

A generation later, Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-73), who began his career as a prominent master of jurisprudence, took a sharp turn in his life pattern as a master of *shar'ia*, prompted by an unnerving question asked by Shams of Tabriz: who was the greater *muslim*, the Prophet Muhammad or (the Sufi) Beyazid Bustani, who said “how great is my glory!”? The notion that the latter had been filled with God in a particular manner—so that he was in the moment of that outcry a channel through which God Itself spoke (as opposed to Bustani speaking as some egotistic politician might)—could suggest a condition of God-filledness even greater than that experienced by the Seal of the Prophets. But that is not possible, since no human spiritual being can achieve greater intimacy with God than Muhammad (PBUH)!

The unanswerable paradox offered by Shams' question led Rumi to move gradually further away from teaching and thinking about jurisprudence and deeper and deeper into a dynamic Sufi *tariqa* renowned both for its mind-bending spinning *sema* and for the poetry that poured out of Rumi himself.¹³ One of the more famous passages ascribed to him is, (in part):

Neither Christian or Jew or Muslim, nor Hindu,
 Buddhist, sufi or zen. Not any religion
 or cultural system. I am not from the East
 or the West, nor out of the ocean or up
 from the ground...

And he writes:

...I go into the Muslim mosque
 and the Jewish synagogue
 and the Christian church
 and I see one altar.

There are those who argue that since these overtly universalistic passages are not from the canonical *Mesnevi* or from the *Divani Tabrizi Shams*, (the two multi-volume main bodies of Rumi's written work), then they may not be his words. Perhaps, but within the *Mesnevi* itself there are also passages such as

Every holy person seems to have a different doctrine
 and practice, but there's really only one work (I: 3087-88).

¹³ *Sema* is a word, together with *dhikr*, typically used to refer to the initiation of the mystical process. Where most Sufi *tariqas* use a word or phrase as a starting point, Rumi came to use the physical act of spinning about. The *tariqa* that evolved included, among other things, whirling round one's own axis while whirling, as a group, around an empty center, with the eyes closed and the head tilted at a 28-degree angle, (which happens to be the angle at which the earth spins on its axis) and with one hand pointing slightly upward, toward heaven and the other downward, toward the earth.

And, in a lengthy passage (in *Mesnevi* II, 1750ff), Moses is represented as being instructed by God that

*...Ways of worshipping are not to be ranked as better
or worse than one another.
Hindus do Hindu things.*

*The Dravidian Muslims in India do what they do.
It's all praise, and it's all right.*

...the love-religion has no code or doctrine.
Only God.

The words in italics are presented by Rumi as God's, the non-italicized words are the poet's comment on God's words. There are more passages like these in Rumi's poetry. He, like Ibn al-'Arabi, was a very devout Muslim—but he saw no contradiction between that and embracing the full spiritual legitimacy of others whose particular form of faith was different from his own.

The point is that both of these mystics, among many others, in simultaneously bursting beyond the bounds of the self and finding the piece of Godness within themselves—so that *ek-stasis* and *en-stasis* are one and the same—understood (in an era fraught with violence and strife, from the Mongol invasions and the *Reconquista* to the Crusades) that the spiritual *jihad* undertaken by the mystic seeking oneness with God opens him/her to true dialogical possibilities with those of different *tariqas*, different *shar'ias*, different Muslim theological, jurisprudential and tradition perspectives, as well as with those whose approach to divinity falls outside Islam.

This perspective has been emphatically expressed in our own time in the preaching, teachings and writings of Fetullah Gulen (b. 1938). He has produced a plethora of theoretical writings—discussions of the Qur'an and Hadith and analyses of Sufism in general and of thinkers like Ibn 'Arabi and Rumi and Sa'id Nursi in particular; and has articulated an ongoing contention that religion can offer an effective partnership and not an opposition to science and its innovations.

He has also been an emphatic advocate of *hizmet*—altruistic service to benefit humanity—at a level that has inspired an extraordinary, far-flung circle of followers to respond to that advocacy. The outcome—schools at every level, from pre-K to university, in 170 countries that, aside from teaching everything from math and science to literature to the arts to sports, seek to turn out students who are themselves inspired to engage in lives of *hizmet*—includes diverse groups that define themselves as part of the *Hizmet Movement*, who organize conferences, concerts, social service efforts and, above all, programs devoted to interfaith and multi-cultural dialogue.

Gulen writes that

Love is the reason for existence and its essence, and it is the strongest tie that binds creatures together... [O]ur approach to creation and other human beings should be based on loving them for the sake of their creator. (“Forgiveness, Tolerance and Dialogue,” in *Love and Tolerance*, 96)

and that

[a]ltruism is an exalted human feeling, and its course is love. Whoever has the greatest share in this love is the greatest hero of humanity... Such heroes of love continue to live even after their death... (“Love,” in *Love and Tolerance*, 35)

What undergirds Gulen’s call to *hizmet* is the interpretation that he arrived at by the 1980s of Islam in general and Sufism in particular: that if one’s goal is to achieve oneness with the One, then the means for doing so are not limited to prayer, meditation, the interior paths of spiritual *jihad*—although one’s own internal spiritual *jihad* (as opposed to argument and violence with others) is the only form of *jihad* with which one should be preoccupied, he has commented—but to *actively* loving God’s creatures, in all of whom, by definition, God may be found.

There is no contradiction between being a devout *Muslim*, as he and most of those inspired by him are (he has inspired many non-Muslims, as well), and being a devout *muslim* dedicated to others from all walks of life, or of being a devout *muslim* devoted to others from other faith traditions: even atheists, Gulen has noted, are doing the work of God and reflect love from and toward God when they engage in *hizmet*, even if they do not think of their actions as associated with God.

He writes:

There is no limit to doing others good. One who has dedicated himself to the good of humanity, can be so altruistic as to sacrifice even his life for others. However, such altruism can be a great virtue only so long as it originates in sincerity and purity of intention and the “others” are not defined by racial preferences. (“Humanity,” in *Criteria*, 12)

He enjoins his readers and followers to “be so tolerant that your chest becomes wide like the ocean. Become inspired with faith and love of human beings,” (“Tolerance,” in *Criteria*, 19), and argues that “our tolerance should be so broad that we can close our eyes to others’ faults, show respect for different ideas, and forgive everything that is forgivable.” (“The Necessity of Interfaith Dialogue,” in *Essays—Perspectives—Opinions*, 51)—a perspective he finds in the heart of the Qur’an itself: “If you behave tolerantly, overlook, and forgive [their faults]” (Q 64:14).¹⁴

¹⁴ The two particular books by Gulen that I am referencing here—there are many more books and essays in which he expresses these sorts of ideas—are *Love and Tolerance*, (Somerset, NJ: The Light, 2006); and *Criteria or the Lights of the Way*, Vol 1, (London: Truostar, 1996).

What is typically translated into English as “tolerance” (as in the previous paragraph) has a more aggressively positive, embracing connotation in the Turkish word *hosgoru* that is the word being translated that way. It more literally means to “see the world from within someone else’s eyes” (the root *hos* means “see”). “Embracing the world” would be an appropriate phrase to describe the *hizmet* that Gulen prescribes, based on an ongoing process of spiritual *jihad*. Spiritual *jihad* in such a context becomes activated as secondary and tertiary *jihad* through both words and actions—words of open-hearted and open-minded dialogue and actions that bring love to the world, rather than strife; that pave a broad *shar* to heaven with an endless array of diversely shaped stones, rather than trying to push others off a narrow road paved with ego and self-focus masquerading as spiritual *jihad*.

Gulen’s sense of Islam is civil and civic, not political; pushing to improve the world, not to conquer it. True *jihad* is the struggle to find increasingly effective ways of engaging others in both thought and action to work together—because this project can only succeed if all of us are engaged with each other in making it happen—to perfect the world. Gulen understands this as the fulfillment of what God Itself hoped for humanity when, on the eve of creating human beings It announced to the angelic hosts that our species, beginning with Adam, would be the *khalifas*—the stewards and guardians—of creation (Q. 2:30). For each individual, true *jihad* is the *jihad* to be a true *khalifah*, thus furthering the moral and ethical ordering process that began with the divine act of physically creating the world.

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