

Religious Freedom in the Baptist Vision and in Fethullah Gülen: Resources for Muslims and Christians

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ABSTRACT

How religions relate to religious plurality is critical for the peace and stability of states and societies in the 21st century world. To engage positively with the challenges and opportunities of such a world, religious people need to draw not only on secular rhetoric and values concerning “toleration” and “human rights”, but also resources rooted in the theological “grammar” and integrity of their own traditions.

Fethullah Gülen’s vision is one of a *tajdid* in which Muslims are called to live according to the authentic spirit of Islam. It is not a “modernist” or “liberal” project that can be dismissed as a betrayal by Muslims who advocate the creation of theocratic polities. Rather, based on his knowledge of the sources of Islam, and of Muslim history, Gülen (in Ünal, A. and Williams, A. eds., 2000), argues: “Politicizing religion would be more dangerous for religion than for the regime, for such people want to make politics a means for all their ends. Religion would grow dark within them, and they would say: ‘We are the representatives of religion.’ This is a dangerous matter. Religion is the name of the relationship between humanity and God, which everyone can respect.”

This approach resonates with the early Baptist Christian, Thomas Helwys (1612) who, in the 17th century argued: “...men’s

religion to God, is betwixt God and themselves: the King shall not answer for it, neither may the King be judge between God and man. Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.”

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INTRODUCTION: FETHULLAH GÜLEN, ISLAM AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

In the 21st century, how religions relate to the diversity of religions and other beliefs in our globalizing and pluralizing world is critical for the internal peace and stability of states and societies and for international relations, as well as for the future of the religions themselves. In connection with this, the issue of religious freedom is one that poses challenges to all religions and to many traditional religious approaches and practices, as well as to aspects of modern “secular” ideologies and constitutions.

In line with the main title of the conference as “Islam in the Age of Global Challenges”, the paper includes a particular focus on Islam and religious freedom – precisely because this conjunction is one that, in a number of contemporary contexts, might appear to be at least problematic. But in connection with this, the paper focuses upon the specific and distinctive (or as the sub-title of the conference puts it, “alternative”) perspectives that are to be found in the teaching of the Turkish Muslim scholar Fethullah Gülen.

While other Islamic teachers can be found who refer to the Qur’anic (Surah 2) injunction that there is “no compulsion in religion”, Fethullah Gülen expresses an authentically Muslim commitment to religious freedom with an unusual clarity and consistency of emphasis. In addition, this commitment has been given expression in the activities of the civil society initiatives that are inspired by his teaching, such as the work of the Journalists and Writers Foundation in Turkey, and that of dialogue societies and initiatives

inspired by Gülen's teaching that can be found in various countries of the world.

While highlighting Fethullah Gülen's contribution, this paper does so also by means of exploring the comparisons and contrasts, differences and resonances that exist between the Islamic teaching of Fethullah Gülen and the Baptist vision of Christianity with regard to religious freedom. It argues that both are religiously authentic, creative and corrective resources that can help contemporary Muslims and Christians to live in faithful, committed and peaceful ways in a religiously diverse world. Exploring such resources is particularly important in the contemporary world because there can be at least perceived to a tension between the "secular" registers in which human rights discourse international law operate and the values found in authentically religious perspectives. (see Weller, 2006).

FETHULLAH GÜLEN'S APPROACH AND THE BAPTIST CHRISTIAN VISION

Islam and Christianity are global religions with billions of adherents worldwide. Between them they also have an enormous influence that stretches far beyond their committed faithful followers into the cultures, societies and states that have been shaped by the values of both religions. Thus, in face of the challenges of living together posed by our globalizing and pluralizing world how Muslims and Christians understand and put into practice issues related to religious freedom is of critical importance.

From within Christianity, the Baptist tradition is selected for comparison for several reasons. First of all, the Baptist tradition is one of the largest global confessional traditions of Christianity (see Pierard, 2005; Randall, Pilli and Cross, eds., 2006). Secondly, in most times and places, it has had a generally consistent emphasis on religious liberty. In fact, worldwide, it is arguable that the note of religious freedom is the nearest to a "universal" commitment that can be found (see Weller, 1990a, 1990b) among Baptists.

However, the Baptist tradition is also selected because the conference is located in the USA, where the global Baptist tradition is numerically at its strongest. But this is also a location in which some parts of that tradition – including most notably some the forces that are currently dominant within Southern Baptist Convention - appear to have lost sight of the importance of this historic emphasis within the broader Baptist tradition. And the recovery of that emphasis is of great importance - both for the integrity of the Baptist tradition and for its relations with the wider Christian Church and beyond.

In the main body of this paper, for convenience, the thinking of Fethullah Gülen and the approaches of those inspired by his teaching is sometimes referred to as “Gülenian.” In doing this, it is realised that this would not be Fethullah Gülen’s own designation of preference. This is because Gülen is not trying to advocate a new or idiosyncratic interpretation of Islam. Rather, his work is concerned with trying to uncover, develop and apply in a way appropriate to the contemporary context, an aspect of Islamic tradition that is rooted in the sources of the Qur’an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad. In addition, although some observers have identified a strongly Sufi flavour in Gülen’s approach, Gülen himself is at pains to stress that Sufism is the inner dimension of Islam itself and is therefore not to be separated from the Sharia’h (Gülen, 1999).

This paper also often refers to the inheritance of the Baptist approach to religious freedom by use of the descriptor “Baptistic”. This is a terminology that has sometimes been used in recognition of the fact that aspects of the historic Baptist vision are shared by other Christian Churches that have a similar ecclesiology, but which are not formally called Baptist, such as among Mennonites and a number of other congregationally-based traditions.

“Baptists” have had that epithet applied to them for longer than those within what is often called the “Gülen movement”. Unlike the “Gülen movement”, the terms “Baptist” or “Baptistic” are not linked with an individual person. But in origin, like the description of the “Gülen movement”, the terminology of “Baptist” was also not a self-

chosen one. Rather, the label was originally given by “outsiders” to those who had a particular form and style of being Christian that was especially linked with their distinctive practice of not baptising babies but only those who themselves could personally make a Christian confession of faith.

“Baptists” themselves do not isolate this distinctive religious practice from the whole complex of ideas that surrounded it and the overall religious vision and ethos within which that practice is embedded. However, in due course, the epithet was one with which the “insiders” came to live, on the basis of explaining what, from their own perspective, it does and does not mean. Like “the Gülen movement”, the label “Baptist” became a “shorthand” way to describe a specific phenomenon within the development of a broader religious tradition.

In fact, rather like Gülen’s insistence that he is not “innovating” in Islam, the early leaders of the Christian movement now known as “Baptist” did not understand themselves to be founding a new branch of Christianity. Rather, they saw themselves as trying to bring about a restoration of the Christian Church of New Testament times from before what they came to see as its confusion with civil society consequent upon the adoption by the Emperor Constantine of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire.

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN “BAPTISTIC” CHRISTIAN VISION

The historical roots of the “Baptistic” refraction of the Christian vision and its emphasis upon religious freedom can probably be traced back to the so-called Anabaptist movements of 16th century continental Europe, although the precise relationship between these movements and the English Separatists who emigrated to the Netherlands in search of religious freedom at the start of the 17th century, is a contested one. However, it seems clear that there was at least some creative interchange between the continental Mennonites

(those who followed the teachings of Menno Simmons) and the group of English Separatists who, led by John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, formed the English Independent congregation in Amsterdam in 1606, members from which, later, returned to England in 1611/12 to found the first Baptist congregations there.

“Baptistic” convictions about religious freedom emerged against a European religious and political background of “Wars of Religion” in which Christendom had been devouring itself in fratricidal religious conflict of a kind eventually led to a reactive movement to banish religion and religious difference into the “private” sphere. In the course of the authoritative survey on *The Development of Religious Toleration in England*, Wilbur Kitchener Jordan argued that,

The great Baptist apologists had made profoundly important contributions to the theory of religious toleration. They had systematised the thought of their predecessors and had broken new ground in their examination of the forces which had for so many centuries made religious devotion synonymous with religious bigotry. (Jordan, 1936: 314)

From a religious perspective, the kind approach from which the “Baptistic” one became differentiated was neatly expressed by one of the founding Baptists, John Smyth, writing at a time before he arrived at his new “Baptistic” convictions on the nature of believing and belonging. As Smyth put it in his 1605 *Patterne of True Prayer*, written while still a Puritan lecturer in London:

When there is toleration of many religions, whereby the kingdom of God is shouldered out of doors by the devil’s kingdom: for without question the devil is so subtle that he will procure, through the advantage of man’s natural inclination to false doctrine and worship, more by thousands to follow strange religions than the truth of God’s word: wherefore the magistrates should cause all men to worship the true God, or else punish them with imprisonment, confiscation of goods, or death as the quality of the cause requireth. (Smyth, in Whitley, 1915: 166)

From a more “political” perspective, the position taken by Edwin Sandys, the Archbishop of York under Queen Elizabeth I was typical, arguing that religious plurality – even Christian plurality - would inevitably be dangerous to the body politic:

This liberty, that men may openly profess diversity of religion must needs be dangerous to the Commonwealth. What stirs diversity of religion hath raised in nations and kingdoms the histories are so many and plain, and in our times insuch sort have told you, that with further proof I need not trouble your ears. One God, one King, one profession, is fit for one monarchy and commonwealth. Let conformity and unity in religion be provided for; and it shall be as a wall of defence unto this realm. (Sandy, cited in McGrath, 1967:1)

In contrast to this was the position taken by the early Baptist Christian, Thomas Helwys, in his pamphlet addressed to King James I, called *The Mistery of Iniquity*, and which was the first sustained argument for religious liberty published in the English language. Remarkably for the times in which he lived, Helwys (and this he also shared with other early Baptists) did not apply this element of his vision only to the diversities of Christian belief. Instead, he held to the position, remarkable for its 17th century context, that freedom of religion should also extend beyond the borders of Christianity, declaring that, “Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure (Helwys, 1612, in Groves, 1998: 53). In speaking within this of “Turks”, in the language of his time and place he was, of course, referring to Muslims.

While this early Baptist commitment to the religious freedom of Jews and Turks was unusual, it could be argued that in the context of 17th century England these groups posed little immediate challenge and therefore that Baptist support for their religious freedom did not mean as much as may now be thought. But the depth and tenacity of the Baptist commitment to religious freedom can be

seen in their general determination to include Catholic Christians among those entitled to such freedom.

To understand the full significance of the Baptist position in this regard, it must be realized that English Protestants feared a possible restoration of the Roman Catholic Church that they believed would threaten their own liberty. They also shared in a widespread perception that Catholics were basically disloyal to the country and were thus seen as potential subversives. When one adds the substantial theological divergences that existed between them, the fact that Baptists by and large remained true to their principles by including Catholics within their stand for religious liberty is convincing evidence about the theological grounding of these convictions.

In 1660, four Baptists from Kent issued from prison, *An Humble Petition and Representation of the Sufferings of Several Peaceable and Innocent Subjects Called by the Name of Anabaptists*. In this – albeit in doing so betraying a common misunderstanding among Christians of the time that Muslims were worshippers of Muhammad - they pointed up the absurdity of requiring one's religion to mirror the religion of one's rulers:

Thus, if we had lived in Turkey we must receive the Koran, and be a worshipper of Mahomet; if in Spain, be a papist; in England, sometimes a papist, as in Henry Eighth's days, a Protestant in Edward Sixth's, a papist again in Queen Mary's, and a Protestant again in Queen Elizabeth's. And so for ever, as the authority changes religion, must we do the same. But God forbid. (Blackmore, Hammon, Jeffrey and Reve, in: Underhill, ed. 1846: 301)

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN GÜLEN'S VISION OF ISLAM

Turning now back to religious freedom in the teaching of Fethullah Gülen, what is particularly significant about the clarity and consistency with which the Gülen's vision of Islam supports and upholds religious freedom - and which was also case with regard to the commitment to religious freedom expressed by Thomas Helwys - is that

this is not the voice of only an individual teacher. Rather, it resonates within a global movement and has influence beyond it. And to fully appreciate its significance, one needs also to understand something about the crucible of modern Turkish history and society out of which it has emerged.

The 20th century the story of the Turkey was one that was dominated by the ideology of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), the founder of the modern Turkish state who abolished the Muslim Caliphate in 1924. Yavuz and Esposito (2003: xxiii) point out that in Kemalist ideology, “modernity and democracy require secularism”. Indeed, the version of secularism that has been dominant in Turkey is what these authors (Yavuz and Esposito, eds. 2003: xvi) call a “radical Jacobin laicism” in which secularism is treated “as above and outside politics” and in which therefore, “secularism draws the boundaries of public reasoning”. But Kemalism was established against the background of a traditional Islam that never disappeared from Turkish society and, in more recent times, it has been opposed by an “Islamist” form of Islam. Thus the “Gülenian” vision of Islam is one that has had both to distinguish itself from obscurantist and oppositionalist forms of Islam, while also needing to engage with the secular.

Based on the evidence of history about attempts, on the one hand, to enforce religious conformity of various kinds and, on the other, to enforce atheistic and/or anti-religious stances, Gülen (2004: 151-152) has pointed out that, “Efforts to suppress ideas via pressure or brute force have never been truly successful. History shows that no idea was removed by suppressing it. Many great empires and states were destroyed, but an idea or thought whose essence is sound continues to survive.” What has always been true of history in this regard is also argued by Gülen to be even more the case in our modern globalized world. As Enes Ergene notes (in Gülen, 2004: xii):

Gülen has stated that in the modern world the only way to get others to accept your ideas is by persuasion. He describes those who resort to force as being intellectually bankrupt; people will

always demand freedom of choice in the way they run their affairs and in their expression of their spiritual and religious values.

At the same time, Gülen warns that the transformations which have occurred in our social, historical, institutional and theological realities may provoke in those who are theologically insecure, a temptation to retreat into or to seek to create, idealised patterns of life which are, in fact, illusory. In fact, for Gülen, the notion that plurality can be abolished is not only illusory, it is also dangerous. Against such dangerous illusions Gülen (2004a: 249-250) warns that:

...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.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND HERMENEUTICAL ROOTS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

We have so far noted how the “Gülenian” vision of Islam and the “Baptistic” vision of Christianity can be located in relation to their historical, social and political roots. But in order properly to be able to understand the place of religious freedom within both religious visions, it is important to appreciate that, what are today articulated as “human rights” in relation to matters of freedom of religion and belief are, within these religious visions, understood to have roots that are also profoundly theological.

Thus with reference to the closely related notion of “tolerance,” Gülen (2004: 37) points out that: “First of all, I would like to indicate that tolerance is not something that was invented by us. Tolerance was first introduced on this Earth by the prophets whose

teacher was God.” Therefore in the “Gülenian” vision of Islam, tolerance is something that has roots that are much deeper and more constant than mere accidents and expressions of history.

In contrast with those whose lives are at the mercy of shifting intellectual or other fashions, those who are rooted in the “Gülenian” vision of Islam and the “Baptistic” vision of Christianity have a perspective on the world that they understand to be rooted in received revelatory truth to which they are called to bear witness, and that reflects the nature of reality as it is. And, as has been seen in the history of persecution experienced by both Christians and Muslims in different historical and social contexts, such is the “rootedness” of convictions like these that they are unlikely to be undermined – and may even be reinforced – when they encounter opposition, whether psychological, economic or physical. In Gülen’s vision, on the basis of the implementation of an authentic Islamic vision, he hopes that a “new man and woman” can be developed in which, as Gülen (2004: 81) says:

These new people will be individuals of integrity who, free from external influences, can manage independently of others. No worldly force will be able to bind them, and no fashionable -ism will cause them to deviate from their path. Truly independent of any worldly power, they will think and act freely, for their freedom will be in proportion to their servanthood to God. Rather than imitating others, they will rely on their original dynamics rooted in the depths of history and try to equip their faculties of judgment with authentic values that are their own.

In terms of lifestyle, this leads to an approach to religious plurality in which dialogue and tolerance are key. And what Gülen means by tolerance is set out clearly by him, as follows:

Tolerance does not mean being influenced by others or joining them; it means accepting others as they are and knowing how to get along with them. No one has the right to say anything about this kind of tolerance; everyone in this country has his or her own point of view. People with different ideas and thoughts are either going to seek ways of getting along by means of rec-

conciliation or they will constantly fight with one another. There have always been people who thought differently to one another and there always will be. (Gülen, 2004: 42)

In neither the “Gülenian” vision of Islam nor the “Baptistic” vision of Christianity is the affirmation of religious freedom, and the promotion of the practice of social and political tolerance that is associated with this, to be understood in terms of a “liberal” or “modern” adaptation to a plural world consequent upon the loss of the power or influence of religion. Rather, it is rooted in a view of religious truth that, ultimately, has confidence in the inherent power of the reality to which truth claims point.

Such a view of religious truth also infused the “Baptistic” view of religious freedom. Emerging from within a Christendom Europe in which religious and civil belonging was often equated, and in which the adoption by local rulers of particular forms of Christianity had become the occasion for wars and of civil conflict, the “Baptistic” refraction of the Christian vision affirmed religious freedom as neither the product of weariness with religious conflict or of religious indifferentism; nor as a merely pragmatic approach to the management of religious plurality – although its pragmatic benefits were recognized. In addition, this aspect of the “Baptistic” was not a “modernist” or “liberal” adjustment to the advancing tides of “secularisation”. Rather, it was rooted in a particular and distinctive understanding of the relationship between human beings and the divine, and between the community of disciples and the wider community.

For “Baptistic” Christians, that understanding was informed by a specific hermeneutic of the Christian scriptural tradition. Among “Baptistic” Christians, the Christian scriptures have a primacy of a kind that the 18th century English Baptist leader and advocate of missionary work, Andrew Fuller, explained in terms of his liberation from the shackles of an overly dogmatic and narrow Christian tradition. At the beginning of 1780, he made a solemn vow in which he declared: “Lord thou hast given me a determination to take up no

principle at second-hand; but to search for everything at the pure fountain of thy word.”

Such an approach to scripture has also under girded the general position on creeds that has been found among Christians in the Baptist tradition. That is, while confessions of faith have been produced around which Baptist Christians have united in particular times and contexts, these have not generally been viewed as definitions of faith. This is because, within the “Baptistic” vision of Christianity, although there has traditionally been a “high” view of scripture, there has also been a conviction that the community of believers need always to engage afresh with the source documents of the Christian tradition in order to discern how they are now being addressed by those same scriptures. Or, as John Smyth put it when recognising that the scriptures are not always self-explanatory and that their interpretation is therefore always open to correction: “We are in constant error; my earnest desire is that my last writing may be taken as my present judgement.” (cited in Ballard, 1969-70: 245)

Such a view contrasts, of course, with that of some contemporary Baptist groups such as the current leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention in the USA, for whom it appears that highly specific interpretations have become requirements that they seek to impose upon others within the same broad tradition (see James, Leazer and Shoopman, 1999). However, such an approach is idiosyncratic even with regard to the history of the Convention itself (see Yarborough, 2000) as well as divergent from the broader variety of Baptist tradition in North America (see Brackney, 2006) and beyond which, while it does hold to a “high” view of scripture, does not fall into the trap of, in practical terms, equating its own interpretations with the authority of scripture itself. It also contrasts with the vision of the great Southern Baptist theologian, Edgar Mullins who, in his classic book of Baptist theology, *The Axioms of Religion* (Mullins, 1908) spoke, in a very vivid phrase, of the importance of ‘soul freedom’.

Gülen points out that a similar reification has occurred in parts of the Muslim community. While the “Gülenian” vision of Islam is one that has a high view of the Qur’an, it also has an approach which is flexible towards interpretation. Thus Gülen (2002: 118) explains that, while “Taking the Qur’an and Sunnah as our main sources and respecting the great people of the past, in the consciousness that we are all children of time, we must question the past and the present.” Put simply, Gülen summarises the challenge thus: “We must review our understanding of Islam.” And as he then went on to further explain his aim, “I’m looking for laborers of thought and researchers to establish the necessary balance between the unchanging and changing aspects of Islam and, considering such jurisprudential rules as abrogation, particularization, generalization and restriction, can present Islam to the modern understanding.”

FREEDOM AND WITNESS

In Islam, Muslims are called to “Dawah” in the same way that in Christianity, Christians are called to “mission” and/or “evangelism”. Modernists among both Muslims and Christians tend, perhaps for pragmatic reasons, to downplay the truth-claims made by what are both, at their root, universalistic religious traditions which have an understanding of what they have received as being something not only for themselves as a particular cultural, ethnic or religious group, but rather as something that is held in trust by them for the whole human community.

Superficially considered, it may seem that a commitment to uphold religious freedom might be fundamentally incompatible with a desire to present the particular claims of a religion and to invite others to consider their validity for themselves. However, what enables this to remain a “creative tension” rather than an “impossible contradiction” in both the “Baptistic” and the “Gülenian” approach to trying to live faithfully as committed believers, is their prior and theological informed affirmation of religious freedom. It is this that

facilitates the possibility of an ethical practice in which truth claims can be advocated, but where the freedom of the other to accept or not to accept these claims is seen as being theologically rooted in the nature of humanity.

In the Christianity of the “Baptistic” vision and the “Gulenian” vision of Islam the revelations received, respectively, through the person of Jesus and in the Qur’an are ones to which people of all cultures are invited to respond. But not only people of all cultures: also people of all religions, since revelation is not to be confused with the “property” of any group of human beings. Within this, testimony to what has been received within each religion is believed to take place before God, and in dialogue with others whose integrity is affirmed and respected, rather than being an activity that is directed at others in a threatening or manipulative way.

Alongside its commitment to religious liberty, the “Baptistic” vision of Christianity has, for much of its history, had a strongly evangelistic commitment. Therefore, as the 20th century British Baptist theologian Henry Wheeler-Robinson noted in relation to Baptists:

It is not an accident of history that they have led the way in foreign missionary work; it is a logical and obvious deduction from their emphasis on individual faith. The measure of personal conviction is seen in its vigour of expansion, its zeal of propagation.

At the same time, Wheeler Robinson was clear that: “...we cannot reverse this and say that where there is propagating zeal, there is the Christian conviction of a world-gospel, because many other motives may lead men to become zealous proselytisers.” Both in history and today, there are individual Muslims and Christians, and Christian and Muslim groups, that have engaged in forms of mission that, among those who have become the “target” of such activities, have been experienced by them as being counter to the nature of the message with which the messengers have been entrusted. In the “Gulenian” vision of Islam, Muslims are still called

upon to manifest the revelation of God in the world, but Gülen teaches that:

....an Islamic goal can be achieved only through Islamic means and methods. Muslims must pursue Islamic goals and adopt Islamic methods to attain them. As God's approval cannot be obtained without sincerity and a pure intention, Islam cannot be served and Muslims cannot be directed toward their real targets through diabolic means and methods." (Gülen, in Ünal and Williams, 2000: 99).

Therefore what is needed among both Muslims and Christians is an ethical theology or a theological ethics that bears witness to the revelatory truth that they claim to have received but which translates into a style of Muslim and Christian living in a religiously plural world in which modesty and integrity are combined with realism and distinctiveness. This gives people of all religions and none the social and theological space to witness to their own understanding of truth as well as to be free to make their response to what is shared with them by others. It means that real witness is always dialogical and because of such an understanding, very particular theological ethics are implicit in a "Baptistic" and a "Gülenian" approach to religious believing and belonging. Indeed, if the theological ethics of religious freedom are not merely an addendum to the basic tasks of Christianity and of Islam, then the praxis of inter-religious dialogue must be understood as part of an understanding of truth. In this, we grow by a "doing of the truth" in which not so much intellectual definition, but rather transformative understanding, is involved.

Because of this, it is possible even for committed believers in one religion to benefit not only from the cognate ideas of others, but even from opposing ideas. As Gülen expresses it, "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, 2004: 33). Significantly, this approach to dialogue does not remain at the level of teaching alone. Rather, it is

expressed through symbolic and effective action. As Bekim Agai explains it:

Although many Islamic leaders may talk of tolerance in Islam, it may be problematic to put it into practice. Gülen himself has shown that he has no fears of meeting leaders of other religions, including the Pope and the representative of the Jewish community in Istanbul. He also crossed the borders of Islamic discourse to meet with important people in Turkish society who are atheists. These activities were not easy from a religious perspective because Islamic discourse in Turkey has definite boundaries that do not appreciate close ties to the leaders of other religions and nonreligious persons. Also, his support for the Alevis was not very popular among most Sunni-Islamic groups. (Agai, 2003: 65)

What this dialogical approach means also in relation to “secular” people can be seen especially clearly in the work of the Journalists and Writers’ Foundation, established in 1994 and of its so-called Abant Platform, early meetings of which have dealt with such challenging topics as “Islam and Secularism” and “Pluralism and Social Reconciliation”. Fethullah Gülen is the President of the Journalist and Writers Foundation while, since 2006, the Academic Co-Ordinator of the Abant Platform has been Professor Dr. Mete Tuncay of Bilgi University – who refers to himself as, “a person who believes in agnosticism in religion”. In this and other similar ways the spirit of dialogue and the theologically grounded freedom to believe or not to believe, is embodied in both action and organization.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, THE STATE & CIVIL SOCIETY

At around the time that “Baptistic” forms of Christianity originally emerged in European history there were also those also on the radical wing of the Reformation who wanted to try to use the Hebrew Scriptures as a template for the establishment of a civil community that would embody the biblical vision of justice and righteousness. In contrast to such a totalizing vision of the relation-

ship between religion, state and society, “Baptistic” Christians have generally held to a conviction that the scriptures are to be interpreted according to a predominantly Christological and soteriological hermeneutic. This approach accorded a relative primacy to the writings of the New Testament and was at least partly responsible for leading Baptists away from an attempt to recreate the theocratic patterns of the Hebrew scriptures.

Such an approach rested upon the theologically prior conviction about the importance of religious believing as a freely chosen life orientation and commitment. It provided a basis for seeking the restoration of what was believed to be a New Testament pattern of Church life. It also reinforced a differentiation between the Church and the social order, leading to a different kind of approach to being Christian in society and the state. Thus, for example, Thomas Helwys believed that religious coercion could become an excuse for people to try and circumvent their individual responsibility and conscience. He also believed magistrates and kings committed a grave sin when they forced the conscience of an individual or group. Because of this, in his *Mystery of Iniquity*, he eloquently argued that:

O Let the King judge is it not most equal, that men should choose their religion themselves seeing they only must stand themselves before the judgment seat of God to answer for themselves, when it shall be no excuse for them to say, we were commanded or compelled to be of this religion, by the king, or by them that had authority from him. (Helwys, 1612, in: Groves, 1998: 37)

Helwys paid for his courage and convictions with the loss of his liberty and finally with his life. However, his early advocacy of religious liberty was soon followed by other Baptists. In 1614, Leonard Busher published a pamphlet entitled *Religion's Peace* (in Underhill, ed., 1846: 1-81) the title of which continued with the words: ‘Wherein is Contained Certain Reasons against Persecution for Religion: Also a design for a peaceable reconciling of those that differ in opinion’. In this, Busher argued that, ‘if the believing should perse-

cute the unbelieving to death, Who should remain alive?’ (Busher, 1614, in: Underhill, ed., 1846: 21).

This was followed in 1620 by An Humble Supplication to the King, Prince Charles and the Parliament (in Underhill, ed. 1846: 189-231) which was thought to be authored by John Murton. Roger Williams, who became a Baptist and founded the first Baptist church in North America, used Murton’s pamphlet as a preface to his own, 1644, classic work on religious liberty, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience Discussed in a Conference Between Truth and Peace* (Williams, 1664, in: Groves, ed. 2001) Williams maintained in uncompromising words that:

...it is the will and command of God that, since the coming of his Son, the Lord Jesus, a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish or anti-Christian consciences and worships be granted to all men in all nations and countries: and that they are to be fought against with the sword which is only, in soul matters, able to conquer: to wit, the sword of God’s spirit, the word of God. (Williams, 1664, in Groves, ed., 2001: 3)

In terms of both theology and the practicalities of state, Williams argued that, ‘true civility and Christianity may both flourish in a state or kingdom, notwithstanding the permission of diverse and contrary consciences, either of Jew or Gentile’. (Williams 1664, in Groves, ed., 2001: 4). By contrast, Williams maintained that ‘an enforced uniformity of religion throughout a nation or a civil state confounds the civil and religious, denies the principles of Christianity and civility, and that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh’.

Just as the early “Baptistic” Christian teachers challenged a totalizing religious vision of Christianity, so Gülen also challenges contemporary “Islamist” visions of Islam. Thus, while noting that, “Supposedly there are Islamic regimes in Iran and Saudi Arabia”, Gülen goes on to say that these “...are state-determined and limited to sectarian approval.” (Gülen, 2004: 151). Both traditionalist and contemporary “Islamist” Muslims highlight a tension, if not outright incompatibility, between what is identified as *dar al-harb* (territory

that lays outside the sway of Islam) and what is called dar al-Islam (those lands within which Islam has taken root). However, others – and of which Ihsan Yilmaz (2002) sees the community associated with Gülen’s teaching as an example - are more concerned with what Yilmaz, after Gülen, identifies as dar ul-hizmet (country of service).

Such an approach presents an alternative to instrumentalisation of religion in the service of politics or politics in the service of religion, and emphasizes instead an understanding of the contribution to public life which service based on religious motivations can make, but as one contribution alongside others. As Bulent Aras and Omer Caha summarise it (2000: 30):

Gülen’s movement seems to have no aspiration to evolve into a political party or seek political power. On the contrary, Gülen continues a long Sufi tradition of seeking to address the spiritual needs of people, to educate the masses, and to provide some stability in times of turmoil. Like many previous Sufi figures (including the towering thirteenth-century figure, Jalal al-Din Rumi), he is wrongly suspected of seeking political power. However, any change from this apolitical stance would very much harm the reputation of his community.

In this regard, the Gülenian vision again proves itself to be very close to the “Baptistic” vision in that both have challenged any form of religion and state relationship in which either religion or state are instrumentalized in the service of the other, or in which temporal structures are held to approximate to a Divine blueprint.

That stance led to the 19th century Baptist Union in England becoming a founding member group of the British Anti-State Church Association, later known as the Liberation Society. The more formal and longer name of the Society – the Society for the Liberation of the Church from State Patronage and Control - emphasized that while the “establishment” of one form of Christianity was seen as being detrimental to the state and society, it was also considered to be damaging to true religion. This has generally been the position held by Baptists in most times and places and is

today also being updated and reinterpreted with reference to contemporary plural societies (see Weller, 2005). Once again, in this there are strong resonances with the teaching of Fethullah Gülen who argues that:

Politicizing religion would be more dangerous for religion than for the regime, for such people want to make politics a means for all their ends. Religion would grow dark within them, and they would say: "We are the representatives of religion." This is a dangerous matter. Religion is the name of the relationship between humanity and God, which everyone can respect. (Gülen, in Ünal and Williams, 2001: 166)

Indeed, in Gülen, one can also hear echoes of Thomas Helwys who, in his *Mystery of Iniquity*, challenged King James I to the effect that:

Our Lord the King is but an earthly king and he hath no authority as a King but in earthly causes, and if the King's people be obedient and true subjects, obeying all humane laws made by the King, our Lord the King can require no more: for men's religion to God, is betwixt God and themselves: the King shall not answer for it, neither may the King be judge between God and man. (Helwys, 1612, in Groves, ed. 1998: 53)

Of course, there is a danger that is opposite to that of creating a totalizing vision of religion, state and society, and it is one into which both some parts of the "Baptistic" vision of Christianity have fallen, as also some of the Sufi traditions and tariqaa that informed the context out of which "Gülenian" thinking and practice emerged. It is the danger of a pietistic of withdrawal from the structures and processes of civil society, and especially of governance, on the basis that these have become so far removed from a religious vision of what the government and the state should be that the wisest course of action is to avoid engagement with them, and to concentrate on personal religious life in the family, and among like-minded religious people.

In relation to the "Baptistic" tradition of Christianity, pietistic withdrawal from the world has become more common among "Bap-

tistic” Christians today. But historically, such withdrawal was more a characteristic of certain parts of the “Anabaptist” tradition than it was among mainstream English Baptists, as illustrated by the major divergence that “Anabaptists” and “Baptists” had over the office of the magistracy. The Anabaptist position was generally that a member of the Christian community could not hold the office of magistrate. This was because it implied the use of the sword that Anabaptists viewed as being contrary to the Gospel imperatives concerned with leaving judgment to God. Baptists, on the other hand, allowed their members to be magistrates, while maintaining that they should not thereby become agents of compulsion in matters of conscience. By not seeing the “the sword” of magisterial responsibility as incompatible with membership of the Christian Church, Baptists were affirming of the importance of the involvement of Christians in matters of social and structural responsibility.

In relation to Islam it is clear that the “Gülenian” approach contrasts strongly with that of those Muslims who would wish either to establish an Islamic theocracy in a particular country, such as Iran under the Mullahs, or Afghanistan under the Taliban, and also with those who seek a re-establishment of a universal Khalifate. A different approach was advocated by many Sufis. However, given the way in which in modern Turkish history religion was systematically excluded not only from the political sphere, but also from education and other key sectors of civil society, a consequence of such alternative approaches was sometimes that if a withdrawal from society.

In contrast, the position advocated by Gülen has argued for a full engagement with the world. It is such an approach which enables Gülen to take the position, as reported by Yavuz (2003: 45) that “...Islam does not need the state to survive, but rather needs educated and financially rich communities to flourish. In a way, not the state but rather community is needed under a full democratic system.” Against the background of a Turkish system in which military coups have several times cut across the democratic process, Enes Ergene (in Gulen, 2004: xii) has pointed out that Gülen has

come to a position in relation to which he argues that: "Democracy in spite of its 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."

Thus, as A.S.P. Woodhouse argued in his study of Puritanism and Liberty, the significance of support for religious freedom goes beyond that of religious freedom in itself: "The amazing importance of the struggle for religious liberty is due partly to the momentous issues with which it deals; but beyond that is the fact that it holds, as it were in solution, within itself all the rest of the struggle for liberty and equality." As Gülen (2004: 151) says: "Democracy is a system of freedoms. However, because we have to live together with our different positions and views, our freedom is limited where that of another begins." And with reference to his vision of a "Golden Generation", Gülen (2004: 99) has argued that: "The generation that will become responsible for bringing justice and happiness to the world should be able to think freely and respect freedom of thought. Freedom is a significant dimension of human free will and a key to the mysteries of human identity."

"GÜLENIAN" AND "BAPTISTIC" CONTRIBUTIONS IN A PLURAL AND GLOBAL SOCIETY

The Baptist refraction of the Christian vision could make a "...radical methodological contribution to the basis on which the theology and practice of inter-religious dialogue is usually constructed" (Weller, 1990b: 314) among Christians. The potential radicality of the Baptist contribution is not because of its adaptation to the modern world, but because of its fidelity and authenticity in relation to the foundational vision of Christianity. It is the argument of this paper that a similarly radical methodological contribution can be made for Islam and Muslims through the "Gülenian" vision of Islam, rooted as it is in its fidelity to Qur'an and Sunnah; drawing

upon the rich synthesis developed in the Turkish appropriation of Islam; and translating that into action via a community of transformative action and a pattern of civil society initiatives.

In moving towards a conclusion, while this paper has sought to stress the theological roots of these religious visions of religious freedom, it is interesting that in Leonard Busher's *Religion's Peace*, alongside the arguments that he made on theological and ecclesiological grounds, he also challenged Christians by reference to historical descriptions of the Muslim treatment of Christians and Jews in Constantinople. In his pamphlet Busher pointed out that,

I read that a bishop of Rome would have constrained a Turkish emperor to the Christian faith, unto whom the emperor answered, 'I believe that Christ was an excellent prophet, but he did never, so far as I understand, command that men should, with the power of weapons be constrained to believe his law: and verily I also do force no man to Mahomet's law.' And I read that Jews, Christians, and Turks are tolerated in Constantinople, and yet are peaceable, though so contrary the one to the other. (Busher, 1614, in: Underhill, ed., 1846: 24)

From citing this practical example, Busher went on to use it in order to press the point by comparison upon the Christians of his time that:

if this be so, how much more ought christians not to force on another to religion. And how much more ought christians to tolerate christians, when the turks do tolerate them? Shall we be less merciful than the turks? Or shall we learn the turks to persecute christians? It is not only unmerciful, but unnatural and abominable. Yea, monstrous for one christian to vex and destroy another for difference and questions of religion.' [Capitalisation in the original]

Bearing this in mind, it is interesting to read what M. Enes Ergene has to say in relation to the linkage between this historical inheritance and the "Gülenian" approach. As the author of the foreword to Gülen's book, *Towards a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, Ergen explains (in Gülen, 2004: 7) that Gülen's model is "...the essence of the

synthesis created by the coming together of Turkish culture with Islam”; that “This tolerance was initiated by Muslim Turkish Sufis”; and that “Muslim Turks have practiced tolerance and concurrence, which are the essence of the contemporary democracy, over a vast geography for centuries. Islam has been interpreted in this geography with the same tolerance for thousand years.”

Therefore like the original “Baptistic” visions of Christianity, so also Fethullah Gülen’s vision of Islam is not that of a “modernist” or “liberal” project which could easily be dismissed as a betrayal of true Islam by Muslims who have a more theocratic approach to the relationship between religion, state and society. Rather, based on his wide and deep knowledge of Muslim, and especially of Ottoman, history, the approach that is taken by Gülen is one of a *tajdid* or “renewal” of Islam that is rooted in the common Islamic sources of the Qur’an and Sunnah. But it is one which also seeks positive engagement with the contemporary world and, within that, with people of religions and none. As Ergen (in Gülen, 2004a: viii), again, explains it, Gülen’s model is one that “re-generates this tolerant interpretation and understanding of Muslim-Turkish Sufism within contemporary circumstances, albeit highlighting a broader, more active, and more socially oriented vision.... Gülen opens up this framework and vision to all societies in the world, transforming and broadening it.”

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper emphasizes the importance of religious freedom in the contemporary world as part of a global framework of human rights. But it also argues that if the reality of religious freedom is to be both deepened and extended, it is important that this is done not only “externally” to the religious traditions of the world through “secular” reasoning and the instruments of international law, but also that it be developed in articulation with the “logic” and the “grammar” of the religions.

Within Christianity, the particular refraction of the Christian vision that can be found in the “Baptistic” tradition’s commitment

to religious freedom offers historical, ecclesiological and theological resources that can help to equip the wider Christian community for a future in which Christians can understand and grapple with the challenges posed by the religious plurality of the contemporary world not only in terms of toleration alone, but also as an expression of a deeply theological commitment.

Within Islam, the teaching of Fethullah Gülen and the practice of the movement that looks for inspiration to his teaching has emerged out of a clash within Turkish history between a radical and often anti-religious form of “secularism” and obscurantist and/or oppositionalist forms of being Muslim. It draws on the best elements of the Ottoman Turkish inheritance with regard to toleration. But it has also issued into a global vision of Islamic integrity in its commitment to religious freedom that is deeply rooted in the Qur’an and the Sunnah, while being fully and dialogically engaged with the plurality of the contemporary world.

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