

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON NEW DEPARTURES  
IN MODERNIST INTERPRETATIONS OF ISLAM IN  
CONTEMPORARY TURKEY: *FETHULLAH GÜLEN CEMAATI*\*

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This paper is an attempt to analyse the thoughts and activities of Fethullah Gülen, the leader of the Turkish religious order called after him the *Fethullahciler*. Within the modernist framework he offers an alternative to the rejectionist tendencies in Islam and provides an Islamically based rationale for religious, social and educational reform in Turkey. Also, through Gülen's personality the transformation of *sufi* religious orders into faith movements becomes more apparent. Whereas so called Islamic fundamentalism is normally used to prove that Islam and politics means almost the same, this article tries to uncover those modernist trends which claim that politicizing of Islam means an insult to religion.

Muslim responses to the challenges of our post-modern age are often described in terms of various "fundamentalisms".<sup>1</sup> The widespread Western view of Islam as a religion conducive to mass anti-Western mobilization is nevertheless one-dimensional, ahistorical and unjust. Moreover, outside the fundamentalist orientation an Islamic modernism also exists. Although it is not easy to find an accurate definition for modernism, certainly not easier than to describe fundamentalism, one is tempted to make at least some preliminary remarks. The Muslim version of modernity as understood here is clearly not the quest for solutions by Muslim fundamentalists as suggested elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Modernism as

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<sup>1</sup> For a useful discussion of fundamentalism see KROPÁČEK, L.: *Islámský fundamentalismus (Islamic Fundamentalism)*, Vyšehrad, Praha 1996, pp. 11–33, or KROPÁČEK, L.: *Facing the West: Ideologies of Contemporary Islamic Movements*, pp. 17–24, in: KRUPA, V.: *Intercultural Contacts and Communication Between East and West*, Proceedings of the International Conference, Bratislava, 17 September 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Islamic fundamentalism is understood as a Muslim version of modernity e.g. by Daniel PIPES, see: *Západní smýšlení radikálního islámu (Western Apprehension of Radical Islam)* in: *Proglas* 3/1996, pp. 20–25.

analysed here proposes that Islam has an adequate ideological base for public life. At the same time modernism claims that Islam allows for positive dialogue with the West, other ideologies or religions.<sup>3</sup> Its flexibility can also be seen in the search to accommodate “modern” values such as democracy, human rights or equality.<sup>4</sup> The very basic question then is to see how the contemporary modernist Muslim expresses himself and whether there is an Islamic way of life capable of meeting the demands of modernity. Unlike fundamentalism, modernist approaches are sensitive to the dialogue between Islamic and secular ideologies and try to prepare their followers for discussions with Western intellectuals. This is true even when modernists are reluctant to adopt Western ideologies. Muslim modernists do not see mortal enemies in imported solutions, but if humanism is to flourish, it should be Islamic humanism.

Jamāluddīn al-Afghānī, Muḥammad Abduh and Sayyid Ahmad Khān were probably the most prominent representatives of Islamic renewal and modernism (*nahḍa*) which began in the first half of the 19th century. Their activities are associated with what is called “the opening of the gate of *ijtihād*”, or the possibility of free interpretation of the *Qurʿān*. If traditionalists often had to agree to face historical changes by granting concessions to modernizers, modernists used tradition and religious symbols to justify change. Abduh and Khān, for example, realized that it was a vital question to adjust Islamic interpretation to all new scientific discoveries, however the approach of the two men was not the same. While Abduh never forgot that he was speaking to the Muslim audience in a broader sense, thus trying to reconcile orthodox Muslim scholars, the uneducated masses and new Western science, Khān, on the other side, has become acceptable almost exclusively for Muslim intellectuals and Westernized people. Abduh’s view that the sphere of interaction between the individual and society (*muʿāmalāt*) is to be regulated by free judgement (*ijtihād*) reinforced, although unintentionally, the secular tendencies which were allowed in by the back door.<sup>5</sup> In the area of law Abduh also stressed individualism which is an important concept of secularism, too.<sup>6</sup> For the modernist approach of Sayyid Ahmad Khān

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<sup>3</sup> GÜNEŞ-AYATA, A.: *Pluralism and Authoritarianism: Political Ideas in Two Islamic Publications*, p. 256, in: TAPPER, R.: *Islam in Modern Turkey. Religion, Politics and Literature in a Secular State*, I.B. Tauris, London 1994.

<sup>4</sup> More on modernist view on human rights in KROPÁČEK, L.: *Islam and Human Rights* in KREJČÍ, J. (ed.): *Islam in Contact with Rival Civilizations – Four Views of the Challenge and Response*, Filosofia Publications, Prague 1998, broader analysis of the same problem is presented by AN-NAʿIM, A. A.: *Toward an Islamic Reformation. Civil Liberties, Human Rights and International Law*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse 1990.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example: HOURANI, A.: *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798–1939*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1962.

<sup>6</sup> According to his apprehension of *maṣlaḥa*, it is possible to draw specific principles from general ones. Likewise, he gave big stress on *talfīq*, or piecing together, in the sense that he not only consulted the opinions of the representatives of four *madhabs*, but he also admitted individual judgement inspired by various other sources.

the importance of the *Qur'ān* was mostly in what it points to, while for more traditionalist views it is more in what the *Qur'ān* says.

In the Turkish context, with all the secularist legacy of this century, Islamic modernism is probably even better placed to accommodate the Western notions of liberalism and humanism. Naturally, modernism too produces mythologies, manufactures ideological slogans and haunting images. Also, its representatives may share a common reformist agenda, but differ in orientations and accents.

Binnaz Toprak showed that the functions and roles of Islam in Turkey have varied during different periods.<sup>7</sup> In the Ottoman period Islam defined individual identity and political legitimacy and functioned as a mechanism of social control. During the transition from an empire to a nation state, Islam provided a source of national unity against invading foreign powers and the nationalist leadership owed much to the cooperation of a large number of local clerics and the use of religious symbolism by the nationalists themselves as a means of rallying mass support. After the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 Islam was a means of protest against one-party regime, whereas still later, during the transition to democracy, it served as a means of political mobilization for opposition. As the right-left polarization became to play a central role in the 1960s Islam became less central.<sup>8</sup> A growing “Islamization” in Turkey has found expression in society and politics again since the 1980s.

Many aspects of the role of Islam in Turkey through the centuries have been underlined elsewhere but for an improved understanding of Turkish Islam two of them seem crucial for an outsider. As Wilfred C. Smith put it: “*Two illusions then go hand in hand...first, the idea that Islam went through its ‘golden age’ at the beginning of its career, the significant period of its history coming to an end in what is now the fairly distant past – in effect, before the Turks came substantially on the scene, and secondly, the idea that in the twentieth century, when Islam is now felt to be pulling itself out of its subsequent torpor and is once again on the move, undergoing its ‘renaissance’, the Turks have rejected Islam.*”<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, without going into further detail it seems to be necessary to mention that the spread of Islam in Anatolia – and also in India, Central Asia and Africa – was carried on through *sufi* brotherhoods, and *sufism* in all these zones made compromises with the spiritual milieu already existing.<sup>10</sup> Until today, *sufi* orders in Turkey are usually understood in terms of personalized and emotional beliefs, as the source of spiritual learning under the guidance of sheikhs. While this is still true for Turkish regions with long *sufi* influence, especially in Western Turkey orders twisted into faith movements. In a setting

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<sup>7</sup> TOPRAK, B.: *Islam and Political Development in Turkey*, E. J. Brill, Leiden 1981, pp. 123–124.

<sup>8</sup> TOPRAK, 1981, pp. 123–124.

<sup>9</sup> SMITH, W.C.: *Islam in Modern History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1957, p. 168.

<sup>10</sup> RAHMAN, F.: *Islam*, Chicago 1966, p. 6.

where universal education has been implemented with success, where industrial relations and mass communications are looming larger every day, *sufi* orders have been transformed into mass religious movements which show new distinctive characteristics.<sup>11</sup> In this respect *neo-sufi* movements can no longer be considered to be an obstacle toward Muslim reformism as understood by the *salafīya* movement. Religious movements and orders have their representatives in various, even secular, political parties, as well as in the so-called Islamist Prosperity Party (*Refah Partisi* – sometimes translated as Welfare Party, outlawed in 1998, today continues former activities as the Virtue Party – *Fazilet Partisi*). Whereas during the early decades of this century, there had been tacit agreement between the most important *sufi* brotherhoods, such as *Nakşibendis* and *Nurcus*, and the secular establishment that if political parties left the religious brotherhoods alone, they would in turn give their political support to the parties, later, the brotherhoods became more active lobbying for the economic ventures established by Islamist groups in textile and construction industry, or banking.<sup>12</sup>

A closer look at the revival of Islam in Turkey since the 1980s proves that the emphasis shifted toward Islamic brotherhoods and the number of religious publications together with the role of media strikingly increased.<sup>13</sup> Newer orders are increasingly focused on belief instead of practice and political engagement is overshadowed by self-improvement. In their majority these brotherhoods adopted an evolutionary and not a revolutionary approach as far as the Islamization of everyday life is concerned.<sup>14</sup>

The leader of one branch of the *Nurcu* (*Disciples of Light*) movement, which is most commonly called the *Fethullahcıs*, is sheikh Fethullah Gülen (Hocafendi).<sup>15</sup> As a Muslim thinker, writer and entrepreneur active in Turkey and Central Asia, Fethullah Gülen (born 1927) presents Islam not as a dogmatic religion but as a system which is able to cope with the changes in society and challenges of our era.<sup>16</sup> *Fethullahcılar*, a growing Islamic group of the late 1980s

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<sup>11</sup> MARDIN, Ş.: *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey. The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1989, p. 230.

<sup>12</sup> AYATA, S.: *Patronage, Party and the State: The Politicization of Islam in Turkey*, in: *The Middle East Journal* 50, no. 1 (Winter 1996), p. 45 – quoted in: HEPER, M.: *Islam and Democracy in Turkey: Toward a Reconciliation?*, in: *The Middle East Journal* 51, no. 1 (Winter 1997), p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> AYATA, S.: *Traditional Sufi Orders on the Periphery: Kadiri and Nakşibendi Islam in Konya and Trabzon*, in: TAPPER, 1994, p. 223.

<sup>14</sup> ÇAKIR, R.: *Ayet ve Slogan. Türkiye’de İslami Oluşumlar (Verse and Ideology. Islamic Formations in Turkey)*, Metiş Yayınları, İstanbul 1990, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> Fethullah Gülen objects to his religious movement being called after him “*Fethullahcıs*” because he does not consider himself to be a sheikh.

<sup>16</sup> Gülen’s most important writings include for example *Sonsuz Nur (Eternal Light)*, *Yeşeren Düşünceler (Green Reflections)* and *Asrin Getirdiği Tereddütler (Hesitations Brought by Modernity)* etc.

and 1990s, invested a lot in the media sector and the highest selling Islamic daily *Zaman* has a circulation of over 350,000.<sup>17</sup>

Due to the fact that Fethullah Gülen in many respects continues the work of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1876–1960), the founder of the *Nurcu* order, attention must be focused on the latter, too. On the whole it is undeniable that Nursi's concern has been much more with the written texts than with traditional *sufism* with personal ties to a charismatic leader. At the top of their preoccupations, *Nurcus*, which started taking ground in the first half of this century among provincial intellectuals, tried to make the teachings of the *Qur'ân* available to the majority of Turks.<sup>18</sup> Later, two groupings emerged from the *Nurcu* movement, *Yeni Asya* (New Asia) and the *Fethullahcıs*. Following Nursi's death in 1960, Gülen established his "religious empire". In the beginning this was more or less on a private basis, but it grew increasingly public in the 1990s. His field of activity is wide, but concentrates mainly on the educational sector (private schools, religious newspapers, TV-channels etc.). Gülen represents the image of a liberal Turkish version of Islam. He is actively engaged in dialogue with Christianity and other religions which is also obvious from the articles published in his daily *Zaman*. Fethullah Gülen, however, is certainly more traditional in his style than some Islamist intellectuals (such as Ali Bulaç) who appear modern in form and style, and see Islamic beliefs and practices as sufficient for life in contemporary society.

According to Fethullah Gülen the mosaic structure of the Ottoman Empire and tolerant attitudes in Turkish culture nourished a positive impact on the practice of Islam in Turkey. He does not approve of Islam practised in the Middle East and in contrast to Erbakan's "Arabization" of Turkish international relations he carries on his activities in Central Asia. In assessing relations between the Turkic people and the Arabs Gülen feels that because the Turkic people share a common history, Asian people have more sympathy towards the Turks than the Arabs.<sup>19</sup> He indicated that the lack of freedom of expression in countries like Iraq or Saudi Arabia differentiates Turkey from the Arabs, moreover, it is unwise – as is usually the case in Saudi Arabia – to urge people to visit mosques without being deeply persuaded.

Fethullah Gülen encourages a different Islamic project from that of Necmettin Erbakan and his party. In contrast to *Refah* which had a political aim, Gülen's movement has primarily social aims and is active in the area of education in order to reconstruct the daily lives of Muslims in Turkey. Representing cultural Islam which gives priority to individual faith over political factors, Fethullah Gülen challenges the political Islam of the *Refah*. The difference be-

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<sup>17</sup> *Zaman* (Time) has been published since 1986 as an international newspaper. It also started publishing in Germany, the USA, the Netherlands, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Romania, Azerbaijan, Central Asia, Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. Other magazines include *Sızıntı* (Tricklings), *Bizim Aile* (Our Family), *Zafer* (Victory), *Sur* (Success). Gülen's famous TV-station is called *Samanyolu* (Milky Way).

<sup>18</sup> MARDIN, 1989, pp. 36–37.

<sup>19</sup> CAN, E.: *Ufuk Turu* (Tour to the Horizon), AD Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 1996, p. 61.

tween cultural and political Islam is that whereas the former aims at having autonomy from the state, the latter seeks state power. Here what is meant by cultural Islam is a social movement which conceives Islam as a culture that is based on the traditions and beliefs of the community. The difference between cultural and political Islam also lies in Gülen's preference for Muslim society but not for an Islamic state. The non-exclusivist nature of his ideas on Islam were reinforced by the suggestion that we should sympathize with both practicing and non-practicing Muslims. Harmonious relations within the society and respect for human rights are expressed in his sympathy for both the practicing and non-practicing Muslims. The importance of this multi-colouredness also results in attempts to foster Muslim-Christian dialogue as well as dialogue with other religions. It is obvious from his effort to prevent conflict between civilizations because, as he claims, mosque, church and synagogue must shake hands.<sup>20</sup> Meetings with various Catholic or Greek orthodox dignitaries at home and abroad took place in a great number of occasions.

Gülen's claims that politicizing of Islam represents one of the biggest insults toward religion stands very close to the famous statement of the outspoken Muhammad Sa'īd al-ʿAshmāwī, namely that "God intended Islam to be a religion, but men have attempted to turn it into politics".<sup>21</sup> Paradoxically, it is by this attitude that Gülen enters the political domain. The fact that he interprets *Refah's* activities as the acceleration of the polarization in society underlines his latent political struggle with Erbakan. With his affinity for the West Gülen tries to counter Erbakan's understanding of Islam which he finds retrogressive. Among politically hot issues one should point out that while Erbakan's party opposes the accession of Turkey into the European Union, Fethullah Gülen, on the other side, supports it.

According to Gülen the Turks are heirs of a militarist past and therefore they are not inclined toward individualism which is so central in his efforts to communicate Islam and improve the democratic culture. That is also why individuals take shelter in communities. But Islam, he thinks, has an individualist approach to people and only when an individual reaches maturity is he prepared to live in society.

Gülen's respect for Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the secular Turkish Republic in 1923, is one of the most significant aspects of his views. He not only praised Atatürk for his leadership and intellect, but went so far as to say that the founder of the republic was a military and administrative genius.<sup>22</sup> The integrity of the Turkish state has always been in the forefront of his behaviour and he never attempted to fight the state authorities (even after the military takeover in 1980) because in his view bad government is better than anarchy. To the extent

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<sup>20</sup> Words pronounced during his meeting with Cardinal John O'Connor in New York. See *Zaman*, 22 September 1997.

<sup>21</sup> see introduction of AL-ʿASHMĀWĪ, M. S.: *Al-islām as-siyāsī* (Political Islam), Dār Sīnā, Cairo 1987.

<sup>22</sup> All this in spite of the fact that Atatürk played a key role in efforts to ban religious brotherhoods in 1925, see LEWIS, B.: *Modern Türkiye'nin Doğuşu* (trans. from *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*), Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, Ankara 1970, pp. 400–407.

that the Turks – unlike the Arabs – did not experience Islam to be an element of the emerging nationalism in the first half of 20th century, current efforts in strengthening Islam are therefore also an attempt to incorporate Islam deeper into Turkish nationalism.

There are voices which claim that the *Nurcu* movement under the leadership of Fethullah Gülen is undergoing a process of nationalization and situates itself under state control. These tendencies, some say, are linked with “dadaş soul” the main characteristic of which is the acceptance of the primacy of state over religion. Especially around Erzurum and Bayburt in eastern Anatolia the state is thought to be the prerequisite for the preservation of Islam.<sup>23</sup>

There is a gradual change from man in his relation to God to a man in his relation with society, cultural integrity and interpersonal relations.<sup>24</sup> Like the *nahḍa* generation of Abduh and Khān, Gülen’s followers would like to end the inferiority of the Islamic world in comparison with Christianity. This aim, however, cannot be achieved without preparation, patience and good timing. At the practical level then the first step is to bring up a new “golden generation”. As a follower of Said Nursi, who attempted to reconcile the education in secular schools which is based on positive science and that of *madrāsas* based on religion, Gülen proposes a marriage between the school and the *madrāsa*.<sup>25</sup> Nursi already attempted to save the students attending *madrāsas* from fanaticism and the students attending public schools from atheism. Traditionally established schools have been opened in order to give education to the poor whereas schools established by the *Fethullahcis* selected the best students via demanding tests before they were admitted. Mystic tradition combined with the elitist attitude is the way how to create a perfect man (*al-insān al-kāmil*).<sup>26</sup> Islam can be diffused then from an enlightened cadre to the people. There has been considerable educational activity by Gülen’s brotherhood in the Turkic republics of Central Asia, especially in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. “High morality” is being spread here in more than thirty secondary education schools and at least one university. The aim, according to Gülen’s words, is to rehabilitate the republics of Central Asia after long years of communist rule and integrate them into the Islamic world.

In contrast to the *Refah*, the *Fethullahcis* try to appeal to the Turkish economic and political élites. The manner favoured by Gülen is not to establish a mass movement through mass psychology and populist appeals but rather to bring people together. Here his distinction between community and society is also important. Community is composed of individuals sharing common beliefs and feelings. In society, however, there are many people who do not share common thoughts and we are obliged to find bonds to overcome particularist interests.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Hakan Yavuz in Turkish daily *Milliyet* on 3 August, 1996.

<sup>24</sup> MARDIN, 1989, p. 38.

<sup>25</sup> CAN, 1996, p. 75.

<sup>26</sup> See CELNAROVÁ, X.: *The Perfect Man in Islamic Mysticism*, in: *Human Affairs* 5 (1995), Slovak Academic Press, Bratislava, pp. 184–192.

<sup>27</sup> CAN, 1996, pp. 19–23.

The debate about the nature of Gülen's thoughts and activities will continue to blossom, but several assumptions have already been made. Commenting on his message one observer argued that "in the current climate of a 'cultural open buffet' in Turkey, Gülen's plate is full of various dishes, i.e., identities, some of which do not go well together".<sup>28</sup> Still another holds that Gülen created a post-modern religious movement which is a mixture of Turkish nationalism, élitist project and traditional political Islam.<sup>29</sup> On matters related to the role of Protestantism in building up a capitalist entrepreneurial mentality within the Christian world, Fethullah Gülen is thought to play a comparable role within Turkish society.<sup>30</sup> Although the majority of the Turkish establishment views Fethullah Gülen – at least officially – as somebody who is aiming to destroy secularism and would like to bring Islam back into politics by using a different (maybe more conciliatory) strategy, on the other side his thoughts have been welcomed by certain other elite groups while being labeled liberal by some others. Due to his distance from politics it is not clear how far can he be seen as a rival of Erbakan and his party, which nowadays represents the established form of political Islam in Turkey.<sup>31</sup>

If Abduh's and Khān's generation sought to bridge the gap between secularism and Muslim traditionalism, the *Fethullahcıs* in a certain sense try to reconcile secularism and rejectionism (most frequently labeled fundamentalism), and to foster their pluralist version of Islam. For both generations, however, disregarding even the whole century which separates them, the West appears both as the problem and part of the solution.

Recently the well-known article by Harvard politologist Samuel P. Huntington maintained that the Turks, rejected by the European Union and suspicious about the Arabs, are focusing on Central Asia in search of a new Pan-Turkic role. In obvious disagreement Fouad Ajami stated that "it is on Frankfurt and Bonn – and Washington – not on Baku and Tashkent that the attention of the Turks is fixed".<sup>32</sup> But, are these two journeys really so incompatible? It appears that the case of Fethullah Gülen proves that one can retain balance and move simultaneously in both directions.

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<sup>28</sup> KADIOĞLU, A.: *Republican Epistemology and Islamic Discourses in Turkey in the 1990s*, in: *The Muslim World*, vol. LXXXVIII, number 1, January 1998, p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> LAÇINER, Ö.: *Postmodern Bir Dini Hareket: Fethullah Hoca Cemaati (Postmodern Religious Movement: Fethullah Hoca's Congregation)*, in: *Birikim* 76 (1995), p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Here one could refer to his successful Asia Finance Institution.

<sup>31</sup> All the comparisons between *Refah Partisi* and the *Fethullahcıs* throughout this paper have not been intended, however, to situate the former at the extremist pole of Turkish Islam and politics. It has been observed many times that only small minority among Turkish Islamists organized in relatively marginal groups opposes the Turkish secular order and for a long time *Refah* has functioned within the democratic order and establishment. See e.g. HEPER, 1997, p. 43.

<sup>32</sup> AJAMI, F.: *The Summoning*, *Foreign Affairs* 72:4 (1993), p. 5, see also HUNTINGTON, S. P.: *The Clash of Civilizations?*, 72:4 (1993), pp. 22–49.