

## Spiritual *Jihad* with Myself and for Others: Islam within an Interfaith World<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract:

Religion is an edifice built of interpretations superimposed on the foundations of revelation. This truth pertains both to the question of which texts are considered revealed and how one understands them. It extends to terms and concepts of which none offers more significant implications across history than the Arabic term, *jihad*, meaning “struggle.” The key form of such struggle is to make oneself as obedient to God as possible—how and when through the word and how and when through the sword?—and while some view this challenge in narrow terms, others, notably mystics, view it broadly. We see the word and its use to express a breadth of love for humanity expressed in the words of Sufi writers like Ibn ‘Arabi and Rumi, and in the writings and action inspired in the contemporary world by M. Fethullah Gulen that has yielded the *Hizmet* Movement. Gulen and his followers offer arguably the most significant Muslim contribution to the process of a vole-laden *jihad* to repair our strife-ridden world.

### Key Words:

Gulen, *hizmet*, *hosgoru*, *jihad*, Ibn ‘Arabi, muslim/Muslim, mysticism, Original Sin, Rumi

### Text:

Many have noted, in the course of discussions within and about Islam, that *jihad*—struggle—operates on three levels. The primary level focuses on one’s self, struggling to make one as effective a *muslim*—one who submits to God’s will—as possible.<sup>2</sup> 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 the focus is a reality—God—by definition beyond our own reality and beyond our human experience and understanding, one is inevitably caught between the faith-bound certainty of revelation and the complexity of interpretation. Each of the

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<sup>1</sup> A slightly different, more abbreviated version of this article appeared embedded in the larger article, “God, Religion, and War: Language, Concept, and the Problem of Definition from Genesis to *Jihad* to Levinas,” in *War and Peace in Religious Culture*; special issue (13) of *Religions*, Douglas Allen, ed., (MDPI, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Note the convenience of contemporary English-language orthography that 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.

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—what ends up within the canon—we find ourselves asking what it means, say, “not to commit murder,” (Ex 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 Qur 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).<sup>3</sup> 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 (*madhabs*) of jurisprudence, 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 *tariqas*.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This will happen in all three Abrahamic traditions, but in slightly different ways. Thus, for example, Jews fast for a 25-hour period known as the Day of Atonement—adding an hour to the 24-hour cycle in order to be absolutely certain that some slip of the mind did not cause less than the full day to be foodless. Muslims fast from sunrise to sundown during the entire month of Ramadan, and there are prescriptions of how to determine absolutely that the sun has set before consuming food; traditional Catholics don't consume meat on Fridays and deprive themselves of something significant during the 40 days of Lent—and in the monastic tradition a host of physical needs are suppressed.

<sup>4</sup> There is considerable discussion as to which, beyond the four Sunni *madhabs*, and the first two of the noted Shi'i *madhabs*, constitute “major” *madhabs*. Gibril Fouad Haddad's *The Four Imams and Their Schools* (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 *madhabs*.

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.<sup>6</sup>

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; he will have to work hard and she 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.<sup>7</sup> 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: “No soul will be questioned for what another soul has done” (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

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<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> This does not disoblige 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 difference of interpretation of the identical revealed narrative in Judaism and Christianity and an analogous one in Islam.

<sup>7</sup> 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).

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—to the issue of revelation/interpretation/belief/certainty 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—we add *love*, 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 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.)

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*, in the *dar al’Harb*. 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?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Shari’a* is what I referred to earlier as “jurisprudence.” The word comes from the root, “*shar*,” which refers to the sort of path that leads one to water in the wilderness—in other words a path essential for one’s survival.

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?

Interestingly, this difficulty is assuaged in a particular way by the mystical traditions within the Abrahamic traditions. 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 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.<sup>9</sup>

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 *jihad* with others over matters of faith. Sufism refers to the elimination of ego as 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.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

The second direction, however, is that, in emptying myself of ego I may come to a clearer sense of how diverse the paths—the *tariqas*—to God’s hiddenmost, innermost recess actually *are*.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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 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.

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<sup>11</sup> *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).

<sup>12</sup> 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.

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.<sup>13</sup> 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).

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<sup>13</sup> *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).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</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).

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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