

# Tolerance as a Source of Peace: Gülen and the Islamic Conceptualization of Tolerance

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## ABSTRACT

**S**eyyed Hossein Nasr has stated that “the future of the world in the next few years and decades will depend obviously on how various world views and civilizations will be able to live together.”<sup>1</sup> A hermeneutic of tolerance that encourages mutual respect, goodwill, and proactive engagement across and within cultures and religious traditions is one important strategy for “living together.” Perhaps nowhere is this effort more important than within the beautifully complex and humane Islamic tradition.

Fethullah Gülen stands as a seminal thinker in this global endeavour to foster greater understanding and peaceful engagement for the purpose of “living together.” Fethullah Gülen has inaugurated a restorative ethos of hospitality and friendship that is obedient to Islamic principles and responsive to the cross-cultural need for coexistence. Gülen is imploring Muslims to embrace their tradition and rebuff the destructive image of Islam “fed to the world.” Through a strategy of “general persuasion”, he is challenging Muslims to reclaim Islam’s overarching message of love, dialogue, and tolerance.<sup>2</sup>

Gülen has not been reticent to proffer Islamic conceptualization of tolerance that would encourage coexistence through an altruistic awareness of human difference. For sustainable peace and hospitality to occur, such a conceptualization of tol-

erance must take root, one which acknowledges the reality of lasting difference and the need for mutual respect, human friendship, and hospitality. This paper will offer an in-depth exposition on Gülen's conceptualization of tolerance—a conceptualization that is cultivated from his spiritually broad and intellectually robust understanding of Islam and the human condition.

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“Muslims should say, ‘In true Islam, terror does not exist.’” So declares Fethullah Gülen in response to the proliferation of terrorist attacks perpetrated by Muslim extremists in the inaugural years of the twenty-first century (Gülen 2006: 185). A prominent Sufi teacher, whose irenic spirit and humane theology has spawned a powerful movement of education and enlightenment, Gülen has written much on the benevolent nature of the Islamic faith and the consequential responsibilities Muslims have toward humanity. Contrary to the exclusiveness and intolerance preached by Muslim extremists, Gülen's writings champion tolerance and *caritas* toward the Other as the essence of a true believer. Tolerance, for Gülen, is a consequence of one's faith in God and a salve of reconciliation in a world of lasting difference. With every region of the world beleaguered by intercommunal conflicts, between and within tribes and religions, a strategy of tolerance, which is both taught and lived, is urgently needed. This article offers Fethullah Gülen's Islamic conceptualization of tolerance as the embodiment of Muslim faithfulness and as a contributive approach to existing and future projects of interfaith dialogue and intercommunal conflict resolution.

Before examining Gülen's faith-based idea of tolerance and its implications for contemporary conflict management, it is helpful to outline pithily current world patterns of violent group conflict, demonstrating how the idea and practice of tolerance is a doubtless boon for Muslims and non-Muslims interested in participating in the difficult work of reconciliation.

## CONFLICT AND ISLAMIC TOLERANCE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Violent social conflict is a phrase not easily defined. Syracuse professor of sociology Louis Kriesberg offers a multivariate concept of social conflict that encapsulates a wide range of group conflicts: "A social conflict arises when two or more persons or groups manifest the belief that they have incompatible objectives." Depending on situational context, this belief in "incompatible objectives" is made manifest in violent or nonviolent ways. Too often, as the brutality of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has tragically illustrated, this incompatibility is exhibited through violent means. The phrase "persons or groups" allows for an expansive understanding of social conflict (Kriesberg 2007: 2-3). Conflicting groups may constitute competing tribes or sects, nation-states, or, from the perspective of some, civilizations

Within the bipolar context of the Cold War, conflict management training and strategies focused chiefly on interstate relationships. Since the 1990s, however, in the throes of a collapsing Cold War, the primary focus of the academic field of conflict management shifted necessarily to intrastate violence between ethnic and religious communities vying for power and territory within and across state boundaries. Today the most destabilizing, intractable conflicts are still those waged between communities distinguished by ethno- or religio-political identities. Tragically, when religious, ethnic, or cultural identities permeate sociopolitical grievances, clashing narratives quickly emerge that essentially dehumanize the Other and make violent escalation more likely and reconciliation elusive.

Ted Robert Gurr, founding director of the Minorities at Risk Project (MAR), purports that "the greatest risk of communal conflict" in the first decade of the twenty-first century is "the radicalization of Muslim communal groups." Of the more than 280 communal groups surveyed through MAR, over 60 were categorized as Muslim communities: "Among them are Shiites in Sunni-majority

societies, Muslims in separatist regions, and Muslim minorities in Western democracies and elsewhere.” Gurr emphasizes the prejudice and persecution experienced by many of these Muslim minority sects. Some are classified as “heretical” by “mainstream Islamic groups,” while others are stereotyped as the dangerous Other by non-Muslim majorities (Gurr 2007: 136). Moreover, radical Muslim movements, espousing ideologies of exclusion and intolerance, are competing for the allegiance of these embattled Muslim communities.

A non-exhaustive list of States experiencing varying levels of intercommunal tensions, which involve one or more Muslim communities threatened or influenced by Muslim extremism, might include Tajikistan and Afghanistan, Indonesia and the Philippines, Nigeria and Somalia, and India and Russia (Gurr 2007: 136). Of course, Western Europe has not been immune to the consequences of Muslim extremism—spawned from the fringes of its ethnically diverse and growing Muslim population. The 11 March 2004 train bombings in Madrid, the murder of outspoken and controversial filmmaker Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands that same year, and the terror campaign against London’s underground transportation system and double-decker bus less than sixteen months later are tragedies that have left many Westerners (Muslim and non-Muslim) angry and worried that a new “home grown radicalism” is emerging in Western Europe—a radicalism that will not evanesce anytime soon (Roy 2005: 360). According to French political scientist, Olivier Roy, the challenge for Europe (and elsewhere) is how to impede the extremist “fringe from finding a broad political base among the local Muslim population” (Roy 2005: 363).

When considering the role of Muslim extremists in numerous intercommunal conflicts and terrorist activities, the question by pundits, policymakers, and some scholars becomes, “Is Islam culpable?” Is Islam a source of extremism, or a source of peace? Is it being manipulated and perverted for reasons of power and politics? Most importantly, are there Muslim voices that can effectively chal-

lence extremist ideologies with counter-interpretations of dialogue, tolerance, and coexistence?

Since 2001, the global community has grown more aware of how the Islamic faith has become an instrument of violence for Muslim radicals. However, unbeknownst to many is the growing number of Muslim scholars and religious leaders who are contesting the impoverished identities and immoral ideas espoused by Muslim extremists, proffering, instead, a humane, compassionate, and charitable interpretation of the Islamic tradition. George Washington Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr is one of many scholars cautioning against Western, non-Muslim propensities to associate the dynamic and complex Islamic tradition with “the violent nature of extremism in certain Islamic countries” (2003: 182). Echoing this wisdom, UCLA law professor Khaled Abou El Fadl argues that the egregious terroristic violence of Osama Bin Laden illustrates only one extreme in the complex ideological “struggle between interpretive communities over who gets to speak for Islam and how” (2004: 49).

International relations professor Aaron Tyler describes how “in an effort to inoculate Islam against the violent tendencies of its militant adherents,” moderate Muslim voices are striving to resuscitate a nonviolent and enlightened Muslim culture that will overcome “the volcanic voices of radical adherents” with a more powerful voice of peace, spiritual renewal, and reconciliation (Tyler 2008: 3). Moreover, Muslim thinkers and movements are emerging that, not only contest the intransigent and intolerant interpretations of Islamists, but proactively demonstrate the benevolent beliefs, rituals, and institutions of Islam as a collective source for intercommunal reconciliation and coexistence across the globe. These scholars and religious leaders are illustrating how the virtues of peace and value of tolerance espoused by Islam can offer practitioners of and participants in conflict resolution a normative framework for sundering the difficult work of peacemaking.

One of the most profound Muslim thinkers contributing to this critical endeavor is Fethullah Gülen. In a shrinking world des-

perately searching for “self-sacrificing spirits who devote themselves to community, and of a genuine movement for dialogue and consensus” (Ergene 2008), Fethullah Gülen and the Gülen movement have become a powerful source of hope and greater understanding, offering individuals and communities—Muslim and non-Muslim—the teachings and traditions of Islam as a holistic vehicle for peace, imbued with a spirit of compassion, hospitality, and service to others. Gülen is entreating Muslims—through dialogue and education—to contest the destructive images of Islam “fed to the world,” and, in a spirit of tolerance and “gentle persuasion,” reveal to the world a “new image of Islam,” one imbued with love and service to God and his creation (Gülen 2006: 52).

Seyyed Nasr has stated that “the future of the world in the next few years and decades will depend obviously on how various world views and civilizations will be able to live together” (Nasr 1997: 55). A hermeneutic of tolerance that encourages mutual respect, goodwill, and active engagement across and within civilizations and religious traditions is one important strategy for “living together” as human beings, regardless of communal differences. Tolerance provides communities a foundation for dialogue and coexistence, and, in a world of immutable diversity, interreligious efforts to assess and reassess the value of tolerance and its acceptable limits are exceptionally meaningful. Perhaps nowhere is this effort to understand and project the value of tolerance more important than within the beautifully complex and humane Islamic tradition.

Fethullah Gülen offers the human community a principled approach to peaceful engagement through the Islamic strategy of tolerance. “Tolerance,” writes Gülen, is humanity’s “safest refuge and our fortress against the handicaps that arise from schism, factions, and the difficulties inherent in reaching mutual agreement” (Gülen 2006: 33). Exercising his responsibility as a viceregent of God, Gülen has given much of his life to teaching and advocating a tolerance toward the Other that burgeons from his profound understanding of Islam. For sustainable peace and hospitality to

occur, such a concept of tolerance must take root, one that acknowledges the reality of lasting difference and the need for mutual respect, human friendship, and active dialogue. Indeed, for Gülen, Islamic tolerance can offer a steadying force in humanity's balancing act with conflict and coexistence.

The nucleus of this paper will now focus on Fethullah Gülen's conceptualization of tolerance—a concept that is cultivated from his spiritually broad and intellectually robust understanding of Islam and the human condition. It begins with a brief exposition on Fethullah Gülen's theological and metaphysical justifications of tolerance, delineating its faith-based parameters and wide-reaching consequences. It will then demonstrate how Gülen's ideation of tolerance has transformative implications for what it means for Muslims to worship fully and live responsibly. The article will then pivot away from the theological and metaphysical considerations to map the practical contributions Gülen's framework of tolerance can make to the difficult, multilevel work of intercommunal dialogue and conflict resolution. It is hoped this interdisciplinary investigation into Gülen's conceptualization of tolerance and its transcendental and temporal repercussions will make clear the profundity of this modern peacemaker and intellectual giant, whose ethical theology and practical vision offer the global community a faith-based, normative framework for conflict resolution and reconciliation.

### *Defining Tolerance*

To discern the parameters of tolerance and its potential for facilitating dialogue and reconciliation between communities, one must first assess how this strategy can be reconciled with what theologian Paul Tillich has named the *ultimate concern*—that is, what a community or individual considers to be of utmost importance: “Whatever concerns a man ultimately becomes god for him,” wrote Tillich, “and, conversely, it means that a man can be concerned ultimately only about that which is god for him” (Tillich 1951: 211). One's highest object of loyalty—Islam, for instance—must sanction a strategy as righteous or permissible before it can be

embraced or pursued. Free trade, coexistence, or democracy may demand a strategy of tolerance. However, while such “less than ultimate” concerns may be rationally demonstrated, one’s ultimate concern is the final arbiter of what is right or wrong, permissible or prohibited. (Budziszewski 2000: 224). Pakistani scholar and educationist Ishtiaq Hussain Quereshi wrote that, for Muslims, “No morality exists which does not find its ultimate sanction in Islam” (Mujahid 1974: 4). The question, then: “Does Islam sanction or, at a more profound level, mandate the value of tolerance?”

For Fethullah Gülen, tolerance is an outgrowth of his Islamic faith, not in spite of it. Not only does the Islamic tradition permit tolerance of the Other, but it provides the global community a taproot for its justification. According to Gülen, “the shielding canopy” of Islamic tolerance “extends not only to the people of the book, but, in a sense, to all people.” (Gülen 2006: 76). As Gülen makes clear, tolerance is embedded in God’s character of compassion, mercy, and forgiveness and is entrusted to his vice-regents in creation (Gülen 2006: 37). Tolerance is a timeless value that emanates from “the essence of creation,” God’s love: “God created the universe as a manifestation of his love for his creatures, in particular humanity, and Islam became the fabric woven out of his love” (Gülen 2006: 60). Tolerance, as an expression of this originating love through Islam, necessarily precedes and supercedes all interpretations of exclusion and belligerence espoused by those radical voices that would emerge later to challenge Islam’s benevolent foundations. “Tolerance is something that has always existed,” writes Gülen, and the intolerance and violence preached through “blind fanaticism” is antithetical to the essence of Islam and God’s message to creation. From this faith-based perspective, Gülen challenges Muslims to reclaim the value of tolerance as “something that is inherent in the spirit of Islam and something that was explained to us in the Qur’an and by the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him” (Gülen 2006: 38).

*NECESSARY LIMITS OF TOLERANCE*

Islamic tolerance is grafted to the theological principle of reciprocity. In the *hadith*, the Prophet Muhammad warns Muslims that “one who is not compassionate, God will not be compassionate to him” (Kamali 2002: 69). One who expects to receive tolerance must also be willing to give it. “Deserving what we expect is very important,” writes Gülen. He continues: “Everyone will receive disrespect to the degree that he has been disrespectful. . . . Those who do not embrace all of humankind with tolerance and forgiveness have lost their worthiness to receive forgiveness and pardon. . . . It is not possible to talk about common ideas or a collective consciousness in communities where individuals do not look upon one another with tolerance or in countries where the spirit of forbearance has not become fully entrenched” (Gülen 2006: 34).

This guiding principle of reciprocity makes clear that tolerance is not without limitations.

Without limits tolerance becomes license or, worse, indifference. By its very nature, Islamic tolerance proscribes forbearance of injustice and oppression. Though it stands as an invaluable faith-based catalyst for achieving a higher order of goods, such as mercy, compassion, and hospitality, tolerance is disallowed as a catalyst for exclusion, discrimination, or unbridled violence. Political theorist John Christian Laursen is right to describe tolerance as a “middle way” between indifference and prejudice. Tolerance, Laursen argues, “is often unstable in the sense that there will pressure to move toward one or both of the extremes: toward persecution or full respect” (Laursen 1999: 6). Gülen echoes this tension inherent in the strategy of tolerance: “Care must be taken to establish balance in one’s tolerance,” he warns—for “being merciful to a cobra means being unjust to the people the cobra has bitten” (Gülen 2006: 76).

For Gülen, tolerance is rooted in the compassionate character of God and his divine love for his beloved creation. For a Muslim to honor God is to love the things and ways of God. Consequently,

from the Islamic cornerstone of God's love for humanity, as a mirror of the divine, emerges an unqualified recognition of the immutable dignity ascribed to each person as an equal in creation. In Gülen's essay, "Islam—A Religion of Tolerance," while Muslims "should dislike such things as immorality, unbelief, and polytheism," they are called to love—even forgive—those who proliferate such behavior: "God created humanity as noble beings, and everyone, to a certain degree has a share in his nobility. His Messenger once stood up out of respect for humanity as the funeral procession of a Jew passed by. When reminded that the deceased was a Jew, the Prophet replied: 'But he is a human,' thereby showing the value Islam gives to human" (Gülen 2006: 60). Ali ibn Abi Talib, Muhammad's son-in-law and fourth "Rightly Guided" Caliph, offered like counsel to the governor of Egypt: "Infuse your heart with mercy, love, and kindness for your subjects. Be not in the face of them a voracious animal . . . for they are of two kinds: either they are your brothers in religion or your equals in creation." Khaled Abou Elf Fadl puts forth a similar definition: grounded on the Islamic idea of benevolent reciprocity, Islam enjoins Muslims "to support the Prophet of Islam" against its assailants, while always acknowledging "the moral worth and rights" of those who condemn the Islamic faith or persecute its adherents (Abou El Fadl 2002: 18). Unlike the predominant liberal contrivance of tolerance, the Islamic ideal is not powerless to confront and condemn inhumanity from a morally defenseless posture. On the contrary, it is able to acknowledge the moral obligation to decry injustice, oppose unbelief, and admonish immorality, without demeaning or dehumanizing those who violate the "ways of God."

Significantly, Gülen posits an idea of tolerance that finds authority outside of Islam and across cultures. Similar to the description offered by Gülen, Aaron Tyler has defined authentic tolerance as an endurance or forbearance of the beliefs or behaviors that one considers to be offensive, inferior, or simply different from his or her own, while not withholding *caritas* and humaneness to the purveyors of those contrary ideas or actions. Similarly, philosopher J. Budziszewski envisions tolerance as the ability to admonish

or disapprove of another person's or society's "flaws," without withdrawing "charity toward their persons" (Budziszewski 2000: 98). Tolerance, then, enables a community to condemn immorality and injustices, while, at the same time, acknowledging the immutable dignity of each person.

To be clear, tolerance does not necessitate a compromise of one's belief system, language, or customs. Political theorist Michael Walzer rightly explains how tolerant human beings are those who "make room for men and women whose beliefs they don't adopt, whose practices they decline to imitate; they coexist with an otherness that, however much they approve of its presence in the world, is still something different from what they know" (Walzer 1997: 11). "Tolerance does not mean being influenced by others or joining them," writes Gülen; "it means accepting others as they are and knowing how to get along with them" (Gülen 2006: 42). For Muslims, tolerance does not mean diluting or dismissing difference; rather, the Islamic tradition equips Muslims with the wisdom to embrace difference as a divinely ordained condition of the human family. The Qur'an declares the enduring diversity of humanity: "If thy lord had willed, He would have made humankind into a single nation, but they will not cease to be diverse . . . And, for this God created them [humankind]."<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, the Qur'an states: "O humankind, God has created you from male and female and made you into diverse nations and tribes so that you may come to know each other."<sup>4</sup> The Islamic conception of tolerance, as interpreted by Gülen, does not negate difference, but openly acknowledges it. Tolerance, rightly defined, enables individuals and societies to engage one another for purposes of coexistence and in search for common ground without having to comprise their communal identity or cultural essence as a result.

#### TOLERANCE: A REQUISITE TO WORSHIP

In his analysis of medieval Muslim, Christian, and Jewish conceptualizations of human volition, philosopher David Burrell explored

the Abrahamic “protagonists” al-Ghazali, Moses Maimonides, and Thomas Aquinas. Burrell demonstrates how, from the perspective of these faith-based philosophers, human beings must transcend identity as self-starters—that is, as the “source of agency”—and discover that “the glory of a human being” is not to originate but to respond in obedience to the one from whom life is breathed. To be free is to respond to God through a spirit of submission and a recognition of life as “a perfection bestowed” by a creator “rather than a ‘value neutral’ precondition” (Burrell 2000: 166, 170). For these medieval theorists of human freedom, God the creator is the “cause of being” who created human beings intentionally that they might respond in gratitude to the “source of their being and well-being” (Burrell 2000: 169).

Not unlike these medieval theorists, Gülen’s interpretation of Islam and human responsibility emphasizes a Muslim’s duty to respond to the initiation and intention of God. Life is a gift to be lived in a spirit of gratitude toward the giver. Humanity, as the viceregent of God and “the favorite of all His creation,” is commissioned to respond in love and service to the things and ways of God (Gülen 2006: 122-23). Contentment as a viceregent of God comes through a volitional response to the Beloved and his intention in creation: “Genuine human beings try to exercise their freewill in a constructive manner, working with and developing the world, protecting the harmony between existence and humanity, reaping the bounties of the Earth and the Heavens for the benefit of humanity, trying to raise the hue, form and flavor of life to a more humane level within the framework of the Creator’s orders and rules” (Gülen 2006: 124).

The quintessential way in which Muslims respond to God is through worship. Gülen corrects the common misconception that worship is nothing more than banal ritual. For Muslims worship embodies “complete submission and the acceptance of a broad responsibility.” Worship is realized through the communicatory rituals of prayer and service to God. Worship, in essence, represents

“the most immediate way to turn our face to God, with everyone and everything, the soundest and most immediate way of associating everything with Him.” Moreover, the Muslim who worships faithfully and habitually experiences spiritual renewal with God and communion with his creation (Gülen 2006: 125). Worship embodies the sacred trust endowed by God to humanity and is the epitome of human freedom. From this perspective, “true believers” will serve God and, by extension, his creation through a spirit of gratitude through worship. Every action, temporal or transcendental, is performed with a “purity of heart” and a desire to love and serve the things and ways of God (Gülen 2006: 126-27).

The value of tolerance depends on its function. The ultimate purpose of tolerance is facilitating one’s *response* to God as his vice-regent on earth. It is a consequence of fidelity to God and a prerequisite to one’s striving for justice, compassion, and hospitality. When filtered through the lens of Islam, tolerance of the Other is not endeavored for selfish, opportunistic reasons. What is more, the “true believer” is not reactionary but reliant on God and his purposes (Gülen 2006: 83). Gülen calls Muslims to embrace a world of difference with determination and enthusiasm, in service to the purposes of God, regardless of worldly failures or successes. Confidence and resolve to engage the world in a spirit of tolerance, regardless of the outcome, is renewed through submission—that is, a Muslim’s willingness to be unbridled from the desires and accolades of the world and immerse himself wholly and hopefully in response to God through worship.

Similar to the Christian credo, faith without deeds is dead,<sup>5</sup> worship, for the true believer, involves prayers and petitions undergirded by action. True to that applicable, albeit trite, maxim, worship involves “practicing what you preach.” Gülen writes,

Representing what he preached is one of the important characteristics of our Prophet. He practiced whatever he said and implemented in his life whatever words he spoke. Words that are not put into practice, regardless of how beautiful or perfect

they may be, are doomed to be spoiled, to be wasted, and to lose their influence with time. It will be understood by their impact on hearts how stagnant, not only human words, but even Divine Words can become if they are not put into practice. . . . The crux of the matter is to put that beautiful expression of words into practice (Gülen 2006: 92).

Love, kindness, compassion, and hospitality must not only be taught but also demonstrated, lived out in a world of conflict and difference. While reciprocity is the *modus operandi* for tolerance, Muslims are exhorted to overlook the transgressions of others, and be willing to speak and implement “love and affection for humankind” (Gülen 2006: 92-93). Gülen puts forth such Qur’anic passages as “And if you behave tolerantly, overlook, and forgive then God is forgiving and merciful.”<sup>6</sup> Rather than being reactive, waiting to receive tolerance, God’s viceregents are called to be proactive and eager to demonstrate forbearance and goodwill to the Other as an ambassador of God and representative of a magnanimous Islam. Mercy, kindness, and forgiveness are countenanced whenever possible. The Qur’an reminds believers that “God does not forbid you, regarding those who did not fight you on account of religion and did not drive you out of your homes, to show kindness and deal with them justly.”<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, the Qur’an affirms the benevolence of the righteous: “They swallow their anger and forgive people. God loves those who do good.”<sup>8</sup> Gülen concludes, without reservation, that Islam is a vehicle of peace and an expression of gratitude and obedience to the benevolent ways of God: “In the Qur’an, Sunna, and in the pure and learned interpretations of the Great Scholars there is no trace of a decree or an attitude that is contrary to love, tolerance or dialogue” (Gülen 2006: 51).

A benevolent disposition toward the Other is countenanced in the Islamic tradition—a disposition that is able to admonish injustices in a spirit of love and generosity. The *sunna* and *sira* give an account of the Prophet Muhammad’s charge for Muslims to live magnanimously, within a spirit of tolerance (Donaldson 1953, 70):

The three doors of good conduct are generosity of soul, agreeable speech, and steadfastness in adversity.

The generous man who is ignorant is more precious in the sight of Allah than the learned man who is miserly.

Generosity is one of the trees of Paradise. Its branches extend to the earth, and whoever seizes one of these branches will be raised to Paradise.

The most worthy of you is the one who controls himself in anger, and the most tranquil (forbearing) of you is the one who forgives when he is in authority.

The best of you are those who are best in disposition, who show kindness and who have kindness shown to them (Donaldson 1953: 70).

As God's vicereagents, Muslims are called, in a spirit of dutiful worship, to reform the world through a proactive witness of God's love. To carry out the divine mandates of reform, Muslims must be introspective, seeking personal and public renewal of the humane, magnanimous intentions of Islam. "Those who want to reform the world," declares Gülen, "must first reform themselves." "Hatred, rancor, and jealousy," writes Gülen, "must be replaced with goodness, truthfulness, and virtuousness, which represent "the essence of the world and humanity" (Gülen 2004: 24). For such an endeavor tolerance is essential. Again, Gülen is instructive:

We should have such tolerance that we are able to close our eyes to the faults of others, to have respect for different ideas, and to forgive everything that is forgivable...Even before the coarsest thoughts and the crudest ideas, ideas that we find impossible to share, with the caution of a Prophet and without losing our temper, we should respond with mildness (Gülen 2006: 33).

Tolerance provides a *via media* through which Muslims can be better Muslims, serving as a vehicle for reaching "new depths" of generosity and magnanimity as vicereagents of God (Gülen 2006: 34). Tolerance is a necessary consequence of authentic worship—

worship that embodies fidelity to God and a benevolent disposition toward his creation.

#### TOLERANCE: A REQUISITE TO DIALOGUE

Contemporary conflict today is primarily intercommunal, not interstate. Violent engagement between religious or ethnic communities has been the predominant formation of group conflict since the collapse of the Cold War. And in a world quickly contracting through interlinking processes of modernization and globalization, violent conflicts within and between communities are no longer isolated occurrences with only localized consequences. The plight of the embattled Ogoni people in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta has undoubtedly affected the stability of the Nigerian state, greater West Africa, and an oil-dependent global community. Intercommunal conflict in Burundi has served to exacerbate tensions in Africa's tribally complex and politically fragile breadbasket. Iraq's constitutional and inter-communal conflicts over Kirkuk are aggravating ethnic tensions between the region's three dominant ethnic groups—Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen—heightening cross-border tensions with its neighbor, Turkey, and irredentist aspirations of Kurdish communities in the region. Hindu-Muslim violence on the Indian subcontinent continues to threaten the fragile peace between South Asia's nuclear powers, India and Pakistan. The regional and global effects of violent tension in the Levant, whether between Jewish settlers and Palestinians in the West Bank or Shi'a, Sunni, and Christians in Lebanon, are all too obvious. Violent intercommunal conflicts continue to proliferate, and the consequences are wide-ranging, from forced migration and resource exploitation to terrorism and ethnic cleansing.

Khaled Abou El Fadl has written of the primeval binary stimulant within human communities to fashion an "us versus them" worldview. This binary impulse has motivated a categorization of the ethnic, religious, or cultural Other as inferior and, in worst cases,

subhuman. Clashing narratives and competing stories of superiority or victimization between tribal groups, religious communities, or civilizations have only proliferated misunderstanding and encouraged violent engagement. However, competing with this binary impulse of exclusion is an equally compelling human inclination to cooperate for the purposes of community (Abou El Fadl 2002/2003: 38). It is from humanity's innate desire to cooperate as social beings that discourse with the Other becomes, not only relevant, but urgent for today's context of human conflict.

In a world shrinking through the ubiquitous processes of globalization, the foreign Other is quickly becoming a fellow citizen. As communal fault lines continue to pulsate through an acceleration of east-west migration and global and local engagement, learning to engage the Other peacefully, and in a spirit of humanity, is critical for lasting coexistence. For this reason dialogue is essential to encourage greater understanding and facilitate a mutual pursuit for common values and the common good. Comparative religions professor Mahmoud Ayoub rightly contends that today's fluid demographic landscape, where "millions of Muslims are now citizens of Western Christian countries," compels a "dialogue of life" between "next-door neighbors" (Ayoub 2004: 317). Malaysian intellectual and Muslim activist Anwar Ibrahim echoes this urgency for dialogue: "[D]ialogue has become an imperative at a time when the world has shrunk into a global village. For it is a pre-condition for the establishment of a *convivencia*, a harmonious and enriching experience of living together among people of diverse religions and culture" (Ibrahim 2007: 342).

Lamenting the destructive consequences of misunderstandings and dehumanization between cultures and faith traditions, Gülen puts forth religion as a primary and powerful stimulant for dialogue. The inclusiveness and tolerance espoused by Islam and the world's major religions provide communities a foundation for dialogue amidst difference and disagreement (Gülen 2004: 4). Importantly, from Gülen's faith-based perspective, dialogue does

not necessitate conversion or a compromise of ideals. The purpose of engagement with other communities is not cajolery or coercion, but rather greater understanding and development of mutual trust and common purpose. While “gentle persuasion,” in a spirit of love is countenanced through the Islamic tradition, lasting difference is expected, and peace is preferred over persuasion. To be a witness of Islam means submission to God in service to humanity—not coercion or forceful compulsion. When disagreement is insurmountable, Muslims are enjoined to respond with an attitude of tolerance, in submission to God’s design: “Your religion is for you; my religion is for me” (Gülen 2004: 14).<sup>9</sup>

Tolerance enables dialogue to focus on interests rather than positions. Through an attitude of tolerance, communities are not preoccupied with differences of identity and behavior but are able to focus on the immediate misunderstandings and transgressions that are prohibiting coexistence. What is more, a product of interfaith dialogue is mutual enrichment. As one seeks to learn from others, his own beliefs are fortified or tempered through greater understanding. According to Gulen, “we should have so much tolerance that we can benefit from opposing ideas in that they force us to keep our heart, spirit, and conscience active and aware, even if these ideas do not directly or indirectly teach us anything” (Gülen 2006: 33).

Not all interfaith dialogue is easy. In most circumstances it is hard. It does not mean acquiescence to the designs or beliefs of others, nor does it mean an end to conflict and unanimous consent. In most cases, interfaith dialogue is an undulating process that encourages constructive conflict, which involves learning how to disagree in a spirit of coexistence and goodwill. Anglican Canon Andrew White, president of the Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East and Vicar of St. George’s Cathedral in Baghdad, gave an interview for Wheaton College in which he explained how interfaith dialogue is too often conceived as “nice people sitting down and talking with nice people.” In circumstances where groups are maiming and killing one another in the name of religion, interfaith dialogue

becomes a life and death enterprise. In cases of tentative discourse between hardened enemies, dialogue “isn’t cucumber sandwiches and cups of tea on the Mayor’s lawn”; rather, dialogue becomes all about “how do we stop killing each other?” (White 2003). In such intractable contexts, Gülen reminds Muslims that tolerance of difference becomes the essential “spiritual discipline” for engaging in dialogue with those who have waged violence against them. Tolerance enables dialogue (and ultimately forgiveness) “even in the face of the crudest behavior and most upsetting events.” “Malice and hatred,” warns Gülen, “are the seeds of Hell” and must be overcome by the Islamic injunctions to love and tolerate the Other through dialogue, including those who have violated the compassionate and just ways of God. To exercise tolerance in such circumstances is neither easy nor, from a materialist perspective, rational. Indeed, such tolerance, in the midst of injustices and hatred, is a gift from God, a “celestial instrument” that can amplify the boon of dialogue between those “who understand its language” (Gülen 2004: 21-22). Intercommunal dialogue cannot proceed without tolerance, and, for Gülen, such an endeavor is not natural, but supernatural, possible only through obedience to the purposes and character of God.

#### TOLERANCE: A REQUISITE TO RECONCILIATION

The Qur’an declares, “peace is good.”<sup>10</sup> Muslims are enjoined to be vessels of peace, especially in a contemporary context where intractable violent conflicts between religious and ethnic groups make such peace seem elusive, if not impossible. The repercussions of identity conflict—genocide, ethnic cleansing, terrorism, etc.—negatively affect entire communities, fueling demonizing images of the Other and encouraging impoverished identities of “us” versus “them.” Fethullah Gülen grieves over the violent historical memory that has captured so many recent generations:

A generation which was raised in a particular past under constant hostile pressure saw continuous horror and brutality in the

dark world into which they had been pushed. They saw blood and pus, not just in the dark of night, but also at the break of day. . . . The things that were presented to this generation were the complete opposite and totally contrary to what they needed and what they desired (Gülen 2006: 29).

The greatest lesson today's generation can impart to succeeding generations is "how to forgive" wrongdoing in a spirit of tolerance and reconciliation (Gülen 2004: 21-22). From Gülen's Muslim perspective, interreligious reconciliation requires forgiveness—through truth-telling and repentance—to be extended to all those who express repentance for the violence or persecution they perpetrated. Such forgiveness can only be expressed through a spirit of tolerance, whereby the transgressions of others are not forgotten, but overlooked or pardoned for higher purposes of God and community. The "greatest exemplars of humanity," writes Gülen, are those who have demonstrated "the greatest forgiveness and the most impeccable tolerance" (Gülen 2006: 29).

Gülen is right to declare that "today there is an interest in religion all over the world" (Gülen 2006: 73). This is no less true in the multidimensional field of conflict management. National and international negotiators and strategists are coming to realize the important contributions that religious ideas and religious affiliated organizations can make in the areas of conflict resolution and reconciliation. In intercommunal conflicts where deep-seated animosities prohibit political efforts toward lasting peace, religion offers important values for facilitating meaningful dialogue and reconciliation. In cases where violent atrocities and stories of demonization are prevalent, perspectives of victimization and vengeance cannot be overcome through coerced ceasefires and legal peace agreements. Normalization and reconciliation require that the world community help current- and post-conflict communities with the normative tasks of restorative justice and the difficult work of reimagining the Other in more inclusive and cooperative terms.

For the purposes of intercommunal reconciliation, the conflict managers at local and international levels can certainly benefit from “true believers” who are willing to help integrate spirituality into the practical work of conflict resolution, inculcating processes of reconciliation with the Islamic characteristics of tolerance, forgiveness, and humility (Gülen 2006: 71-73). In a world of lasting difference, where universality can never mean sameness, reconciliation and coexistence will require a normative model of tolerance—one that incorporates intellectual humility, a willingness to forgive, a cooperative desire for dialogue, and a disposition of *caritas* toward the Other. Gülen and the Gülen Movement proffer such a model, doing their best, through intercommunal engagement and education, to help the “breeze of tolerance and dialogue to continue blowing.”

Reconciliation, through the mechanisms of tolerance and forgiveness, enables Muslims to rename the enemy as a brother or sister in creation, recognizing their likeness to the creator, despite transgressions. The Muslim conception of tolerance of those who have offended is not dissimilar to the Christian idea that if you have anger in your heart against another, reconcile before you come before God. Indeed, for the Muslim, reconciliation with others is a prerequisite to reconciliation to God. The farther one travels from God—the source of love and tolerance—the more treacherous the path of life becomes (Gülen 2006: 11). Islam offers an understanding of reconciliation that is motivated, not only by the immediate need for peace, but, most importantly, by a love for God. Reconciliation, then, is a fruit of worship, done for the sake of God (Gülen 2006: 15).

Gülen and the Gülen Movement offer an enlightening counter position to the virulent Muslim extremists who would co-opt the Islamic faith for temporal aspirations of territory and power. Gülen compels Muslims to vie courageously and with conviction for the marrow of Islam, reclaiming, through words and actions, its heritage of love, forgiveness, and tolerance. In an era of proliferating violence in the name of religion, Islam must be harnessed as a bea-

con of peace, a salve of reconciliation and spiritual renewal: “We believe that forgiveness and tolerance will heal most of our wounds, if only this celestial instrument will be in the hands of those who understand its language.” Whether in Iraq or the Levant, Indonesia or Tajikistan, Nigeria or Somalia, Bosnia or France, Gülen, through his writings, speeches, and example, is imploring Muslims, in submission and response to God and his creation, to proffer the tolerant and humane spirit of Islam as a vehicle for dialogue, reconciliation, and, one hopes, enduring peace. In a globalizing world where conflict has too often trumped coexistence, humanity must choose between “getting along by means of reconciliation” or “constantly fight[ing] with one another.” Gülen’s Islamic understanding of tolerance emerges as a potent *via media* for getting along and living together in a world of lasting difference.

## CONCLUSION

The scaffolding of this paper followed its purpose: to demonstrate how Fethullah Gülen’s faith-based conceptualization of tolerance is a wholly Islamic ideal that can enrich Muslim understandings of faithfulness and help facilitate inter- and intra-communal endeavors for cooperative dialogue, mutual understanding, and benevolent coexistence.

Philosopher Donald Demarco is right to distinguish between two manners of tolerance: “One is rooted in skepticism, the other in respect for truth and the dignity of others. We might refer to the first kind as pseudo-tolerance, the second as genuine tolerance” (Demarco 2005). Contrary to post-modernity’s *pseudo-tolerance*, which is often criticized for its moral vacuity, Gülen is not reticent to espouse a *genuine*, faith-based idea of tolerance that embraces humanity’s search for truth and encourages coexistence through a benevolent awareness of lasting human difference and an unqualified defense of the dignity ascribed to each person. If healing and community—between religions, tribes, and cultures—is to take place, such a con-

ceptualization of tolerance must take root, one which acknowledges the reality of human diversity and the need for mutual respect, human friendship, and hospitality.

## NOTES

- 1 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Metaphysical Roots of Tolerance and Intolerance: An Islamic Interpretation," in *Philosophy, Religion, and the Question of Intolerance*, ed. Mehdi Amin Razavi and David Ambuel (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1997), 55.
- 2 Gülen, "The Two Roses of the Emerald Hills."
- 3 Qur'an 11:118-9.
- 4 Qur'an 49:13.
- 5 James 2:20.
- 6 Qur'an 64:14.
- 7 Qur'an, 60:8.
- 8 Qur'an, 3: 134.
- 9 Qur'an, 109:6.
- 10 Qur'an, 4:128.

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