Gülen on Nature of Knowledge: Bridging Science and Spirituality

Zenno Noeralamsyah
UIN Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten

Abstract: This article aim to explore perspective of Fethulleh Gülen about knowledge. The idea that science and religion coalesce in the structure of the universe has been expressed by Western philosophers, that contributed to the almost complete separation of intellectual and scientific activities from religion. In this view of dualism, science and religion both find their apotheosis and its keeping religion and science separating by an unbridgeable chasm. The ontological argument of the idea of giving birth to materialism, which supposes that the nature of existence based on matter. Associated with this, Fethullah Gülen offers a new typical scientific approach that will fuse scientific knowledge and religious beliefs closely associated with spirituality, reconfigures modern understandings of science and faith to relieve the dichotomous presumption of the reason-revelation divide. He is deeply interested in the problematic of the relationship between religion and science, while he does not reject the modern scientific approach, neither does it deify it. The essence of the philosophical thought of Fethullah Gülen (who was otherwise known simply as Hoca Effendi) is that understanding the religious texts and the creeds of Islam should be performed using sufi interpretation and commentary by transmission, without denying current context. In Gülen’s view, religious belief and scientific reason should be combined, for they are a single truth with two expressions. Therefore, the unification of physics and metaphysics in the nature of knowledge, fundamental concept of bridging science and spirituality, both traditional and modern influences in Gülen's treatment of science will be analyzed in this article, to examine what nature of knowledge is in accordance with Gülen's worldview.

Keywords: physics and metaphysics; religious belief; reason-revelation divide

Introduction
Cross-cultural society and inter-religious community of scholars all over the world talked about Fethullah Gülen's thoughts and the Hizmet (Service) Movement, or Gülen’s Movement. They see him as a peace activist, an intellectual, a contemporary Islamic scholar, a mentor, author and poet, a great thinker and a spiritual guide who has devoted his life seeking the solutions for society's ills and their spiritual needs. They see the movement he helped to nurture as a movement dedicated to education, but an education of the heart and soul as well as of the mind, aimed at reviving and invigorating the whole being to achieve competence and providing goods and services useful to others.1 Talked about Hoca Effendi Fethullah Gülen (henceforth referred to as Gülen) and his brilliant

thought means combining two-sided issues; a breadth thinking of philosopher concurrently with a depth of sufi spirituality. Moreover, the issue lifted discussion here is his views and attitudes towards positive sciences and his way of reconciliation of positive sciences with religious sciences, which is also very close to the nature of knowledge and its relational ties that are cannot be separated from the religious matrix and spirituality. The basic issue related to the relationship between religion and science, become a topic of epistemological discussion for a long time. To discuss Gülen’s thought of this problem, Osman Bakar concentrated three issues pertaining to the essential topic of the relation between religion and science, based on his writings in *The Essential of Islamic Faith* (2004): 1) the relationship between religious and scientific truths; 2) the Islamic view of the modern scientific approach to nature; and 3) the approach of the Qur’an to science. But we may also find his epistemological outlooks scattered in many different books and published writings, he asserts this throughout his works.

The basic issue related to bridge religion and science, become a topic of epistemological discussion for a long time. To discuss Gülen’s thought of this problem, Osman Bakar concentrated three issues pertaining to the general theme of the relationship of religion and science, based on one of his very few books available in the English language, *The Essential of Islamic Faith* (2004): 1) the relationship between scientific and religious truths; 2) the Islamic view of the modern scientific approach to nature; and 3) the approach of the Qur’an to science. But we may also find his epistemological outlooks scattered in many different books and published writings, he asserts this throughout his works.

So, here I will present the views of Gülen on the relationship between science and spirituality. Gülen defends science as the truth comes from God as there is in religion. The first entity is always synonymous with reason and the second is something that is found deep within oneself that can be found in Muslim religious practices. This paper argues that the ideas that Gülen offers are originally an Islamic-rooted idea. He is not currently offers the new version of Islam, but rather to restore the spirit of Islam itself, which almost disappeared from the Muslim minds. Gülen suggests transcendent values of Islam rooted in faith and love of God based on the prophetic tradition, with the shades of Sufi commentaries. He presents religion as spirituality and morality, besides law and legislation. Spirituality identified as a manifestation of religious-based on the principle of divinity and faith and spirituality of science acquired from the educational process.

---

Where Does Truth Come From?

Regarding the question of “Where does truth come from?” we must also inquire “What the truth is?” this is because the two questions are very much related. The first represents a source of the truth, the second represents the nature of truth. Although the question of the nature of truth has been discussed by classic philosophers since the time of Aristotle (384-322 BC), even existed before the appearing of word “philosophy” derived from the Greek term φιλοσοφία (Philosophia) meaning “the love of wisdom”. Truth is one of the principal subjects of philosophical and religious discourse discussed according to various approaches and any sort of perspective. Aristotle's famous definition of truth and falsehood in *Metaphysics* (1011b26f.) is: “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what it is and of what is not that it is not, is true.”³, at one and the same time, was a stimulus for intellectual fervor and conflict. However, Aristotle’s well-known definition of truth became a foundation for the correspondence theory of truth.

According to Gülen, truth is not something the human mind produces. Truth exists independently of man and man's task is to seek it.⁴ There are two sides to the love of truth; one is constituted by knowledge while the other is constituted by faith. Indeed, while on one side of the relationship is the discovery and determination of the truth, i.e., what creates the link between human knowledge and consciousness, on the other side is the attitude adopted in relation to the truth.⁵ Arabic word for ‘truth’ is haqq (h-qq), derivative word nearby word haqiqah (reality, fact, actuality, certainty) in the meaning. In Arabic language, haqq means both 'truth' and 'reality', and these senses can be derived straight from the Qur'an.⁶ It also means, real, right, justice, genuine, worthy, and appropriate. The Qur'ān uses haqq, the conceptual opposite of bātîl means false, untrue, fallacious, vain, unfruitful, unreal, worthless, and inappropriate. In a variety of senses, not least as a divine name, in the 99 Glorified Names of Allah (al-asma al-ḥusnā) also include al-haqq which means “The Absolute Truth or The Reality”, and to designate the content of revelation. Qur’ān denoted that al-haqq (truth) is God itself,⁷ which God’s truth is absolute truth, every truth comes from God because God is truth and the source of all truth, as John Calvin's (1847) Commentaries on Titus: “All truth is from God; and consequently, if wicked men have said anything that is true and just, we ought not to reject it; for it has come from God.”⁸ Even, Qur’ān has a different concept of God than the Bible's, divinity is an epicenter of the common issues related to man’s search for truth. There is a transmissive truth inside the revelation, reasonable truth in the entire universe for

---

those who possess understanding. The mystic masters, Ibnal-'Arabi (1165-1240) describes, "The whole universe is the locus which the names of God become manifest".9 Each cosmos is the locus of manifestation of God’s existence, demonstrates the truth of God. Ibn al-'Arabi argues that the main motif of creation is nothing but the great love of God to have a relationship with the creature. He often quotes a divine saying of God: “I was a hidden treasure and I loved (alhabbatu) to be known, so I created the creatures and made Myself known to them; so they knew Me."10 This concept overlooks the creation of the universe by a necessity of the divine nature which God manifests Himself in His creation by divine will. If the creation of the universe has a purpose and sign of truth, this must be reflected in its nature and structure, and hence in scientific truth.

Elsewhere, the title “al-haqq” is also attributed to the nature of hereafter either heaven (al-jannah) or hell (al-nār) and used to refer to revelation, thus I note it is not a title exclusively referring to God. The great Shafi‘ite theologian al-Ghazzāli says that God is al-Haqq because he is ‘the One truly existing in itself, from which every true thing gets its true reality’.11 The absoluteness of God’s truth manifested to religion, religion here means recognizing God and His absolute and transcendental Oneness; acquiring spiritual purity by acting in His way; arranging relationships in His name and according to His commandments, and feeling a profound interest in and love for all creation on His account.12

A Metaphysical Way to Bridge The Gap Between Religion and Science

To bridge the gap between between scientific reason and the spirituality of religion, Gülen build his way by his epistemological beliefs, which can be called the "metaphysical bridge", between science and spirituality. But first, we must get clear about the word ‘metaphysics’ and the concept of it. Its use was based on the order of the texts published editions of the writing of the Greek philosopher Aristotle. The chapters on "physics" were followed by chapters on what Aristotle himself called "first philosophy," al-falsafah al-ūlā.

Metaphysics is a branch of Philosophy, even be one of the most difficult in it discourse. Metaphysics is the philosophical investigation of the even more fundamental principles of reality and an inquiry into the nature of being as being and entity as such. Metaphysics as a term taken from Greek words μετά (metà) (meaning "beyond" or "after") and φυσικα (physikà) (meaning "physical"). Kant’s philosophical question about metaphysics in his Prolegomena is “Is metaphysics possible at all?”, what then directly formulated that this question must not be answered by skeptical objections to particular assertions of an actual metaphysics (for at present we still allow none to be valid), but out of the still problematic

---

10Ibid., p. 127.
12Pearls of Wisdom, p. 9.

concept of such a science.¹⁴ So the term I mentioned before used to express an epistemological work of Gülen to make an Islamic spiritual concept in looking at the position of knowledge, including positive science, in the perspective of Gülen’s Islamic thought, but then ruled out the derived polemics on the subject of metaphysics as a philosophical disputation.

Although we cannot equate Gülen with his predecessor Ibn al-'Arabi, known as al-Shaykh al-Akbar (the Greatest Master), sufi influence seems to be most dominant in the intellectual framework of Gülen's thoughts on religion and science.¹⁵ Gülen more appropriately aligned with, 13th century Muslim Sufi poet-preacher of Anatolia, Maulana Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207-1273). Nevertheless, we cannot say that Gülen just relies on the methodology of sufi commentary on the Qur'ān (al-tafsīr al-sūfī) and denies the other ways. Besides giving Qur'ānic verses traditional interpretations which refers to the methodology of either interpreting the verses using other verses or the commentary of the Qur'ān through transmitted prophetic tradition and based on what was transmitted by the Companions of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), in many cases He interprets certain verses according to subjective opinion and also in a metaphysical perspective, gives an inner or esoteric dimensions of consciousness and existence.

The sufi modesty of Gülen's lifestyle does not delimitate him to pay attention to global problems. The major problem in the world today, according to Gülen, is lack of knowledge which includes the production and control of knowledge, as well as acquiring existing knowledge. Producing, maintaining and disseminating knowledge can only be achieved through quality education, not by politics or force.¹⁶ Gülen means by education is an education of the heart and soul as well as of the mind, aimed at reviving and invigorating the whole being to achieve competence and providing goods and services useful to others. Education is one of the most important factors in the understanding of human life. The main duty and purpose of human life are to seek understanding. The effort of doing so, known as education, is a perfecting process through which we earn, in the spiritual, intellectual, and physical dimensions of our beings, the rank appointed for us as the perfect pattern of creation.¹⁷ But as we have seen in the Muslim world today, scientific education separated from Islamic education. The current educational institution curricula in Muslim countries is not integrated positive science into the spirituality of religion.

Gülen discerns the gap between science and religion in several minds of Muslims. Islam, to him, holistically deals with the human, as a combination of mind, heart, spirit, and body. Islam is open to scientific developments and universal realities, with all its social, cultural, economic, and political institutions. Islam considers nature a book to be read, experienced and observed in contemplation. It reveres nature as a monument due to its craftsmanship in the

¹⁵ Osman Bakar, Gülen on Religion and Science: A Theological Perspective, p. 362.
land of the hand of the Creator. God gave a man a mind and an intellect so that he could know God and the nature of creation through the thinking processes. For Gülen, the purpose of human creation is obvious: to reach our utmost goals of belief, knowledge, and spirituality; to reflect on the universe, humanity, and God, and thus prove our value as human beings.

The Holy Qur’an contains many verses, such as: Say: “Are they equal—those who know and those who don’t know?” that emphasizes the importance of knowledge and learning. It also warns that “Among His servants, only those who have knowledge truly fear God,” meaning that true piety and worship is possible only through knowledge. Confining knowledge to religious sciences devoid of reflection and investigation inevitably results in contentment with animal breeding and agriculture, in idleness and the neglect of striving in the way of God. The ultimate result is misery, poverty, and humiliation. Gülen points out that the Qur'an clearly rejects scholasticism, conjecture, imitation, and convention, and explains how Islam attaches importance to empirical knowledge, experimentation, observation, research, reasoning, and rationale by displaying such verses of the Qur'an. Then, he deals with the issue of how Islamic views of empirical science and scientific thought flourished in the early period of Islam.

For Gülen, there are two reasons for the so-called dichotomy between scientific and Islamic education. The first historical and institutional reason is the exclusion of natural sciences from the madrasa. Between the ninth and eleventh centuries, when science was part of the madrasa curricula, Muslims accomplished significant scientific developments. Second, the historical tension between science and the Medieval Catholic Church was mistakenly attributed to science and Islam, although Islam's attitude toward science has been different. Because Muslim modernists completely emulated the Western model, they applied the dualities between modern and Catholic values to the Muslim world, ignoring the peculiarities of Islam. Gülen sees failure in institutions of education as a result of veering from human values and ethics to those of material success, producing generations “devoid of any ideal.” The dichotomy between science and religion produces a “mind-worshippers” scientist, whereas a human being is a totality of physical, intellectual, psychological and spiritual components, if there is no balance between all, true happiness can never come to the life of mankind.

---

18Tradition Witnessing the Modern Age, p. 68.  
19Toward A Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance, p. 133.  
20 See Al-Zumar [39]: 9, kal yastawī alladzīna ya’lamūna wa alladzīna lā ya’lamūn.  
21 See Al-Sajdah [32]: 28, innāmā yakhshīya Allāha min ‘ibādihi al-’ulamā’.  
23Tradition Witnessing the Modern Age, p. 68.  
24 Gülen mentioned ‘madresas’, taken from Arabic word ‘madrasat/un’ (مدرسة) means ‘school’.  
25 M. Fethullah Gülen (1997) in M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito (eds), Turkish Islam and The Secular State: The Gülen Movement, (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), p. 120.  
The purpose of science education is to take a rational and scientific guide to the enlightenment of human beings and the ways of life in which humanity is destined to reach its perfection. The science that does not conduct spirituality is a burden for knowledgeable people. All human knowledge does not intended to achieve the noble goal is just a burden to the soul and mind and became useless. Keeping distance from the position of positive science (and so do the natural science) with the assumption that it leads to atheism is a puerility. Had a hunch that positive science was an opponent to religion and as means of atheism and the way toward it, is merely prejudice and ignorance. Both scientific virtue and religion are the enlightenment of the superstitious life and the materialistic society. Virtue stands on three foundations of science (al-‘ilm), prudence (al-hilm) and worship (al-‘ibādah). Science would lead a human to the prudential values, the prudent scientist would therefore eschew violence and corruption, and lead to solutions for humanity’s problems through his hands. Just like the ‘two-faced’ nuclear power, that are useful in the hands of righteous for a sustainable source of energy that can replace a significant part of the fossil fuels, but also a lethal weapon in the hands of the wicked.

Gülen offers a new typical scientific approach that will fuse scientific knowledge and religious beliefs closely associated with spirituality, reconfigures modern understandings of science and faith to relieve the dichotomous presumption of the reason-revelation divide. Kuru called Gülen’s view as “The middle way”, that is an important concept in Gülen's understanding. It is, to a great extent, similar to Aristotle's conceptualization. Gülen’s mainstream of Islamization is the middle wave Islamization, the middle way between metaphysics and materialism, faith and reason, modernity and tradition, and science and religion. Hence, unlike most other scholars, Gülen criticized the relationship between science and religion through dialogue approach and obviously born the criticism out. Marx’s harsh critique of the philosopher in Theses on Feuerbach (1845) nowadays have been removed by Gülen’s epistemological view and his obvious works, if Marx said that, “The Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.” So, Gülen saw, science that is not based on deed then its fate is decline. Gülen made changes when he thinks philosophically, he proves the silence revolution without any bloody shedding, nor coup d'etat. He is an influencer of the Hizmet Movement that is linked to more than 1.000 Gülen-inspired schools in more than 130 countries around the world, seeking to integrate science and spirituality in an effort to educate people in order to raise a “Golden Generation”

Al-Mawāzin au Adhwā ‘alā al-Tharīq, p. 11.
28 Ibid., p. 99.
29 Ibid., p. 192.
32 Al-Mawāzin au Adhwā ‘alā al-Tharīq, p. 192.
who will be advanced in science and technology, usher in humanity, service the mankind and peace-keeping of the world.

Not least, said soonest mended, as a Muslim philosopher, scholar, educational activist, founding father of the worldwide social movement in the area of human virtues, The Hizmet Movement, which is meant Service Movement, Gülen gave evidence to the field of education, social and economics, development of science and knowledge, global peace effort, inter-cultural dialogue, and call toward a global civilization. Gülen concerned with the major goal of Islam to provide mankind with a beautiful mind that gave birth to a practical and realistic code of life-based on virtue, world peace, social justice, human happiness, and well-being. Thus, it not only interpreted the world but then changed it. Gülen is not just good at talking, wrote a lot of books, contributed to many dialogues with the interfaith and cross-cultural community in the entire world, but Gülen was able to prove the influence of his thought in clear form, which represents in various Gülen-inspired educational institutions. All of Gülen’s efforts not for the sake of political purposes, but then due to be convinced that, the more intellectually and spiritually disciplined on is, the more consistent and harmonious one's thoughts and actions are. The more open to the realms beyond one's conscience is, the more Divinely inspired and guided one's manners are.\textsuperscript{33}

In many writings, books and speeches, we know that Gülen is deeply interested in the problematic of the relationship between religion and science, while he does not refuse the modern scientific reasoning, but neither does it deify it. His philosophical thought is to get the “picture” of God in the scripture of nature and the transmitted sciences. In Gülen’s view, religious belief and scientifical reason should be combined, for they are a single truth with two expressions. Therefore, the unification of physics and metaphysics in the nature of knowledge, fundamental concept of bridging science and spirituality, both traditional and modern influences in Gülen’s treatment of science are the aim of examining what nature of knowledge is. Gülen has argued that Islam as a faith is not a dogmatic theology without movement, nor a philosophical proposition without argument. A good Muslim must manifest his religiosity into action in daily life, extending from the inner dimension to outer, the balance of exoteric and esoteric aspects.

The different conditions with the tradition of Islamic thought happened in Christianity. The conflict occurred in circles of two realms. As a result, religion, that is, Christianity, was reduced to a worldly phenomenon, and it was confined to the walls of the church and the individual sphere of the world, and it became a widespread phenomenon through the process of Westernization.\textsuperscript{34} The historical problem of the early 20th century was the result of a long process of secularization that has been taking place in Western civilization since the 7th century, besides the secularization itself is a sociohistorical process. Westernization is closely related to secularization, it is a social process of Western

\textsuperscript{33}Pearls of Wisdom, p. 26.

\textsuperscript{34}Tradition Witnessing the Modern Age, p. 52-53.
society Gülen is also not all of a sudden response to the emergence of authoritarian Medieval Church in an unobjective manner or accuses without evidence as causal factor for rejection of religious belief in the name of science and knowledge. The loss of spirituality among Western society not merely as an institutional error, but also the loss of divinity vision and the loss of the idea of the sacred. Despite their claims and the assertions of their Western counterparts, it is difficult to accept that Western scientific thought, although primarily materialistic, has always been separate from spirituality and metaphysics. Modern Western civilization is based on the trinity of Greek thought, Roman law, and Christianity. This latter, at least theoretically, contributes a spiritual dimension. The West never completely discarded Platonist thinking, although it failed to reconcile it with positivistic and rationalistic philosophy. Gülen acknowledges the West as the best source of technology at the moment although, of course, Muslims would prefer the Muslim world to be the leader. Gülen gave an adequate disclosure about the relationship between science and religion in Western history without bigotry or skeptic either. He always showed the criticism in a constructive manner through dialogue, as performed by the Seljuq Sultanate in Anatolia (Turkey), with the policies that paid attention to religious tolerance and gave the rights and freedoms in the fields of religion and belief. The Seljuq Sultan even visited churches monasteries for hearing to the priests, and they made.

**Conclusion**

In brief, to bridge the gap between science and religion Gülen refers pointedly to the opinions of two in one concept of truth. He strongly states to confirm that religious belief and scientifical reason should be combined, for they are a single truth with two expressions. Both are guides to the truth, the difference only lies in its role for human life. Religion as guidance to seek the way leading to happiness in this world, and happiness in the hereafter. Science, when well used and be realized in the proper application of perception, will be like a bright torch that light the way and provides human to follow the same path. Gülen said, nothing in true religion is contrary sound thinking, common sense, and knowledge. Therefore true religion cannot be criticized from any rational point of view. Those who do not accept religion either are devoid of sound thinking and reasoning or have a wrong conception of knowledge and science.

According to Gülen’s comprehension of Islamic sources, the teachings of Islam were never as implacably opposed to the rise of science as objective knowledge, like what happened during Europe’s Middle Ages (the Dark Ages). Medieval European regarded religion as an institution established by men for various social reasons, moreover, they did not found spirituality inside. Gülen emphasizes that religion is an inexhaustible and blessed source that lays the foundation of true civilization. It is through religion that we are elevated so high

---

37 *Pearls of Wisdom*, p. 9-10.
in spirit and feelings that we make contact with metaphysical worlds, where we are "fed" to full satisfaction with all kinds of beauty, virtue, and goodness.\(^{38}\) Many current scientists reject religion, not solely by the nature of science they assumed, deemed to be anti-religion, anti-God, but rather because of the socio-historical background of Western scientist experiencing. Gülen argues that Islam advocates science and knowledge a human to love all the entities of science, scholars read and seek knowledge, the Quran encourages people to develop science, through the heavens and the earth with the power of science, not just against it. However, it must be borne in mind that the thinker of these ideas is more than Muslim scholar, philosopher, and sufi, but an actor of social change, a propagandist calls for peace and love through dialogue, not love with tongue but with acts and in reality, an educator expounds the integration of science and spirituality through both Islamic and scientific education, without skeptical outlook.

References
Bakar, Osman, “Gülen on Religion and Science: A Theological Perspective”, *The Muslim World* volume 95, no. 3 (July 2005), p. 359-72.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., p. 10.