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Fethullah Gülen's Contribution to Muslim-Christian Dialogue in the Context of Abrahamic Cooperation

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Introduction

Among contemporary Muslims, Fethullah Gülen may be one of the most interesting partners for Christians engaged in dialogue with Islam. Thomas Michel, who was one of the first Christian theologians to recognize Gülen's importance, argues that Gülen is more famous as an activist in the areas of education and public communication than as a thinker or a writer.¹ One may be expected, therefore, to encounter Gülen's followers in the practice of interreligious dialogue before reading his ideas on dialogue. This was what happened in my case as well.

Since my work as a Christian theologian at the Radboud University in Nijmegen, the Netherlands, involves engagement in dialogue with Muslims, I was happy to be invited – together with my wife who worked as a pastoral worker – to an *iftār* dinner by the local branch of the Islam and Dialogue Foundation in the Netherlands. In these days, a few months after Sept. 11, 2001, I was particularly interested in the hotly debated issues of the relation between religion and violence. When preparing a symposium on God and violence in the

¹ Thomas Michel s.j., "Turkish Experience For Muslim-Christian Dialogue. A Thinker: B.S. Nursi; An Activist: M.F. Gülen." In: *Travelling Together Beyond Dialogue: Peace and Dialogue in a Plural Society, Common Values and Responsibilities* (Melbourne: Australian Intercultural Society, 2002), pp. 33-40.

three Abrahamic religions,² my attention was drawn to what I consider to be an interesting contradiction in the self-representation of Islam by the Islam and Dialogue Foundation. On their web site, the Foundation presents its mission statement in rather irenic terms, stressing that violence and terror are out of place in Islam. In its printed public-relations brochure, however, the Foundation includes the following English quotation: “Loving affection and detesting hate are the most distinguishing qualities of a heart exuberant with faith”. In my opinion, this quotation expresses the true nature of faith in God and its ambiguous nature better than the somewhat idealistic mission statement. Although it is understandable that Muslims resort to apologetics in the Islamophobic atmosphere after Sept. 11, the statement that religion has nothing to do with violence simply does not do justice to the complicated relation between religion and violence. If I understand the quotation well, it says that religious persons will love everything that is good, but abhor everything that is bad. So there is a positive and a negative power in religion, and the important thing for human beings is how to transform this negative power into a constructive social force. I will not go into the details of the theological consequences, but concentrate on the source of the quotation. After some research, I found some similar quotations in the works of Fethullah Gülen, for instance: “The most distinctive feature of a soul overflowing with faith is to love all types of love that are expressed in deeds, and to feel enmity for all deeds in which enmity is expressed”.³ According to Gülen, the positive and the negative power cannot be put on a par. In an interesting exegesis of the verse, ‘do not take Jews and Christians as allies’ (Q. 5: 51), Gülen argues that this verse has to be explained according to the context. In some specific conditions, it may be necessary that Muslims do not cooperate with Jews and Christians; but in general, it is better to cooperate, as the Qur’ān says: ‘peace is good’ (Q. 4: 128).⁴ This is a hermeneutical rule that helps Gülen to avoid the extremes of an unrealistic irenism on the one hand, and a belligerent polemics on the other hand. Peace between human beings and religions should be promoted in all circumstances, unless justice is violated by some persons to such an extent that one has to treat enemies as enemies. While tolerance is an extremely important virtue that should always be promoted, one has to be realistic as well. While tolerance and forgiveness may be good at the individual level, the law may require mutuality

² Pim Valkenberg (red.), *God en geweld* (Budel: Damon, 2002).

³ Fethullah Gülen, *Advocate of Dialogue*. Compiled by Ali Ünal (translator) and Alphonse Williams (Fairfax VA: Fountain Publications, 2000), p. 198. See also www.fethullahgulen.org.

⁴ Fethullah Gülen, *Love and the Essence of Being Human*. Prepared for publication by Faruk Tuncer, translated by Mehmet Ünal, Nilüfer Korkmaz (Istanbul: Journalist and Writers Foundation, 2004), p. 167.

and justice.⁵ Sometimes, it may be good to turn the other cheek – a clear reference to Jesus’s saying according to Matthew 5: 39 – but at other times, one has to take care to establish balance in tolerance. To quote Gülen once more: “Being merciful to a cobra means being unjust to the people the cobra has bitten”.⁶

In my contribution to the conference *Turkey’s Fethullah Gülen: His Life and Works*, I propose to read one of Gülen’s most important writings on the dialogue between religions with this hermeneutical rule in mind. Since my reading is a Christian reading of Gülen’s texts, I will concentrate on his remarks on Muslim-Christian dialogue. In the end, however, I hope to make clear why and how Jews will have to be included in this dialogue as well.

The Necessity of Interfaith Dialogue

Unlike his spiritual father Said Nursi (1876-1960), Gülen is not particularly noted for his original thinking. In fact, the hermeneutical rule just mentioned has been derived from Said Nursi as well.⁷ It can be found in Nursi’s *Damascus sermon* and in some parts of his *Risale-i Nur* as well. The same holds true for the quotation on loving good deeds and detesting bad deeds, since in the same *Damascus sermon* from 1911, Said Nursi stated that “the thing most worthy of love is love, and that most deserving of enmity is enmity”.⁸

So, the most interesting thing about Gülen’s writings is not his originality, but the way in which he combines the wisdom of mystical and exegetical traditions of Islam with references to Western philosophers and theologians. Fethullah Gülen has written about dialogue many times, so much so that one of volumes in which his writings have been collected, is entitled *Advocate of Dialogue*.⁹ Among these writings, Gülen’s essay on ‘The Necessity of Interfaith Dialogue’ is of paramount importance, since it has been presented at the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1999 and has subsequently been published in English versions several times.¹⁰ The essay consists of five short parts, an introduction and a conclusion.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 207. Also, *Advocate of Dialogue*, p. 260.

⁷ For Nursi’s view on collaboration between Muslims and Christians, see his *Damascus Sermon* (Istanbul: Sözlür Neşriyat, 1996) p.35, and the fifteenth letter from his *Risale-i Nur* (Istanbul: Sözlür Neşriyat, 1997) p 78f. Also, Thomas Michel s.j., *Reflections on Said Nursi’s Views on Muslim-Christian Understanding* (Istanbul: Söz Basım Yayın, 2003) pp. 20-32).

⁸ Nursi, *Damascus sermon*, p. 49.

⁹ *Fethullah Gülen, Advocate of Dialogue*. Compiled by Ali Ünal (translator) and Alphonse Williams (Fairfax VA: Fountain Publications, 2000).

¹⁰ Original versions in *Turkish Daily News* of January 11-12, 2000, and in *The Fountain* of July to September, 2000. Somewhat different English translations have been published in *Advocate of Dialogue*, pp. 241-56 and in M. Fethullah Gülen, *Essays – Perspectives – Opinions*. Compiled by The Fountain (Rutherford N.J.: The Light,

In the introduction, Gülen argues that dialogue between Christians and Muslims is indispensable in view of the now prevailing materialist worldview. He points to a Muslim *hadith* that says that Jesus will return during the last days, which means that the central values of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as prophetic traditions will in the end prevail. It is interesting to note that this *hadith* is quoted by Said Nursi in his *Damascus sermon* as well: “... it is Islam that will be the true, and spiritual, ruler over the future, and only Islam that will lead mankind to happiness in this world and the next; and that true Christianity, stripping off superstition and corrupted belief, will be transformed into Islam; following the Qur’an, it will unite with Islam”.¹¹ While it is clear that Islam will be the most important eschatological power in the writings of Said Nursi, and that Christianity will only be able to cooperate with Islam if it cleanses itself from superstition, Islam and Christianity seem to be equal powers in Gülen’s reception of the *hadith*. Moreover, Jews are explicitly included as well. Gülen refers to the Jewish philosopher Michael Wyschogrod who argued – in a session of the Islamic Studies Group at the annual conference of the American Academy of Religion, New York 1979 - that Jews and Muslims have as many points in common as Jews and Christians.¹² Moreover, Gülen adds, Muslims have generally treated Jews quite fairly in history.¹³

Muslim Difficulties in Dialogue

After these introductory remarks, Gülen mentions four reasons why Muslims often have problems with dialogue. First of all, many Muslims were killed by Christians especially in the last century. Therefore, many Muslims tend to think that the West continues this systematic aggression with more subtle means, such as dialogue. As a Christian, I have heard this suspicion more often – not only from the side of Muslims and Jews, but also from the side of Hindus and Buddhists. In most cases, adherents of other religions are suspicious because they notice that dialogue is, for many Christians, still connected with missionary activities and the proclamation of the Gospel.¹⁴ They are right that this is somewhat peculiar,

2002), pp. 32-43. The essay was published separately as *The Necessity of Interfaith Dialog: a muslim perspective* in the series *Windows onto the faith* (Somerset N.J.: The Light) in May, 2004.

¹¹ Nursi, *Damascus sermon*, p. 35-6.

¹² See M. Wyschogrod, “Islām and Christianity in the Perspective of Judaism.” In Isma‘īl Rajī al Fārūqī (ed.). *Triologue of the Abrahamic Faiths*. Papers presented to the Islāmic Studies Group of the American Academy of Religion (Washington D.C.: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1402/1982), p. 16.

¹³ Gülen’s argument is corroborated in broad outline by Mark Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: the Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁴ See the document “Dialogue and Proclamation. Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ”. This joint declaration by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of People has been published in *Bulletin Pro Dialogo* 26 (1991) 210-50.

but on the other hand it is a consequence of the missionary character that Christianity has in common with Islam. It is my contention that Christian mission and Islamic *da'wa* are not so different at all, since both religions hope that the whole of humankind will accept what they see as the best guidance. In itself, there is nothing wrong with such forms of persuasion as long as one accepts it to be mutual persuasion. However, the mutuality is often jeopardized by differences in power. And this is the point where difficulties in dialogue between Christians and Muslims are greatest. Therefore, Gülen points to the lasting influence of colonialism on the one hand, and the desire to become independent from the West on the other. So, in my opinion, Muslim suspicions about Christian invitations to dialogue are primarily political in nature, not theological. When I travel to a Muslim country, for instance the Middle East, I notice that many people call me to account for Western politics, and the politics of the United States in particular.

While the first three reasons for Muslim suspicion about dialogue are of a political nature, the fourth reason is theological: the distorted image of Islam as a degeneration of religion, and of the Prophet as an imposter. At this point, I must confess that Christianity has been guilty of such distortions in most of its historical encounters with Islam. There is a horrible continuity between the Christian image of Islam as described by Norman Daniel in his *Islam and the West* and the cultural tradition of Orientalism described by Edward Said.¹⁵ The Christian theologian Yanah ibn Sarjun ibn Mansur, better known as St. John of Damascus, is an early and very influential exponent of this tradition. In the final chapter of his book on heresies, he introduces this new religion as a deceptive superstition and a forerunner of the Antichrist, and describes Muhammad as a false prophet.¹⁶ Since he had been educated at the Umayyad court in Damascus around 680 A.D., John knew quite well what he was talking about. However, he could only measure this new religious phenomenon by the central norm of his Christian tradition, and it is precisely because the Qur'ān contained traditions about Jesus Christ that John could deem them inadequate and therefore heretical. At that time, the new religion handed down by Muhammad was not yet known as Islam, and therefore John of Damascus uses three names that connect this religion with the stories about Abraham or Ibrahīm: Ishmaelites (children of Ishmael, the first son of Abraham), Hagarenes (children of Hagar, Ishmael's mother, but the Arabic may also mean 'those who have performed the

¹⁵ Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1993. Orig. 1960); Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995. Orig. 1978).

¹⁶ See Jean Damascène, *Écrits sur l'Islam. Présentation, commentaires et traduction par R. Le Coz* (Sources Chrétiennes, 383. Paris 1992). Also, Adelbert Davids and Pim Valkenberg, "John of Damascus: the Hersy of the Ishmaelites", in: Barbara Roggema, Marcel Poorthuis, Pim Valkenberg (eds.). *The Three Rings: Textual Studies in the Historical Dialogue of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), pp. 71-90.

hijra'), and finally Saracenes. This final name became the standard name for Muslims in the Middle Ages; John of Damascus associates it with 'those who were left destitute by Sarah, but again the Arabic probably has a different meaning: people coming from the East.¹⁷ The references to Abraham's children indicate that Christianity and Islam are two genetically related religions, together with Judaism. In such a relationship, the younger religion is able to give itself an identity by relating itself to older traditions. In theory – not always in fact – Islam recognizes the Scriptures of the Jews and Christians who are characterized therefore as *ahl al-kitāb*, people of the Book. At the same time, Islam claims to possess the true and unadulterated interpretation of these Scriptures. For the same reason but the other way round, the older religion finds it much more difficult to relate itself to its younger sister that pretends to have fulfilled its mission. If Christians think that Christ is God's final and unsurpassable revelation – in the same manner as Muslims think that the Qur'ān is God's final and unsurpassable revelation – they have great difficulty to recognize Muhammad as God's prophet and messenger because that would jeopardize their confession of Christ as God's final Word. This genetic relationship makes it understandable – though inexcusable – that Christians have given such a distorted picture of Islam and Prophet Muhammad in history,

Dialogue is a Must

After having mentioned these difficulties, Fethullah Gülen comes to the core point of his message: "Interfaith dialogue is a must today, and the first step in establishing it is forgetting the past, ignoring polemical arguments, and giving precedence to common points, which far outnumber polemical ones".¹⁸ At this point, Gülen does not explain his rather categorical statement that dialogue is necessary today. One may be inclined to think that he simply contrasts the polemical mentality of the past with the dialogical mentality of the present. This would, however, be a lopsided interpretation. A few pages later, Gülen will also argue that the Qur'ān urges Muslims to respect the followers of other religions and to accept former Prophets and their Books. So he will insist that an attitude of dialogue is not only required by modernity but also by the very source of Islam.

Gülen proceeds to indicate the method of dialogue: forgetting the arguments of the past, and concentrating on common points. Again, as a Christian theologian, I want to make a few remarks with respect to this method. First of all, I notice a convergence between the attitude of Fethullah Gülen and the attitude prescribed by the second Vatican Council which

¹⁷ See Davids & Valkenberg, pp. 79-80.

¹⁸ Gülen, *Advocate*, 244-5.

says, in its declaration *Nostra Aetate* on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions, with reference to Muslims in particular the following: “Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values”.¹⁹ Although Fethullah Gülen and the second Vatican Council agree on this point, I beg to disagree. Such appeals to ignore the differences runs the risk of narrowing interreligious dialogue down to a form of polite conversation that is not very helpful when religious violence determines the larger context of this dialogue. Focusing on common points may be an important strategy when mutual suspicions are still prevalent, but if dialogue is to change the mentality of the partners involved, a ‘reconciliation of memories’ has to take place. This phrase was coined in Christian ecumenical dialogue to indicate the necessity to consider historical dissensions in a new light, in order to be able to understand each other. In this sense, I would say that differences are important as well as common points to come to mutual understanding between Christians and Muslims. Meanwhile, the second Vatican Council seems to have a more specific common effort in mind: Christians and Muslims can easily agree on promoting common values such as peace and justice. I will come back to this method of stressing common points later on with reference to the possible Jewish contribution to dialogue between the Abrahamic religions.

In the next sentence of his text on the necessity of dialogue, Gülen refers to Abraham as well by quoting Louis Massignon, a French Islamicist and Christian scholar who referred to Islam as ‘The faith of Abraham revived with Muhammad’.²⁰ In this sense, by re-awakening the faith of Abraham, Islam can have a positive prophetic mission in the post-Christian world. Sidney Griffith, Gülen’s intermediary to Massignon, argues that Massignon’s ideas about the religious significance of Islam would radically alter the Christian views of Muslims if they would be accepted by most Christians.²¹ At this place, Gülen mentions several other Christian voices who support the call for dialogue with Muslims. He also mentions some stimulating texts from the second Vatican council and popes Paul VI and John Paul II. However, he does not mention the fact that the second Vatican Council seems to endorse Massignon’s plea for

¹⁹ *Nostra Aetate*, no. 3. Translation in: *Vatican Council II. The Basic Sixteen Documents*. A Completely Revised Translation in Inclusive Language, ed. Austin Flannery o.p. (Northport N.Y.: Costello Publishing – Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1996), p. 571-72.

²⁰ Gülen refers to an article by Sidney Griffith, “Sharing the Faith of Abraham; the ‘Credo’ of Louis Massignon”, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 8 (1997) 193-210. The quotation by Massignon can be found on p. 201.

²¹ Griffith, “Sharing the Faith of Abraham”, p. 198.

acknowledging Abraham as common father for Jews, Christians and Muslims in two very important texts. The first text is from *Lumen Gentium*, the dogmatic constitution on the Church that states, in a paragraph on the relationship between the Church and those who have not accepted the Gospel, that “the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, first among whom are the Moslems: they profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, who will judge humanity on the last day”.²² This is a text of enormous importance for Christian-Muslim dialogue since it clearly states that the faithful of both religions adore the same One God and Creator who will judge us all. It also seems to recognize the Muslim claim to be in continuity with the faith of Abraham. While Jews and Muslims converge in their claim to be the physical heirs of Abraham through Isaac and Ishmael respectively, Christians and Jews converge in their claim to be spiritual heirs of Abraham. The same recognition may be heard in the declaration *Nostra Aetate* quoted before: “The church has also a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to humanity. They endeavor to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God’s plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own”.²³ In this text, the Vatican Council recognizes the name *muslim* for people who submit themselves to God with reference to the faith of Abraham as someone who was “upright and devoted to God”, according to Abdel Haleem’s translation of the words *hanīf* and *muslim* in Qur’ān 3: 67.²⁴ The tendency of Christians and Muslims to take Abraham/Ibrāhīm as epitome of faith may facilitate interreligious dialogue between them; yet at the human level, taking Abraham as example is not without some serious problems as a careful reading of the stories concerning Abraham in the Hebrew scriptures shows. Apart from various forms of sexual violence and abuse of power in these stories, Abraham’s faith seems to imply the willingness the sacrifice a human being – a threat of terror that hovers about absolute submission to the will of God ever since.²⁵

Towards the end of his argument that Christians agree to give Islam a special prophetic mission in this time of secularization, Gülen mentions an interesting statement from Pope John Paul II who mentions Muslim prayer as an example for Christians, because,

²² *Lumen Gentium*, no. 16. Translation in *Vatican Council II. The Basic Sixteen Documents*, p. 21-22.

²³ *Nostra Aetate*, no. 3. Translation in *Vatican Council II. The Basic Sixteen Documents*, p. 571.

²⁴ *The Qur’an*. A new translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) p. 39.

²⁵ See, among others, Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); Yvonne Sherwood, “Binding – Unbinding: Divided Responses of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to the ‘Sacrifice’ of Abraham’s Beloved Son”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72: 821-61.

generally speaking, Muslims still worship in the best and most careful manner.²⁶ It is true that the previous Pope has expressed this opinion many times, not only with reference to prayer but also with reference to the fasting of Ramadān.²⁷ Gülen states that Christianity and Islam can learn from each other: the West has its technological and scientific supremacy, while Islam is supreme in its religious fervor. It is certainly true that Islam, precisely as religion of submissiveness to God, may be an incitement for Western people to remember their religious roots. In Dutch public debates, Islam already has this function, albeit in a negative vein. But in such a view, the West is identified with the secular world over against Islam as a religious power. I think that it may be possible to do more justice to the power of Christianity as a religious presence in the Western world on the basis of the very same idea of mutual exemplarity or – as I would prefer to call it – spiritual emulation. This idea may be particularly fruitful between Abrahamic religions, or – as the Qur’ān names them – the ‘People of the Book’. To these, Jews, Christians and Muslims, the Qur’ān says: “If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good.”(Q. 5:48). A Christian reading of this text²⁸ may connect it with St. Paul’s ideas about the ‘salvific jealousy’ between Jews and Gentiles to become acquainted with God’s mercy in Christ. This shows the relevance of differences between religions as a means to mutual incitement. Again, the life of Louis Massignon and his discovery of the meaning of Ibrāhīm in the world of Islam may serve as example here.²⁹ By ‘passing over’ to the world of Islam, Massignon discovered the value of his own Christian background so that it is legitimate to say that the encounter with Islam caused his ‘conversion’ to Christianity.³⁰ Although he does not use the words ‘spiritual emulation’, I am convinced that Fethullah Gülen would endorse this idea of using differences between religions as incitements to dialogue. In his life and his writings, he shows how Muslim sources can motivate one to engage in dialogue with other religions. For this to succeed, however, it is necessary that the other religion be acknowledged as a religion and not as a political system only. It is at this point that people from the West often go wrong in their approach to Islam, as

²⁶ Gülen refers to a book with interviews by Vittorio Messori, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. Its original edition, *Varcare la soglia della speranza*, has been published by Mondadori in Milano, 1994.

²⁷ See *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*, Byron L. Sherwin and Harold Kasmow, editors (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), pp. 58-69.

²⁸ For a first sketch, see Pim Valkenberg, “The Future of Religion: From Interreligious Dialogue to Multiple Religious Identity?”, *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 14 (2004): 95-107, here 104.

²⁹ Giulio Basetti-Sani, *Louis Massignon (1883-1962): Christian Ecumenist; Prophet of Interreligious Reconciliation*. Edited and translated by Allan Harris Cutler (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1974); Jean-Marie Gaudeul, *Encounters and Clashes: Islam and Christianity in History* (Rome: PISAI, 1984) vol. I, p. 336.

³⁰ Mary Louise Gude, *Louis Massignon: the Crucible of Compassion* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), p. 55.

Gülen remarks toward the end of this section. They see Islam as a political force, an ideology or a terrorist threat. In this context, an explicitly Christian approach to Islam may be of help.

Islam's Universal Call for Dialogue

In the third section, Gülen refers to the Qur'ān and its call to the People of the Book to come to common terms concerning the One God (Q. 3: 64). In the interpretation by Abdul Haleem: "Let us arrive at a statement that is common to us all: we worship God alone and ascribe no partner to Him". This is the basic Muslim call to dialogue. If the others do not accept it, they may go their own way, while Muslims remain faithful to their path. But these differences may not lead to disagreements, but rather to different way of confession the same God. In this respect, Gülen quotes from a vision by Said Nursi who, while praying the words "You alone do we worship and You alone we ask for help" (Q. 1:5) in the Bayezid Mosque in Istanbul, described three circles of congregations that together worshiped God.³¹ Within the first congregation, Muslims are brought together with others who affirm divine Unity. But God is praised by other creatures, human and non-human, as well. From this vision, Gülen concludes that Islam offers a broad path of salvation to the whole of humankind.

In the fourth section, "How to Interact with Followers of Other Religions", he stresses the common points between Islam and the People of the Book once again: the Qur'ān accepts former Prophets and their Books. Therefore, Muslims should not enjoy defeating others in discussing matters of faith. Gülen explains the important reminder to "argue only in the best way with the People of the Book" (Q. 29:46)³² as: discuss not except with means better (than mere disputation). I agree with Gülen – who borrows his interpretation from Said Nursi once again – that the words for debate and disputation, *jidāl* and *munāzara*, are often used negatively as signs of human ignorance in the Qur'ān.³³ But at the same time, I am convinced that the rules for debate formulated in the Qur'ān and in subsequent Muslim tradition may still be meaningful in determining the agenda of modern interreligious dialogues. One may think, for instance, about the rules for organizing court disputations or *majālis* between scholars with different religious background at the court in the Abbasid period.³⁴ Again, I would underscore the role of differences in interreligious dialogues between Abrahamic religions

³¹ The reference is to Said Nursi's 29th letter, first section, sixth point. English translation in Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Letters 1928-1932* (Istanbul: Sözlür Neşriyat, new ed. 2001), p. 461-3.

³² Translation according to the interpretation by Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, p. 255.

³³ See Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Debate and Disputation" in id. (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, vol. I (Leiden: Brill, 2001), p. 511-14.

³⁴ See *The Majlis. Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam*, edited by Hava Lazarus Yafeh, Mark R. Cohen, Sasson Somekh, Sidney H. Griffith (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1999).

somewhat more than Fethullah Gülen does. Therefore, I would say that debate and disputation may be meaningful contributions to interreligious dialogue provided that they be implemented “in the best possible way”, as the Qur’ān says. If we are prepared to learn from one another as means to intensify our faith instead of showing off against each other, we may come close to “mutual enrichment” or even “mutual transformation” as goal of interreligious dialogue.³⁵

Promoting Positive Values

In the final section of his contribution “the necessity of interfaith dialogue”, Gülen mentions four fundamental universal values that are sustained by religion and are therefore to be promoted in interreligious dialogue. It is a matter of fact that these four words: love, compassion, tolerance, and forgiving, may be very important subject-matters in dialogue between Christians and Muslims, because both traditions may offer some profound spiritual teachings with regard to these values. Moreover, it would be a good thing when Muslims and Christians together could promote these values as a basic ethic for the whole of humankind. But you will have noticed that I would like to complement this agenda for Christian-Muslim dialogue with some reflections that the differences between religions and the question of how to deal with these differences without violence. In other words. I would like to plea in favor of a contextual analysis in which the specific place and function of dialogue between two religions may be assessed properly.

My considerations on the importance of differences as an instrument for improving interreligious dialogue have been derived from my Jewish dialogue partners. Apart from the pervading influence of Emmanuel Lévinas and his insistence on the importance of the otherness of the religious other, pioneers in interreligious dialogue such as Jonathan Sacks and Jonathan Magonet have opened my eyes for the importance of differences.³⁶ More particularly, Alon Goshen-Gottstein has argued that Jews are quite often only implicated bystanders in Muslim-Christian dialogues on Abraham.³⁷ I have indicated some of the reasons for this before: apart from the fact that the contemporary use of the term ‘Abrahamic religions’ has begun in the context of dialogue between Christians and Muslims, Jews cannot identify with the stress on the faith of Abraham/Ibrāhīm in the same way as Muslims and

³⁵ See John B. Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

³⁶ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum, 2002); Jonathan Magonet, *Talking to the Other: Jewish Interfaith Dialogue with Christians and Muslims* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003).

³⁷ A. Goshen-Gottstein, “Abraham and ‘Abrahamic Religions’ in Contemporary Interreligious Discourse: Reflections of an Implicated Jewish Bystander”, *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 12 (2002), 165-83.

Christians. But if we want to remain true to this Abrahamic heritage, we cannot exclude Jewish voices from our Christian-Muslim dialogue, but should let them interrupt this dialogue, even if their voices are quite often disturbing. As Farid Esack has argued convincingly, Christian-Muslim dialogue may become a dialogue of the powers that be if it is not opened up to the broader vision that Said Nursi saw in the Bayezid Mosque.³⁸

But of course, dialogue between Christians and Jews may be a dialogue of the powers that be as well. A contextual analysis shows that, while Muslims may be inclined to stress common points both because their religion is so often connected with violence and other vices and because of their genetical place as youngest of the Abrahamic religions, Jews may be inclined to stress differences because of their minority position and because they belong to the oldest Abrahamic sister-religion. The situation of Christians is most peculiar, because they behave differently towards their Jewish ‘elder sisters’, with whom they would like to discuss common points, while Jews tend to find the differences more interesting. On the other hand, Christians always have felt the need to underscore the differences with Islam as their ‘younger sister’, while many Muslims rather like to discuss similarities. Moreover, Christians are often seen as not-so-religious citizens of the Western world where the real powers that be hide. Because of this global context in which the Christian partner in dialogue as a rule is the most powerful partner, it would be important to let the agenda of dialogue be determined by those who are not in power. For Christians in the West, this could mean that they stress common points in dialogue with Muslims and stress differences in dialogue with Jews. In this sense, Fethullah Gülen’s insistence on love, altruism, compassion, forgiveness and tolerance as the pillars of dialogue may be an excellent starting point for dialogue among Muslims and Christians in the broader context of Abrahamic religions.

³⁸ Farid Esack, *Qur’ān, Liberation and Pluralism: an Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1977), p. 258