

## **Turkish experience for Muslim-Christian dialogue** **A thinker: Said Nursi; An activist: M. Fethullah Gülen**

Thomas Michel, *Turkish Daily News* 20 November 2002

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- In contrast to the popular way in which many Muslims of his day looked at things, Said Nursi holds Muslims must not say that Christians are the enemy. Rather, Muslims and Christians have three common enemies that they have to face together: ignorance, poverty, dissension. In short, he sees the need for dialogue as arising from the challenges posed by secular society to Muslims and Christians and that dialogue should lead to a common stand favoring education, including ethical and spiritual formation to oppose the evil of ignorance
- Where Gülen most clearly answers the call of Said Nursi is by taking up the challenge to combat ignorance. There are now over 300 schools around the world inspired by the convictions of Mr. Gülen, set up, administered, and staffed by his circle of students and associates. The schools try to bring together educational objectives that are too often dispersed among various school systems. They seek to give a strong scientific grounding, together with character formation in nonmaterial values, which includes cultural, ethical, religious and spiritual training.

Dialogue is a much used - perhaps excessively used term in our times - but for Christians and Muslims, who make up the great majority of the participants at our conference, it refers to an important task of those who believe in and worship God and seek to do God's will in our societies. Dialogue does not simply mean talking to one another, but goes beyond talking to include listening to each other, studying problems together, working together for the good of all and, most of all, living together in peace and harmony. It involves an openness to those whose religious or ethnic group is different from our own; it means accepting them as they are, without feeling that we have to change them and make them like ourselves.

### **The roots of dialogue: Catholic Church**

In the Catholic Church, our commitment to engage in dialogue with Muslims goes back to the time of the Second Vatican Council in 1965. The Council is made up of the Catholic bishops from all over the world, together with the Pope, who presides over the Council, and is the most authoritative body in the Catholic Church. In one of its decrees, the document *Nostra aetate*, the Council speaks, for the first time in history of the Catholic Church, about Muslims. It calls on Catholics to have "respect and esteem" for Muslims and lists the many grounds for which this respect is due.

First and foremost is the fact that Muslims worship the One and only God, just as do Christians, and like Christians, Muslims seek to do God's will in all things. The document goes on to list prayer, almsgiving and fasting, three pillars of Islamic practice, as further reasons why Christians should respect Muslims. Finally, the statement concludes by acknowledging that in the course of history, Christians and Muslims have not always lived in peace, but have in various times and places engaged in enmity, conflict and at times even warfare. But it calls on both communities to move beyond the past to cooperate with each other in four key areas of modern life: in working for peace, liberty, social justice, and moral values.

This decree of the Second Vatican Council is important because it shows that for Catholics, having respect and esteem for Muslims is not simply the personal choice of a few individuals, an element of Christian faith which one can take or leave as one wishes, but is a part of how the Catholic Church understands what it means to be a Christian today. It should note that as a Catholic I am most knowledgeable about the roots of dialogue in the Catholic Church, there have been parallel developments in other Christian Churches, especially in the members of the World Council of Churches.

If there were no follow up, no genuine effort to build mutual understanding and cooperation with Muslims, one could claim that the statements of these Churches, like the decree *Nostra aetate*, were really only a kind of public relations, similar to the way that movie stars and other public figures will kiss and profess great affection for those whom they really dislike. But we can point to a tremendous development in the years since the Second Vatican Council. Our present pope, John Paul II, has met

with Muslims over 60 times, more than all previous Popes put together. For 13 years I worked at the Vatican's Council for Interreligious Dialogue as Head of the Office for relations with Muslims, and I can testify that the efforts of dialogue on the part of the Catholic Church have been sincere and real.

Dialogue needs two willing partners; otherwise, one would have a monologue. I will limit myself to pointing out, mainly to my fellow Christians, that Muslims have not always been in a passive state of waiting to be invited to dialogue, but have often taken the first initiative. In Yogyakarta, Indonesia, for example, where I have lived for many years, we had a very active faith-discussion group, at the initiative of Muslim colleagues in the Islamic colleges, already some years before the Second Vatican Council.

### **Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: a Muslim teacher who advocated dialogue**

I would like to illustrate my point by outlining the contributions to the idea and practice of Muslim-Christian dialogue made by two key individuals in recent Turkish history. Long before the Second Vatican Council, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1876-1960), one of the most influential Muslim thinkers of the 20th Century, advocated a dialogue between true Muslims and true Christians. The earliest statement of Said Nursi concerning the need for dialogue between Muslims and Christians dates from 1911, more than 50 years before the Council document, *Nostra aetate*.

Said Nursi was led to his view about the need for Muslim-Christian dialogue from his analysis of society in his day. He considered that the dominant challenge to faith in the modern age lay in the secular approach to life promoted by the West. He felt that modern secularism had two faces. On the one hand, there was communism that explicitly denied God's existence and consciously fought against the place of religion in society. On the other, there was the secularism of modern capitalist systems which did not deny God's existence, but simply ignored the question of God and promoted a consumerist, materialist way of life as if there were no God or as though God had no moral will for humankind. In both types of secular society, some individuals might make a personal, private choice to follow a religious path, but religion should have nothing to say about politics, economics or the organization of society.

Said Nursi held that in the situation of this modern world, religious believers - Christian as well as Muslim - face a similar struggle, that is, the challenge to lead a life of faith in which the purpose of human life is to worship God and to love others in obedience to God's will, and to lead this life of faith in a world whose political, economic and social spheres are often dominated either by a militant atheism, such as that of communism, or by a practical atheism, where God is simply ignored, forgotten, or considered irrelevant.

Said Nursi insists that the threat posed by modern secularism to a living faith in God is real and that believers must truly struggle to defend the centrality of God's will in everyday life, but he does not advocate violence to pursue this goal. He says that the most important need today is for the greatest struggle, the *jihad al-akbar* of which the Qur'an speaks. This is the interior effort to bring every aspect of one's life into submission to God's will. As he explained in his famous Damascus Sermon, one element of this greatest struggle is the necessity of acknowledging and overcoming one's own weaknesses and those of one's nation. Too often, he says, believers are tempted to blame their problems on others when the real fault lies in themselves - the dishonesty, corruption, hypocrisy and favoritism that characterize many so-called "religious" societies.

He further advocates the struggle of speech, *kalam*, what might be called a critical dialogue aimed at convincing others of the need to submit one's life to God's will. Where Said Nursi is far ahead of his time is that he foresees that in this struggle to carry on a critical dialogue with modern society Muslims should not act alone but must work together with those he calls "true Christians," in other words, Christians not in name only, but those who have interiorized the message which Christ brought, who practice their faith, and who are open and willing to cooperate with Muslims.

In contrast to the popular way in which many Muslims of his day looked at things, Said Nursi holds Muslims must not say that Christians are the enemy. Rather, Muslims and Christians have three common enemies that they have to face together: ignorance, poverty, dissension. In short, he sees the need for dialogue as arising from the challenges posed by secular society to Muslims and Christians and that dialogue should lead to a common stand favoring education, including ethical and spiritual formation to oppose the evil of ignorance, cooperation in development and welfare projects to oppose the evil of poverty, and efforts to unity and solidarity to oppose the enemy of dissension, factionalism, and polarization.

Said Nursi still hopes that before the end of time true Christianity will eventually be transformed into a form of Islam, but the differences that exist today between Islam and Christianity must not be considered obstacles to Muslim-Christian cooperation in facing the challenges of modern life. In fact, near the end of his life, in 1953, Said Nursi paid a visit in Istanbul to the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Orthodox Church to encourage Muslim-Christian dialogue. A few years earlier, in 1951, he sent a collection of his writings to Pope Pius XII, who acknowledged the gift with a handwritten note.

The particular talent of Said Nursi was his ability to interpret the Qur'anic teaching in a such way that it could be applied by modern Muslims to situations of modern life. His voluminous writings which have been gathered together into the *Risale-e-Nur* the Message of Light express the need for a revitalization of society by the practice of everyday virtues like labor, mutual assistance, self-awareness, and moderation in possessions and deportment.

### **M. Fethullah Gülen: a Muslim activist who practices dialogue**

How can the call to dialogue between believing Muslims and believing Christians be put into practice by the followers of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi? How can his directives to struggle together against the common enemies of ignorance, poverty and disunity be put into practice in a world which has continued to evolve in ways that are sometimes encouraging and in other ways that are quite disturbing? This is the challenge taken up by a contemporary Turkish activist, Muhammad Fethullah Gülen (1941- ). Gülen, affectionately called "Hoca Effendi" by his associates and students, never met Said Nursi and, while he speaks highly of Bediuzzaman and claims to have been greatly influenced by his writings, he denies being a "Nurcu" or follower of Said Nursi in any sectarian sense.

However, some scholars consider the movement associated with Gülen as one of the transformations that have occurred as Said Nursi's thought continues to be reinterpreted and applied anew in evolving historical and geographical situations. One scholar to study the movement Professor Hakan Yavuz, at present a visiting scholar at Notre Dame University in the U.S.A., notes that "Some Turkish Nurcus, such as Yeni Asya of Mehmet Kutlular and the Fethullah Gülen community, reimagined the movement as a 'Turkish Islam'." Another scholar, Dr. Ihsan Yilmaz concurs: "Nursi's discourse 'has already weathered major economic, political, and educational transformations'... Today, the Gülen movement is a manifestation of this phenomenon."

Where Gülen most clearly answers the call of Said Nursi is by taking up the challenge to combat ignorance. There are now over 300 schools around the world inspired by the convictions of Mr. Gülen, set up, administered, and staffed by his circle of students and associates. The schools try to bring together educational objectives that are too often dispersed among various school systems. They seek to give a strong scientific grounding, together with character formation in non-material values, which includes cultural, ethical, religious and spiritual training. In addition to the formal education carried out in schools, Fethullah Gülen's movement has pursued non-formal education through television and radio channels, newspapers and magazines, cultural and professional foundations.

Fethullah Gülen and his movement have also been active in the area of interreligious dialogue and peacemaking. Four years ago, Mr. Gülen traveled to Rome where he was met by Pope John Paul II. He has met the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Orthodox Church numerous times. His interreligious activities have gone beyond Muslim-Christian relations to include meetings with Jewish leaders at the national and international level. In connection with the Parliament of the World's Religions, held in Cape Town, South Africa, Mr. Gülen delivered a major address on the theme: "The Necessity of Interfaith Dialogue: a Muslim Approach."

Mr. Gülen's was one of the first Muslim voices heard in condemnation of the terrorist acts committed on 11 September 2001. Within 24 hours of the tragedy, Mr. Gülen wrote an open letter in which he stated: "What lies behind certain Muslim people or institutions that misunderstand Islam getting involved in terrorist attacks that occur throughout the world should be sought not in Islam, but within those people themselves, in their misinterpretations, and in other factors. Just as Islam is not a religion of terrorism, any Muslim who correctly understands Islam cannot be thought of as a terrorist."

As a Christian involved in working with Muslims and other religious believers for peace through interreligious dialogue, I am grateful for the insights of Said Nursi and for the leadership in this field provided by Fethullah Gülen.

Fr. Thomas Michel took vows in the Society of Jesus in 1971 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia and is a member of the Indonesian province of the Jesuits. After Arabic and Islamic studies in Egypt and Lebanon, he completed a doctoral dissertation on the thought of the 14th Century Muslim scholar Ibn 'Taymiyya and received a Ph.D. in Islamic Thought from the University of Chicago in 1978. Between 1978-1981, he taught at Sanata Dharma University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. In 1981, he was appointed to the Asia Desk of the Vatican Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and in 1988, he became Head of the Office for Islam in the same Vatican department. Between 1994-1996 he served as Executive Secretary of the Office for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences in Bangkok, Thailand. He is now Secretary of the Jesuit Secretariat for Interreligious Dialogue in Rome, Italy, and Ecumenical Secretary for the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences.

He has taught at North-Western and Colombia Universities in the U.S.A, at Sanata Dharma University and Driyarkara Institute of Philosophy in Indonesia, at St. Paul's Major Seminary, Dansalan College, and Euntes Asian Centre in the Philippines, at Ankara, Dokuz Eylul, Seljuk, and Harran Universities in Turkey, at the Pontifical Institute for Arabic/Islamic Studies in Rome, at St. Peter's Major Seminary in Malaysia, at St. Paul's Seminary in Albania, and at the University of Birmingham, in England. In 2000, he delivered the D'Arcy Lectures at Oxford University in Oxford, England, on Christian- Muslim relations.

Fr. Michel is on the Academic Council of the "Centre for Muslim-Christian Understanding" of Georgetown University, Washington, USA. He is on the International Advisory Board of the Khalidi Library, Jerusalem and the Editorial Board of the journal Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations in Birmingham, UK. He is on the International Advisory Panel of the International Movement for a Just World in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and the International Advisory Committee of the Centre for World Thanksgiving, Dallas, Texas, USA and on the Advisory Board of the Centre for Civilizational Dialogue at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.