

TODAY'S ZAMAN

Impressions from the Gülen Conference in Los Angeles

by

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In 2005 in my editorial in a special issue of The Muslim World journal about contributions of Fethullah Gülen and contemporary Islam in Turkey, I wrote that the Gülen movement can contribute to the development of positive relationships between Islam and the West. I suggested that American academia be more interested in Gülen and his movement.

Four years later, I had a chance to attend a conference, titled "East and West Encounters: The Gülen Movement," of which I was part of the editorial board. This conference has given me the impression that there is a rising interest among scholars concerning Gülen, his teachings and the movement named after him. The conference, which was held on Dec. 4-6, was organized by the Pacifica Institute, a Turkish-American institution established by the Turkish community in the Los Angeles area. The conference was sponsored by the University of Southern California's Office of Religious Life, the International Education Center at Santa Monica College, the department of theological studies at Loyola Marymount University, the department of religious studies at Humboldt University and the department of religious studies at Whittier College. The conference was held on the USC campus. During the conference, various topics about Gülen and his movement were discussed, including the characteristics of the Gülen movement, which were described as *hizmet* (service), the functionality of the movement in contrast to the organizational structure, the contribution of the movement in dialogue between Muslims and Christians, the personality of Gülen and his reflections on *hajj*, gender issues and the Gülen movement, and *hijra* (migration) for the sake of God by admirers of Gülen. Some other topics that were discussed included the education of young men as practiced in Gülen-inspired schools and a comparison between educational and spiritual foundations of Gülen schools and Jesuit schools in specific contexts, such as Gülen schools in Australia and Kosovo.



Again, among the topics that were discussed was a comparison between Gülen and Alasdair MacIntyre, who is a contemporary philosopher at the University of Notre Dame, and the contribution of Gülen to public life through the promotion of virtues and spirituality, as well as another paper that dealt with the critiques of Gülen and his movement in political, economic and ideological contexts. Dr. Kathleen Moore of the University of California at Santa Barbara spoke of Turkey's secularism and the Gülen movement. Dr. Juan Campo spoke on Gülen's reflections of *hajj*, which led me to think once again of the importance of studying Gülen from a religious perspective and not only from a political or sociological perspective.

Thinking of all these topics and the discussions presented during this two-day conference, one can get the impression that there is a rising interest in the Gülen movement. From the scholars present at the conference, which included Jill Carroll and Dr. William Martin from Rice University, John Olsen of the University of Arizona, Daniel Skubik of California Baptist University, Darryl

Tippens of Pepperdine University, Dr. Marcia Hermansen from Loyola University-Chicago and Thomas Michel, S.J., of Georgetown University, one can see the interest in American academia that the Gülen movement is having. The above mentioned scholars contributed greatly to the conference through their presentations and discussions at the conference.

Most successful conference to date

I had previously attended several conferences on Gülen. This particular conference can be considered one of the most successful, both academically and organizationally. It was very interesting to see the curiosity in Turkey and the teachings of Gülen by scholars such as Reza Aslan from the University of California, as evident from his keynote address. In his address, he criticizes critiques of the Gülen movement and the current ruling party in Turkey, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), by saying those who are criticizing Gülen and his endeavors do not introduce any alternative to the Gülen movement. He also criticized Michael Rubin, who is closely associated with neo-conservatism. Aslan says this group pushed America into war and that they are failing in every aspect. Aslan said it is unbelievable to see that these people can still find jobs though they are failing, which made the audience laugh. I thought Aslan was good in his assessment of Turkey and what was going on between the elite ultra-secularists on the one hand and the current ruling party along with the Gülen movement on the other. After Aslan's eloquent speech, to me the most interesting talk during the opening remarks was the speech of a local Armenian who came to the podium and expressed his feelings. He described how he and his group, the Organization of Istanbul Armenians of Los Angeles, became involved in several projects with the cooperation of the Turks who established the Pacifica Institute. He suggested that the Turks in the Pacifica Institute are engaged in dialogue with Armenians not superficially but genuinely and from the depths of their hearts. It was interesting to hear that the one thing he missed the most was the trait of the Anatolian people who would help you, regardless of your religion or ethnicity, whenever they found you in need of help. This is a very important step in the dialogue between Armenians and Turks in the city of Los Angeles. Surely this achievement gives hope for a better relationship on a larger scale between Turkey and Armenia as well.

As for the presenters, they were prepared, and the papers were mostly above and beyond the standard. Being one of the editors, I can say that the process of the editorial assessments was very serious; therefore, from 84 papers, only 18 were chosen to be presented. To mention all the papers and their titles would be beyond the scope of this article; therefore, I will only mention two of them that were also published in the conference proceedings. In the panel chaired by Rabbi Reuven Firestone, Russell Powell presented a paper titled "Forgiveness in Islamic Jurisprudence and Its Role in Intercommunal Relations," which resulted in many questions from the audience and an interesting discussion. The paper also showed that people are very much interested in the Islamic understanding of law and forgiveness. Gerald Whitehouse, in his paper titled "Movement Functionality versus Organizational Structure," strongly emphasized the importance of the Gülen movement as a movement and not as an organization. He suggested that if the movement turns into an organization, it will lose its strength. Therefore, the Gülen movement should never attempt to become an organization because its power lies in the movement itself.

All discussions during this conference show that in American academia there is a growing interest in the Gülen movement and its endeavors. Today in the West, unfortunately the image of Islam and Muslims is presented as barbaric, violent

and even backwards. The Gülen movement is showing the world that there is an Islam which is positive, and there are Muslims that do not put forward their Muslimness, rather they put forward their service for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. They are contributing to the betterment of their communities not only through their words but also through their actions. These Muslim Turks are proving that Islam has another image and that image is a positive one. Their actions speak louder. Many papers in this conference elaborated on the characteristics of the Gülen movement and the power beyond its success. When discussion turned to the secret of the success of the movement, one presenter said "Allah," which received a positive reaction from the audience. The participants had almost a consensus that the movement was powered by a dedication for service to others, regardless of their ethnicity or religion. This is why some presenters suggested that among the admirers of Gülen, there are many non-Turks as well as non-Muslims.

This conference has shown that things related to the Gülen movement are to be discussed in the future and in more detailed ways. I think this conference gave us an opportunity to think and elaborate on the Gülen movement and its endeavors in a more focused way. If there are going to be more conferences on Gülen, I think academic institutions should carry this responsibility and elaborate on themes such as jihad, gender issues, independent reasoning and Sufism from Gülen's perspective.

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Op-Ed