

The Idea of Europe will be fulfilled by Muslim Turkey: *Nurculuk* arguments

“A community’s survival depends on idealism and good morals, as well as on being able to reach the necessary level in scientific and technological progress”, says the Turkish preacher Fethullah Gülen.¹ He and millions of others in what is called the *nurculuk* movement argues that the dominant Western civilization has lost the good morals, and that many Muslim movements lacks the necessary interest in science and technology.

In this presentation I have two objectives. The main one is to present how three generations of representatives of the *nurculuk* movement, one of which is Fethullah Gülen, argue when they see Muslim Turkey as a possible fulfilment of the idea of Europe. My other objective is to suggest an interpretation of the presented thinkers and their texts as a kind of border thinking. That could contribute to the theorizing on borderland identities and open for a more complex understanding of the idea of Europe. My hope is that this will shed some light on the debate on Turkey’s place in Europe and the European Union.

Turkey identifies itself as a European state. The official identification has also been strongly secular. But the majority of Turkey’s citizens have always identified themselves as Muslims. These differing identifications have come to the front in the coverage of Turkey’s negotiations to become a member of the European Union. But is there really an opposition between these identifications? Can Turkey not be a Modern Muslim European state, whose citizens identify themselves as Muslim and European? Many, among them for example French president Sarkozy, seem to have a firmly negative answer to that question. In Turkey there are more and more people that are involved in formulating such a European Muslim identity.² One important actor in this process is the *nurculuk* movement that engages at least six million people in Turkey today. And they are gaining more participants, in Turkey and around the world.³

The founder of this movement was the Kurdish imam Ustad Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1877-1960).⁴ Said Nursi was deeply involved in the transformation from

¹ Gülen, M. Fethullah, *Toward a global civilization of love and tolerance*, The Light, New Jersey, 2004, p. 208.

² On the ruling Justice and Development party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) as an actor in this process, see Duran, Burhanettin, “JDP and Foreign Policy as an agent of transformation” in M. Hakan Yavuz (ed.), *The emergence of a new Turkey: Democracy and the AK Parti*, University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, 2006.

³ Yavuz, M. Hakan, *Islamic political identity in Turkey*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2003, p. 11.

⁴ For his biography, see Vahide, Sükran, *Islam in modern Turkey: An intellectual biography of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, SUNY Press, Albany, 2005.

the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic, but as the Republic grew more and more laicist-secularist he came to be considered a threat and was put in house arrest up to his death in 1960. During all those years in exile Said Nursi composed a work of several thousand pages called the *Risale-i Nur*. It was distributed in secrecy and gained many devoted readers and students. The movement called nurculuk is not an organisation with members, nurculuks are all those that regularly get together in study groups to read and discuss the *Risale-i Nur*. It is of course very hard to estimate their number.

The most influential nurculuk preachers today is Fethullah Gülen (1938-). Gülen has a very strong position in the “religions dialogue industry” in the United States, and is one of the most widely spread Muslim preachers world wide.⁵ He got his stately imam licence in 1959. In the 1960ties he was one of the leaders of the Association for Fighting Communism in Turkey with close ties to right wing nationalistic organisation the Turkish Hearth (*Türk Ocağı*). But he distanced himself from their connections to political violence and as Said Nursi before him instead worked outside politics to change people’s minds to build a better society.⁶ For every year he has attracted more and more followers and has become more and more international in his approach. In the 1990ties he stated to stay in Pennsylvania and since 1999 he lives there. With an increasing professionalism the different actors in the nurculuk movement spread there specific Modern Turkish interpretation of Islam over the world through books and the internet.⁷ One of the more prominent in the new generation is Ali Ünal, who among other things has produced an English translation of *the Qu’ran* with extensive interpretations.⁸

Said Nursi’s and Fethullah Gülen’s works are read by millions of people in over 20 languages. There are over 250 schools outside of Turkey that are run according to the educational ideas of Gülen, mainly in Central Asia and the Balkans, but also in most countries in South East Asia and one in almost every Western country.⁹ The nurculuk connected daily *Zaman* is one of Turkey’s leading news paper, with a daily English edition, it is also published in over ten countries in their respective languages.¹⁰ But it is important to stress that

⁵ Interview with Rev. Dr. Stephen J. Sidorak JR., *Muslim-Christian Dialogue Group of Connecticut*, at Akgün Otel, Istanbul, 19 Nov-06.

⁶ Özdalga, Elisabeth, “Worldly asceticism in Islamic casting: Fethullah Gülen’s inspired piety and activism”, *Critique*, vol. 17, 2003, pp. 101.

⁷ Among others: www.nur.org, www.fgulen.org, www.sozler.com.tr, www.thelightpublishing.com, www.interfatihdialog.org, www.dislam.org.

⁸ *The Qu’ran with annotated interpretation in Modern English by Ali Ünal*, The Light, New Jersey, 2006.

⁹ Agai, Bekim, “Discursive and Organizational Strategies of the Gülen Movement”, conference paper, <http://en.fgulen.com/content/category/293/294/31/>, [12 Nov. -07]

¹⁰ www.zaman.com.

nurculuk is not a religious order or an organisation. It is very hard to say who represents who and what the connections between different activities are.

Bediüzzaman Said Nursi's Damascus sermon 1911

Like a whole line of contemporary thinkers in Arabic contexts, like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Qasim Amin and Rashid Rida, the Kurdish imam Ustad Bediüzzaman Said Nursi talks about the need for Islam to regain its fundament and realise that it is as much its own short comings that has made Europe into the leading power in the world.¹¹ One of his first appearances in front of a larger audience was at the Sermon he held in the Ummayyad mosque of Damascus in early 1911. The sermon was published in Damascus the same week and republished in Arabic in Istanbul in 1922. In 1951 Said Nursi himself translated it into Turkish with additional comments, and included it in his collected work *Risale-i Nur*.¹² My presentation of Said Nursi's thought will build on that Turkish version from the 1950s. According to Islam there are two main paths to knowledge: the Qu'ran and the Creation. Modern science has woken man and shown him the true nature of humanity and the Creation; it has done this by using reason in the way that the Qu'ran again and again urges us to do.

Therefore, in the future when reason, science and technology prevail, of a certainty that will be the time the Qu'ran will gain ascendancy, which relies on rational proofs and invites the reason to confirm its pronouncements.¹³

In the early twentieth century Said Nursi saw that the spread of scientific thinking in Europe had made the Europeans get rid of their ignorance, barbarity and their bigotry in religious matters. Now Europe could finally be open to the Qu'ran's rational proofs of its truth. If we sharpen his formulations just a bit we might say that the Enlightenment was merely a step on the road to the Islamisation of Europe. The Enlightenment was needed to make the Europeans rational enough to understand Islam and become Muslims. But the spread of science was a progress also for those who had been Muslims for a long time. Many within Islam had lost their contact with Islam's fundamental message and sunken into superstition and ignorance. Said Nursi's task was to show that there was no opposition between science and Islam. Even if the European civilisation had given birth to modern science and thereby could explain how the Creation

¹¹ On the contemporary Arab thought see Hourani, Albert, *Arabic thought in the liberal age: 1798-1939*, Oxford University Press, London, 1962. When defending himself in a court-martial in 1909 Said Nursi referred to al-Afghani and Abduh as his predecessors on the issue of Islamic unity. Vahide, p. 22.

¹² Vahide, Sükran, *Islam in modern Turkey*, pp. 94 & p. 323.

¹³ Said Nursi, Bediüzzaman, *The Damascus sermon, From the Risale-i Nur collection*, Sözlük publications, Istanbul, 2001, p. 32.

functions, it wasn't built on virtue and righteousness. It was built on "lust and passion, rivalry and oppression".¹⁴ European civilisation as a whole has been dominated by evil powers that have led it to try to dominate the rest of the world for its own gains.

A just and good civilisation can be brought about only when the scientific and technological progresses made in the West are put under the guidance of Islam and within the limits of the *Shariah* that ensures a peaceful future for everyone. The *Shariah* bears the ideals of constitutionalism and opposition to despots; that is not something Islam has to learn from Europe. Said Nursi thought that such a civilisation could come about in a reformed Ottoman Empire that took Islam as its national unifying principle and symbol. In the period up to the formation of the Turkish Republic he was an active political voice arguing that the only road to national unity and a constitutional state was by having the *Shariah* as the state's foundation. Islam is above politics, Said Nursi says, but all politics could and should be a tool for Islam and its truths, as long as Islam never becomes reduced to a tool for politics. When the modernistic groups gained control over the political process he abandoned politics and used all his strength to save and further spirituality on an individual level, rather than a political one. When the democratic party won the elections in 1950 the circumstances changed and Said Nursi once again tried to gain influence in the political sphere. No matter what period in his life one examines he always holds forth the positive importance of science for true Islam, and he always emphasises that it has to be conducted within the limits of the *Sharia*. Thus can a civilisation taking the best from Europe and Islam be created and the true Idea of Europe be fulfilled.

Fethullah Gülen: Towards a global civilisation of love and tolerance

The most influential propagator for Said Nursi's teachings during the last 20 or 30 years has, as already mentioned, been Fethullah Gülen. His message is in many ways an updated and more accessible version of many of Said Nursi's foundational ideas. One important change is that the good civilisation to be created with the merging of European and Islamic Ideas with Gülen has become much more Turkish. Gülen often points to Turkish Islam with its Sufi strands as being more focused on tolerance and love than the Arabic interpretation of Islam. This makes Turkey into a place with unique possibilities to complete the developments that so far have taken place separately in Europe and in Islam, and create a global civilisation of love and tolerance.

Gülen have grown up and been educated in the secular Turkish Republic.¹⁵ He has thereby had a natural relationship with Western culture and philosophy and

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁵ On Gülen's biography, see Gülen, Fethullah, *Advocate of dialogue*, The Fountain, Fairfax, 2000, pp. 1.-42.

relates to it closer than Said Nursi who speaks about the importance of science to understand Islam correctly in general terms.

Throughout his writings Gülen tries to construct a contrapuntal Western scientific canon representing true progress. He builds a platonic tradition more responsive to the spiritual dimensions that positivism has denied, with devastating outcomes, according to Gülen.

Bergson, Eddington, J. Jeans, Pascal, Bernhard Bavink, and Heisenberg are just as important in Western thought as Comte, Darwin, Molescholt, Czolba, and Lamarck. Indeed, it is hard to find an atheist scientist and philosopher before the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁶

Gülen doesn't say much about what it is in these writers' and scientists' works that he thinks is important. There are names that give his argumentation legitimacy and strength and they fill a rhetorical rather than a theoretical function. Here it is important that he speaks about Europe as a something to admire and follow, but also as something lacking certain qualities that the Islamic tradition can contribute with. Materialistic conclusions drawn from European philosophy and European scientific developments are not only contrary to the message of the Qu'ran, but they are not scientifically valid or representative of the big philosophers of European modernity such as Descartes, Leibniz, Kant and Hegel, Gülen states.¹⁷

Ali Ünal: Islam addresses contemporary issues

Ali Ünal explains that there are different kinds of laws governing the world, those that should govern the life of the Islamic *ummah* are in the *Shariah*, those that shall govern nature are the laws that God has placed in nature and that the scientists call natural laws. It is important to see that the natural laws are divine laws, and to realise that they are Gods way of keeping order in the Creation and that they therefore do not stand above Gods active involvement in the Creation. Ünal also claims that there is a difference between absolute, general and relative truths. Absolute truths are about such matters as for example god's existence. Scientific laws are general truths, they have exceptions and are mere theories about Creation that will develop and be adapted to according to their time and place. Relative truths are those truths that are totally dependent on the perspective of the beholder, they re only true in relation to one specific place, time and disposition.¹⁸

¹⁶ Gülen, M. Fethullah, *Global civilization of love and tolerance*, pp. 148.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 149.

¹⁸ Ünal, Ali, *Islam addresses contemporary issues*, The Light, New Jersey, 2006.

Ünal develops his arguments in a closer relation with the canonical figures of the West, and also uses Western critique of positivism to argue that religion, and in particular Islam, is the future. The interest in religion is growing everywhere, while modernity is instead gaining more and more critics and opponents. Many claim that religion leads to fanaticism and violence, Ünal writes. But since the eighteenth century all extermination and most of the killings in the world have been in the name of entities like modernity, progress, the white race, and communism. The most important factor behind western science and technology is the resources that the colonial conquest of the world gave the West, Ünal says. To say that religion is the source of violence in modern times is considered historically wrong.¹⁹

If handled in the correct way science and technology are positive values that can create wealth and wellbeing and lead us into a happy future. For this to be, they have to be held back by a respect for Creation. This will be the case in a Islamic modernity. “Seeing religion and science or scientific studies as two conflicting disciplines is a product of the Western attitude toward religion and science.”²⁰ It was already with Paul that the Christian relegation of nature and this world to a lesser domain started, claims Ünal and traces the denial of this world through Western Christian history and argues that this led to a rift between rationality and religion. There is also a somewhat closer discussion about Descartes role in the development of this dualism, which leads him to a different opinion than Gülen. For Gülen it is important that Descartes was a Christian, for Ünal it is more important that he strengthens the dualism that leads to materialism and Western modernity’s disconnection from religion.²¹ This is a disconnection that he claims never have taken place in Islam. “More than 700 [Qur’anic] verses urge people to study natural phenomena and to think, reason, search, observe, take lessons, reflect, and verify.”²² The temporary civilisatory backwardness of the Islamic world came about because the Muslims forgot this and left scientific studies to materialistic scientist in the West. With environmental disasters and ruthless militarisms it has now become clear what devastating results this division between reason and spirituality leads to. It is high time Islam takes on the civilisational lead and fulfils the Idea of Europe and puts progress in the service of man as a whole: with body, spirit and soul. That is Ünal’s message.

Nurculuk and border thinkning

Are the nurculuks modern? Is that a question that can be answered? Is it even a meaningful question? I think it is a strange question that is asked all too often,

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 46 and 63.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 58.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 79.

²² Ibid., p. 81.

and the questioners don't really seem to have thought about what they are asking for. Are they reliable? Are they dangerous? Or: are they like us?

The organisation of the nurculuk movement can be seen as an almost too fitting example of network societal organisation. They are very successful on the internet. They dress modern; they speak in the modern *lingua franca* of English. They are (more and more) well versed in modern science and technology. From these perspectives they are very modern, or even post modern.

But the interpretation of Islam they have is in many ways traditionalistic. They are conservative in the way that they want to draw attention to certain lost strands of the Islamic tradition. They say there is no such thing as Modern Islam; that Islam doesn't have to become modern to be acceptable or good.

A good way to analyse the nurculuk views on the relation between Islam and Europe is to see them as an example of border thinking. It is a way to create a new global design from the perspective of a local Turkish history. Walter Mignolo has argued that every global design is controlled by a local history, even if it often tries to put itself forward as a universal perspective.²³ Modernity has so far been dominated by the local histories of North-western Europe, Islam from Arabic local histories. Nurculuk can be seen as an attempt to establish a new global design from a Turkish local history. And that Turkish or maybe better Anatolian locality has for a very long time been a borderland where European and Islamic influences have intermingled and mixed in the different layers of local traditions.²⁴

Said Nursi can be seen as a border thinker that from his Kurdish background propagates for an Islamic nationalism and *shariah* based constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire. To further these interests it was important for him to keep the Arabic writing as a pan-Islamic identity marker and link to pan-Islamic communication. To communicate his message about nationalism, scientific rationalism and constitutionalism, values that can be seen as European ones, he used the Turkish language. But his Turkish is a more Islamic one, rich in Arabic and Persian words and forms. At the same time he is thinking from the borderland of Islam and Western positivistic modernity. He was all his life

²³ The concepts of border thinking and local histories/global designs are taken from Mignolo, Walter D., *Local histories/global designs: coloniality, subaltern knowledges, and border thinking*, Princeton studies in culture/power/history, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999. I develop this theme further in Grinell, Klas, "Beyond East and West: Fethullah Gülen and border thinking", in Ihsan Yilmaz (ed.), *Peaceful coexistence: Fethullah Gülen's initiatives in the contemporary world*, Leeds Metropolitan University Press, London, 2007.

²⁴ I take the concept of borderland from Anzaldúa, Gloria, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The new Mestiza*, 2nd ed., Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco, 1999.

involved in a struggle over Turkey's border identity, whether it was Muslim or modernistic, or both?

In contrast with Nursi, Gülen and Ünal are rather located in a borderland between European/Global and Turkish/Islamic. They both live in the United States and lead their lives along very different borders than Nursi did.

The concept of borderland must be read deconstructively. Turkey may be a typical borderland between Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East. But any region is a borderland in some aspects. There are no uncomplicated national identities, there are always cultures living without care for national borders. All thinking is in some way border thinking. It is a myth that there are people that have ever felt themselves altogether at home in European rational modernity. To understand this we could make a broad use of the concept of intersectionality.

Intersectionality is a concept developed within feminist theory, at first by women of colour as a way to show how main stream feminists have tended to universalise the experiences and conditions of white middle class women in theories of gender oppression. To stress the fact that there are factors besides gender that make up the specific way any person is oppressed feminists of colour developed the concept of intersectionality. Categories like gender, race and class are simultaneous and intersecting, and any one of them cannot be said to be prior or more fundamental. They always intersect in any particular and localised situation. Many of those who use the concept of intersectionality also stresses that categories aren't fixed – the understanding of gender or race are always construed in complex relation to other factors. The different factors in play always constitute each other. A broader use of the concept of intersectionality have been criticised because it often misses that the concept was used to analyse oppression and power. It is a concept to see and analyse the intersections of different power structures, not merely a metaphor for multicultural identities.²⁵

I want to use the concept to bring in power as a factor in the analysis of the borderland. Along some axis the Nurculuk border thinkers speak from above, along others from below. They are all male and partake in a patriarchal discourse from the dominant perspective. But they are Muslim, and as such from the unprivileged side of Turkish official identification. Nursi is from a Kurdish minority, Gülen from the Turkish majority, and so on... Very few persons are privileged in all sections, a binary opposition between in and out is to coarse,

²⁵ Gillman, Laura, "Beyond the Shadow: Re-scripting race in women's studies" in *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2007, pp 119. For an early and important critique of 'bland intersectionality', see Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, "On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberal Education." in *Cultural Critique* 14, 1989–90.

and an underdog perspective on one axis cannot be universalised as a representation of the oppressed as such. This application of the concept of intersectionality is not all together true to its feminist intentions; the gender axis is to invisible in this article. With that acknowledged I still think the concept is important to high light the power relations in the borderland.²⁶

Seeing Turkish thinking as border thinking must not lead to an exotification of Turkey. The borderland is plurilingual, and at least every one that does not have English as a mother tongue is a border thinker by necessity. There is no difference of kind between different borders, but there are important differences of degree between every specific borderland.

What is the idea of Europe, then?

I hope I have been able to show that it for every generation becomes increasingly difficult to pin the nurculuk proponents to a specific tradition. They take their arguments form Western philosophers and scientists as well as from the Qu'ran, the *Hadiths* and Islamic theologists and thinkers. They say studying chemistry is as important as reading the Qu'ran. In the texts I have discussed here they often sweep over traditions rather than engage in discussions about details. That is way it is hard to know exactly how their global civilisation of love and tolerance is meant to be. They claim to take all the positive aspects of the Idea of Europe and fulfil it by reuniting it with the spirituality and respect for the creator that Islam contains.

Still, after reading this article, the idea of Europe is something very vague and opaque. It is obvious that there can be very different interpretations of the content of this idea. Otherwise it would be impossible to understand how it can be used by so different camps. The pietistic Muslim missionaries of the Nurculuk use the same positive symbol as those saying that Europe and the European Union cannot contain Muslim Turkey.

What are the different aspects of the idea of Europe? Often we take Europe to be a geographical concept. But where are the geographical borders? They do not coincide with existing national borders. They never have. In the southeast the Ottoman Empire and its heir Turkey blurs the European lines. Most of the riches, the administrators and the cultural elite of the Ottoman Empire came from its oldest parts around the preconstantinopolitan capital of Edirne in Thrace and the Eastern Balkans – geographical Europe. In that respect the Ottoman Empire was a European empire. It was never, until its very last two-three years a confessional state. But the Ottoman sultan was the guardian of Islam, the caliph,

²⁶ This is also relevant since Gloria Anzaldua, although she doesn't use the concept intersectionality in *Borderland/La Frontera*., is an important reference within that field. See Gillman, Laura, "Beyond the Shadow".

and the majority of the land he controlled where Muslim lands outside of Europe. But he lived in Europe, on the northern shores of the Bosphorus.²⁷ Geography turns out to be a difficult delineator of Europe.

The aspect of religion then arises, as it does in any effort to understand Turkey's Europeanness. Those wanting to keep Turkey outside of Europe say that the idea of Europe is closely tied, and even born within, Christianity. Without Christianity there is no true European identity. The Nurculuks alter this argument just a little to state that the idea of Europe is closely tied to, and even born within, Abrahamic religion. But many of today's representatives of Europe have denied this fact. They think Europe means positivism and unreligious, even anti-religious, rationalism. The Nurculuks say their way is more in tune with the idea of Europe since it is a religious way, an Abrahamic way. Theirs is the true way of Jesus, they say. The meaning of Europe's relation to religion also becomes complex and contested.

Another important aspect of the idea of Europe is scientific and technological progress. These are positive values for most defenders of Europe. But today many people say that this belief in, and dependence on, progress leads to disastrous effects on nature and now threatens our lives. In green political circles this can lead to a disconnection from the idea of Europe. The idea of Europe is essentially destructive and has to be abandoned. This is not the Nurculuks argument. The destructiveness is not something contained in science; it is an effect of the materialistic ideologies misunderstanding science to be the only valid way of understanding life. Science has always needed the guidance of religion. The true and original idea of Europe contained this knowledge and the Nurculuk's message is in accordance with this true Europeanism, they state.

Democracy, constitutionalism, human rights and such values are often perceived as European, and they might be central in the idea of Europe, but that fact must not be misunderstood as implying that they only exist in the European tradition. They are as Muslim as they are European, Nursi said, they are the core values of the *Shariah*.

These are only some examples. Meeting the Nurculuk's message can make us see the tensions and complexity in the idea of Europe clearer. 'Europe' is a contested concept, we could say, or within other theoretical frames it can be called a floating signifier that can be attached to different chains of references according to different political and spiritual aims. There is no direct link between the signifier and any signified object, the signifier rather gets its meaning in relation to other signifier in a certain discourse and ideology within

²⁷ Historical grounds for this argument can be found in Zürcher, Erik J., *Turkey: A Modern History*, 3rd ed., I.B. Tauris, London, 2004.

which the signifier seems to have a specific meaning. But that meaning is ideological, and political debate is a mean to make it seem as if ones own understanding of the signifier is the only possible one. Saying that Turkey is not European, or that it is European, are both political statements.²⁸

There are many different ideas about what Europe is, and there are no objective criteria to judge whose idea correspond with reality. The Idea of Europe is so complex that even opposing views can find support for their argument within it. Reading Nurculuk writers can make this clearer to us, as it gives an insight into how Europe can be perceived from a Turkish perspective. Is it plausible to see Muslim Turkey as a fulfilment of the idea of Europe? It is at least possible.

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²⁸ This is a sweeping application of the language of Laclau, Ernesto & Mouffe, Chantal, *Hegemony & socialist strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, London, 1985.

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