

Turkish Islam and the Secular State

The Gülen Movement

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M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito



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Fethullah Gülen

A Sufi in His Own Way

ZEKI SARITOPRAK

FETHULLAH GÜLEN is one of the most influential and impressive Muslim Turkish scholars of the last decades of the twentieth century. Despite this, no published work about him has studied his school of religious thought adequately. In this chapter, I explore his Sufism. After a preliminary introduction of Sufism, I focus specifically on Gülen's attitude toward Sufism and his own spirituality.

What Is Sufism?

There are many definitions of Sufism, as well as several theories regarding the origin of the term. Delving into the details of definitions and theories is beyond the scope of this chapter, but a brief look is possible. Some scholars say the term is derived from the Arabic word *suff*, which means "wool," but others say it is from *safā*, which means "purity." The latter seems to be more relevant to the context and aims of Sufism. The person who follows Sufism is called a Sufi. A well-known Sufi in North Africa, Ahmad al-Alawi, describes the essence of Sufism: "It is an Islamic way of transcending one's own soul, that is, of letting one's spirit rise above oneself. And it is where human self ends and the heavenly mysterious begins" (qtd. in Lings 1993, 34). In other words, Sufism means abandoning one's physical form in order to gain a spiritual nature. This transformation is expressed in the phrase "annihilation in God's presence." Through annihilation, one realizes oneself in God. The principle of annihilation has been formulated by a Nakşibendi sheikh as follows: "Four things are necessary in the Nakşibendi order: Abandoning the world, abandoning the hereafter, abandoning the body, and abandoning this 'abandoning'" (Nursi 1962, 511). It should be noted that

reaching this level is a long process for a Sufi. In his invocations, the poet Khawajah Abdulah Ansari illustrates fully the aim of the Sufi path:

The heart inquired of the soul
What is the beginning of the business?
What its end and what its fruit?
The soul answered:
The beginning of it is
The annihilation of self,
Its end faithfulness,
And its fruit immortality.

(Singh 1939, 42;
cited in S. H. Nasr 1991, 34)

Sufism is grounded in the powerful spiritual message of the Prophet of Islam. Even before the revelation of the Qur'an, the Prophet used to go to the cave of Hira and isolate himself from the worldly life in order to focus on his spirituality. Then, one day, the angel Gabriel appeared unto him. This was the spark of the Prophet's long spiritual journey. The revelation of the Qur'an came verse by verse and encouraged the Prophet and his companions to follow a spiritual path of life. The freshness of God's words dominated their spirits. They commenced a profound glorification of God's names. Starting from the very beginning of its revelation, the Qur'an has been promoting and encouraging piety and purification of the heart. The Qur'anic concordance records 133 different variations of the term *qalb* (heart; Turkish: *kalp*). For example, it describes the Prophet Abraham as one who had a "peaceful" heart (37:84). However, it describes others with the phrase, "There is a sickness in their hearts" (2:7). Sickness and peacefulness are not physical traits here, but rather spiritual attributes. Hundreds of verses in the Qur'an deal with similar issues. For instance, the Qur'an posits a different kind of seeing and hearing. Describing nonbelievers, it says, "they have eyes, but they don't see, and they have ears, but they don't hear" (7:179). It also recounts the Prophet's experience with the unseen or the invisible world, one that average humans cannot see—that is, the realm of angels. A clear example of movement in this unseen world is the Prophet's mysterious night journey, which is mentioned briefly in the Qur'an and treated more extensively in the hadith. The Qur'an states simply that the Prophet took a night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem. According to the hadith, the Prophet ascended from Jerusalem to the heavens, accompanied by the archangel Gabriel, and finally met God in the realm of the unseen. The Qur'an calls the level that the Prophet

reached *kalb qansayn* (the space between two eyebrows, 51:23), where the physical world separates from the eternal one.¹ Sufis frequently use this term to indicate their closeness to God. Through his ascension, the Prophet opened a way for Muslims to the world of the unseen, *alam al-ghayb*. The Prophet brought back with him from this world the gift of the five daily prayers for his community. This story indicates that believers, through prayers, are able to follow the path of spirituality taken by the Prophet. The Prophet said, "the servant's nearest position to God is when he is in prostration."

The Qur'an emphasizes that this worldly life is a deceptive toy and that the real life is that of the hereafter: "This worldly life is but a test of time and a game. Lo, the home of the hereafter—that is life, if they but knew" (29:64). The Prophet asked his followers to be ascetics, saying, "Be in this world as a stranger or as a passer-by." He asks them to purify their hearts in order to reach the level of perfection. In the hadith, when Gabriel asks the Prophet about *ihsan* (perfection), the Prophet replies: "Pray to God as if you see Him; although you don't see Him, He sees you." The term *ihsan* later became one of the key terms of Sufism.

The generation of believers who came after the Prophet explored the areas of Qur'anic spirituality and asceticism that constituted a paradigm for later Sufis. They borrowed key terms from the Qur'an, which they applied to their spiritual experience and teachings. Terms such as *qalb* (heart), *tauba* (repentance), *khauf* (fear of God), *baqa* (abiding), *barakah* (blessing), *rida* (contentment), *dhikr* (remembrance of God), *haqq* (the truth), *rja* (hope), *ikhlas* (sincerity), *ma'rif* (mystical knowledge), *sabr* (patience), *qurb* (nearness to God), *tauakkul* (trust), and *yaqin* (certainty) constitute the heart of the Sufi tradition. At the same time, the later Sufis borrowed negative terms from the Qur'an to describe the temptations with which they struggled, terms such as *nafs* (ego-self), *ghafis* (ritual lapse), *rja* (self-display), and *shirk* (associationism).

Early Sufis—such as Hasan al-Basri (d. 728), the famous woman saint Rabi'a al-Adawiyya (d. 801), Harith al-Muhasibi (d. 857), Abu Nazid al-Bisami (d. 874), and Junayd al-Baghdadi (d. 910)—used the terms of the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet in their teachings and practices. They developed a spiritual basis for the later institutionalization of Sufism. The process of articulation began with Al-Qushayri (d. 1074) in his *Risala* (Treatise). Firdausdin Attar (d. 1230) and his contemporaries Ibn al-Arabi (d. 1240) and Jalalu'ddin Rumi (d. 1273) further

1. On Ibn Hisham's account of this event, see Cells 1996, 54–55.

2. For example, in discussing the term *nafs* and how humans can take refuge from its inclinations, al-Muhasibi refers to the famous verse from the Qur'an in sura al-Yousef (12:53). This verse later became the foundation for the Sufi understanding of the term. See Cells 1996, 176–79.

articulated Sufi thinking in the early period.³ The Sufi tradition became a way of life that Sufis practiced even in the public sphere. Even before the institutionalization of Sufism, people began to call those who followed the path of certain saints after the names of these saints. In the second phase of its development, innovations and practices such as dance and music (especially that elaborated by Rumi) penetrated into Sufism and caused the ulema to take a stand against it. Therefore, a debate ensued among the scholars of Islamic law (shariah) and the practitioners of Sufism.

One arguably can say that by the thirteenth century Sufism was a reaction to the formalism of the ulema, whom Sufis called the *ulama-i zahir* (scholars of the outward), meaning they judged external actions. Similarly, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that he had come to breathe spirituality and soul into Hebrew law in order to retain the spirit of the law (Matt. 5–8). One can say that Sufism was to Islamic law what Jesus was to Hebrew law. In time, some Sufis went too far, underestimating and even neglecting some basic religious law, which resulted in the emergence of extreme, esoteric movements. The debate continues between fundamentalist Wahhabi Muslims and Sufis even today.

This period also marked the establishment of the major Sufi orders—namely, the Nakşibendi, Qadiri, Chisty, Suhrawardi, and Shadhili orders.⁴ Scholars believe that the most influential Sufi order is the Nakşibendi, named after the famous fourteenth-century Sufi Bahauddin Nakşibend (d. 1389). Many branches of this order remained powerful in India, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵

Initiation into the Nakşibendi Sufi order continues to follow traditions developed several generations ago.⁶ It may be useful to review this initiation rite, which is similar to that practiced in other orders. When a person intends to become a member of the Nakşibendi order, first he visits the sheikh (master). He takes his sheikh's hands, kisses them, and then the master takes the novice's hands, reciting formula words calling for the repentance of all the sins the novice has committed in his life. The novice repeats the words and promises never to make the same mistakes again. He then accepts the master as his spiritual guide, verbally promising that he will be a member of the order from that

3. Some ideas in Sufism suggest the influence of Jewish and Christian tradition, Gnosticism, neoplatonism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism. See Poitella 1963.

4. See Shah 1966, 126–27. On the Shadhili order, also see Lings 1993, 57.

5. On the influence of Khalidiyya branch of the Nakşibendi order, see Hakim 1990. For a brief history of the Nakşibendi order, see Algar 1990.

6. The account here is based on the author's interview with a novice who was initiated into the Nakşibendi order in southeast Turkey, 30 April 1994.

moment on. After this ceremony, he leaves the master and takes a shower, symbolizing the cleansing away of spiritual dirt. On the next day, the novice tells the master what, if anything, he saw in his dreams. Then, according to the novice's capacity, the master gives him some spiritual duties, such as reciting the name of God, "Allah," five thousand times a day. The sheikh increases this number up to one hundred thousand in accordance with the novice's ability. If the novice continues to manage what the master asks, depending on his spiritual level, the sheikh may choose him as his successor, or *khalifa*, in certain regions. Then the "novice" may become a prominent Sufi and his fame may surpass that of his master. In short, this is the way a person comes to be a Sufi.

As mentioned, the early Sufis had neither orders nor formal organizations. For example, famous Sufis such as Rabia, Junayd, Muhasibi, Bishr, al-Ghazzali, Feriduddin Attar, and even Rumi did not belong to a *tarikat*. From the perspective of institutionalized Sufism, their Sufism might be problematic because none of them had a spiritual master. In the Sufi tradition, he who has no a sheikh finds Satan as his sheikh. However, current Sufis consider this general principle as nonapplicable to the earliest Sufis, and no member of any Sufi order would claim, for example, that Junayd's sheikh was Satan. These early Sufis, who were not attached to any specific order but practiced and even elaborated the principles of Sufism, simply constitute a different category of Sufism. Hujwiri, an eleventh-century Sufi of Lahore (in modern Pakistan), considered the Prophet's companions and their successors as real Sufis. He wrote: "In the time of the companions of the Prophet and their successors this name [Sufi] did not exist, but the reality thereof was in everyone; now [meaning his time] the name exists, but not the reality."⁷ This statement by one of the great Sufis in history indicates that the reality of Sufi thought and practice is much more important than the name Sufism. In fact, Islamic history is replete with Sufi practitioners who did not belong to any Sufi orders. A famous twentieth-century example is Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (d. 1960), the Islamic scholar in Turkey, whom many perceive as Fethullah Gülen's predecessor.

Gülen's Doctrinal Sufism

The basic sources of Gülen's Sufism are the Qur'an, the Prophet's words, and the various Sufi texts, specifically Nursi's seminal work, the *Risale-i Nur* (The epistles of light). We may consider the latter text as the warp on which Gülen has woven his ideas. Basing himself on Junayd, Shibli (d. 946), and other early Sufis,

⁷ From Reynold A. Nicholson's translation of *Kashf al-Maqbur* and cited in Lings 1993, 34.

Gülen defines a Sufi's way as "the path followed by an individual who, having been able to free himself or herself from human vices and weaknesses in order to acquire angelic qualities and [conducting himself in a manner] pleasing to God, lives in accordance with the requirements of God's knowledge and love and in the resulting spiritual delight that ensues" (1999c, xiv).

In his definition, Gülen focuses on a path by which one can overcome weaknesses by oneself rather than with a guide. The individual must live in accordance with the requirements of the Qur'an and follow the example of the Prophet. Therefore, a Sufi's path must accord with the teachings of the Qur'an and with the sunna of the Prophet. All Sufi practices have to be measured by these criteria. According to Gülen, in order to purify one's heart, "strict observance of all religious obligations, an austere lifestyle, and renunciation of carnal desires [are] required" (1999c, xv).

Gülen divides Sufis into two categories: "Those who stress knowledge and seek to reach their destination through knowledge of God (*ma'rifa*), and those who follow the path of yearning, spiritual ecstasy, and spiritual discovery" (1999c, xxv). In his interpretation, he favors the first group of Sufis. I would argue that the first category also is divided into two subcategories: those who are attached to a Sufi order and those who are not. For example, al-Ghazzali was a Sufi and simultaneously a scholar of Islamic law, but he did not belong to any Sufi order.

Gülen does not differentiate between Sufism and Islamic law (*shariah*). They are like two departments in a university, each seeking to teach their students the two dimensions of Islam so that the students can practice them in their lives. These two departments are not in opposition; rather, they complement each other. One teaches how to pray, how to fast, and how to give charity, while the other concentrates on what these actions really mean. Sufism in particular teaches how to make worship an inseparable part of one's life and ultimately how to elevate oneself to the rank of a universal and perfect being (*al-insan al-kamil*) (Gülen 1999c, xix-xxx). Sufism helps a novice to gain a deeper understanding of Islamic law (Gülen 1999c, xix). For Gülen, "Sufism is the spirit of Islam" (1998g, 24-27).

Gülen uses Sufi terminology, adding his own understanding by means of a thorough analysis of the technical terms. In his book *Sufism*, he interprets fifty key words of the Sufi path, and his interpretations are consistent with the path of early Sufis such as al-Muhasibi and especially al-Ghazzali. In the case of some terms, it appears that Gülen has elaborated on Nursi's understanding of them. For example, in his interpretation of the term *tawadu* (humility), Gülen quotes from the Qur'an, the hadith, and specific Sufis—particularly from Nursi. The

Qur'anic verse he quotes says: "The servants of the All-merciful are those who walk on the earth in modesty, and if the impudent offend them, they continue their way saying 'peace'" (25:63). After elaborating on the verse, he gives an example from the Prophet's hadith that says: "Whoever is humble, God exalts him; whoever is haughty, God humiliates him."⁸ To support his approach further, he also quotes from Muhammed Lurî Efendi, who said about humility, "Everybody else is good, but I am bad," and from Nursî, who said, "Do not see anything or anybody else other than God as so much greater than you as to deserve adoration or servanthood. Do not boast of yourself in a way to see yourself as greater than another." Finally, Gülen describes humility in his own terms: "Humility is the portal to good conduct or being characterized by the qualities of God (such as generosity, mercy, helpfulness, forgiveness, and so on), it is also the first and foremost means of being near to both the created and the Creator. Roses grow on the earth, and humanity was created on the earth and not in the heavens" (1999c, 76–80). As this example illustrates, Gülen's writings on Sufi concepts share the same features of the early Sufis' work.

In order to examine his concept of Sufism more thoroughly, we can look at how Gülen has elucidated other Sufi terms such as *tauba* (repentance), *zihd* (resistance against desire), *muhasaba* (questioning oneself), *zafakeur* (meditation), *sayr ila Allah* (journey to God), *hudur* (divine presence), *qalb* (heart), and *ihsan* (perfection).⁹ According to Gülen, the first step in the Sufi path is *tauba*, or repentance, a Qur'anic command. His definition of this term is larger than the traditional Sufi one. In the traditional understanding, repentance is done by words. However, Gülen adds repentance in motion, in thought, in imagination, and with regard to behavior committed against the will of God (1997e, 14). He is quite explicit in this matter, dividing repentance into three levels, a division also found in early Sufi thought. The first stage is the *tauba* of common people. The second stage is *inaba*. If *tauba* is the journey to God, *inaba* is a journey in God. The third stage is *arba*, which is a journey from God. In other words, *tauba* is refuge in God; *inaba* is annihilation in God in order to maintain the spiritual levels that one has attained; and *arba* is to be closed to everything except God.¹⁰

Resistance against bodily and mental desires is called *zihd* in the Sufi tradition. According to Gülen, *zihd* is an important moral value. It always has had an important place in Islamic Sufism since the Prophet Muhammad and his life de-

8. The hadith mentioned is in the collection of al-Haythami, *Majma' al-jaw'id*, 10: 325.

9. I rely on the Turkish version here, but refer to the English translation as well.

10. For the origin of these stages in the Qur'an, Gülen refers to verses 24:31, 39:54, 38:44, and 50:33.

fined its meaning and spirit. *Zühd* should be a significant virtue of every Muslim, especially in this present age of materialism, when it can be very difficult to resist the lures of reputation, money, career, and so on. Yet the principle of *zühhd*, an ascetic way of life, requires this resistance. In a softened tone, Gülen says, "The first step in asceticism [*zühhd*] is the intention to avoid what has been forbidden (*haram*) and to engage only in what has been allowed. The second and final step is being extremely careful even when engaging in what is allowed (*halal*)" (1999c, 42).

Gülen believes that one who follows the path of Islamic spirituality—which all Muslims are supposed to do—must question oneself every day and even every moment, comparing one's good deeds to one's bad deeds. Gülen calls this *muhasaba-i nafs*, a term that basically is grounded in the Prophet's saying, "O people, question yourselves, before being questioned." In essence, one must discover oneself within one's inner depths. On this matter, Gülen completely reflects al-Ghazzali's ideas about self-knowledge, as expressed in his *Kimya-i Saadat* (The alchemy of happiness) (al-Ghazzali 1991, 5–15). Self-knowledge is the key to knowledge of God: "He who knows himself knows God."

On the subject of questioning oneself, Gülen refers to a verse in the Qur'an: "Verily those show piety, who when a phantom from Satan touches them, recollect themselves, and, lo, they see clearly" (7:201). Accordingly, they are always alert to the satanic phantoms. Gülen describes this self-questioning as the presence of an inner preacher who distinguishes between good and bad. He also refers to the tradition of the Prophet that says, "If you only knew what I knew, you would laugh a little and weep much" (Al-Bukhari, al-Kusuf, 2). The people who are aware of this Sufi way always think of the Qur'anic verse "To God belongs all that is in the heavens and on Earth. Whether you show what is in your minds or conceal it, God calls you to account for it" (2:284). Gülen says: "While it is difficult for everyone to achieve this degree of self-criticism, it is also difficult for those who do not do so to live today better than yesterday, and tomorrow better than today" (1999c, 9). In other words, Gülen wants to emphasize that whoever does not question himself or herself will make no progress, and his or her future will not be better than the present.

In Gülen's opinion, meditation is the light of the heart, the sustenance of the spirit, and the spirit of knowledge. He likens meditation to lifeblood, in accordance with Islam. For those who have this sense of meditation, the universe is a book to be read; it does not require a specific time and space or a definite position. The Qur'anic verse on meditation refers to those people who contemplate, mentioning their specific postures: "those who celebrate the praises of God,

standing, sitting, and lying down on their sides, and contemplate the wonder of creation in the heavens and the earth" (2:191).

Gülen defines the Sufi term *sirr*, the spiritual journey, as "a journey from creature to Creator"—in other words, from shadow to reality and from a single drop to the ocean of His mercy. The verse "Hasten you then to God" (51:50) constitutes and shapes the idea of the Sufi journey. The term *hudur* (divine presence), for Gülen, means the feeling of being with God, of being filled with Him, and of finding Him in one's conscience. By continuously maintaining this feeling, one comes into His light. Although the feeling of divine presence emanates from God, Gülen says it changes according to one's personal level and abilities. He views attaining the higher level of *hudur* as having spiritual taste (1995a, 25).

As mentioned earlier, *qalb*, or "heart," is the most distinguished term in Sufism, and it is of paramount importance in Gülen's teaching. Anyone even slightly familiar with Sufi tradition knows the importance of *qalb*. By this term, Gülen does not mean the physical organ of the human body, but the spiritual one, the heart that is the place of faith and the mirror of God. He articulates the matter of heart in his writings through examples from Qur'anic verses, prophetic traditions, other prophets mentioned in the Qur'an, and previous Sufis such as Rumi. In fact, the Turkish title of his book on Sufism is *Kalbin Zümrüt Tepeleri*. (The emerald hills of the heart) (Gülen 1997e).

According to Gülen, *qalb* is a subtle and divine essence that Sufis call "the reality of humanity." The spirit is the ineffable essence of the divine, and the biological soul is its vessel. *Qalb* is a central feature of Sufi teaching in accordance with the Prophet's saying, "God does not look at your appearance, but He looks at your heart" (Muslim, Birr, 33). The heart is the fortress of reason, science, intention, faith, wisdom, and knowledge of and proximity to God. The life of these vital senses is connected to the life of the heart: if the heart is alive, then these others are alive and vice versa. Gülen quotes the prophetic tradition on this point: "Oh, there is a part in the body that, when it becomes good, the whole body becomes good, and when it becomes bad, the whole body becomes bad. Oh, that part is the heart" (Al-Bukhari, Iman, 39). Hence, just like Ahmad Sirhindi, the founder of Mujaddidi Nakshibendi *tariqa*, Gülen holds that the miracles and mysteries of the Sufi path are considered toys of the path. Real Sufis do not ordain such miracles as their target.

It is true that the aim of all Sufi practices is to reach the level of *insan*, of being a perfect human. Gülen holds that love is the vital condition of perfection. If there is no love, there is no perfection. Souls without love cannot be elevated to the horizon of human perfection. Even if such people live hundreds of years, they can make no advance on the path of perfection. Those who are deprived of

love become entangled in the nets of selfishness, are unable to love anyone else, and die unaware of the love deeply implanted in the very being of existence.¹¹ These several examples of Gülen's approaches to the Sufi terms are explicated in his books on Sufi concepts.¹²

In the Qur'an, there is an emphasis on the paramount importance of certainty in faith. Believers are encouraged to have certainty in their belief in the hereafter (2:3–4). In further expressing this idea, Gülen states that certain steps are necessary to reach that level of certainty: above all, the believer has to surrender to God and pray sincerely to Him.¹³ Gülen describes eleven principles as pertaining to this process:¹⁴

reaching true belief in God's divine Oneness and living in accordance with his demands;

listening to the word of God and comprehending His power and His will in the physical world (the law of creation);

overflowing with divine love of the truth and seeing the universe as a "cradle of brotherhood";

acting in accordance with the idea of preference, *ihlas*—that is, putting others' needs before one's own;

giving priority to the will of God and realizing that through annihilation one can never be separated from God;

being able to discern what is in hearts or minds through facial expressions, the inner, divine mysteries, and the meanings of surface events;

being open to love, spiritual yearning, delight, and ecstasy (*radjd*);

visiting those places that remind one of the eternal life and intending holy migration (*hijra*);

being content with permitted pleasure and not transgressing against the will of God;

struggling continuously against the desires longing of worldly life and being constantly aware that it is transient.

11. On Gülen's teachings about love, see Ünal and Williams 2000, 362–34.

12. In addition to his work *Suñm*, Gülen 1999c. Gülen addresses the subject further in Gülen 1996a, 1996d, 2000c, and 2000d.

13. Gülen says it is unfortunate that many are led away from spirituality by the influence of positivism and thus are deprived of the fruits of Suñism. Those who do not believe in the spiritual life and its results will not be able to reach certainty.

14. Hazrat Inayat Khan, a contemporary Pakistani Sufi, condenses the teachings of Suñism into ten principles, each focusing on a different dimension of Suñism; see "The Sufi Message of Hazrat Inayat Khan, Part 1, ch. 1," cited in Politella 1963.

remembering that there is no salvation without certainty (*yaqin*), sincerity (*ikhlas*),¹⁵ and contentment (*rida*)

It must be noted that the concept of *wahdat al-wujud*—the notion that there is no being but His being, formulated as the doctrine of ontological monism—engendered a bitter debate between Sufis and the ulema, especially the scholars in the school of thought founded by Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). Gülen's discourse on the subject in his book *İsmi Getirdiği Tereddütler* (Gülen 1998b, 47–60) deserves attention. Referring to Qur'anic verses and prophetic traditions, Gülen accepts that there are some verses that apparently deny the function of human will (8:16, 48:10) and identify God with humans. In the tradition of "My servant becomes so much close to me until I become his eyes, his ears, his hands, and his feet," Gülen delicately distinguishes the difference between the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud* and pantheism. He argues that the first is a joyful spiritual experience, whereas the second is a mere philosophical theory. In general, he favors the creed of the majority of Sunni scholars that creatures are the signs of the existence of God; therefore, one has to accept the physical realities. The particles of the world cannot be parts of God; because the Qur'an mentions creatures as signs of the existence of God, one must accept the reality of things. Also, there will be an end for everything, so we have to ask, "How can something unreal come to an end?" The eternity of matter is not accepted by consensus (Gülen 1998b, 47–60). Accordingly, Gülen believes that the idea of oneness of being has some Qur'anic and prophetic references; however, those references should not be taken literally. What prominent Sufis such as Ibn al-Arabi and Rumi wrote on the doctrine are the result of their spiritual observations and little understood by those who have not reached that level of spirituality.

The Practical Aspect of Gülen's Sufism

Gülen's way of practicing Sufism is different from that of the Sufi orders. As a devout, celibate¹⁶ person, his life is very simple. He prays five daily prayers, almost without exception, with the congregation and with his followers. Although

15. Gülen criticizes those who pray to God to get a reward of paradise, quoting from Junayd, who says, "They are the servants of Paradise, but not God." "Therefore," Gülen says, "Pleasing God must be the only aim of prayer. One should not pray to God for the sake of paradise, or for the fear of hell" (1998b, 82).

16. Regarding his predecessor's celibacy, Gülen describes how when Nursi was asked whether he ever had thought of marriage, he gave an interesting answer: "The suffering of the Islamic community is more than enough. I haven't found a time to think of myself" (Gülen 1995b, 140).

Sufis are concerned about prayers, in many cases litanies (*awrad*) come before prayer. For Gülen, prayer is the most important part of his life. He wakes up very early and reads his *shikr* or *awrad*. Because he knows the Qur'an by heart, for him a devotion to constant recitation of the Qur'an is significant. Therefore, he recites and asks his followers and his community to recite. Supplication to and recitation of the Qur'an and application of the verses in his own life have influenced both his interpretation of those verses and his approaches to a variety of faiths. This fact sets him apart from other Sufis. For example, he believes that dialogue is Qur'anic teaching. Accordingly, he seeks to establish good relations with scholars and spiritual leaders of diverse religious groups.¹⁷ To a certain extent, he follows Rumi in pursuing the path of love, opening his arms to people of all religions.

Some Sufis cite this attitude to justify their criticism of Gülen. They think he has no spiritual master. They also criticize him for abandoning the sunna of the Prophet, for not growing a beard, and for not getting married. Gülen, however, believes that having a master is not necessary and that the master does not have to be human. For him, the Qur'an is a superior master and guide. He holds that the way of contemplation is drawn from the Qur'an, and it is not necessary to be confined by a specific Sufi order. Abu Ubayda, one of the prominent companions of the Prophet, is famous for a saying that fully illustrates Gülen's contemplative way: "I have never looked at a single thing without God being nearer to me than it."¹⁸ In this teaching, everything from atoms to stars reflects God according to its level.

It might be useful to picture a day in Gülen's life, a life surrounded by four walls. As mentioned, he wakes up very early, reads his litanies, recites his regular daily Qur'anic reading, performs the morning prayer, and then recites his *awrad*. After having breakfast, he speaks to his students or visitors for half an hour. He responds to questions or discusses religious topics. He then edits his books and articles. He takes a nap before noon and then performs noon prayer. After lunch, he again talks to the people around him and recites some of his daily *awrad* until the afternoon prayer, *asr*. He performs the *asr* prayer and recites and reads some of his regular *awrad*; then, following his doctor's instruction, he uses an exercise bicycle. He performs the *maghrib* prayer. After dinner, he responds to

17. He has met with Pope John Paul II; Leon Levy, former chairman of the Conference of Presidents of U.S. Jewish Organizations; Abraham Foxman, executive director of the (Jewish) Anti-Defamation League; and other spiritual leaders.

18. Quoted from Arberry's translation of al-Kharraz, *Book of Truthfulness*, and cited in Lings 1993, 129.

questions and reads. Finally, after performing the evening prayer, he goes to bed, to wake up for night prayer, *tahajjud*. He sleeps for only a short time. One might say that Gülen's life is filled with three things: prayer, recitation, and reading. His life is full of the awareness of God. Just as Jesus said, "My kingdom is not in this world," Gülen believes that the reason why humankind comes to this world is to prepare for the hereafter, where God has prepared for his servants something "no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no heart can conceive."

Gülen never calls himself a Sūfī. One is not a Sūfī in name, but rather in spirit and heart. As Rumi asks, "What Makes the Sūfī? Purity of heart, not the patched mantle and the perverse lust of those earth-bound men who steal his name. He in all things discerns the pure essence."¹⁹ In short, Gülen understands that one may annihilate oneself in the rays of the existence of the Truth through knowing one's own impotence, poverty, and nothingness.

The Gülen Community

If Gülen does not promote any Sūfī order, then what should one call his gathering of followers? What keeps this large community together?²⁰ This question has been the source of some confusion and controversy. The Turkish media, in general, call Gülen's community a Sūfī order, perhaps intentionally because Sufi orders are prohibited by law in Turkey. The most appropriate term seems to be *Gülen community*. In this community, there is no registration or membership, no verbal promise. The community has an inclusive character, which reflects diversity. The supporters of the community are a diverse group from Jewish businessmen to the *mijlā*.²¹

The ties that bind the people of Gülen's community differ from those of the Sūfī orders. Sūfīs share a sheikh and an order. The people of the Gülen community share the same values and understand that these values are conveyed via modern mass communications—books, cassettes, journals, and educational institutions. Nursi's interpretations of the Qur'an and Gülen's writings and video-cassettes comprise the main sources of the community's teachings.²² These teachings and the Qur'an constitute the main connective links between individ-

19. Rumi 1990, 24, verse 355–60, cited in Polite's 1963.

20. There are no reliable statistics about the number of people in the community. It is believed that the numbers range from between 2 and 4 million for the numbers of the schools, reading circles, foundations, and active businessmen. see Yavuz 1999c.

21. *Mijlā* in modern Turkey are the highest-ranking official religious persons of the city.

22. For textual sources of the community, see Yavuz 1999c.

uals in this community, but Gülen's spiritual influence on those who meet with him also constitutes a very important tie that brings them together. A student in Turkey who sent an e-mail message to the Rumi Forum in Washington, D.C., is a good example of how people are influenced by Gülen's teachings: "I am a student in Turkey. I am very happy that you are organizing a program about Mr. Fethullah Gülen. I have read many of his books and listened to many of his seminars. His ideas, which come from Islam, have changed my life." One can hear similar views from thousands of people in Turkey. An American newspaper correspondent has referred to the Gülen group as a "loosely-knit Islamic Community" ("Turkish Court" 2000).

The people of the Gülen community choose to become active participants in their society and to perform public service by establishing schools and hospitals. The community's enthusiasm for establishing secular schools in both the Muslim and non-Muslim world, specifically schools serving people of all faiths and nationalities, is unprecedented among Sufis. Instead of being isolated from the society, they try to reconcile their spiritual life with their worldly one, following Gülen's advice. Gülen does not have a problem with material prosperity, although he possesses no personal wealth himself.²³

Gülen's way of Sufism cannot be confined by the framework of a specific Sufi order. Although somewhat following the path of the early Sufis, he also encourages his followers to take an active part in the community, thus differentiating himself from previous Sufi traditions. He has a strong place in the heart of literally millions of people. Their intense support, dedication, and commitment demonstrate the strength of his spiritual presence. History will look at him as one of Islam's greatest figures.

Strictly speaking, Gülen is not a Sufi. However, in light of Hujwiri's definition quoted earlier, Gülen is a Sufi in practice, if not in name. The companions of the Prophet and their successors also were real Sufis, although they were not called Sufis. Given all of the matters discussed here—his dedication to Islam, his interpretations according to Sufi belief, and his ascetic lifestyle—it is clear that Gülen can be called a Sufi, albeit a Sufi in his own way.

23. A Turkish prosecutor, Nuh Mete Yüksel, investigated Gülen's wealth in 2001 and proved that he had none.