

Islam in the Age of Global Challenges

On 14-15 November 2008, Georgetown University's Copley Formal Lounge and Philodemic Room served as the venues for an extraordinary conference on a unique Muslim leader who is finally becoming better known in the United States: Fethullah Gulen. Beginning in the early 1950s, this graduate of the Turkish seminary system began encouraging Turkish businessmen and others to build schools to provide a modern education to as many students as possible. People listened, and there are now over 600 schools in 100 countries. This conference, "Islam in the Age of Global Challenges: Alternative Perspectives of the Gulen Movement," which was sponsored by the Georgetown University President's Office, the Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, and the Rumi Forum, attracted both Muslim and non-Muslim academics and others.

Of the 170 papers submitted, forty were chosen to address the movement from the following viewpoints: (1) the man, his thoughts and ideas, and how he formed his community and (2) what the movement is doing vis-à-vis bringing meaning to people's lives, who/what were/are his sources, tolerance, dealing with non-Muslims, issues of religious freedom, women, peace issues, interfaith dialogue, the role of his schools in peacemaking, charitable organizations, financial sources, and globalization.

Ali Yurtsever's (conference coordinator; president, Rumi Forum) opening remarks defined the conference's context: the Gulen movement's approach toward globalization, poverty, illiteracy, education, interfaith, and other problems afflicting humanity. John Borelli (special assistant for inter-religious initiatives to the president, Georgetown University) welcomed the

participants. John Esposito (founding director, Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Georgetown University) noted that the first conference on the movement was held at Georgetown in 2001 and expressed his pleasure with the social scientists' increasing interest in it.

John C. Haughey, S.J. (senior fellow, Woodstock Theological Center, Georgetown University) presented "The Driver in the Mind of Fethullah Gulen," in which talked about his perceptions of Gulen's inner life, for "the journey to God has to go through the self." Remarking that every person is moved by questions of "is/is not, what is/is not good, and meaning," he stated that Gulen's "symbolic operator" is Prophet Muhammad, to whom he constantly tries to draw closer. Thus, Gulen is always trying to see the relationship between a given subject and his faith. As a result, he has created a holistic subjectivity/personhood, as opposed to the fragmented one that is at the core of most people.

Aaron Tyler (St. Mary's University, San Antonio) spoke on "Tolerance as a Source of Peace: Gulen and the Islamic Conceptualization of Tolerance." He mentioned Gulen's view that tolerance is a natural outgrowth of Islam, for it is inherent in Islam. Gulen, who has grafted tolerance to the principle of reciprocity, is an example of balanced tolerance. Tolerance does have limits, however, for without limits it becomes either license or indifference. It is also a prerequisite of worship, dialogue, reconciliation, and learning how to stop killing and hating each other.

John Pahl (Lutheran Seminary, Philadelphia) analyzed an issue of concern to governments everywhere: "Dying for a Cause: Youth, Violence, and the Gulen Movement – Beyond Tolerance and Dialogue). Comparing the recruitment policies of the military and of ideological groups, he stated that the main technique is "promising them glory that transcends the miserable agony and crushing disappointment that so often attends the coming of age." The Gulen movement seeks to counteract this by providing *dershanes* (lighthouses; "sacred places") to serve as venues of vernacular rights of passage, schools that promote the abilities associated with self-criticism; and a "love jihad," defined as a holy war against violence. These youths are invited to "mutually fulfilling and responsible living," to living (instead of dying) for a cause, to live as "soldiers of spirituality" armed with "the Qur'an in one hand and reason in the other." The final product, according to Gulen, is *al-insan al-kamil* (the perfect person): a person willing to endure testing, submission (to God), devoted to self-criticism/humanity, and an example of peacefulness.

Zaynep Sahin (University of Southern California) discussed "Interfaith Dialogue Organizations of Actors of Peace." Stating that religion came

back to international relations in the early 2000s, she discussed the role that religion can play in bringing peace. Such a view differs radically from the traditional peacebuilding model, which is structured around conflict management, conflict resolution, and structural reform. A faith-based model, on the other hand, is comprised of promoting non-violence, transnational justice, interfaith dialogue, and education. She then presented her case study on the Rumi Forum.

Thomas Michel, S.J. (a Jesuit of the Indonesian Province; international visiting fellow, Woodstock Theological Center, Georgetown University) analyzed a new venture of the movement in his “Kimse Yok Mu: The Gulen Community’s Fight against Poverty.” Said Nursi, a major influence on Gulen, characterized humanity’s enemies as “Lord Ignorance, Sir Poverty, and Master Disunity.” The Gulen movement has been active in all of these spheres: in the 1980s its members fought ignorance by establishing schools, in the 1990s they tried to bring people and communities together, and in the 2000s they went after poverty (mainly in the sense of relief rather than of alleviation) in a spectacular fashion. Translated as “Doesn’t anybody care?” this program grew out of a 2002 television program of the same name. From a very modest beginning within Turkey, by 2007 the organization was active in thirty-seven Turkish cities and forty countries, from Peru to Indonesia and from Mongolia to Pakistan.

The final paper, New York lawyer Jerome Maryon’s “Globalization’s Challenge to Justice and Gulen’s Answer: Two Wings,” overwhelmed the audience. Stating that the West’s approach to humanity is based on division, he said that Gulen’s approach transcends divisions, thus sharing Tyler’s contention that Gulen is trying to replace “us” vs. “them” with “we.” In his words, Gulen’s genius lies in how much he has understood himself, for by so doing he has found most of the oversights of Islam and the West. When asked by an audience member, a biologist, about the value of these “nebulous” spiritual/religious terms as opposed to scientific facts, he replied to the effect that science asks “how,” whereas religion asks “why,” and that being fully human means to ask “why” – something that is at the core of Gulen’s life.

In his closing remarks, Michel summarized the conference by referring to Gulen in Biblical terms, “By their fruits you will know them” (Matthew 7:16), and cited his purity of intention, for, as the latter constantly says, everything he does is done for God.