

## THE NECESSITY OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE: A MUSLIM PERSPECTIVE

By Fethullah Gülen

Introduction

Today, people are talking about many things: the danger of war and frequent clashes all over the world, water and air pollution, hunger, the increasing erosion of moral values, and so on. As a result, many other concerns have come to the fore: peace, contentment, ecology, justice, tolerance, and dialogue. Unfortunately, despite certain promising precautions, those who should be tackling these problems tend to do so by seeking further ways to conquer and control nature and produce more lethal weapons. Besides obscene material are spread through the mass media, especially the Internet. At the root of the problem is the materialist world view, which severely limits religion's influence in contemporary social life. The result of such a situation is the current disturbed balance between humanity and nature and within individual men and women. Only a few people seem to realize that social harmony and peace with nature, between people, and within the individual only can come about when the material and spiritual realms are reconciled. Peace with nature, peace and justice in society, and personal integrity are possible when one is at peace with Heaven.

Religion reconciles opposites that seem to be mutually exclusive: religion–science, this world–the next world, nature–Divine Books, the material–the spiritual, and spirit–body. Religion can erect a defense against the destruction caused by scientific materialism, put science in its proper place, and end long-standing conflicts among nations and peoples. The natural sciences, which should act as steps of light leading people to God, have become a cause of unbelief on a previously unknown scale. As the West has become the main base for this unbelief, and because Christianity has been the religion most influenced by it, dialogue between Muslims and Christians appears to be indispensable.

The goal of dialogue among world religions is not simply to destroy scientific materialism and the materialistic world view that have caused such harm; rather, the very nature of religion demands this dialogue. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and even Hinduism and other world religions, accept the same source for themselves, and, including Buddhism, pursue the same goal. As a Muslim, I accept all Prophets and Books sent to different peoples throughout history, and regard belief in them as an essential principle of being Muslim. A Muslim is a true follower of Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and all other Prophets, upon them be peace. Not believing in one Prophet or Book means that one is not a Muslim. Thus we acknowledge the oneness and basic unity of religion, which is a symphony of God's blessings and mercy, and the universality of belief in religion. So, religion is a system of belief that embraces all races and all beliefs, a road that brings everyone together in brotherhood.

Regardless of how their adherents implement their faith in their daily lives, such generally accepted values as love, respect, tolerance, forgiveness, mercy, human rights, peace, brotherhood, and freedom are all values exalted by religion. Most of these values are accorded the highest precedence in the messages brought by Moses, Jesus, and

Muhammad, upon them be peace, as well as in the messages of Buddha and even Zarathustra, Lao-Tzu, Conficius, and the Hindu prophets.

We have a Prophetic Tradition almost unanimously recorded in the Hadith literature that Jesus will return when the end of the world is near. We do not know whether he will actually reappear physically, but what we understand is that near the end of time, values like love, peace, brotherhood, forgiveness, altruism, mercy, and spiritual purification will have precedence, as they did during Jesus' ministry. In addition, because Jesus was sent to the Jews and because all Hebrew Prophets exalted these values, it will be necessary to establish a dialogue with the Jews as well as a closer relationship and co-operation among Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.

There are many common points for dialogue among Muslims, Christians, and Jews who take their religion seriously. As pointed out by Michael Wyschogrod, an American professor of philosophy, there are just as many theoretical or creedal reasons for Muslims and Jews drawing closer to one another as there are for Jews and Christians coming together. (Faruqi, Ismail, R., *Ibrahimi Dinlerin Diyalogu* (trans), Ist. 1993, pp. 51–3.) Furthermore, practically and historically, the Muslim world has a good record of dealing with the Jews: there has been almost no discrimination, and there has been no Holocaust, denial of basic human rights, or genocide. On the contrary, Jews have always been welcomed in times of trouble, as when the Ottoman State embraced them after their expulsion from Spain.

### Muslim Difficulties in Dialogue

The followers of other religion, namely Christians, Jews and others, may be facing internal difficulties in dialogue. However, I would like to make a brief survey of certain fundamental reasons making it difficult for Muslims to establish dialogue. The same reasons are also responsible for the present misunderstanding of Islam in the world.

According to Fuller and Lesser (Fuller, Graham E., Lesser, Ian O., *Kusatilanlar–Islam ve Bati'nin Jeopolitigi* (trans), Ist. 1996, p. 41-2), in the last century alone, far more Muslims have been killed by Western powers than all of the Christians killed by Muslims throughout history. Many Muslims tend to produce more comprehensive results from this. They believe that Western policies are intentionally designed to weaken Muslim power. This historical experience leads even educated and conscious Muslims to believe that the West is continuing its thousand-year-old systematic aggression against Islam and, even worse, that it is doing so now with much more subtle and sophisticated methods. Consequently, the Church's call for dialogue meets with considerable suspicion.

In addition, the Islamic world entered the twentieth century under the direct or indirect domination of the West. The Ottoman Empire, the defender and greatest representative of this world, collapsed as a result of Western attacks. The struggles against foreign invasions throughout the Muslim world were followed with great interest in Turkey. In addition to this, within Turkey itself, the conflicts between the Democratic Party and People's Party in the 1950s led to Islam's being perceived by conservatives and some

intellectuals as an ideology of conflict and reaction and a political system, rather than as a religion primarily addressing one's heart, spirit, and mind. Perceiving Islam as a party ideology in some Muslim countries, including Turkey, contributed to this impression. As a result, secularists and others began to look upon all Muslims and Islamic activities as suspect.

Islam also is seen as a political ideology because it has been the greatest dynamic in the Muslims' wars of independence. Thus, it has become identified as an ideology of independence. Ideology tends to separate, while religion means enlightenment of the mind together with belief, contentment, and tranquillity of the heart, sensitivity in conscience and perception through real experience. Religion also has the nature and ability to penetrate by means of such essential virtues as faith, love, mercy, and compassion. Reducing religion to a harsh political ideology and a mass ideology of independence has led to walls forming between Islam and the West, and has caused Islam to be misunderstood.

Christendom's historical portrayal of Islam also has weakened Muslims' courage with respect to interfaith dialogue. For centuries, Christians were told that Islam was a crude and distorted version of Judaism and Christianity. For a very long time the Prophet Muhammad, upon him be peace, was considered an imposter, a common or ingenious trickster, the Antichrist, or an idol worshipped by Muslims. Even recent books have presented him as someone with strange ideas who believed he had to succeed at any cost, and who resorted to any means to achieve success.

### Dialogue Is a Must

I believe that interfaith dialogue is a must today, and that the first step in establishing it is forgetting the past, ignoring polemical arguments, and giving precedence to common points, which far outnumber polemical ones. In the West, some changes are witnessed in the attitudes of some intellectuals and clerics toward Islam. I must particularly mention the late Massignon, who referred to Islam by the expression: "The faith of Abraham revived with Muhammad." He believed that Islam has a positive, almost prophetic mission in the post-Christian world, for: "Islam is the religion of faith. It is not a religion of natural faith in the God of the philosophers, but faith in the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Ishmael, faith in our God. Islam is a great mystery of Divine Will." He believed in the Divine authorship of the Qur'an and the Prophethood of Muhammad, upon him be peace. (Prof. Griffith, Sidney, 'Sharing the Faith of Abraham: the 'Credo' of Louis Massignon', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, vol.8, No.2, pp.193-210.) The West's perspective on our Prophet, upon him be peace and blessings, also has softened. Together with Christian clerics and men of religion, many Western thinkers besides Massignon, like Charles J. Ledit, Y. Moubarac, Irene-M. Dalmais, L. Gardet, Norman Daniel, Michel Lelong, H. Maurier, Olivier Lacombe, and Thomas Merton express warmth for both Islam and for our Prophet, and support the call for dialogue.

Also, expressions regarding Islam in the final declaration of the Second Vatican Council, which began the process of dialogue, cannot be ignored. This meant that the attitude of

the Catholic Church toward Islam had now changed. In the second period of the Council, Pope Paul VI said:

On the other hand, the Catholic Church is looking farther, beyond the horizons of Christianity. It is turning towards other religions that preserve the concept and meaning of God as One, Transcendental, Creator, Ruler of Fate and Wise. Those religions worship God with sincere, devotional actions.

He also indicated that the Catholic Church commended these religions' good, true, and humane sides:

The Church reaffirms to them that in modern society in order to save the meaning of religion and servanthood to God – a necessity and need of true civilization – the Church itself is going to take its place as a resolute advocate of God's rights on man.

As a final result, the written statement entitled "A Declaration Regarding the Church's Relations with non-Christian Religions," which was accepted at the Council, declared that:

In our world that has become smaller and in which relations have become closer, people are expecting answers from religion regarding mysterious enigmas in human nature that turn their hearts upside down. What is man? What is the meaning and purpose of life? What is goodness and reward, what is sin? What is the source and point of suffering? What is the path to true happiness? What is death, what is the meaning of judgement after death and receiving the fruits of what one has done on earth? What is the mystery surrounding the beginning and end of existence?

After stating that different religions attempt to answer these questions in their own ways, and that the Church does not reject altogether the values of other religions, the Council encourages Christians to have dialogue with members of other religions:

The Church encourages its children, together with believing and living as Christians, to get to know and support with precaution, compassion, dialogue and co-operation those who follow other religions and to encourage them to develop their spiritual, moral and socio-cultural values. (Translated from: Prof. Yildirim, Suat, 'Kiliseyi Islam ile Diyaloga Iten Sebepler,' Yeni Umit, No. 16, p. 7)

Another important point is that the current Pope, John Paul II, admits in his book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, that (in spite of Muslim neglect and carelessness) it is still the Muslims who worship in the best and most careful manner. The Pope reminds his readers that, on this point, Christians should take Muslims as their example.

In addition, Islam's resistance to materialist ideologies and its important role in the modern world has amazed many Western observers. The observations of E.H. Jurji are very significant here:

In its self-respect, self-maintenance, and realistic zeal, in its fight for solidarity against racist and Marxist ideologies, in its vigorous denunciation of exploitation, as in the preaching of its message to a wayward, bleeding humanity, Islam faces the modern world with a peculiar sense of mission. Not confused and not torn apart by a mass of theological subtleties, nor buried beneath a heavy burden of dogma, this sense of mission draws its strength from a complete conviction of the relevance of Islam. (Izzeti, Abu'l-Fazl, *Islamin Yayilis Tarihine Giris* (trans), Ist. 1984, p.348)

Muslims and the West have struggled with each other for almost fourteen centuries. From the Western perspective, Islam has threatened Western doors and opened many of them, facts that have not been forgotten. That said, the fact that this struggle is leading Muslims to oppose and resent the West, will never benefit Islam or Muslims. Modern modes of transportation and mass communication have turned the world into a global village in which every relationship is interactive. The West cannot wipe out Islam or its territory, and Muslim armies can no longer march on the West. Moreover, as this world is becoming even more global, both sides feel the need for a give-and-take relationship. The West has scientific, technological, economic, and military supremacy. However, Islam possesses more important and vital factors: Islam, as represented by the Holy Book and the Sunna of the Prophet, has retained the freshness of its beliefs, spiritual essence, good works, and morality as it has unfolded over the last fourteen centuries. In addition, it has the potential to blow spirit and life into Muslims who have been numbed for centuries, as well as into many other peoples drowned in the swamp of materialism.

Just as religion has not yet escaped the onslaught of unbelief based on science and philosophy, no one can guarantee that this storm will not blow even stronger in the future. These and other factors do not allow Muslims to view and present Islam purely as a political ideology or an economic system. Neither do they allow Muslims to consider the West, Christianity, Judaism, and even other great religions like Buddhism from a historical perspective and define their attitude accordingly.

When those who have adopted Islam as a political ideology rather than a religion in its true sense and function, review their activities and attitudes they claim to be based on Islam, especially political ones, will discover that they are usually moved by personal or national anger, hostility, and other similar motives. If this is the case, we must accept Islam and adopt an Islamic attitude as the fundamental starting point for action, rather than the existing oppressive situation that we face. The Prophet, upon him be peace and blessings, defined a true Muslim as one who harms no one with his/her words and actions, and who is the most trustworthy representative of universal peace. Muslims travel everywhere with this sublime feeling that they nourish deep in their spirits. Contrary to giving torment and suffering, they are remembered everywhere as symbols of safety and security. In their eyes, there is no difference between a physical violation and a verbal violation, such as backbiting, false accusation, insult, and ridicule.

A Muslim's beginning point must have an Islamic basis. In the present situation, Muslims cannot act out of ideological or political partisanship and then dress this partisanship in Islamic garb, or represent mere desires in the form of ideas. If we can overcome this

tendency, Islam's true image will become known. The present, distorted image of Islam that has resulted from its misuse by both Muslims and non-Muslims for their own goals scares both Muslims and non-Muslims. Moreover, as was stated in the Zaman newspaper in an interview with Professor Sidney Griffith, director of the Institute of Christian Oriental Research in The Catholic University of America and a sincere supporter of Islam-Christian dialogue, how the West sees Islam is illustrated by the fact that in American universities Islam is not taught as a religion in theological schools, but as a political system in the political science or international relations departments. Such a perception also is found among Westernized segments of the Islamic world and non-Muslims in Asia and Africa. Strangely enough, many groups that have put themselves forward under the banner of Islam export this image and actually strengthen it.

### Islam's Ecumenical Call for Dialogue

Fourteen centuries ago, Islam made the greatest ecumenical call the world has ever seen. The Qur'an calls the People of the Book (Christians and Jews primarily):

Say: "O People of the Book! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with Him; that we take not, from among ourselves lords and patrons other than God." If then they turn back, say you: "Bear witness that we are Muslims (i.e., those who have surrendered to God's Will)." (3:64)

This call, coming in the ninth year of the Hijra, begins with the "la (no!)" in the statement of faith, "La ilaha illa Allah (There is no god but God)." More than a command to do something positive, it was a call not to do certain things so that followers of the revealed religions could overcome their separation from each other. It represented the widest statement on which members of all religions could agree. In case this call was rejected, Muslims were to adopt the attitude expressed in another sura: "Your religion is for you; my religion is for me." That is, if you do not accept this call, we have surrendered to God. We will continue on the path we have accepted and leave you to go on your own path.

Elmalili Hamdi Yazir, a famous Turkish interpreter of the Qur'an, made the following interesting observations regarding this verse:

It has been shown how various consciences, nations, religions, and books can unite in one essential conscience and word of truth, and how Islam has taught the human realm such a wide, open, and true path of salvation and law of freedom. It has been shown fully that this is not limited to the Arab or non-Arab. Religious progress is possible not by consciences being narrow and separate from each other, but by their being universal and broad. (Hak Dini Kur'an Dili, Ist., Vol.2, pp.1131-2.)

Islam gave as a gift this breadth of conscience, this broad path of salvation, and this law of freedom. Bediüzzaman Said Nursi explains this broadest scope of Islam from a contemplative observation he had in the Bayezid Mosque in Istanbul:

Once I thought about the pronoun "we" in the verse: "You alone do we worship, and You alone we ask for help" (1:5), and my heart sought the reason why "we" was used in place of "I." Suddenly I discovered the virtue and secret of congregational prayer from that pronoun "we."

I saw that by doing my prayer with the congregation at the Bayezid Mosque, every individual in the congregation became a kind of intercessor for me, and as long as I recited the Qur'an there, everyone testified for me. I got the courage from the congregation's great and intense servitude to present my insufficient servitude to the Divine Court.

Suddenly another reality unveiled itself: All of Istanbul's mosques united and came under the authority of the Bayezid Mosque. I got the impression that they confirmed me in my cause and included me in their prayer.

At that time I saw myself in the earthly mosque, in circular rows around the Ka'ba. I said: "Praise be to the Lord of the worlds. I have so many intercessors; they are saying the same thing I say in my prayer and confirming me. "

As this reality was unveiled, I felt I was standing in prayer in front of the blessed Ka'ba. Taking advantage of this situation, I took those rows of worshippers as witnesses and said: "I witness that there is no god but God; again I bear witness that Muhammad is God's Messenger." I entrusted this testimony to faith to the sacred Black Stone. While leaving this trust, suddenly another veil opened. I saw that the congregation I was in was separated into three circles.

The first circle was a large congregation of believing Muslims and those who believe in God's existence and Unity. In the second circle, I saw all creatures were performing the greatest prayer and invocation of God. Every class or species was busy with its own unique invocation and litanies to God, and I was among that congregation. In the third circle I saw an amazing realm that was outwardly small, but, in reality, large from the perspective of the duty it performed and its quality. From the atoms of my body to the outer senses, there was a congregation busy with servitude and gratitude.

In short, the pronoun "we" in the expression "we worship" pointed to these three congregations. I imagined our Prophet, upon him be peace and blessings, the translator and propagator of the Qur'an, in Madina from which he was addressing humanity, saying: "O mankind! Worship your Lord!" (2:21). Like everyone else, I heard his command in my spirit, and like me, everyone in the three congregations replied with the sentence: "You alone do we worship"(Mektubat, 29. Mektub, 6. Nukte, Ist.).

#### How To Interact with Followers of Other Religions

In the Qur'an God says: "This is the Book; wherein there is no doubt; a guidance to those who fear God" (2:2). Later it is explained that these pious ones are those: "Who believe in the Unseen, are steadfast in prayer, and spend out of what We have provided for them;

and who believe in what is sent to you and what was sent before you, and (in their hearts) have the reassurance of the Hereafter" (2:3-4). At the very outset, using a very soft and slightly oblique style, the Qur'an calls people to accept the former Prophets and their Books. Having such a condition at the very beginning of the Qur'an seems very important to me when it comes to starting a dialogue with the followers of other religions.

In another verse God commands: "And discuss you not with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation)" (29:46). In this verse, the Qur'an describes what method, approach, and manner should be used. Bediuzzaman's view of the form and style of debate are extremely significant: "Anyone who is happy about his opponent's defeat in debate is without mercy." He explains further: "You do not gain anything by his defeat. If you were defeated and he was victorious, then you would have corrected one of your mistakes." Debate should not be for the sake of our ego, but to enable the truth to come out.

Elsewhere, in Sura Mumtahana, it is stated: "God forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) Faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for God loves those who are just" (60:8).

Some Qur'anic verses level, according to some, certain degree of harsh criticisms against the People of the Book. However, such criticism is directed against wrong behavior, incorrect thought, resistance to truth, the creation of hostility, and undesirable characteristics. The Old and New Testaments contain even stronger expressions against the same attributes. However, immediately after these apparently sharp criticisms, and threats directed at those who engage in such behavior, very gentle words are used to awaken hearts to the truth and to plant hope. In addition, the Qur'an's criticism and warning about some attitudes and behavior found among Jews, Christians, and polytheists also were directed toward Muslims who still engaged in such behavior. Both the Companions and expounders of the Qur'an agree on this. Further discussion on this matter is beyond the scope of this paper.

God-revealed religions strongly oppose disorder, treachery, conflict, and oppression. Islam literally means "peace," "security," and "well-being." Naturally based on peace, security, and world harmony, it sees war and conflict as aberrations to be brought under control. An exception is made for self-defense, as when a body tries to defeat the germs attacking it. Self-defense must follow certain guidelines, however. Islam has always breathed peace and goodness. Islam considers war an accident, and has established rules to balance and limit it. For example, it takes justice and world peace as a basis, as in the verse: "Let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from Justice" (5:8). Islam developed a line of defense based on certain principles that protect religion, life, property, the mind, and reproduction. The modern legal system also has done this.

Islam accords the greatest value to human life. It views the killing of one person as the killing of all people, for a single murder engenders the idea that any person can be killed. Adam's son Cain was the first murderer. Although their names are not specifically

mentioned in the Qur'an or the Sunna, we learn from the Bible that a misunderstanding between Cain and Abel resulted in Cain unjustly killing Abel in a jealous rage. And thus began the epoch of spilling blood. For this reason, in one of the hadiths, the Messenger of God, upon him be peace, says: "There is no case on earth where a person has been killed unjustly that a portion of the sin for murder is not credited to Adam's son Cain, for he was the first person to open the way of unjust killing to humanity." (Buhari, Diyat 2, Enbiya 1; Müslim, Kasame 27) In the continuation of the story of Cain and Abel, the Qur'an states that one who kills a person unjustly is as if he/she killed everyone, and one who saves another is as if he/she saved everybody (5:32).

### Love, Compassion, Tolerance and Forgiving: The Pillars of Dialogue

Whether in the form of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, or other world religions like Buddhism and Hinduism, religion commands love, compassion, tolerance, and forgiving. Therefore, I would like to say a few words concerning these fundamental, universal values.

Love is the most essential element in every being. It is a most radiant light, a great power that can resist and overcome every force. Love elevates every soul that absorbs it, and prepares it for the journey to eternity. Those who make contact with eternity through love exert themselves to implant in all other souls what they receive from eternity. They dedicate their lives to this sacred duty, and endure any hardship for its sake. Just as they say "love" with their last breaths, they also breathe "love" while being raised on the Day of Judgment.

Altruism, an exalted human feeling, generates love. Whoever has the greatest share in this love is the greatest hero of humanity, one who has uprooted any personal feelings of hatred and rancor. Such heroes of love continue to live even after death. These lofty souls, who, by kindling each day a new torch of love in their inner world and making their hearts a source of love and altruism are welcomed and loved by people, receive the right of eternal life from such an Exalted Court. Not even death or Doomsday can remove their traces.

The most direct way leading to the hearts of people is that of love. This is the way of the Prophets. Those who follow it are not rejected; even if they are rejected by some people, they are welcomed by many. Once they are welcomed through love, nothing can prevent them from attaining their goal.

As for compassion, everything speaks of it and promises it. Therefore, the universe can be considered a symphony of compassion. A human being must show compassion to all living beings, for this is a requirement of being human. The more people display compassion, the more exalted they become; the more they resort to wrongdoing, oppression, and cruelty, the more they are disgraced and humiliated. They become a shame to humanity. We hear from Prophet Muhammad, upon him be peace, that a prostitute went to Paradise because her compassion compelled her to give water to a dog

dying of thirst, while another woman went to Hell because she allowed a cat to starve to death.

As for forgiving, it is a great virtue. It is wrong to consider forgiveness separate from virtue, or of virtue as separate from forgiveness. Everyone knows the adage: "Errors from the small, forgiveness from the great." How true this is! Being forgiven means a repair, a return to an essence, and finding oneself again. For this reason, the most pleasing action in the view of the Infinite Mercy is the activity pursued amidst the palpitations of this return and search.

All of creation, both animate and inanimate, was introduced to forgiveness through humanity. Just as God showed His attribute of forgiveness through individual human beings, He put the beauty of forgiving in their hearts. While the first man dealt a blow to his essence through falling, which is somehow a requirement of his human nature, it was God's forgiveness that gave a hand to him and elevated him to the rank of Prophethood.

Whenever a human being has erred, mounting on the magic transport of seeking forgiveness and surmounting the shame of personal sin and the resulting despair, they attain infinite mercy and overlook the sins of others. Jesus said to a crowd of people eager to stone a woman: "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone." Can anyone who understands this binding, fine point incline even consider stoning someone else when he or she is also a likely candidate for being stoned? If only those unfortunate ones who demand that others pass a certain litmus test could understand this!

Malice and hatred are the seeds of hell scattered among people by evil. In contrast to those who encourage malice and hatred and turn the land into a pit of Hell, we should carry forgiveness to those whose troubles are pushing them into the abyss. The excesses of those who neither forgive nor tolerate others have made the past one or two centuries the most horrific of all time. If such people are to rule the future, it will be a fearful time indeed. For this reason, the greatest gift today's generation can give to their children and grandchildren is to teach them how to forgive, even in the face of the crudest behavior and most upsetting events. We believe that forgiveness and tolerance will heal most of our wounds only if this celestial instrument is in the hands of those who understand its language.

It should be such a broad tolerance that we can close our eyes to others' faults, show respect for different ideas, and forgive everything that is forgivable. In fact, even when our inalienable rights are violated, we should respect human values and try to establish justice. Even before the coarsest thoughts and crudest ideas, with the caution of a Prophet and without boiling over we should respond with a mildness that the Qur'an presents as "gentle words." We should do this so that we can touch other people's hearts by following a method consisting of a tender heart, a gentle approach, and mild behavior. We should have such a broad tolerance that we benefit from contradictory ideas, for they force us to keep our heart, spirit, and conscience in good shape even though they do not teach us anything.

Tolerance, which we sometimes use in place of respect and mercy, generosity and forbearance, is the most essential element of moral systems. It also is a very important source of spiritual discipline, and a celestial virtue of perfected men and women.

Under the lens of tolerance, the merits of believers attain a new depth and extend to infinity; mistakes and faults shrink so much that they can be squeezed into a thimble. Actually the treatment of He Who is beyond time and space always passes through the prism of tolerance, and we wait for it to embrace us and all of creation. This embrace is so broad that a prostitute who gave water to a thirsty dog touched the knocker of the "Door of Mercy" and found herself in a corridor extending to Heaven. Similarly, due to the deep love he felt for God and His Messenger, a drunk suddenly shook himself free and became a Companion of the Prophet. In another example, with the smallest of Divine favors, a murderer was saved from his monstrous psychosis, turned toward the highest rank, which far surpassed his natural ability, and reached it.

We want everyone to look at us through this lens, and we expect the breezes of forgiveness and pardon to blow constantly in our surroundings. All of us want to refer our past and present to the climate of tolerance and forbearance, which melts and transforms, cleans and purifies, and then walk toward the future without anxiety. We do not want our past to be criticized, or our future to be darkened because of our present. All of us expect love and respect, hope for tolerance and forgiveness, and want to be embraced with feelings of liberality and affection. We expect tolerance and forgiveness from our parents in response to our mischief at home, from our teachers in response to our naughtiness at school, from the innocent victims of our injustice and oppression, from the judge and prosecutor in court, and from the Judge of Judges (God) in the highest tribunal.

However, deserving what we expect is very important. Anyone who does not forgive has no right to expect forgiveness. Everyone will see disrespect to the degree that they have been disrespectful. Anyone who does not love is not worthy of being loved. Those who do not embrace humanity with tolerance and forgiveness will not receive forgiveness and pardon. One who curses others can only expect curses in return. Those who curse will be cursed, and those who beat will be beaten. If true Muslims would continue on their way and tolerate curses with such Qur'anic principles as: "When they meet empty words or unseemly behavior, they generously pass them by" and "if you behave tolerantly and overlook their faults," then others would appear to implement the justice of Destiny on those cursers.

### The Last Word

Those who want to reform the world must first reform themselves. In order to bring others to the path of traveling to a better world, they must purify their inner worlds of hatred, rancor, and jealousy, and adorn their outer worlds with all kinds of virtues. Those who are far removed from self-control and self-discipline, who have failed to refine their feelings, may seem attractive and insightful at first. However, they will not be able to inspire others in any permanent way, and the sentiments they arouse will soon disappear.

Goodness, beauty, truthfulness, and being virtuous are the essence of the world and humanity. Whatever happens, the world will one day find this essence. No one can prevent this.

=====

#### About the Author

Known by his simple and austere lifestyle, Fethullah Gülen, affectionately called Hodjaefendi, is a scholar of extraordinary proportions. This man for all seasons was born in Erzurum, eastern Turkey, in 1938. Upon graduation from divinity school in Erzurum, he obtained his license to preach and teach. In addition to his great contribution to the betterment activities of education in Turkey by encouraging people to open private schools, he is renowned for his painstaking endeavors for the establishment of mutual understanding and tolerance in society. His social reform efforts, begun during the 1960s, have made him one of Turkey's most well-known and respected public figures. His tireless dedication to solving social problems and satisfying spiritual needs have gained him a considerable number of followers throughout the world.