

From Dialogue to Collaboration: The Vision of Fethullah Gülen and Muslim-Christian Relations

Conferences focusing on the thought of Fethullah Gülen, especially the activities of the faith-based movement inspired by it, can nowadays be considered common events. Indeed, by now the organization of such academic conferences can rightfully be regarded as yet another regular field of activity of the movement, besides its major and relentless endeavors in interreligious dialogue, secular education, welfare, and the media. Whereas the major events of the last two years took place in Europe and the United States (London and Rotterdam, 2007; Washington DC, 2008; and Potsdam, 2009), the Australian Catholic University, the Australian Intercultural Society, and Monash University put Australia back on the map with this conference. Convened during 15-16 July 2009 at the Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, it was also meant to celebrate last year's establishment of the university's Fethullah Gülen Chair for Islamic Studies, held by Prof. Ismail Albayrak.

The organizers were obviously well aware that setting up a conference of this kind only makes sense if it is centered on relevant focal points. Thus, its declared aims were "to explore Fethullah Gülen's worldwide contribution to Islamic studies, education, philanthropy, and interreligious dialogue, through the prism of his personal and theological profile." Moreover, "his vision of dialogue and Muslim-Christian relations" was intended to be "brought into relation with developments in the Catholic Church and other Christian Churches since *Nostra Aetate* (1965)." The first aspect, with its reference to Gülen's own personal and theological profile, is of particular relevance as in-depth studies of both his writings and his intellectual background are still

largely lacking. This comes as a surprise, given the substantial amount of academic output dealing with certain well-known aspects of his thought and how they are put into practice by the people he inspires. Likewise, connecting his and the movement's vision of interreligious dialogue with the document of *Nostra Aetate*, as a major breakthrough in Catholic Christianity regarding its relationship with other religions, also proved to be a fruitful approach as far as comparisons and broadened perspectives on interreligious dialogue in general are concerned. Most of the presented papers lived well up to the stated aims, and once more a substantial number of scholars obviously not involved in the movement (most noteworthy, many Christian theologians) guaranteed that it was not a question of an interest group merely generating its own discourse in an academic garb at this conference.

Already the opening addresses strongly hinted at an interesting conference. With Abdullah Aymaz's paper on the past and present of the Gülen movement, the audience had the rare chance to hear a personal account of an otherwise seemingly well-known story by someone who has been there since the beginning, an early student of Gülen and a founding figure of what became known as the Gülen movement. Right afterwards, Dan Madigan SJ provided critical perspectives on what he regards as the "*Nostra Aetate's* unanswered questions," opening up this track of the conference in an unexpected manner. The following panel, "Fethullah Gülen: Sources and Traditions," made important contributions to our knowledge of Gülen's intellectual and religious background with presentations scrutinizing his approach to Qur'anic exegesis and Sufism, as well as his relationship to the tradition of the Naqshbandi brotherhood. Moreover, a presentation by Amin Abdullah from Indonesia, although held in very general terms, was particularly valuable as the vision and appeal of Indonesia's neo-modernist movement has been likened to the experience of the Gülen movement by outside observers (most prominently Greg Barton), but has not yet been commentated upon so far by scholars from the region.

Other especially notable papers of the first day were presented by David Tittensor and the Jonathan Lyons. The former discussed how the movement's rhetoric on religiously motivated but strictly secular and universal value-based education is translated into action through the establishment of schools, voluntary teaching missions in faraway lands, and conveying religious values by exemplary behavior. While these are all issues frequently dealt with in literature concerned with the movement, there is apparently a startling lack of empirical data in most of these accounts, and it is precisely this gap that was tackled by the presenter. On the other hand, Lyon's presentation was not even directly linked to Gülen. However, given the latter's con-

stant efforts at reconciling Islam with science through reference to a past where such a task would not have been necessary, Lyon's talk on how the western post-Enlightenment intellectual and historical tradition (among other factors) served to rob Islam of its rightful place in the global history of science, the connection is nevertheless obvious.

The second day also consisted mainly of relevant and original papers. Highlights were arguably the presentations of Züleyha Keskin, Greg Barton, and Constant Mews. Keskin's observations on the principles of dialogue in Gülen's thought were much less theoretic than was to be expected, and indeed her paper was very insightful regarding the actual activities in inter-religious dialogue done on the ground and the related personal experiences. Barton, on the contrary, set out to situate the Gülen movement in the context of modern Islamic social movements of various strands, which, due to its particularities and comparatively recent emergence, proved to be an important but difficult task.

On a completely different plain Mews argued, with reference to the historical evolution of both Islam and Christianity, that the most profitable way of exchange between two religions often was – and should be – genuine interculturalism rather than respectful but disinterested multiculturalism. An unusually empirically rich perspective on Gülen-inspired schools in Australia by Çemen Polat not only shed light on the crucial issue of financing, but also showed how these initially mostly Turkish schools became truly international in a short time. Finally, Neil Ormerod's well thought-out analysis of the rise of secularization in the West and the related gains and losses for Christians and Muslims brought up an issue that occupies an important place in Gülen's thought and confronts adherents of the two faiths in very much the same way.

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