
Book Review: Paul Weller, Fethullah Gülen's Teaching and Practice: Inheritance, Context, and Interactive Development (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022)

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Abstract: Rather than attempting to survey all the topics covered in Paul Weller's book, this article draws out a number of issues which seem of particular interest. These include the role of the five purposes of Islamic law (*maqasid al-shar'iā*) in providing a framework for developing new Islamic reflection, and the question of what constitutes authentic Islam. It goes on to look at Gülen's comments on conversion and interreligious relations; Weller's concept of 'theological insecurity'; and the role of Sufism and love in Gülen's thought. It concludes with some comment on the theme of self-criticism within the Gülen Movement.

Keywords: Hermeneutics, Theology, Gülen, Peace, Self-criticism

Since Fethullah Gülen's name has become so well known in recent years, I welcomed this opportunity to become more familiar with his work and the voices of some of the members of his movement. I write not as a scholar of the Gülen Movement [hereafter GM], known by its followers as Hizmet, nor as a researcher of modern Turkey, but rather as a historian of various aspects of Muslim-Christian relations, and with a background in the study of classical Islam. These interests will no doubt be evident in what follows, while my interest in Muslim-Christian relations intersects with GM's strong interest in interreligious relations. Rather than attempting to survey the whole book, I aim here to draw out points of particular interest and significance.

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Weller's book opens (Part I) with a clear and helpful summary biography of Gülen, tracing his journey westward from Eastern Turkey through Edirne and Izmir to Istanbul. This migration westward has, of course, been extended by self-imposed exile in the USA. Part II, entitled 'Islamic Rootedness, Taboo-Breaking, and Socio-Religious Implications' raises two important areas which I shall return to later. One is the statement, periodically repeated during Weller's work, that Gülen is rooted in Islamic tradition. The second is a discussion of 'Muslim Insecurity, the "Heroic" Tradition, and Alternative Hermeneutics', the title of an intriguing section of the second chapter of Part II [see 119]. The third part of the book is entitled 'Islamic Heroism, Hizmet Loss, and a Future beyond Gülen?' This part reflects on the impact of GM finding itself at the centre of intense opposition following the attempted coup in 2016. Themes of dealing with trauma in the movement, the emergent capacity for self-criticism, previously rarely heard in public, and the consideration of future developments beyond the lifetime of Gülen himself, are all in view.

Weller includes excerpts from an interview he conducted with Fethullah Gülen himself. In addition, much of the book engages with adherents of Hizmet, many of them significant figures in the movement's history. Quotations are given regularly, so that these voices form part of the fabric of the work. These people are identified in the 'Acknowledgements' section of the book, although how they were selected and on what basis is not stated.

The book raises two important hermeneutical questions. One is the fundamental question common to all traditions based on a founding scripture – how to distinguish the unchanging elements of a faith from those which can be subject to re-interpretation through time [216]. This question is raised but not directly addressed. Secondly, one of the interviewees discusses the approach to what are known in Islamic legal thought as the five essentials or purposes of the law (*maqāṣid al-shari‘ā*). He raises the question of whether other key areas can be added to this list of five. As this is an important area of modern Muslim discussion, it provides an appropriate way to begin discussion here. I will first quote one of the interviewees before discussing these purposes and Gülen's and GM's possible extension of them. Weller preserves the English of his interviewee, Kurucan, while 'Hojaefendi' refers to Gülen.

As it has been I think formulated from the time of Imam Ghazzali and Imam Shatibi, I believe, the five purposes of Islam which are related to the protection of one's faith, life, family, property, mind, (some add "honour" as the sixth). But Hojaefendi considers very significant to add a sixth one which is freedom.

The speaker is correct in linking the formulation of these five purposes, or essentials, to these two names. These purposes are not explicitly grouped together in the

Qur'an or hadith, but were most famously formulated in this way by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) in his work *The Quintessence of the Science of Principles* (*al-Mustasfā min 'ilm al-uṣūl*), and al-Shāṭibī (d. 790/1388), in *The Reconciliation of the Principles of the Law* (*al-Muwāfaqāt fi uṣūl al-shari'a*), the relevant passage being translated into English (al-Shāṭibī 2014, 9). These five purposes can be summed up as follows. The protection of faith denotes no apostasy, the protection of life prohibits murder, while the protection of family opposes adultery, since this can make paternity unclear. The protection of property forbids theft, while the protection of the mind bars the use of intoxicating substances. These purposes have become more prominent in recent decades as Muslim thinkers consider how to contextualise the faith in the modern day. These classically formulated purposes provide one framework by which to support the process of extracting principles from Islamic law. This process can sometimes be used to argue for departing from the letter of the law and adapting it, to a greater or lesser extent, to modern circumstances. Kurucan comments that Gülen proposes adding freedom as a sixth essential [131], notably freedom of conscience, including freedom to leave Islam. Weller acknowledges that when Gülen made this argument it was 'revolutionary' [131], though it is clearly a discussion which resonates with other Muslim writers (see Saeed 2004).

Gülen himself is quoted at length on freedom, a few pages later in Weller's work [136–37], from the interview he gave to the author. He begins by listing the five essentials and goes on to state that 'freedom of the person' is a sixth element [136]. He notes that freedom is an essential component of being human, and that 'In Islamic tradition, the freedom of choice is an essential value'. I would venture that locating differing understandings of freedom in Islamic tradition deserves more comment. Freedoms, especially individual freedoms, are in all cultures balanced by the perceived needs of the community or communities to operate within recognised limits. Notions of freedom in Islamic tradition are usually set in the context of obedience to God and to the perceived demands of the law. For example, Patricia Crone has set out how the verse 'no compulsion in religion' (Q 2: 256) was interpreted down the centuries of Qur'anic commentary. Unsurprisingly, the verse admitted of no single or simple interpretation, and constraints on the individual, particularly regarding apostasy, were not necessarily seen as in conflict with the verse (Crone 2016; see also Laskowska 2016). So Gülen's comments on freedom invite greater exploration to discover how he (and his followers) understand this appealing but complex concept.

Thinking more broadly about extending the five purposes of the law, it would be very interesting to learn more of what types of freedom Gülen would permit and prohibit, and how such proposals and decisions are to be determined. However, it may be that part of Gülen's legacy is more to raise an issue, and add his considerable profile to its cause, rather than seek to provide specific answers to it. Interestingly, Kurucan

proposes adopting Gülen's method of extending the five essentials, in a way which generates further new essentials, specifically the protection of nature and the environment [216].

Discussing change in the context of the five purposes of the law is an approach which is of course connected to the classical traditions of Islam. This raises a wider issue, the question of how one might determine that certain positions in Islam are 'proper' or 'authentic' terms used regularly in the book [145, 146, amongst various examples]. On similar lines, we read that GM is 'clearly located in the classical scholarship traditions' [216]. Gülen is likewise 'rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah' [189]. It would be interesting to know how this aligns, for example, with Weller's judgment, mentioned above, that Gülen on the issue of apostasy was 'revolutionary'. The wider question concerns how 'authentic' Islam is to be identified or defined. Discussion of this has occurred not only at the level of media and political discussion of ISIS and like-minded groups which are deemed to fall outside of Islam. (In fact, the identity of ISIS has itself been the subject of serious academic discussion; see Anchassi 2021). The question of what can be deemed 'Islamic' has been explored at length in (for example) two recent works by Shahab Ahmed and Thomas Bauer (Ahmed 2016, Bauer 2011, 2021).

Such exploration of rootedness in Qur'an and Sunnah would enable us to gauge Gülen's relationship to the tradition in which he is said to be rooted. Gülen is not aiming to be an academic, or a systematic theologian, but his teaching, as captured in his sermons and books, is open for analysis and exploration. In fact, being located in classical traditions, and being rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah, can represent two different approaches. Some trends in Muslim thought separate the two, prioritising Qur'an and Sunnah and downplaying later classical traditions or legal schools. This type of approach is often associated with Salafi thought. Other Muslims believe that they express their rootedness in Qur'an and Sunnah by basing themselves in classical traditions, such as the ideas of the law schools.

In fact, as is well known, the claim to be properly Islamic is made by a wide spectrum of Muslim believers. To mention another aspect of this discussion of authenticity in Islam, Weller mentions liberal Islam as not representing a way forward for contemporary Muslims because of the need to defeat terror on genuinely Islamic grounds [145]. But many so-called more liberal Muslims, usually defined by their desire to re-interpret rather than dismiss parts of the Qur'an, would say that they are arguing for a re-imagined form of Islam precisely on Islamic grounds, and would strongly resist the charge that they are not [145] (see *inter alia* Kurzman 1998).

Turning from an intra-Islamic discussion to an interreligious theme, one of Weller's interviewees states that he knew a couple of adults who told Gülen that they wished

to convert from Christianity to Islam [103]. In response Gülen told them not to since ‘you shouldn’t give up anything from your own culture and belief’. I should note that this and similar comments attributed to Gülen are quoted from a member of GM reporting Gülen’s words, rather than a direct quotation from Gülen himself. In the panel discussion held on Weller’s work someone commented that they were not sure that this was a correct understanding of Gülen’s view. If it were (and I emphasise the ‘if’ here), this would be very interesting given that Gülen seems also to have quite a traditional Muslim view of the Bible, in two respects. First, it has been altered so that its extant form is not necessarily a reliable guide to the original contents. Related to this, the Bible has value in containing plentiful references to the Prophet Muhammad, such as Psalm 72, which Gülen understands as referring to Muhammad’s authority to rule (Gülen 2006, 9–14). Gülen’s attitude to religious conversion is a topic which deserves separate study in itself. It should be noted that this discussion occurs in the context, in Weller’s book, of various other quotations from Gülen, and from others about him, stating that he sees the Abrahamic faiths as being fundamentally similar, even though they disagree on details [103–04]. Weller also notes that Gülen’s interest in interreligious relations predated the events of 9/11. He sought out a synagogue in Edirne as a young man, showing that his interest in relations with other faiths was motivated not by political or any other expediency, but was pursued in obscurity for no apparent public gain. A long quotation, of over a page, from one of the members of GM, emphasises the risks Gülen has taken in seeking to breach religious boundaries [108–09].

Weller draws attention to what he terms a ‘theological insecurity’ in some contemporary Muslims, which exists over and above any social and political insecurity, though it may be related to it [114]. This theological insecurity is a lack of ‘the kind of theological confidence in the ultimacy of the divine to which Islam calls humanity’. In Weller’s view, for some Muslims this insecurity leads to appeals to the use of force, and not just appeals but in some cases violent radical action. Weller seeks to explore ‘the alternative hermeneutics offered by Fethullah Gülen that leads to a proper Islamic confidence’. Gülen is said to have ‘a very different starting-point’ [118], emphasising ‘the ultimate aim and goals and ends, which are concerned with the doing of peace and the whole trajectory of Islamic and of human development, rather than taking the conflicts that have occurred as the hermeneutical key to understanding the Qur'an and Islam’ [119]. This is all based on Gülen’s re-reading of the Prophet’s life designed to focus on peace and peacemaking. Again, it would be fascinating to hear a more fully-orbed exploration of how Gülen, and the interviewees, relate to the varied aspects of Islamic scripture and history which involve both peace-making and what could be termed the sacred use of force. It is not that Gülen’s approach is not important, but there is a need to hear more about how it is arrived at, on what basis certain strands of teaching and example are prioritised over

others, and how the full range of attitudes to peace and its alternatives are understood. This has been the subject of serious study in recent years through the research project *Legitimate and Illegitimate Violence in Islamic Thought* (LIVIT), which has generated a number of important volumes (Gleave and Kristó-Nagy 2015).

Fundamentally, Gülen is said to advocate a religion of love. Sufism is said to be at the centre of his thinking [124–26], but in a way which creates an activist piety, not an approach which withdraws from the affairs of the world. One of the interviewees likens Gülen most of all to Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī in following a path from scholarly research to a ‘spiritual search’ [126]. The interviewee’s language is interesting, since he refers to ‘Gülen’s soft, velvety Islamic view that is all-welcoming, all-embracing, open to plurality that focuses on the human being, ethics, and spirituality, I believe, comes from that similarity with Ghazzali’s case’ (I retain the English as recorded by Weller here). I am not sure whether Gülen would affirm that his faith is ‘soft, velvety’ but I do not find this a convincing description of al-Ghazālī’s own thought. Al-Ghazālī is a complex figure as regards the range of views and writings he produced, but he held an earnest searching after truth alongside clear boundaries regarding the errors of certain positions, be they errors of philosophers, Christians, or others. The point here is not to delve into the thought of Al-Ghazālī any further, but to note that the perception of the member of GM quoted here reflects a somewhat selective understanding of the classical past. To what extent this would be standard amongst GM members is of course impossible to say. In sum, however, the theme of love is central to Weller’s understanding of Gülen’s legacy. Weller describes this legacy as not so much his teaching as a methodology with two foci. One is the primacy of divine love, the second a focus on the human [217, 220] within the Qur’ān and Sunnah.

A common criticism of the GM in previous years has been its followers’ unwillingness to voice criticism of the movement or its founder. However, Weller’s book includes a section on this very theme. This criticism has been set free, if not directly caused, by the traumatic events around the attempted coup in Turkey in 2016. As Caroline Tee comments, following the clampdown on GM after the attempted coup, ‘For the first time, GM insiders have spoken out critically about Fethullah Gülen and his leadership. Such criticisms had previously only been voiced by those who had left the GM’ (Tee 2021, 105). Weller records some of this internal criticism (173–85), such as the criticism of key (unnamed) decision makers for ‘domineering practices’ [180]. Weller’s interviewees also identify issues inherent in running an organisation. One is the need for greater diversity on GM’s governing board, specifically a need for greater female and non-Turkish representation, and even involvement of non-Hizmet people [198]. Secondly, there is discussion of whether Hizmet spins off too many organisations, with some voices arguing that it would be

better to have its members involved in already existing non-Hizmet entities which are doing like-minded work [198]. A greater openness to internal debate, including its being aired to non-GM members, may help to alter positively the profile of GM amongst the wider public. And it is worth noting that this section on self-criticism is included in a book made possible by funds through the Dialogue Society itself, which is to the credit of the Society.

To conclude, Weller's book gives us insight into the views of a circle of Hizmet adherents, who are not afraid to be critical of the movement at times, while remaining committed, perhaps even devoted, to it. It also includes a valuable interview with Gülen himself. There is less information on how Gülen and his followers regard or deal with positions which differ from the classical heritage of Islam but, looking forward rather than back in time for a moment, Gülen notes that we must 'review our understanding of Islam' [215], a fascinating and provocative statement. What direction that review will take will depend not only on Gülen himself, but on those who carry on the movement after his death. This is openly discussed in a final section of the book, which asks to what extent the remarkable capacity of Gülen to 'break through' [240] will be continued. By 'breaking through' Weller refers to various taboos, be they political, cultural, or religious, which he considers GM to have challenged. Presumably, though this is not mentioned, another aspect of that breaking through is the large movement which Gülen himself has been able to attract and maintain in the cause of pursuing his aims. Weller argues that Gülen's emphasis on 'love and the human' [241] could yet offer something 'important and distinctive' to addressing 'shared global human problems.' The relevance of this agenda is not in doubt.

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