well as in the Islamic world. Writing several books and articles, as well as participating in national and international conferences and meeting the scholars and thinkers of other religions is just a part of his activities in relation to religious pluralism.

Dr. Abdul Karim Soroush was chosen by Time Magazine (April 2005) as one of the 100 most influential people of 2005 in the world. Scott MacLeod has introduced Dr. Soroush as the Iran's democratic voice. He also received the Erasmus Prize (2004) of the Praemium Erasmianum Foundation.<sup>[1]</sup>

### **3.2. Arguments**

Dr Soroush in clarifying and classifying the theory of pluralism has used mainly four sources and characters including: first of all Emanuel Kant the 18th German philosopher and his theory of noman- phenomena, second, Jalal-al-Din Rumi and his mystical and sufistic world view which pluralism and tolerance are a significant part of it, third, Karl Popper the science and political philosopher of the 20th century and his critical realism theory, and fourth, John Hick, the contemporary theologian and religions philosopher who puts forward the theory of religious pluralism in the modern era.

Dr Soroush's reasoning and argumentations can be mentioned briefly as follows:

#### **Epistemological Argument**

The basis of Dr. Soroush's argumentation in believing in religious polarity is his belief in diversity of religious knowledge and epistemology. In his opinion religion has two major sources: religious texts and religious experiences<sup>[2]</sup>, since these two sources are silent, and people are influenced by their outer side and by their interpreters, therefore none of these two, religious knowledge and religious interpretations, might be definitely regarded as the monopolistic and exclusive authority.

Consequently, there is no way out of accepting religious plurality and tolerance. This argument can be explained and clarified through the following arguments (Jhanbakhsh 2004: 231).

- Religious texts and experiences are the primary sources for gaining religious knowledge. Therefore human does not have access to the essence of religion itself. In fact religion is nothing but various interpretations of it, throughout history.

- Religious texts and experiences are silent; human beings interpret them.
- In interpreting religious texts, interpreter employs his/her own expectations, questions, and presuppositions.
- These expectations, questions, and presuppositions come from somewhere out of religion.
- Out of religion is changeable, variable, and indeterminate. Science, philosophy, and human properties are constantly increasing and changing.
- Inevitably interpretations that come out of such expectations, questions, and presuppositions would be also variable and changing.
- Considering the fact that human being is always liable to err, therefore not any interpretation can be claimed as the single and definite authority.

### **Mystical Argumentation**

Dr. Soroush also employs other reasoning mainly derived from mystics and Sufism, especially from Rumi that can be summarized as follows: according to mystical trainings there is an obvious difference between the internal [Baten] and external [Zaher] world. What human see of religious diversity is just the apparent and outward of religion, the shell of it, and the essence is hidden in all religions. Although the followers of different religions are worshiping different names, they are in fact in search of one single essence. The external diversity is caused by the limitation of materialistic world.

### **Incompatibility of Religious Exclusiveness with God's Guidance and Conduct**

If just as the exclusivists, for instance, just 70-80 millions *Twelve Imam Shiite* Muslims have been guided, or if just 12 millions of Jews are guided, this would contradict Divine attributes of conduct and leadership. It definitely contradicts divine attributes of mercy, wisdom, and conducts, if most of human beings are not guided and remain misled and imperfect.

### **Hereditariness of Religious Believes Among the Pious**

It is not always like this that followers of all religions, for instance Christians, all choose their religion based on reason and research, but people become Muslim, Christian, or Jew on the spur of family and society demands. In other words human beings' religion has some "cause" rather than "reason". Therefore, is that logical or compatible with God's wisdom to say that human's salvation or tribulation is a result of something hereditary and unintentional? (Soroush 2001: 50-51).

## **4. Comparison and Conclusion**

According to the comparison made on Fethullah Gülen and Dr. Soroush's views on pluralism and religious tolerance, some similarities and some differences between the two views are recognizable. Both of the thinkers emphasize the necessity of peaceful and positive communication with the followers of different religions, as well as with secular groups. Furthermore, they reject the fundamental, violent, and exclusivist interpretations of religion. Both put emphasis on the comprehensive tolerance and do not restrict it to some religions (for example, those having heavenly

books). Concerning their sources and arguments, both of them use mystical, especially Rumi's heritage, and theological sources and arguments. Their books and activities prove this claim.

However, in spite of their major common point of view they are different in their approaches, arguments, sources, results and achievements. While Dr. Soroush employs mystical and theological (Shiite-Mu'tazeli) sources as well as western sources, Fethullah Gülen mainly uses theological (Ashari-Hanafi) and mystical sources. Soroush uses theological (Divine conduct), mystical (distinction between shell and essence of religion), experimental (hereditariness in religion) reasoning and epistemological argumentations. Gülen uses mystical (comprehensive love), theological (referring to Qur'an and Prophet's tradition) and pragmatist (common goal of all religions). Consequently, it is possible to conclude that Soroush mainly has an epistemological approach and with an emphasis on religious diversity, ends up in pluralism and religious tolerance. Gülen emphasizes on pragmatist reasoning (to help the common goal of all religions that is to fight materialism and to revive the existence of God in people's lives).

In sum, Fethullah Gülen is seriously concerned with religion and in order to improve the religious life of contemporary human being suggests tolerance and interfaith dialogues. To achieve this goal he maintains his traditional interpretation of Islam, which is to believe in Islam's superior position and tending to reject other religions' truth. But Soroush because of epistemological necessity and probably because of his concern with modernity chooses the path of religious pluralism. And because of this closeness and fairness to traditional interpretations of religion, Gülen has been more successful than Dr. Soroush, not only, in the eyes of the people of his own country, but also among the people throughout the world. Nevertheless, the practical results of both points of views are the same and both of these thinkers suggest tolerance and influential communications with the followers of other religions.

### **Acknowledgments:**

I would like to thank Ms. Maryam Najafi for her review of the entire text and helpful comments.

[1] for more information visit Dr. Soroush's official site: <http://www.drSORoush.com/english.htm>

[2] In a recent speech Dr. Soroush stated that prophethood and revelation are religious experiences, just like Sufis religious experiences. The difference is that prophets have the mission of preaching. Refer to: Soroush, A. Expansion of Prophetic Experience, Serat Publication, Tehran, 1378. [In Farsi].

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(2004); 'Four Principles of Bioethics from the Islamic Point of View', Iranian Journal of Diabetes and Lipid Disorders, 6 (2006); 'Euthanasia: an Islamic Point of View', American Journal of Bioethics, 7/ 4 (2007); 'Iran's Reaction to the Pope's Speech at Regensburg University', The Conference of Islamic World's Reaction to Pope's Speech (Eichstätt, 2007).