

*Fethullah Gülen and Mohandas Gandhi:
Hizmet and Ahimsa--Convergences in Growing Deep Peace*

Dr. Jon Pahl

In this paper I discuss Fethullah Gülen and Mohandas Gandhi: Hizmet and Ahimsa--Convergences in Growing Deep Peace.

I want to begin in what might seem a slightly strange way, by confessing that I love potatoes. One of my earliest memories, in fact, is of helping my parents harvest potatoes with pitchforks and a wooden wheelbarrow in late summer at my great-grandparents' Oscar and Hilda Olsen's farm in Northeastern Wisconsin, near where I grew up. I remember the smell of my great-grandparents' root cellar, in particular, into which we wheeled loads of potatoes to be stored that would eventually make lefsa, or mashed potatoes, or boiled, baked, roasted, buttered and parslid potatoes--served with every meal. And now that I am once again living in Wisconsin, where we've resided near my extended family for the past five years, I grow potatoes in my own garden: Yukon Golds, Norland Reds, and Russets. Yummy.

I confess this strange love because potatoes will link together, in at least an amusing initial way, my two subjects for this paper--the well-known peace activist known as the "great one," the Mahatma, Gandhi--and the lesser-known but no less interesting individual, I hope you'll agree by the end of the article, M. Fethullah Gülen. They don't share everything as peace activists--one worked in South Africa and India in the first half of the twentieth century--Gandhi was murdered in 1948, and one worked in Turkey in the second half of the 1900s, and since 1999 Gülen has lived in exile in the U.S., with continuing influence across global contexts down to today. I have intuited a relationship between Gandhi and Gülen since I undertook the research to write the first critical biography of Gülen in English, published in 2019, but this article allows me to explore the correlation between the two in a disciplined way. I hope you enjoy what I've discovered--a rather clear link, or rather--a series of links, between Gandhi and Gulen, at the intersection of *ahimsa* (Gandhi's principle of non-violence) and *hizmet* (which is the Turkish word for "service," and the name given to the community or movement that Gülen has inspired).

And it all begins with potatoes. Sometime in the late 1970s, according to Irfan Yilmaz, an Istanbul businessman, Gülen, whom they call Hodjaefendi, "honored teacher," cooked a meal for a group of people close to him. The meal took place at Yilmaz' home in Istanbul. And Gülen's menu went like this: Potato soup. Meat with potato. Potato salad. Potato köfte--think meatballs made with...you guessed it, and spices. And, for dessert--I'll let Yilmaz' words tell the rest: "I suspected from the courses before that it had to be a potato dish, but I couldn't taste it. One of our friends asked [Gülen], "this dessert is really nice, what is it?" And then I jumped in and asked, "is this a potato dessert?" And Hodjaefendi said, "Yes, it is. ... We peeled one big

sack of potatoes! ... Today,” he went on, “is the meal of Gandhi.” Gandhi, Gülen explained, used to cook in one type, simply.¹ (182-3)

Born in 1938 in a very poor village in Northeastern Turkey, throughout his life Fethullah Gülen has sought, and lived, a life of simplicity. He has never married, he has never owned property, and he currently resides in a two-room apartment in a retreat center in the Pocono mountains of Pennsylvania. His bedroom features a single bed and small dresser, and his office/sitting room has a modest (for a scholar who has published over 60 books) library, and dozens of small jars of soil from the various places where he has preached over the course of his life, mostly in Turkey but also in Australia, Europe, and the U.S. Gülen is also an ardent advocate for the Muslim observance of fasting during Ramadan--and he teaches that the fast is practice in “living simply,” as he puts it regularly, “so that others may simply live.”

Gandhi, as is well known, also lived simply; in fact, he may have coined the phrase I quoted from Gülen above. Once he settled in India as an adult, Gandhi lived in an *ashram*, an intentional community dedicated to a non-mechanized lifestyle gathered around study, prayer, and activism. He also, of course, fasted--famously in hunger strikes to protest South African apartheid and the ruthless British Raj, but also as practices of discipline (which is the root meaning of the word “yoga”) to focus his own spiritual life. I am not familiar if he ever cooked with potatoes, but that he emphasized eating simply (as a vegetarian) is unquestionable.

So, we are off and running in finding correlations, if not influence, between these two spiritual thinkers Gandhi and Gülen. An affinity between the two became apparent to me early in my research, which began in 2010, and yet when I suggested it to Bekir Aksoy--one of Gülen’s longest-standing associates, he stopped me immediately. “No,” Aksoy said, “Gülen is not resisting anything, like Gandhi did. He’s not a political thinker. He’s not trying to overthrow an empire.” I remember the moment vividly--it was in the living room of my home in Philadelphia, probably in 2012. To differentiate Gülen from Gandhi in this way is important, given that Gülen has been slandered as a “terrorist” by the Turkish government since 2016. I use the term slander intentionally. I have studied Gülen and the Hizmet movement for over a dozen years, now, and I have found zero evidence--ZERO, that he harbored any political ambitions, much less desired to overthrow the government. I have studied and interviewed Gülen’s critics as well as friends of the man, and I have observed the increasingly dictatorial behavior of the current Turkish regime. The evidence is plain to me: the accusation by the Turkish regime that Gülen is a terrorist is an example of a propagandistic “big lie,” of which there are too many circulating in recent years on the global stage. So, Bekir Aksoy’s caution stands: Gülen’s life was politicized for him. He did not agree with Gandhi that all religion is political, as the Mahatma put it.

And yet, one of Gülen’s central teachings is in Turkish *müspet hareket*--consistent positive action, or patient and sincere practice of Islam--prayer, charity, fasting, pilgrimage, and so forth. It is this *müspet hareket* that constitutes the life of a person of *Hizmet*, a person of

1

service. Gülen puts it like this: “We must be as if helpless to those who hit us, tongueless to those who curse us. Even if they try to fracture us into pieces ...still we are going to remain unbroken and embrace everyone with love and compassion.” (145) Gülen’s description of *müspet hareket* sounds an awful lot like Gandhi’s description of *ahimsa*, which usually gets translated as “non-violence.” *Himsa*, in Sanskrit, means “the desire to kill,” so *a-himsa*, literally is the opposite of the desire to kill, hence, nonviolence. But Gandhi goes on: *ahimsa* “means that you may not offend anybody; you may not harbor uncharitable thought, even in connection with those you consider your enemies. To one who follows this doctrine, there are no enemies. ... If you express your love- *ahimsa*-in such a manner that it impresses itself indelibly upon your so-called enemy, [they] must return that love. ... And that requires far greater courage than delivering of blows.”²

And so, while Gandhi and Gülen differed in context and strategies, there are some definite correlations, affinities, or harmonies between them. I’ll track the resonances in how they sought to grow peace in three sections: first, in a section entitled Resignation to Truth as God, God as Truth; second, in a section entitled An Ethic of Love, Serving All the Living; and, third, a section entitled Growing Deep Peace--Fostering Trust through Education, Prayer, Engaged Empathy, Principled Pluralism, and Social Enterprise. In my conclusion, I’ll offer a word of hope--that although so-called “strong men” appear to rule the world--it truly does seem as if the bad guys are winning, in fact there’s a deeper trajectory in history, and especially on the margins, that pulls us toward and makes manifest a more cooperative, compassionate and a peaceful future, one that both Gandhi and Gülen envisioned.

Resignation to God as Truth, Truth as God

Central to the life and work of Gandhi was not only a commitment to *ahimsa*, non-violence, but also a commitment to another Sanskrit term--*satyagraha*, which is often translated as truth-force, soul-force, or “the force that is generated through adherence to Truth”³

Here’s one of Gandhi’s descriptions of what *satyagraha* is all about:

Satyagraha is not physical force. A *satyagrahi* does not inflict pain on the adversary; [they] do not seek destruction. A *satyagrahi* never resorts to firearms. ... *Satyagraha* is pure soul-force. Truth [*satya*, in Sanskrit] is the very substance of the soul. That is why this force is called *satyagraha*. The soul is informed with knowledge. In it burns the

² “What is Ahimsa,” at <https://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/ahimsa-its-theory-and-practice-in-Gandhism.html>

³ “What is Satyagraha,” at <https://www.mkgandhi.org/faq/q17.htm>

flame of love. If someone gives us pain through ignorance, we shall win [them] through love. (316)

Historically, as you can discover by watching the excellent 1982 film of his life--starring Ben Kingsley, which won the Academy Award for best picture and has held up quite well over the decades, Gandhi put *satyagraha* into practice by engaging individuals in civil disobedience to unjust laws imposed on the people of India by the British Raj. Most famously, perhaps, in 1930 he led a multitude of people in a march to the sea, where they harvested natural salt from the ocean to protest a law that required Indian people to buy British salt (and hence enrich British corporate coffers). Facing punishment for this "crime" of producing local salt, and other similar mass actions, Gandhi demonstrated the power of people to defy oppressive laws and to set the terms of their own society. And it worked: using no weapons but *satyagraha* and *ahimsa*, Gandhi helped end the British occupation of India, and bring about what is now the world's most populous democracy.⁴

Satyagraha worked, Gandhi contended, because truth-force was how we operate, ordinarily, most of the time, in everyday life. We trust each other to tell the truth. He wrote: "History is really a record of every interruption of the even working of the force of love or of the soul. Two brothers quarrel; one of them repents and re-awakens the love that was lying dormant in him; the two again begin to live in peace; nobody takes note of this. But if the two brothers ... take up arms ... their doings would be immediately noted in the Press. ... And what is true of families is true of nations. ... History, then, is a record of an interruption of the course of nature. Soul-force, being natural, is not noted in history." (318-9) Gandhi's point is an obvious one that it is easy to miss: ordinarily, every day, each moment--we trust that people will act trustworthily--that they'll stop at red lights; take their turn in line at the grocery store, and on and on.

And yet, for Gandhi, *satyagraha* was not only and not primarily a political strategy or social fact: it was also a theological conviction. "I can live," Gandhi wrote, "only by having faith in God. My definition of God must always be kept in mind. For me there is no other God than Truth; Truth is God." (43) So, *satyagraha*, truth-force, was for Gandhi God's power in action. Truth, and trustworthiness, is how God acts through people. "My religion," Gandhi wrote, "begins and ends with truth and non-violence." (11) As a Hindu, Gandhi found *satyagraha* at the heart of the *Bhagavad Gita*, no doubt the most revered sacred book among the many in the Hindu tradition. As is well known, the Gita begins with an impending battle that paralyzes the warrior, Arjuna, whose charioteer, Krishna (an incarnation of God) urges him to fight. And yet in Gandhi's reading--he wrote a commentary on the Gita; the entire scenario is a metaphor. The battlefield is life, and the weapons to be used by Arjuna are the yogas. And those yogas--of *karma*, *jnana*, and *bhakti*--all resolve, in the end, to *satyagraha*--to soul force. We are to fight

⁴ Richard Attenborough, *Gandhi* (1982), at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0083987/>

in life through the yogas of action, knowledge, and devotion. Indeed, one discovers through the practices of those yogas one's destiny, one's dharma, one's duty. So, fight!

For Fethullah Gülen, the doctrine that is at the heart of his teaching would seem the opposite of Gandhi's. The term is *rıza*, usually translated as "resignation," but meaning much more. Gülen studied, as a youth, with several Sufi teachers. Sufism is the spiritual path within Islam, which cuts across both Sunni and Shia communities. And for Sufis *rıza* means to accept *actively* what God destines. Since God is all-aware, God knows what people do. God desires people to respond to God with acts that are pleasing to God--acts of justice and mercy, acts of worship, and acts filled with goodness, beauty, and truth. God then takes pleasure in people through these acts, and people (in turn) find pleasure in pleasing God. *Rıza* finally means, then, living for God's pleasure. Gülen writes:

One can have no greater reward or higher rank than God's being pleased with him or her, which is only attainable by personal resignation to what God has decreed. . . As the greatest rank in God's sight, resignation or God's pleasure is a final target that has been sought by the greatest members of humanity, from the glory of creation [Prophet Muhammad], upon him be peace and blessings, to all the other Prophets, saints, and purified scholars who have passed the final test through sincerity, certainty, reliance, surrender, and confidence. They have surmounted many difficulties and obstacles, and bore many unendurable sufferings and torments. (112)

Rıza, in other words, is a way to fight, too.

In his own life, Gülen has experienced more than his share of difficulties and obstacles, sufferings and torments--and not only recently. Between 1960 and 1999, Gülen's most active years in public life, Turkey experienced four brutal military coups. After each coup, Gülen was arrested and taken to prison, charged with being a threat to the official secularism of the Turkish state. And each time, Gülen was eventually exonerated--after no evidence could be identified of any nefarious activities. Throughout his life, Gülen preached openly, drawing massive crowds. His popularity made him a threat to a fragile state. He was not an advocate of what has come to be called "political Islam." He has never endorsed a party or candidate. What *rıza* became through his preaching and teaching is *hizmet*--voluntary service in what sociologist Muhammed Cetin has dubbed "civil Islam."⁵ Within *Hizmet*, this voluntary service or civil Islam, following from the desire to please God, led to three ambitious initiatives that over just a few short decades grew into a global movement: to end ignorance through education; to end poverty through the generation of wealth that served the common good; and to end violence and conflict through interreligious dialogue and through agencies that promote mutual understanding and respect. Are these the activities of "terrorists?"

Over time, on that first initiative, people inspired by Gülen built hundreds of schools (especially math and science academies) in more than 130 different nations. The Gülen-

⁵ Muhammed Çetin, *The Gülen Movement: Civic Service without Borders* (Clifton, NJ: Blue Dome Press, 2010)

inspired schools in Turkey regularly sent their graduates to the most prestigious universities in the country, and a similar pattern held in Gülen-related schools around the world. I'll say more about this later. On the second initiative--wealth generation for the common good, businesses begun by people inspired by Gülen's teaching of *rıza* covered the gamut of socially-responsible enterprises--real estate and construction; a banking network incorporating Islamic principles of finance (*Bank Asya*); a disaster relief agency (*Kimse Yok Mu*--now Embrace Relief); newspapers and magazines (*Zaman* and *Sızıntı*), radio and television networks (*Samanyolu*), hospitals and clinics (*Şifa*); and countless small businesses--people of *Hizmet* worked as furniture makers, ceramic shapers, baklava bakers. And in interreligious dialogue, their third initiative, people inspired to *hizmet* as an expression of their desire to please God organized think tanks (*The Journalist and Writer's Foundation*) and public conferences on social concerns such as poverty, human rights, and gender equality (*The Abant Platforms*). Most notably--since this is how I first became aware of Fethullah Gülen--at an event in Philadelphia in 2006, people of *Hizmet* sponsored *iftar* dinners to break the Ramadan fast. Within Turkey, these *iftar* dinners brought together diverse, often conflicting, segments of Turkish society, and the same became true of the *iftar* dinners held in any country where people of *Hizmet* took up residence. It is not too strong to say that people inspired by Gülen transformed Turkish civil society as fully as Gandhi shaped India--and utterly without violence. There was a reason Barack Obama chose to make his first official State visit to Turkey in 2008: *Hizmet* gave hope that a Muslim-inspired democracy with a robust civil society was really taking root in the Middle East.

Alas, by 2012, it had begun to fall apart. Gülen consistently preached nonviolence, but people inspired by him did serve in the military, and in other positions in government, such as the police and justice system. Gülen's teaching on war and peace was akin to the Christian doctrine of just war: any act of violence was justifiable only by a legitimate authority, in self-defense, and in proportionate means to restore peace.⁶ His commitment to the rule of law and democracy was absolute: he had experienced first-hand the trauma of arbitrary military rule. Beginning in 2012, then, police and judges, some of them people of *Hizmet*, sponsored investigations and raids that exposed corruption in circles very close to the President of Turkey and his family (who had just completed building a palace for themselves with 1100 rooms). And instead of allowing the corruption inquiry to proceed, the government targeted the police and judges. The government claimed these civil servants were part of a "deep state." In time, and accelerating after 2016, anyone at all associated with Gülen was labeled by the government as part of a "terrorist" conspiracy to overthrow the government: the Fethullah Terrorist Organization, or FETO. Thousands of police, judges, military officers and soldiers, journalists, teachers, and other civil servants were summarily fired or imprisoned--often on the thinnest pretexts.

The government, increasingly beholden to a kleptocratic version of political Islam, scapegoated Gülen and people of *Hizmet* (recall--they don't hit back), and began seizing the

⁶ See *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, where he discusses this at some length under the category of "jihad"

assets associated with the schools, agencies, and networks that people inspired by Gülen had built. And this big lie worked, leading to a series of human rights violations that are ongoing and that cry out for justice. At the time I completed the biography, in 2019, the Turkish government had seized roughly \$18 billion from individuals inspired by Gülen (or accused of being close to him). Most of those assets have been redistributed through various “trusts” or “foundations” to cronies of the ruling family. That number has undoubtedly grown, since the witch-hunt continues. Newspapers, construction companies, schools, television networks, relief agencies--all closed, assets seized, employees fired, and individuals black-balled from other means of employment. Since 2016, people of *hizmet* who had the means to do so have fled the country as refugees seeking asylum--many of them under horrific circumstances. Others are in jail, on charges of “terrorism,” for serving as journalists, doctors, lawyers, scientists, bakers, taxi-drivers, historians, theologians--an entire community dedicated to pleasing God effectively purged from Turkey.⁷

So, Gülen and Gandhi have shared in suffering for *ahimsa* and *Hizmet*. Gandhi of course suffered in 1947 the partition of Muslim-majority Pakistan from Hindu-majority India--a development that grieved him deeply. And then, on January 30, 1948 Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu nationalist who thought Gandhi was too soft on Muslims. Gülen has experienced exile in the U.S. since 1999, and now endures the suffering of people close to him at the hands of a ruthless dictator--a development that grieves him deeply. And yet just as Gandhi's commitment to *satyagraha* was unwavering, Gülen continues to teach *müspet hareket* and *rıza*--counseling people inspired by him to consistent positive action in the ways of peace, and to doing everything for the pleasure of God. “Power resides in Truth,” Gülen frequently counsels, in a direct evocation of Gandhi's *satyagraha*, which of course has inspired countless movements for greater justice and peace around the globe, including the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. And while there is no way to predict the future--I am only a modest historian, after all, Hizmet has now taken root globally--in societies as diverse as Indonesia, Australia, Nigeria, Norway, Tanzania, Belgium, South Africa, Egypt, Pakistan, and the United States, to name just a few.

An Ethic of Love, Serving all the Living

Gülen's thought begins and ends with Allah, the Arabic word for God. Informed especially by his study of Sufism, Gülen applies his God-centered devotion in an ethic of love, drawing especially on the poetry of Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi--the 13th century Persian

⁷ I detail these developments in Chapter Five of the biography.

poet. Rumi's most famous poem, perhaps, is entitled "I belong to the Beloved," and it reads, in Coleman Barks' beautiful translation:

Not Christian or Jew or Muslim,
not Hindu, Buddhist, sufi, or zen.
Not any religion or cultural system.

I am not from the East or the West,
not out of the ocean or up from the ground,
not natural or ethereal,
not composed of elements at all.

I do not exist, am not an entity
in this world or the next,
did not descend from Adam
or Eve or any origin story.

My place is placeless,
a trace of the traceless.

Neither body or soul.

I belong to the beloved,
have seen the two worlds as one
and that one call to and know,
first, last, outer, inner,
only that breath breathing human being.⁸

Gülen, in the first sentences of his most accessible English work, *Toward a Global of Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, puts his spin on Rumi's insight like this:

Love is the most essential element of every being, and it is the most radiant light, and it is the greatest power; able to resist and overcome all else. Love elevates every soul that absorbs it, and prepares these souls for the journey to eternity. Souls that have been able to make contact with eternity through love exert themselves to inspire in all other souls what they have derived from eternity. They dedicate their lives to this sacred duty; a duty for the sake of which they endure every kind of hardship to the very end, and just as they pronounce "love" with their last breath, they will also breathe "love" while being raised on the Day of Judgment.⁹

Love unites a living person, a soul, with the living God, eternity. Practically, this leads Gülen to three key emphases that give shape to his love-ethic: a clarified understanding of the much-

⁸ See Coleman Barks, *The Essential Rumi* (NY: HarperOne, 2004).

⁹ M. Fethullah Gülen, *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance* (Istanbul: Tughra Publishing, 2010), p. 1.

misunderstood word *jihad*; an emphasis on forgiveness; and a nonbinary approach to life captured well by a metaphor that a person must “fly with two wings.”

Jihad is an Arabic word that simply means “struggle.” Unfortunately, and as a result of unscrupulous Islamophobia, the term has come primarily to be associated with the acts of terrorists such as Osama bin Laden, who wrote along with other al-Qaeda leaders a Fatwa or Declaration of Jihad against all Jews and Crusaders in 1998. That so-called Fatwa laid the foundation for the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. But Gülen, who condemned those attacks, and called bin Laden “a monster,” has written about the proper meaning of *jihad*, as follows: “*jihad* means using all one’s strength, as well as moving toward an objective with all one’s power ... and resisting every difficulty.” (163) Gülen clarifies that there are two applications of *jihad* in the Qur’an and in Islamic thought. One is internal, the other external. The external *jihad* is self-defensive struggle against any occupying or attacking army, declared by a legitimate authority (which bin Laden was not), and conducted in carefully circumscribed laws about the conduct of conflict (such as not killing non-combatants). But the internal *jihad* Gülen calls “the primary *jihad*,” or “the greater *jihad*.” This “greater *jihad*” is, he writes, “based on overcoming obstacles between oneself and his or her essence, and the soul’s reaching knowledge and eventually divine knowledge, divine love, and spiritual bliss.” This greater *jihad*, he goes on, “is our struggle with our inner world and ego ... [This greater *jihad*] is proclaiming war on our ego’s destructive and negative emotions and thoughts (such as malice, hatred, envy, selfishness, pride, arrogance.)” (163) For Gülen, and those inspired by him, an ethic of love meant that the primary struggle in a life of faith was toward egolessness--to lose the narrow attachments that go with being a self, and to live for others--again, with God’s pleasure in mind. Think for a moment of the whirling dervishes, whose spinning to the repeated name of God, Al-lah, Al-lah, Al-lah links heaven and Earth in a circle of love.

Obviously, a life for others is also a life open to forgive whatever is forgivable. Gülen holds to a mixed view of human nature. People can be like angels, and they can be like demons. What distinguishes one from the other is the capacity to forgive, as we are forgiven. He writes: “It is impossible for people who have given their heart to seeking forgiveness not to think of forgiving others. Just as they desire to be forgiven, they also desire to forgive. ... Is it possible for people not to forgive if they know that the road to being forgiven passes through the act of forgiving? Those who forgive are honored with forgiveness.” (27) This rule to forgive is not absolute. For Gülen, accountability must occur before forgiveness--repentance and confession are antecedents to honest forgiveness. Truth requires no less. But invoking another of his key ideas, *hoşgörü*--about which more shortly, he writes: “Our *hoşgörü* should be so broad that we can close our eyes to others’ faults, show respect for different ideas, and forgive everything that is forgivable.” (286)

Finally, then, Gülen’s ethic of love invites us to consider a nondualist or non-binary way of living, beyond us-them dichotomies. The metaphor he often cites is that people must “fly with two wings.” He uses this especially in explaining how he sees science and religion related.

Reflecting back on his own education in a *madrasa*, or theological school, he recalled that it “estranged the natural sciences” and theology. “Although the Qur’an was read,” he goes on, “the book of nature was left to the side.” The result, he goes on, is that “a clash emerged in the society, and the mind separated from the heart.” (56-7) This estrangement between head and heart, often described as a “warfare” between science and religion, would be resolved by reuniting the separate elements: to fly with two wings. Not surprisingly, Gülen organized conferences early in his career, in the late 1960’s and early 1970s, that brought together scientists and people of faith to explore together diverse questions, such as evolution--in what were at the time unprecedented gatherings in Turkish society.

Gandhi’s diagnosis was similar to Gülen’s, if harsher: the materialist foundation of industrial “civilization” in the West had impeded the integration of spiritual values and practices across society. The arrogance of industry, the ruthlessness of political and economic activity across capitalist and socialist societies, and the enduring colonialist practices of Empires all needed tempering with human compassion. Gandhi put his ethic of love--*ahimsa* and *satyagraha*, like this, again evoking the kind of non-binary world Gülen would also envision: “The purpose of life,” Gandhi wrote, “is undoubtedly to know oneself.” But to know oneself for Gandhi was not to fixate on one’s ego--one’s consciousness or individual identity. Instead, Gandhi goes on “We cannot [know our self] unless we learn to identify ourselves with all that lives.” (41) Like Gülen, Gandhi saw the ego as an obstacle to Truth. And Truth for Gandhi, recall, is God, or, put another way, as he wrote: “The sum total of that life [with which we must learn to identify ourselves] is God. Hence the necessity of realizing God living within every one of us. The instrument of this knowledge is boundless selfless service.” (41)

Now, I have found nothing in Gandhi quite like Gülen’s emphasis on forgiveness. Gandhi was from his years in South Africa through his return to India continuously in a social and political fight. But he sought to live in relation to all the living through loving action, nondualistically. Whoever “is without love,” wrote Gandhi, “that is, [whoever] lacks the spirit of *ahimsa*, who cannot look upon all living things as ... kith and kin, will never know the secret of living.” (31) Now, this is not exactly the greater *jihad*, and it is not exactly learning to “fly with two wings.” But it is, I propose for your consideration--a close correlation of an ethic beyond binaries, at least. Gandhi and Gülen shared an ethic of love, focused on finding ways, as Gandhi put it, “to lose oneself in continuous and continuing service of all life.” *Hizmet* and *ahimsa* shared an ethic whereby “social service ... must be taken to include every department of life. In this scheme there is nothing low, nothing high. For all is one, though we *seem* to be many.” (64)

Growing Deep Peace: Fostering Trust through Education, Prayer, Engaged Empathy, Principled Pluralism, Social Enterprises

As I mentioned earlier, I see Gülen's Hizmet movement converging with Gandhi's *ahimsa* in generating what I call "deep peace," which is a kind of flourishing no matter the exogenous circumstances. It seems to me that scholars in peace and justice studies have often been bewitched by reductions of life to politics and economics; not realizing that the deeper currents run in channels associated with culture, language, metaphor, poetry, and religion. Consequently, I have taken to describing what I call the "peace-growing garden" to differentiate three different kinds of peace and their relation--which I see as organic, a matter of cultivation, more than (in the common metaphor) something to be "built." So, in this garden I differentiate between what I call basic peace, policy peace, and deep peace. Peace, I define simply as the capacity to flourish. Peace is not a utopian dream. It is an everyday hope, and a human right.

Basic peace, then, is the flower that results from the other two kinds of peace-cultivation. That is, basic peace is what scholar Johan Galtung called negative peace--the absence of war or absence of indiscriminate violence.¹⁰ This is the basic peace because it is the most obvious. But it is the flower of the other two kinds of peace-growing: policy-peace and deep peace.

Policy peace is when through laws, social relations, and economic behavior people share resources fairly and equitably--water, food, education, and healthcare, for example. Policy police would be like the plants in the garden--roots and stems and leaves that need tending and trimming, and the water that enlivens the whole. Cultivating good policies grows peace, just as bad policies kill more people than wars, and kill them more slowly and with greater suffering over time. So--policy peace is when a society arranges relations harmoniously, so that all have the capacity to flourish.

But beyond politics and economics I see the deepest sources of peace in the quotidian relations of everyday life that draw on the wells of culture. That is, deep peace grows when we find and foster ways to trust each other. Deep peace is when the seed goes into fertile soil and grows. Deep peace is when we strengthen bonds between each other that endure despite challenges. Deep peace is to cling to goodness, truth, and beauty despite conflicts. Deep peace we experience as a peace that can never be taken from us, even by death. Here is where the world's religions cultivate character and courage, at their best, along with other forms of culture--literature, art, music, and all the means of grace, if you will. And it is clear to me that Gandhi and Gülen shared an understanding of the reality of this deep peace, and both sought to acquaint those who studied with them with this deep peace. I know Gülen's story better than I know Gandhi's in this regard, so in this final section of my paper, I will highlight five ways to grow "deep peace" that Gülen has taught, and that people of Hizmet have instituted, around the globe--touching down only briefly with Gandhi along the way.

First, then, Gülen taught people to find deep peace through education--through literacy across disciplines, scientific and spiritual. Gandhi of course understood the virtues of

¹⁰ Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," in *Journal of Peace Research* 6(1969): 167-191.

education: “Joy,” he wrote, “is a matter of education. We shall delight in things which we have been taught to delight in as children.” (76) For Gülen, “A school is a kind of place of worship,” he once wrote, and teaching “the most sacred, but also the most difficult, task in life.” (72) Within Turkey, the first initiatives in the 1960s associated with what is now the global Hizmet community were schools funded by non-profit foundations. These foundations--in essence, Boards of Trustees, raised money through donations and then diligently plowed any tuition or profits back into the educational enterprises. The schools were led by administrators and teachers informed by Gülen’s teachings, although they did not proselytize: the schools followed secular curricula. Religious influence came indirectly, through example. Teachers would go out of their way to spend hours beyond those in their classroom to assist students in learning--building trust with them, fostering their gifts and skills across domains--in sciences, arts, sports, and so on. Again, the schools in Turkey became among the most reliable source of students for the most prestigious universities in the Republic; and in my experience, similar academic excellence has followed the schools wherever they have been planted. Sadly, again, in recent decades many of the schools have been closed, due to an intense campaign of harassment, interference, and disinformation sponsored by the government of Turkey, funded with the equivalent of millions of U.S. dollars.¹¹ Still, a focus on education remains a feature of anyone inspired by Gülen. Across the Hizmet community education is valued, and excellence sought, as a path of the peace that comes from knowing something that nobody can ever take away--the joy of learning!

Second, deep peace follows from sustained engagement in the nonviolent practices of a religious tradition, such as prayer. Gandhi counseled that “if insistence on truth constitutes the root of the ashram, prayer is the principal feeder of that root.” (124) Prayer feeds the root of truth and nonviolence, as neuroscientists have been discovering through functional MRI studies with Buddhist monks and other people at prayer. We are learning, in other words, that the nonviolent practices of religious traditions change the human brain, forging neural pathways oriented to attention, calm, compassion, and other virtues--while quieting the reactive brain associated with the impulses of fight and flight. I believe the same will be proven to be true not only of prayer, but of other spiritual practices--music and singing, dance and procession, veneration of icons and religious art, incense and pilgrimage, fasting and feasting.

For Fethullah Gülen, prayer (the word is *salah* in Turkish) five times a day has been his consistent practice since age four. As I put it in the discussion of prayer in his biography:

As with most ritual, repetition is part of the point. The brain changes slowly but surely from its animal habits of fight or flight into something recognizably human through habits of patient practice like repeated prayer. It helps to be in a community of

¹¹ Here in the U.S., Robert Amsterdam and Associates have been funded by millions of dollars to mount a disinformation campaign against the extensive network of schools that people inspired by Gülen began. See Liz Essley White, “The Bizarre American Lobbying War over Turkish Run Schools,” in *Politico*, Feb. 3, 2018, at <https://www.politico.eu/article/bizarre-american-lobbying-war-over-turkish-run-schools-fethullah-gulen/>

practice--which is the idea behind every assembly--Jewish, Christian, Muslim or otherwise. Gülen put it this way:

Salah ... [is when] patience is put into practice ... It is also the most appropriate and propitious ground for social agreement and harmony and the clearest sign of the formation of a Muslim community. Everyone who is able to make belief a part of their nature through prayer and ... dive into the depths of the life of the heart through it, and see themselves as an inseparable part of a community like a firm, solid structure in its warm and peaceful clime, can easily overcome the hardships along the path of servanthood. (96)

Prayer, in short, builds deep peace--within, and without.

Third, what I call engaged empathy is both a marker of and a seed that grows deep peace. Gandhi of course frequently expressed empathy for the suffering of the untouchables, or the Sudra who were shunned in India's rigid *varma-dharma* caste system. Indeed, Gandhi's entire campaign of *satyagraha* engaged empathy to foster the full inclusion of men and women, girls and boys, without exception, in a democratic India--a vision still very much in the process of being realized, as in other democracies around the globe.

Gülen came to be known throughout Turkey as the "crying hodja," the crying teacher, because he would frequently weep during sermons. In fact, Gülen's crying while preaching often had the effect of triggering entire congregations to weep along with him. When I first began studying Gülen, this seemed strange--even potentially manipulative or toxic. But as I interviewed people, and studied his thought, it became apparent that what he was expressing through his tears was not only the suffering of Muslims, who Gülen frequently described as having "fallen behind" the rest of the world in democratic values, education, technology, and so forth--but even more, Gülen's tears indicated an individual in touch with the deep suffering that is, finally, the lot of every human being. As the Buddha put it in the First Noble Truth: life is suffering. And yet Gülen's empathy did not end with emotion. Instead, following in Gandhi's path of activism, he sought to engage Muslims with those practices and agencies that would foster the alleviation of suffering, insofar as possible. As he put it many times, encouraging his students to go to Tajikistan, or Nigeria, or Philadelphia--to live and work with the poor: "being with the oppressed is the same as being with God." (315) Practically, engaged empathy for Gülen, as for Gandhi, also meant advocating for the full inclusion of girls and women in society, and especially in all levels of education. He articulated this advocacy for women and girls in an officially egalitarian, but in practice ruthlessly patriarchal Turkey. (251-259) Engaged empathy also motivated Gülen to speak out against the casual racism common in Turkish society, notably against the Kurds, and to grow trusting relations with the Christian and Jewish communities in Turkey. (259-268) Finally, given these initiatives, it should be no surprise that among the agencies begun by people of Hizmet was an NGO to offer relief in war zones, or after climate catastrophes or other disasters. The name of the agency was *Kimse Yok Mu*, which translated from Turkish means "Is Anybody There?" Persons cultivating engaged empathy identify

suffering wherever it exists, and they direct resources toward bringing comfort to the oppressed. That was and is a mark and catalyst of deep peace, too.

Fourth, deep peace grows as people practice what I call principled pluralism. Gandhi was firm in his practice of Hinduism, which he explicitly “prized above all other” traditions. (10) But Gandhi also recognized that “every religion holds both truth and untruth.” (50) He therefore held that “a curriculum of religious instruction should include a study of the tenets of faith other than one’s own.” (51-2). Gandhi’s reading of the Christian theologian (and novelist) Leo Tolstoy was particularly formative in shaping his teachings of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*. As a Hindu, Gandhi finally put the idea of principled pluralism like this: “I pray not that others may believe as I believe, but that they may grow to their full height in their own religion.” (53)

For Fethullah Gülen, principled pluralism is evident in an idea central to his teaching and practice: *hoşgörü*. The term is often translated as “tolerance,” but as I learned from Dr. Scott Alexander, Professor of Muslim-Christian studies at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, *hoşgörü* is a compound word meaning literally “to see nicely.” Still following Alexander, for Gülen and for people of *hizmet*, to translate *hoşgörü* accurately requires a theological interpretation. Thus, “to see nicely” means that when we meet someone from a different tradition, or encounter their ideas and practices, *we seek to see them as God sees them*, according to Alexander. And that means that when we encounter someone with different beliefs or practices than ours, we see them above all *with eyes of mercy and compassion*. Mercy and compassion are the two most frequently mentioned attributes of God in the Qur’an, and mercy and compassion are regularly invoked whenever Muslims gather, in the Bismillah. In his own words, for Gülen

hoşgörü which we sometimes use in place of respect and mercy, generosity and forbearance, is the most essential element of moral systems. . . Under the lens of *hoşgörü* ... mistakes and faults shrink into insignificance. Actually, the treatment of [the One] Who is beyond time and space always passes through the prism of *hoşgörü*, and we wait for it to embrace us and all creation.” (286)

Principled pluralism is the deep peace to know where one stands, and because of that clarity--to be able accept all others, working together for the common good.

Finally, then, deep peace means a way of relating to others that we can call social enterprise. It is here, perhaps, that Gandhi and Gülen most directly diverge. Gandhi had little place for modern economics, modern capitalism or socialism, and modern civilization. Trained as a lawyer, he largely renounced modernity by living in an ashram and following village ways. Gülen, who grew up in a village, eventually traveled to and preached, taught, and lived in the great cities of Turkey--Erzurum, Edirne, Izmir, and Istanbul. Throughout his life, he interacted regularly with business leaders who had accumulated wealth and could put it to use to solve the problems of ignorance, poverty, and violence. At the heart of the various *Hizmet*-related schools, media, banks, hospitals, and all the rest--was a principle called *istişara*. *Istişara* is a

Turkish word with an Arabic root (*şura*) that translates as “mutual consultation.” People of *Hizmet* consulted with each other on any enterprise, debated with each other, sought the counsel of elder siblings. *Abis* and *ablas*--elder siblings, are informal roles very important in *Hizmet*. Through mutual consultation, people sought to hold each other accountable for the success of any venture. This culture of consultation and accountability led to enterprises akin to those the economist Muhammad Yunus, in his book *Creating a World without Poverty*, called “social businesses.”¹²

For Gülen, *istişara* “is a vital attribute and an essential rule. ... Consultation is mentioned in the Qur’an to the same degree as [prayer].” (294) Consequently, “the most intelligent person is the one who most appreciates and respects mutual consultation and deliberation, and who benefits most from the ideas of others.” (295) In practice, consultation grew the gifts of all people engaged in a project. *Istişara* fostered talent by inviting people’s voices and skills into a process. Consultation was also a way to hold accountable leaders--since no one’s voice was automatically granted authority: authority had to be earned. Gülen wrote: “neither seniority nor title, nor status, nor being a personage of esteem can be a factor for making another’s person’s opinion more credible.” (296) Through this commitment to *istişara*, people of *Hizmet* grew deep peace--they learned to trust each other, and they earned trust from others. *Istişara* was the DNA of the various enterprises they began; again--the schools, construction companies, media businesses, hospitals, banks, and more. Practically, again, these enterprises were akin to what Muhammad Yunus called “social businesses.” They existed to be sustainable--to generate wealth, but they existed even more to mobilize resources to solve problems in society--to serve all stakeholders. I compare these enterprises historically to the way the Society of Friends or Quakers began--with mutual consultation and deliberation at the heart of social enterprises.

To conclude: what I have pointed out to you in this paper are correlations, not causality, between the thought and practices of Mahatma Gandhi and the thought and practices of Fethullah Gülen and the global *Hizmet* community. I do not know how much of Gandhi Gülen knew or studied--I would now like to ask him that question! But both men communicated a hopeful vision for the world; indeed--both were convinced that peace was not only possible, but peace was unfolding and growing in history around them. Gandhi put it this way, in a letter to a U.S. publication in 1935:

Not to believe in the possibility of permanent peace is to disbelieve the godliness of human nature. ... If the recognized leaders of [humanity] who have control over engines of destruction were wholly to renounce their use, with full knowledge of its implications, permanent peace can be obtained. This is clearly impossible without the great Powers of the earth renouncing their imperialistic design. This again seems impossible without

¹² Muhammad Yunus, *Creating a World without Poverty: Social Business and the Future of Capitalism* (NY: Public Affairs Press, 2009).

great nations ceasing to believe in soul-destroying competition and to desire to multiply wants and therefore increase their material possessions. It is my conviction that the root of the evil is want of a living faith in a living God.

And Gandhi then directed his challenge directly to Christians:

It is a first-class human tragedy that peoples of the earth who claim to believe in the message of Jesus who they describe as the Prince of Peace show little of that belief in actual practice. It is painful to see sincere Christian divines limiting the scope of Jesus' message to select individuals. I have been taught from my childhood and tested the truth by experience that the primary virtues of [humanity] are possible of cultivation by the meanest of the human species. It is this undoubted universal possibility that distinguishes the humans from the rest of God's creation. If even one great nation were unconditionally to perform the supreme act of renunciation, many of us would see in our lifetime visible peace established on earth. (42)

May it be so.

You should not be surprised by now to learn that Gülen shared a similar, if broader, vision of a world at peace. He wrote:

Our old world will experience an amazing “springtime” before its demise. This springtime will see the gap between rich and poor narrow, the world’s riches will be distributed more justly, according to work, capital, and needs; there will be no discrimination based on race, color, language or worldview; and basic human rights and freedoms will be protected. Individuals will come to the fore and, learning how to realize their potential, will ascend on the way to become ‘the most elevated human’ on the wings of love, knowledge and belief.’ ... Yes, this springtime will rise on the foundations of love, compassion, mercy, dialogue, acceptance of others, mutual respect, and rights. It will be a time in which humanity will discover its real essence. Goodness and kindness, righteousness and virtue will form the basic essence of the world. No matter what happens, the world will come to this path sooner or later. Nobody can prevent this.

We pray and beg that the Infinitely Compassionate One will not let our hopes and expectations come to nothing. (358)

And again, I say, and on this I shall conclude: Amen.

This paper, lightly edited for this publication, was originally presented at The College of Saint Benedict and St. John’s University, St. Joseph, Minnesota, February 28, 2022.

