The Ramadan Fast, *Jihad,* and *Hizmet* in the World of Fethullah Gulen

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Fasting During Ramadan and Otherwise

In the Muslim world we have recently passed through the month of Ramadan—marked most obviously by a full fast, every day, for those who are healthy adults, from dawn to sunset.[1] Many religious traditions offer times of fasting on their calendars. Jews fast for 25 hours (adding an extra hour to the process, lest by some accidental miscalculation one short-change the full-day fast) on the tenth day of what has become the first month of the year; Catholics (and many other Christian denominations) deprive themselves of some particular pleasure, gastronomic or otherwise, during the 40 days of Lent, and many Catholics fully fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday—to name two well-known examples. The Peruvian Incas and Native Americans of Mexico observed fasts to appease their gods, as well—to name two less familiar instances.

The point and purpose of these exercises that offer a form of rigorous, particularly gastronomic, self-deprivation is to focus on the spiritual side of what we are as human beings, and to demonstrate how, as a species, we differ from other groups of animals. Where dogs and bears and fish eat, by instinct, virtually whenever food is available and without usually desisting from doing so unless they are more than completely sated, humans have the capacity to regulate what and when we eat—and even not to do so when hungry, if the food itself or the circumstances of its consumption are inappropriate. In broad terms, the Ramadan fast is one response to the observation (Q. 79:40-41) that one who restrains him/herself from lower desires will find Paradise as his/her inhabitation.

The spirituality associated with fasting within a specific religious context is not simply a negative—an act of self-deprivation that shows our discipline—but an emphatic positive. We don't merely fast, but we direct ourselves toward God. Much of the 25 hours of the Jewish Day of Atonement fast are spent in the synagogue, praying as a community. The month-long, dawn-to-

[1] Properly speaking, those expected to fast include post-puberty adults who are not ill, menstruating, pregnant, or travelling. Those whose situation is temporary are enjoined to make up the lost fasting-time as and when their situation permits.

sunset fast of Ramadan is, on the contrary, spent in engaging in most ordinary activities, actively ignoring the distraction of hunger and thirst—and it bracketed by a dawn pre-fast breakfast (*suhur*) that is accompanied by particular prayers and an evening *iftar* meal that breaks the fast each day (beginning with dates and water, and following the evening prayer) and is often followed by further prayers and/or study sessions that can extend into the night, or in some cases, through the entire night, based on the tradition that the Prophet Muhammad, late in his life, began to perform extra night prayers during Ramadan, called *taraweh*.

Moreover, one's act of fasting (and abstaining from sexual activity) is less consequential without the strength of one's mental intention (*niyyah*) and without one's abstention from unkind words or impure thoughts. All of this is intended to shape a particular *taqwa*, a form of piety or consciousness of God that is meant to build our strength to resist immoral behavior and so protect us from God's punishment. So the emphasis, as in the Jewish, Christian, and other traditions, is on the human capacity for spiritual reality and not merely on our ability to eschew material reality.

On the Christian—Gregorian—calendar, which follows the annual passage of the earth around the sun, Lent falls approximately at the same time, year by year. The duration of each year is 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes, and 45.7 seconds, so that every fourth year an extra day is added so that we never stray far from a 365-day cycle. The Jewish calendar combines a lunar calendar—following the course of the moon around the earth, and therefore offering a year of 354-355 days—and every fourth year adds an entire extra month to remain in synch with the solar year, so that Jewish festivals move 10-11 days forward through the Gregorian year and then bounce back toward whatever one might call the "starting point" at the end of each such cycle. The Muslim calendar is fully lunar. Thus the month of Ramadan[2] and its accompanying fast continues to shift through the Gregorian year in a much longer cycle; it takes 33 years to return to whatever we might construe as its "starting point."

These sorts of calculations are part of the larger phenomenon that is central to all religious traditions of whatever sort, which associate their rituals with precision. Every ceremony has as its point and purpose to connect us to our sense of divinity and the process of making that connection must, by definition, be achieved not in some random manner but with very specific care that is understood in each expression of faith to have been commanded by God Itself, and revealed through the intermediating sorts of figures that we refer to, in English, as prophets or priests. God commands the Israelites in the wilderness, through Moses (Lev 23:27-28), to fast on the tenth day of what at that time was the seventh month (the year being understood as beginning in the spring), and over time both the shaping of the calendar and the specifics of how to carry out that fast as part of a Day of Atonement become an essential part of what evolved as Judaism (including a rethinking of when the year begins, which beginning point was deliberately disconnected from the cycle of nature). God commands Muslims, through Muhammad, to fast (Q. 2:183ff)—and the fast evolves from an all-day fast on the tenth day of the ninth month, to the first ten days of that month, to the full-month, dawn-to-sunset fast that it ultimately became for Islam. The moment that begins

[2] "Ramadan" means "intense heat," referring to the fact that that month was a scorching summer month (part of a pre-Islamic calendar) when the fast was first prescribed, perhaps in 622 CE—about a dozen years after the Prophet experienced his first revelation.

the fast at dawn is that in which a person standing outside can distinguish a white thread from a black thread (Q. 2:187).

Each of these traditions offers different particulars with regard to what it means to be a *muslim* (note the lower-case "m"): one who submits to God's will, (which is what that term means in Arabic).[3] Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others beyond the Abrahamic faiths define themselves as submitting to God's will based on the particular texts that they regard as uniquely revealed and/or inspired by God and the patterns of interpreting those texts that has shaped these various religious traditions across time. Practitioners in each tradition struggle to address their understandings of how and what God is and what it is that God would have of us—how we should think, speak, pray, act—so that we submit ourselves to the will of a Being (or in some traditions, beings) that has created us with a purpose. In Islam, for instance, the overriding shape of that purpose is directly articulated in Q. 2:30-34, where God informs the angels that the human being about to be created is expected and intended to be God's *khalipha*—vice-regent—on earth.

Revelation, Interpretation and *Jihad*

Humans have struggled as far back as we can trace ourselves to understand the parameters—the rights and responsibilities—of how to fulfill our divinely-appointed mission. Within Islam, with the Arabic language as its primary revelationary and interpretive instrument, the word for struggle is *jihad*. It is important to understand that *jihad* operates on three levels. The primary level focuses on one's self, struggling to make one as effective a *muslim*—a submitter to God's will—as possible. The secondary level applies to the larger sphere of the *'Umma* and only the tertiary level pertains to the realm beyond the *dar al 'Islam*.

Within this threefold matrix there is an inherent double issue with double consequences. As always in the history of religion, for which God is by definition a Being beyond our own reality and beyond our human experience and understanding, we are inevitably caught between the faith-bound certainty of revelation and the complexity of interpretation. Each of the Abrahamic traditions offers to its constituents the certainty that the text of the Torah (and Hebrew Bible) or the Gospels (and Old and New Testaments) or the Qur'an represents God's definitive word through one or more intermediating prophets or messengers. Once these texts are committed to a canonical written form—and more importantly, once the prophetic conduit through which the message has been transmitted is no longer among us—we are caught in the complication of interpretation.

Thus aside from the interpretational issue pertaining to what *constitutes* the revelation[4]—what ends up within the canon—we find ourselves asking what it means, say, "not to commit murder," (Ex

[3] The convenience of contemporary English-language orthography permits a distinction between "Muslim"—one who follows the specific spiritual lead of Muhammad—and "muslim": anyone, in particular pre-Muhammad figures like Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, who submit to God's will.

[4] The "Bible," for example, is a text the entirety of which, for Jews, is comprised of the Torah, Prophets, and Sacred Writings (*hagiographa*)—the *TaNakh* or Hebrew Bible. For Protestants these works comprise the Old Testament, and the "Bible" includes them together with the New Testament (the Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Book of Revelation). For Catholic and Orthodox Christians, the "Bible" also includes Intertestamental (aka Deuterocanonical) books, such as Judith, Susannah and the Elders, the Wisdom of Ben-Sira, and First and Second Maccabees. Ethiopian and Eritrean

20:13 and Deut 5:17) or "to turn the other cheek" (Matt 5:38), or we wonder where the *Masjid al'Aqsa* (referenced in Q. 17:1) is located. The interpretation of these and endless other ideas within what has become the agreed-upon revelations of these religious traditions becomes the foundation of their edifices. Where *jihad* is concerned, the double consequence is obvious. We might reasonably assume that primary *jihad* is not only purely spiritual *jihad*, but is *effected* through spiritual means (although the spiritual might be reinforced by physical means: fasts, for instance, or other denials of the body's needs). When, however, one turns to secondary and tertiary *jihad* an obvious interpretational issue will be: what are the most appropriate instruments of the struggle to make the entire 'umma more properly *muslim*, and what of the non-Muslim world? Concisely put: the word or the sword?

The very fact of interpretation within Islam has led, across history, to the early Sunni-Shi'i schism, and beyond that split, to *Ash'arite* and *Mu'tazilite* understandings of fundamental religious issues (such as God's attributes, the Qur'an as created or uncreated, the reality of human free will, the validity of the use of reason within the understanding of revelation, *inter alia*), to say nothing of diverse schools (*madhab*s) of jurisprudence (ie., *shari'a*),[5] from Hanbali, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanafi to Ja'fari, Zaydi and Ismaili (to say nothing of minor schools)—and within Sufism, to scores of different *tariqa*s.[6] Across geography and history within and beyond the borders of the *dar al'Islam*, *jihad* has meant discussion and debate and it has also sometimes meant warfare. So it is no small matter to say that *jihad* is this and not that: our human penchant for interpretation, complicated by the limits of words when confronted with describing and conveying an understanding of and from the Ineffable has meant that *jihad* has had varied practical applications over the centuries.[7]

This complexity is further complicated by how we interpret the need for *jihad*: not only what it means to be a better *muslim*, but what the consequences are if one fails to fulfill that ambition. Consider: for Christianity (to be concise), the consumption in Eden by Adam and Eve of the fruit forbidden to them by God ends up interpreted as an Original Sin profound in its repercussions. The notion that all of humanity is the heir to that Sin merely by being born as a consequence of sexual congress, combined with a well-evolved concept of Hell in all of its horrors yields the unhappy fate for all of humankind to end up forever in that Hell unless they embrace Jesus (who is both human and divine) as their savior.[8]

Christians also include the Book of Enoch. So the first layer of interpretive challenge for the Bible is the question of what constitute its textual components.

[5] *Shari'a* comes from the Arabic word, *shar*, referring to a path to water in the wilderness—thus the implication of the word is that it refers to a path essential to spiritual survival.

[6] There is considerable discussion as to which, beyond the four Sunni *madhab*s, and the first two of the noted Shi'i *madhab*s, constitute "major" *madhab*s. Gibril Fouad Haddad's *The Four Imams and Their School*s (London: Muslim Academic Trust, 2007) offers a dense yet concise discussion of the Sunni schools and there is a plethora of works on each of these and on the various non-Sunni *madhab*s.

[7] One of the ways in which Islam underscores the *ineffability* of God is with reference to the complication of God's Name: that there are 99 "Names" to reference God—and certain types of individuals, such as mystics and, above all, the Prophet Muhammad, know/knew many more than 99 such Names.

[8] This does not disobligate Christians from good as opposed to evil deeds as essential religious values: an evil-doer who is baptized does not automatically get into heaven thanks to that sacrament. My point (in the following paragraph) is that neither Islam nor Judaism carry within them the idea of Original Sin and its consequences—a function of

Judaism interprets the act of Adam and Eve as disastrous on a moral and practical plane (they do disobey God and are thrown out of the Garden of Eden, after all; Adam will have to work hard thereafter and Eve will bear children in pain) but without the generation-by-generation consequences explicated by Christianity. There is not even a real word for "Hell" in Hebrew, much less the sort of visions of it endemic to Christian thought.[9] While Islam offers a concept of Hell and also a distinct concept of Final Judgment that can lead someone to that unhappy place, the road to damnation is not based on the sin of Adam and Eve. On the contrary, Islam's primary text is explicit that one person's sins cannot yield consequences for someone else: "He who follows the Right Way shall do so to his own advantage; and he who strays shall incur his own loss. No one shall bear another's burden." (Q. 17:15). So the very nature of sin and evil, particularly as understood through the act of Adam and Eve, is necessarily subject to an interpretive process when trying to determine how most fully to submit to God's will—and each tradition, speaking broadly, goes in its own direction.

What we believe is inevitably interwoven with what and how we understand and how and what we understand is interwoven with what we believe. St Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) recognizes this even when he is undertaking the first fully articulated argument for God's existence—the "Ontological Argument," contained in his ca 1085 work, *Proslogium*—when at the end of the first chapter he notes that "I do not seek to understand that I may believe, I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe: that unless I believed, I would not understand." And indeed, his "proof" is predicated on an already-accepted belief not only in God's existence but in an understanding of God as perfect—as a Being than which there can be none more perfect—and that to exist is more perfect than not to exist.

I make this last point to underscore the historical tendency of humans to confuse our belief in a given set of revelations with the interpretations to which the revelations have been subject. If we add *love* to the issue of revelation/interpretation/belief/certitude complexity; and the issue of "knowing" what constitutes God's Will and "knowing" how serious the abrogation of that Will might be, together with particulars of the potentially negative consequences of that abrogation—then *jihad* with regard to others becomes potentially further complicated.

Loving myself and loving God and therefore struggling with myself so that I am a better *muslim* is simple enough as a concept. Loving others, both because God suggests that we love one another and simply because one, as a practical matter, does love certain others—most obviously, family and friends—is also simple to understand but potentially complicating when that secondary love is placed in the context of secondary *jihad*. If I love you and therefore want the best for you, I naturally want to struggle to help you become a more effective *muslim*, which at least will make

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difference of interpretation of the identical revealed narrative in Judaism and Christianity and an analogous one in Islam.

[9] Two Hebrew words are eventually pressed into service by Jews for "Hell." One is *she'ol*, which originally, however, really only meant "grave"—or at any rate a dark and still place where those who are dead go. See Robert Rainwater, "She'ol," in Watson E. Mills, ed., *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Mercer University Press, 1990), among other discussions. The other, *gehenna*, is a corruption of the phrase *gei ben Hinnom*—the "Valley of Hinnom," just south by southwest of Jerusalem, with an at worst horrifying and at best ugly history: this is the "Valley of the Shadow of Death" through which the psalmist walks, "fear[ing] no evil, for Thou art with me" (Ps 23:4).

you a happier being in this life and perhaps the next and at most keep you from Hell—if my tradition indicates that there is such a thing as Hell. So my need to pull you toward my interpretive understanding of God and everything that comes with that is based on my concern for the welfare of—might we say?—your soul.

Thereby, of course, hangs the double conundrum: if my tradition teaches that there is Hell and that those found morally wanting (which condition might be assumed by me to include misbelieving) end up in that place, I believe that loved ones who fall into this last category are in obvious danger. Aside from the question of whether Hell exists (as it does *not* in every tradition), I am bound by the problem of whether or not I am accurate in my assessment as to what it is that my loved ones (and I) need to be doing to please God and what not to do not to please God: a constant *jihad* to understand this and to know how to improve myself and others must never let me rest with the certainty that I *have* it. I must continue to struggle. (From a different contextual perspective, one might think of and adapt Plato's view: my life and those I love may never sit there simply unexamined but require constant thinking and rethinking.)[10]

My loved ones may, if, say, I am a Muslim, fall within the *'Umma* but it is also conceivable that some of them are beyond the *'Umma*. Ought I to struggle with them all to compel them to see the Truth of God as I see it, or as the leaders whom I follow and respect see it? If I have found the right path—the *shari'a* that leads me in the wilderness of existence to the water of eternal life—ought I not enjoin others to join me on that path, and ought I, if I can, use whatever means are at my disposal to ensure that they do so—including violent means?

How capable am I of recognizing the possibility that my path could be *mistaken*—that what I believe, even if it is perfectly correct for me, might not be so for others, or that I and those who agree with me could even be wrong about what we believe, based on our misinterpretation of the revelation's message? How capable am I of understanding the degree to which my ego—my *self*-focus—may impinge on my understanding of God and the path to God?

Mystical *Jihad* in Ibn-'Arabi and Jalaladdin Rumi

Interestingly, this difficulty is assuaged in a particular way by the mystical traditions within the Abrahamic faiths. The mystic, by definition, believes that there is a hidden innermost depth to God that s/he can access, even as God's depths are inaccessible—and even as, in the Muslim and Jewish traditions God is understood to be absolutely without form and thus without the spatial aspect that the notion of "innermost depth" implies. But mysticism embraces the paradoxes that define any attempts to grasp, engage, understand, "know" God. The mystic seeks the unseekable, the *mysterion*, ("closedness, hiddenness," in Greek; *mysterium* in Latin) and believes that the God who

[10] Plato's Socrates famously observes that "the unexamined life is not worth living," and that to be fully human means to be constantly exercising our minds to ask questions about what the Good and all of its concomitants mean.

is *sought* is, at the same time, *seeking* the mystic—seeking the unity of the mystic's soul (a tiny "piece" of Godness in all of us) with the Source of every human soul.[11]

One way to understand this—words are always limited and limiting instruments of engaging, exploring and explaining God—is to say that the mystic seeks to be completely filled with God. In order to be filled with God one must be empty of self—empty of ego and of self-focus. This (ego) is precisely the element that might cause an individual to engage in violent *jihad* with others over matters of faith. Sufism labels the elimination of ego a condition of *fana'*—a dissipation of one's self into Godness. To be relieved of ego, of self, can lead in at least two directions. One is the direction of danger: if I cannot regain my ego once I have been emptied of it, once I have escaped it (achieving *ek-stasis*, a condition of being outside myself), then I will go mad—or I will die or apostasize.

If my ability to return to our everyday reality—and to communicate the experience well enough to benefit the community around me—is compromised, then I will have fundamentally failed. For my goal has to have been not to gain enlightenment but to gain it in order to improve the world of others around me—otherwise my goal will have been too selfish, so I will not have been able to succeed in the first place. If my goal was to improve the world around me but I so completely lose myself in Godness that I cannot regain myself, my goal will not have been achieved. The danger of losing myself is layered with possibilities.[12]

The second direction, however, is that, in emptying myself of ego I may come to a clearer sense of how diverse the paths—the *tariqa*s—to God's hiddenmost, innermost recess actually *are*.[13] Given the endless diversity of humanity and of all of the Creator's creation—no two trees, leaves, snowflakes, or human beings are identical—it seems inherently odd that, in only this one area of human enterprise, religion, there would be only a single path to God, and the mystic has a unique potential to recognize that oddness and to articulate a broad understanding of *shar'ia*.

This perspective expressed itself historically in the words of any number of Sufis.[14] One might note two outstanding examples—both of them individuals well versed in conventional legalistic *shar'ia* and both of them engaged in life-long spiritual *jihad*, ever seeking the path to effective *islam* vis-à-vis God. Ibn al-'Arabi (1165-1240), popularly known as *Muhyi id-Din* ("Reviver of the Faith"), who drew together so many prior threads within Muslim thought and wrote extensively

[11] There are many discussions of what mysticism is, from that in Henry James and Evelyn Underhill to a plethora of recent volumes. A concise and accessible definition is found in Ori Z Soltes, *Mysticism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*: *Searching for Oneness*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 1-10.

[12] The story of the mystic Muhammad al-Hallaj (d. 922) presents him as returning from his condition of absolute oneness with God and unable to regain himself—to disentangle himself from God—so that he came out (or partially out) of *ek-stasis* yelling, "*Ana al Haqq*!": "I am the Truth (one of the 99 names of God—in other words: "I am God!"). Of course, the "I" was not the ordinary self; this was not some exclamation of profound egotism; on the contrary, it reflected a complete elimination of self, buried within God. But the authorities misunderstood, of course, and executed him as an apostate. His is the consummate cautionary tale regarding the dangers of the mystical enterprise.

[13] *Tariq(a)* is another Arabic word meaning path or trajectory; it is specifically used in Sufism to refer to the specific Sufi orders (each of which is its own uniquely and specifically contoured path or trajectory).

[14] There are Christian and Jewish mystics, such as St Francis of Assisi and Abraham Abulafia, who manifest particularly interesting and/or strong expressions of this sensibility, as well. See Soltes, *Searching for Oneness*, 1-10, 124-30, 135-9.

about Islam, also noted that in the Qur'an we are told that "wherever one turns, there is the Face of God" (Q. II.115). His understanding of that verse, in part, led him to write, in his *Bezels of Wisdom* (*Fusus al-Hikam*):

> …My heart can take on any form:
> A meadow for gazelles,
> A cloister for monks,
> For the idols, sacred ground,
> Ka'ba for the circling pilgrim,
> The tablets of the Torah,
> The pages of the Qur'an.
>
> My creed is love;
> Wherever its caravan turns along the way,
> That is my belief,
> My faith.

His view is explicitly that aspirants of diverse spiritual traditions can become one with God. The heart to which he refers is both his own heart, assuming an omnimorphous condition—and the heart of God, speaking through him. For his heart is emptied of self and filled with God, but he has managed to regain a self that can communicate his enlightened condition. The God he experiences is a God of love, seeking reunion with all those who seek Him—not only those who follow a particular *shar'ia* or *tariqa* or form of faith. Yet there is no contradiction for him between this perspective and his spiritual state as a pious and emphatic Muslim.

A generation later, Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-73), who began his career following in his father's footsteps as a prominent authority on Islamic 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!

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.[15] One of the more famous passages ascribed to him is, (in part):

[15] *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

> 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).

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, too, 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 that 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

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spins on its axis) and with one hand pointing slightly upward, toward heaven and the other downward, toward the earth. Each whirling *darwish* is a visible connector between heaven and earth.

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 *tariqa*s, different *shar'ia*s, different Muslim theological, jurisprudential and tradition perspectives, as well as with those whose approach to divinity falls outside Islam.

Fethullah Gulen and the *Jihad* of *Hizmet*

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 others, like 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.[16]

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 a pair of realizations to which he arrived by the early 1980s. One pertained to his sense that, whereas he had been earlier focused on the problems of Turkey—its youth, its future, its being cut off from its own previous six centuries of history as a Muslim country—the issues were world-wide and the solution to the problems that he saw could only be arrived at through efforts that would be interfaith, interethnic, international, multi-racial, bi-genderal. In short, if all of humanity does not work together to address what are universal concerns, then in the end no particular group really succeeds in solving its problems.

[16] The Turkish word *hizmet* means "service."

This practical understanding of the world and its complex issues coincided, not surprisingly, with the interpretation that he arrived at by the same time, as a person of spiritual piety, 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, as 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 engaged in active world-transforming actions, 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 has written:

> 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).[17]

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. *Hosgoru* 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, social and cultural, not political; pushing to improve the world, not to conquer it. True *jihad* is the struggle to find increasingly effective ways of engaging

[17] 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: Truestar, 1996).

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, (as previously noted), on the eve of creating human beings It announced to the angelic hosts that our species, beginning with Adam, would be the *khalifa*s—the stewards and guardians—of creation (Q. 2:30). For each individual, true *jihad* is the *jihad* to be a true *khalifa*, thus furthering the moral and ethical ordering process that began with the divine act of physically creating the world.

With this in mind, those inspired by Gulen—participants in the Hizmet Movement—have, with constantly increasing breadth, followed Gulen's injunction to be involved in both the theory and practice of *hizmet—hizmet* offered in an altruistic manner, because it needs to be offered, not because there is an expected payback for it. Succinctly stated, the threefold human problem that Gulen first articulated in the 1980s—ignorance, poverty, and strife—continues to be addressed by a threefold response. There is the far-flung system of schools noted briefly above, dominated by teachers and administrators whose dedication to their students is breathtaking (I make this statement based on a wide array of personal observations of such schools, on four continents).

There is an array of poverty-alleviating programs that extend from soup-kitchens to high school projects such as that in Melbourne, Australia. There the high school juniors and seniors plant and harvest an organic vegetable garden (from which process they learn how difficult it is to generate such produce, rather than by simply showing up at the grocery store and finding it on the shelves. The vegetables are sold around the neighborhood, which yields funds that are then sent to a village in West Africa (in Mali, the year I visited) that had lacked easy access to fresh water, and, thanks to those funds, now had the wherewithal to dig a well and put in a piping system providing the village with fresh water.

So, too, the creation of a range of interfaith and multi-cultural programs have become a staple across the Hizmet landscape—particularly interfaith *Iftar* dinners during the month of Ramadan. These bring people from diverse faiths, ethnicities, nationalities, and social and cultural backgrounds to eat and speak and celebrate with each other—and to learn about each other's communities. Thus the fast associated with the month of Ramadan and with it, the spiritual intentions of crossing the boundary into and out of the reality of eating and not eating, becomes a centerpiece of the *jihad* not only to make one's self a better *muslim*, but to make the world a better place.

Bio:

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