

MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

Topic: Interfaith Dialogue in the Thought of M. Fethullah Gulen
Convener: Richard Penaskovic, Auburn University
Presenters: Pim Valkenberg, Loyola College of Maryland
Richard Penaskovic, Auburn University

In his presentation, "Seeking Common Ground in Muslim-Christian Dialogue: M. Fethullah Gulen and *A Common Word*," Pim Valkenberg began with a short biography of Gulen. He noted that Gulen was greatly influenced by the Qur'an and is a scholar in the tradition of Said Nursi. The way Nursi's students lived and learned together in *dershanes* or lighthouses served as a model for Gulen's educational initiatives throughout the world. The third significant influence on Gulen was the Sufi masters such as Jalaluddin Rumi and Yunus Emre. To some extent Gulen speaks more through his followers than through his words, which combine traditional Islamic wisdom with openness to central Western values.

Both Gulen and the 138 Muslim scholars (who wrote the declaration titled, *A Common Word Between Us and You*, in response to Pope Benedict XVI's Regensburg address in 2007), seek to establish common ground between Muslims and Christians. Valkenberg submits that the authors of *A Common Word* go beyond Gulen because they demonstrate that this "common word" is not only a negative principle as Gulen suggest, but also a positive principle in the Judaeo-Christian scriptures as well. Valkenberg raises the question whether common ground exists between Islam and Christianity as suggested by the phrases "People of the Book," or "Abrahamic religions." He concludes by noting that rather than speaking of common ground between Islam and Christianity it is more precise to note certain analogies between the two religions.

In "Interfaith relations in M. Fethullah Gulen," Richard Penaskovic emphasized the importance of tolerance, love, and dialogue in the thought of M. F. Gulen. Tolerance means to overlook the faults of others and to respect differences. Gulen would say that if others disagree with us, they have something to give us. If others provoke us, we should respond, not in kind, but with "gentle words." Gulen notes that dialogue means to engage in conversation with members of other religious traditions while simultaneously bonding with them in friendship. In the matter of interfaith relations Gulen argues that we must forget the past, ignore polemics, and focus on common points. There are some dangers involved in interfaith dialogue. Those who engage in such dialogue must be humble rather than adopting a superior attitude toward their dialogue partners. Gulen also writes that in interfaith dialogue we should avoid issues that separate us. Penaskovic questioned such an assertion noting that differing perspectives may be the result of linguistic differences rather than involving issues of real substance.

For example, Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologians saw justification as a major stumbling block to church unity yet after serious dialogue among theo-

logians from the two churches, no longer do so. One could ask if, *mutatis mutandis*, similar results may come from dialogue between Muslims and Christians on issues that seem, on first blush, to be intractable. What is the Muslim view in regard to religious pluralism? Most Muslims are exclusivists in the sense that they see Islam as true to a degree other religions are not. However, other Muslims such as most Shi'ites and the Sunni group, the Mu'tazilis, would say that Judaism and Christianity may be ways to salvation for their followers on the basis of the revealed and rational guidance to which their followers were exposed. Finally, some Muslim commentators, such as Ibn Kathir (d. 774/1373), note that Judaism and Christianity were salvific only before the time of the Prophet Muhammad, may his name be blessed, and the revelation known as the Qur'an.

Most of the discussion centered around Pope Benedict XVI's Regensburg address in 2007 when he said that "Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." The point of this controversial statement was this: religion and violence do not go together since spreading the faith through violence is unreasonable in that it is compatible neither with the nature of God, nor with the nature of the soul.

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