

**Launch of the Fethullah Gülen Chair
in the Study of Islam and Muslim-Catholic Relations
at Australian Catholic University (ACU National)
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***Fethullah Gülen:
Contributions to Global Peace and the Inter-religious Dialogue***

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Are these the best of times or the worst of times for Muslim-Christian relations? It's hard to argue that these are the best of times when reliable social polling, such as that undertaken by the Pew Research Foundation, indicates a precipitous decline since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, across the entire Muslim world, in positive sentiment towards America and its western allies. Unfortunately, for many Muslims the ineptly titled 'Global War on Terror' feels more like a 'western war on Islam'. Tragically, the near-universal goodwill towards America in the wake of the horrible events of September 11, 2001 was not seized upon as an opportunity for cooperation between the US and the Muslim world. Instead, through ignorance and a single-minded rush to action, the moment was lost. It will be a long time before America, and the west in general, fully recovers the good standing it used to enjoy amongst ordinary Muslims everywhere. Through ineptitude much more than through malice the dubious efficacy of 'hard power' has washed away the work of a lifetime in building 'soft power', understanding and trust from Casablanca to Jayapura.

The poll results are bad enough but if we believe some observers the reality that awaits us down the track is very much worse. In their view we are not simply moving through a difficult patch but rather are in the incipient stages of a slide into an abyss of conflict and confrontation. Perhaps the best know of these prophets of doom is the Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington whose highly influential 1993 article "The Clash of Civilizations?" in *Foreign Affairs*, and his subsequent book *The Clash of Civilizations and Remaking of World Order*, gave credibility and currency to the notion that Islam and the west were on a collision course. Though influential in certain policy circles Huntington's ideas were broadly denounced by his academic peers who generally argued that Huntington had played fast and loose with his empirical data. Scholars of Islam, in particular, criticised Huntington for adopting an essentialist understanding of Islam and Muslim society that equated the views of a minority of extremists with the position of mainstream Muslims. Very few serious scholars agreed with Huntington's assessment and most rejected the propositions that a clash between the 'Christian West' and the 'Muslim world' was either imminent or inevitable. But Huntington was not alone in seeing Islam in essentialist terms. Many radical Islamists, including the intellectual leaders of jihadi terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, agreed with Huntington's analysis and

with his predication of a looming clash between Islam and the west. They saw in Huntington's work both evidence of the west's antipathy towards Islam and affirmation of their potency. As the world watched the twin towers of New York's World Trade Center collapse into billowing clouds of dust Huntington's thesis gained sudden credibility.

The post-September 11 period has seen a sudden rise in western suspicion and fear of Muslims. For many Muslims living in the west it has been a particularly difficult time. And yet, if we are honest, we must acknowledge that these are clearly not the worst of times either. Thankfully, we are not living during the dark days of medieval western ignorance, and sometimes crusading malice. Nor are we back in the age of self-absorbed and self-serving western colonialism. In their desire to provoke an angry, ill-judged response to audacious acts of terror the leaders of al-Qaeda surely succeeded beyond their wildest expectations. At the same time, however, the west has been awakened like never before to its need to properly understand Islam and Muslim society. Enrolments in courses on Islam in western universities have surged. For some students the motivation to study Islam lies in their vocational aspirations but for many the desire to understand more about the world's second largest religion stems from a deeper and more personal conviction that Islam is intrinsically important and interesting, and from the realisation that if ignorance of Islam has led us to make mistakes then fixing them surely requires learning about Islam.

If these are not yet the best of times for Muslim-Christian understanding there is much that is happening in our universities that holds the promise of a better future. In the Australian context, and even in the global context, the launching of a professorial chair named after one of the greatest Islamic leaders of the current time by a university that consciously embraces its Christian heritage marks a remarkable development in Muslim-Christian relations.

Australian universities have a long history of uneasy engagement with religion. The earliest universities were prohibited by charter from teaching subjects on religion and it is only relatively recently that courses in comparative religion have found acceptance in university curricula. Religion, it was argued, was something too personal and too emotive to be discussed in university classrooms. But if religion can't be discussed in an objective and academic manner in our universities then where can it possibly be studied? Confessional seminaries have an important role to play in the development of religious professionals but it is now clear that society requires more than this. In the middle of the last century it was widely believed that belief, at least in its traditional institutionalised form was rapidly declining and that modernization would see religion retreat into the personal sphere and into the margins of society. By the end of the century this conviction looked increasingly naïve and mistaken. Modernity, it became clear, did not mean the end of religion. And yet years of neglect within the universities meant that they had very limited capacity to teach or research religious matters.

For all the reasons outlined above the announcement of a new chair in Islamic studies, especially one that is concerned with the study of Muslim-Christian relations, represents

a development of great importance. The fact, moreover, that ACU National is taking the initiative in launching a chair named after Fethullah Gülen is of particular significance and this requires further explanation. There are many Muslim leaders and many Islamic intellectuals after whom a university chair could very appropriately be named. There are few, however, more appropriate than Fethullah Gülen, particularly when one is talking about a Christian university with an interest in promoting Muslim-Christian relations.

Such comments might well be dismissed as the stuff of mere platitude. If one knows something about who Gülen is and what it is that he stands for, however, it becomes clear that naming a chair for the Study of Islam and Muslim-Catholic Relations after Fethullah Gülen is profoundly appropriate.

This is not the time nor the place for a dry, academic discussion of Gülen's thought and social activism. And we certainly don't have the time to do more than scratch the surface of all that he has written and done over the past four decades. What follows then, is a brief review of three key elements of Gülen's work. I would argue that careful research would reveal these three elements to be axiomatic themes running across the full arc of Gülen's life and work (and there is now a sizable body of scholarly material available in English for those interested in reading more). For now, however, there is only time for some brief assertions and explanations to illustrate the theme.

There are many ways of summarising Gülen's thought and describing his social activism. He is, first and foremost, an *alim*, a traditional Islamic scholar with a deep understanding of the Qur'an, the Sunnah, Islamic jurisprudence and Islamic history. He is also a Sufi, though he does not belong to any particular *tarikah*, or Sufi brotherhood. His most immediate source of influence is the writings of the great Turkish Sufi scholar Said Nursi (1878-1960), writer of the influential multi-volume commentary on the Qur'an, *Risale-i Nur*, and who himself was a Sufi in the line of the great Persian/Anatolian poet Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207-1273). Gülen shares with Nursi the conviction that interfaith dialogue and cooperation between Jews, Muslims and Christians should be key concerns of modern Muslim intellectuals. But whereas Nursi, principally through the legacy of the *Risale-i Nur*, has inspired millions of followers who meet regularly to read his work, Gülen has inspired a vast social movement concerned with practical religious philanthropy on a grand scale.

This religious philanthropy can be understood simply as revolving around three axial themes or elements: a deep desire for dialogue, a love of learning and a passion for service.

Gülen's profound interest in dialogue can readily be discerned in his writing and in his personal activism. In February 1998, for example, Gülen met with Pope John Paul II, having already met with many of the senior religious leaders in Turkey and surrounding nations. The most overtly dialogue-orientated group associated with the Gülen movement is found in the Journalists and Writers and Foundation (JWF) established in 1994. This very influential NGO goes beyond straightforward journalistic reporting and analysis to support strategic public intellectual initiatives in the promotion of dialogue.

One of the Foundation's most important activities is the hosting of a high level annual summer dialogue forum known as the Abant Platform (named after the lakeside location of its annual meetings) designed to bring together disparate elements of the political and cultural elite to talk face to face about issues of pressing national importance. Each Abant Platform produces an Abant Declaration summing up the issues discussed. The first Abant Platform was held in July 1998 on the theme of 'Islam and Secularism'. Subsequent Abant Platforms dealt with the related themes of 'Religion and State Relations' (July 1999), 'Islam and Democracy' (July 2000), and 'Pluralism' (July 2001). In April 2004 the Journalists and Writers Foundation took the Abant Platform offshore to America and held a successful forum meeting at Johns Hopkins University in Washington D.C. around the theme of Islam and Democracy. Subsequently the Abant Platform has also met in Europe and has planning for an ongoing series of international meetings.

In a broader sense, the fact that since 1983 the Gülen movement has established more than 500 schools across Turkey and throughout Asia, Africa and the western hemisphere, all of which are secular, and many of which are located in areas of socio-economic hardship in both Muslim and non-Muslim communities, can also be seen as an exercise in practical dialogue. Similarly, the commercially successful and broadly influential *Zaman* newspaper global network, and its television analogue Samanyolu TV, with their focus on objective, professional journalism and wholesome, but not overtly religious, entertainment and education, can also be seen as exercises in dialogue. The closest equivalent in Christian publishing is arguably the surprisingly professional *Christian Science Monitor*.

The second element in Gülen's thought and in the Gülen movement's social activism is a love of learning. This can be readily discerned in the aforementioned schools. In addition to these schools there also a handful of well regarded secular colleges and half a dozen universities such as Fatih University in Istanbul and Ankara. These schools, many of which have been deliberately established in some of the poorest and most needy parts of the world, are generally very well regarded and achieve a high standard of scholastic achievement in neighbourhoods, districts and nations not normally accustomed to excellence in education. What makes them so remarkable in the context of the Muslim world is their commitment to secular modern learning open to students of all backgrounds. The schools, regardless of the nation in which they operate and the legislation that pertains to religious instruction in schools, adhere consistently to a secular curriculum. In this and many other respects they are very much like modern Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist or Catholic schools. *Zaman* newspaper, *Samanyolu TV* and many of the books and magazines published by Gülen movement publishers such as Isik Publishing can also be said to be concerned with education in the broadest sense, much in the manner of America's *Reader's Digest* magazine.

The Gülen movement speaks of itself as being the Gülen *hizmet* and of its members being engaged in *hizmet*. The Turkish word *hizmet* translates as 'service' and for the members of the Gülen movement *hizmet* – 'service' is understood in much the same way as active Christians use the word service to describe their religious activism and philanthropy.

Some institutions associated with the Gülen movement, such as *Zaman* and *Samanyolu TV* have become so commercially successful that they have been able to run along regular business lines. But many other aspects of the movement's work, such as *Fountain* magazine rely, at least in part, on the contributions of volunteers. The schools, in particular, are very much the product of volunteer activism. The seed capital to set up a new school, often in a remote part of Africa or Asia, is typically generated through the philanthropy of a community of Gülen movement businessmen meeting in a certain town or suburb. The idea is that the schools ultimately become self-sustaining but before this is possible they rely on teachers leaving behind the comforts of Istanbul, Izmir or Ankara to travel to the likes of Kazakhstan, Nigeria or Cambodia to serve out several terms as 'secular missionary' teachers. This, more than anything, embodies the movement's notion of *hizmet*, or service.

This is much more that could be said about Fethullah Gülen and the philanthropic movement that he has inspired. And there are many elements in addition to a deep desire for dialogue, a love of learning and a commitment to service. But these three elements – dialogue, learning and service – sum up the core passions of Gülen. And they explain why it is profoundly apposite that the ACU National Chair for the Study of Islam and Muslim-Catholic Relations should be named the Fethullah Gülen Chair.

As Christians and Muslims seeking to promote dialogue, deepen understanding and build relationships we do indeed live in the worst of times and the best of times. We certainly live in interesting times, in challenging times. But tonight we should take heart. This new century promises to see so much more achieved in Muslim-Christian relations and in the scholarly understanding of religion and religious communities than was achieved last century. The launch of this Chair at this university, I believe, represents something very good and something of great significance that goes well beyond any one institution and any one appointment. This, *insyallah*, God willing, is the start of something big.