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### **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.<sup>16</sup>

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.

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<sup>16</sup> 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).<sup>17</sup>

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

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<sup>17</sup> 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).

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 *khalifas*—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.

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