

Necessity and Importance of Interculturalinterreligious Dialogue and Initiatives of Fethullah Gülen

by Niyazi Öktem on 22 November 2007. Posted in Peaceful Coexistence

1. Introduction

Being believers of different religions and different cultures, we should confess that religions, especially monotheistic religions do not like 'tolerance' very much. Most of the religions and sects, at the risk of their own decline, prefer protecting the faithful against, so called deviation of the faith they uphold: Heresies, schism, heterodoxy etc. , must be condemned. That was the logic and the mentality of the religious wars during the history.

For the fanatic members of the religions, there is no mercy for the others.

In the old testament, the expression 'chosen people' for a fanatic jew means, the place of the members of the other religions is lost in the univers; salvation is a privilege only for the Jews. In the other hand, for a liberal jew, all the believers of one god might have the privilege of being chosen people.

For a fanatic christian, the members of the other religions are anthe-christ's children. But for a liberal, rationalist christian, Jesus Christ, who is the incarnation (in Coran Jesus Crist is *Kelamullah* or *Kelimetul* Allah which means *logos*), would embrace all the children of God.

Djihad is the word for self-defence in the Koran. But, for a fanatic muslim, according to this concept, believers should kill all the pagans. He does not know the deeper meaning of the *djihad* which means making war against our desire and our ambitions.

If believers make an effort to learn and to understand the deeper meaning and the aim of their faith, tolerance and peace can find a better place in the social and political life. Ignorance is the main obstacles of tolerance and peace for humankind. . Ordinary people don't know his own religion and *a fortiori* others's religions. Thus believers of the other religions, other sects and denominations become enemy for them. Ignorance humiliates other beliefs and other thoughts. Ignorance brings nationalism and chauvinism, and consequently war and *caos*.

Only liberal and open minded religious leaders can break religious ignoranc and fanatic aproaches. This kind of leaders, philosophers can open the way of the interreligious and intercultural dialogue procesus which could be institutionolize with the support and the participation of the masses.

Institutionaly, the Second Vatican Concil (1958-1963-65), whit the great effort of Pope John the Twenty Third interreligious dialogue started in our modern times. But of course, before that we always can see, during the centuries philosophers, priest, Saints, Imams, Rabins who had worked seriously for the interfaiths diologue. Among the others, names such as Saint Franois of Assisi, the catholic; Maimonides, the Jew; Mawlana Djalaleddin Rumi the Muslim are some of the thinkers and the activist of the dialogue.

In modern times in the Muslim Word, one of the Pioneer of interreligious dialogue is Mr. Fethullah Glen. Mr. Glen is the first Turkish muslim religious leader who institutionalise intercultural and interreligious dialogue worldwide.

He founded in 1994 The Journalists and Writers Foundation where he is now honorary president.

Coming from Said Nursi tradition, Mr. Glen always had appaciated interreligious and intercultural dialogue, but institutionaly the start took a run-up whit this foundation. His 'master' Said Nursi exerted his personal efforts at building reconciliation and friendship with Christians. Nursi, in 1950, sent a collection of his studies to Pope Pius XII in Rome and recieved in reply a personal letter of thank. In 1953, he went to visit the Ecumenical Patriarche Athenagoras in Fener-Istanbul to seek cooperation between Muslims and Christians against to the face of aggressive atheism. But, first intititional start came up from Fetullah Glen.

2. Intellectually, Who is Fetullah Glen?

Born in 1938, in Erzurum. east part of Anatolia Fetullah Glen, while child, started to learn soufi interpretation of Islam from Sheikh Muhammed Ltfi. In his moral training, especially his mother, and his Soufi teacher played formative roles. His unofficial Soufi education affected his ongoing spirituality. I think that Soufi formation is the main stream for him to realise the importance of the interreligious and intercultural dialogue, because Soufism, mystical aproches in religion could open the concept of unification and equality among the human being. Soufism is humanism.

But on the other hand, he grew up whit the concept of nationalism, because Erzurum had lived the reciprocal atrocities with Turcs and Armaniens. He has always been nationalist, but not chauvinist. His moderated nasionalism focuses on loving his people and respecting all the other nations, religions and etnicities. 'Co-existance pacifique' in is his main aim to estabilish peace in the World. His nationalism, maybe, opened the vison of founding schools in Central Asia and also worldwide.

The Glen's attitute of nationalism thus differentiates itself from other islamic and nationalist groups is adopting the free market, modern education and liberal interpretation of Islam. This new 'national islam' of Turkey marked by the logic of market economy and Otoman legacy which means to know how to co-existe whit the other religions and etnicities in the different liberal social and political states.

Gülen believes the virtue of democracy. He also thinks that Democracy and Islam are compatible. Islam does not propose a certain unchangeable form of government. In the other hand democratization is an irreversible process in Turkey. From this perspective, Fetullah Gülen follows, like his master Said Nursi, the path of islamic intellectual movement Nahta (Islamic Renaissance of Mouhammed Abdouh and Djamalettin Afgani).

According to the Nahta movement, tree main principles of Islam ara creed (*iman*), ritual obligations (*ibadet*) and legal-economic affairs (*muamelat*). Interpetation's principles in creed and ritual obligations should be literally. But for *muamelat*, rulers, juges, that meens all the Muslims can apply in jurisprudence sociological and *theleological* interpretations. That means, if there is an inflation in the conjoncturel economical situation in a Muslim country, you can not apply the literally the verset of Coran which says that interest is a sin. If you apply this principle, poor people, having noting than a small amont of money, will loose more if he doesn't accept a reasonable interest from the bank. Justice is is one of the main principle of Islam. If that men looses his money with the inflation, without having interest you avoid one of the main principles of Coran which is justice. As a philosophical concept, justice can appear differently according to the socio-economical situations. Appling Coran in *muamelat* needs a socio-economical and *teleological* approach. *Teleos* is the ultime aim of our holly principles. So, we should always concern the aim of Islam which is creating 'city of Justice'. So did Khalif Omar when a thief was expecting the sentance of cuting his hand he said: it is famine, there is general scarcity of food. It is not fair if we cut the hand of this thief. Omar did not apply the literally interpretation of the verset of Koran but he prefeere the sociological and teleological interpretation.

With this kind of approaches, Nahta's principles are compatible with the principles of the modern democracy. Turkish Muslim thinkers and modern Muslim businessmen are not far a way from Nahta's principles.

With the support of modern and moderated Muslim businessmen and his ordinary fallowers, Gülen's modern intellectuel vison of Islam and his activist nature gave him the chance of being honorary and spirituel leader of many important activities in different fields. Media, schools, intellectuel foundations, intellectuel platforms.

In my speech I'll talk about intellectuel foundations and intellectuel platforms.

In dead, we can find and regroup in a concrete way his intellectuel approaches's is the activities of Journalists and Writers's Foundation.

3. Journalists and Writers Foundation

Journalists and Writers Foundation, which was founded in 1994, promote dialogue and toleranc among all stratum of society. According to his president, Harun Tokak, the Foundation took as its principle the performance of activities that develop and consolidate love, tolerance and dialogue, first among journalist and writers, and than throughout Turkish society and humankind.

From this perspective above, Journalist and Writers Foundations created Abant Platform and Intercultural Dialogue Platform.

3. 1. Abant Platform

In 1997, pioneered by the Journalists and Writers Foundation, a group of Turkish scholars and intellectuals of different political tendencies decided to organise a thin-tank in order to discuss regularly Turkey's and World's social, intellectual, religious, political and philosophical problems.

On July 16-19 th, in a hotel, by the Lake of Abant hiding behind Bolu mountains with its natural beauties, a group of intellectuals from different places, of different opinions and stands took a 'first step' for the peace and dialogue. Most of them came together for the first time, most of them newly meet. The initial timidity turned into friendship, distances into understanding, while hard looked, frictions transformed into witty remarks, intellectual bickerings; and diversities became a richness.

From 1998 to 2007.

Within a very short time, The Abant Meetings became a classic, a tradition. We call it 'Abant Spirit' which is pluralism, freedom, individuality, civil consciousness. search, courage, resistance to impositions, persuasion, tolerance to opposition, knowledge and critical intellect, to search for a common denominator, vision, respect, feeling outer worlds, dialogue and tolerance, complete democracy.

Seen as having a week choice, tried tone and being colourless and drained, for a period that could be considered a long one, The Turkish intellectual has returned to life with the Abant Spirit. Accomplishing that at a time when ideologies and dogmas besieged life and held living and thinking spaces in mortgage was a great move possessing the quality of a mental revolution, a reform

Regularly, through the years, such issues have been discussed with the collaborations of the different national and international institutions:

- Islam and Secularism. 1998. Abant-Turkey
- Religion, State and Society. 1999. Abant-Turkey
- Democratic Law State. 2000. Abant-Turkey
- Pluralism and Social Reconciliation. 2001. Abant-Turkey
- Globalisation. 2002. Abant-Turkey
- War and Democracy. 2003. Abant-Turkey.
- Islam, Democracy, Secularism and the Turkish Experience. 2004 Washington DC. John Hopkins University.
- In the Process of Turkey's Accession to the EU: Culture, Identity and Religion. 2004. European Parliament. Brussels. Catholic University of Louvain.
- On the Verge of New age :New Searches in Education. 2005. Erzurum-Turkey.
- Paris I. April 2006. Maisons des Sciences de L'Homme et Conseil International des Sciences Sociales. Maubert-Mutualite. 'Republic, Cultural Diversities and Europe.'

- Paris-Istanbul II. April 2007. Palais de France-Istanbul. Fondation pour l'Innovation Politique and Revue Esprit. 'Franc, European Union and Turkey'.
- Alevilik. Historical, Cultural, Folkloric And Actual Aspects of Anatolian Alevites. May 2007. Istanbul Turkey.

3. 2. Intercultural Dialogue Platform

Intercultural Dialogue Platform is also one of the important institutions of the Journalists and Writers Foundation. In that context, the Honorary President of the Foundation held talks with many religious leaders and institutions, such as Pope John Paul II (in 1998), Greek Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomeos (in 1996), Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel Eliahu Bakshi Doron (in 1999) and other religious leaders of Turkey in many occasions.

Beginning from 1997, men and leaders of the different religions living in Turkey took places, under the umbrella of the Journalists and Writers Foundation, around the table of the Ramadan dinner.

Among the academic meetings, Intercultural Dialogue Platform have organised following symposiums:

I- Intercivilisational Dialogue Symposium 6-7 June 1997 Istanbul.

II- The art of Living Together. 'Tolerance700" 1999. Istanbul

III- The Globalisation and Intercivilisational Dialogue. 2004 Tbilisi. Georgia.

IV- From Terror to Universal Ethics: Religions and Peace Conference. 2005 Moscow. Russia.

V- Hunger and Poverty: Solutions Offered by Religions. 2006. Istanbul

VI- Haran Meetings.

It is known that the Abrahamic traditions holds an important place in Anatolia which is the crossroads of ancient cultures. The fact that a part of Abraham's life has passed in northern Mesopotamia. Abraham is the common father of three monotheistic religions. Christians and Muslims of different sects, who lived in this region, tried to keep Abrahamic tradition continuously alive.

In the context of interreligious dialogue, Intercultural Dialogue Platform organised two symposiums in two important cities of this area, where the Abrahamic tradition is practised.

- 13-15 April 2000. First one took place in Sanliurfa which is accepted as the birthplace of Abraham and has a position of being the center of the Haran region that has been housing a rich scientific and cultural heritage since Babylon. Different religious leaders and scholars from different countries came to participate to the symposium. His Holiness Bartholomeos and Chief Rabbi of Turkey were among them...
- 13-16 May 2004. The second one took place in Mardin also in northern Mesopotamia. Among the participants I can mention the following names: His Holiness Bartholomeos ; Abdulkadir Aksu, Minister of Internal Affairs, Mor Ignatius Iwas, Syriac Orthodox Patriarch; Rav Izhak Haleva Chief

Rabbi of Turkey, Mgr. Edmond Ferhad, Vatican Ambassador. Also worldwide, different scholars and religious leaders took place at the symposium.

VII- Common Prayers for the Peace.

The intercultural Dialogue Platform has created a tradition for The Common Prayers for the Peace. Religious leaders of the different religions and sects living in Turkey have come together each year for a common prayer for the peace. First one was organised in January 15th 2004 in Istanbul. After the prayers, a panel is always organised within the framework of issue that is on the spiritual agenda of World and Turkey.

VIII- With the participation of the different religious representatives, Intercultural dialogue Platform organise also panels on following subjects:

- The concept of incarnation in the three monotheistic religion.
- The Concept of God in the three monotheistic religion.
- The concept of ethics in the three monotheistic religion.

4. Conclusion

Like the other religions, Islam has different interpretations. It is undoubted fact that certain Islamic traditions and interpretations and practices are might have conflict with the modern state and modern society. In judisim and in chritianity, we can also see fundamentalist approaches. I think that, like the other religions philosophicly, sociologically and theologically Islam is multudimensional and has many aspects. I believe thet rationalist and mistical interpretations of faith are perfectly consistent with international human progressiveness.

In respect of its historical, sociological and judicial heritage, Turkey and Islam in Turkey, whit Sunnite and Alevit interpretations and sects is not clasical traditional Muslim society.

Our rich historical heritage gave us the opportunity of having liberal and humanistic interpretation of Islam. Mr. Fethullah Gülen and the tradition that he fallows has opend to the Turkish society the doors of the intercultural and interreligious dialogue activities.

Dialogue can only can give us a concrete way for the peace.