

“AND NOT EQUAL ARE THE GOOD DEED AND THE BAD”

ON VIOLENCE, POWER, AND PEACE IN TURKEY’S MOST DISASTROUS YEAR

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Why do the most violent people in the world accuse the most peaceful of violence?

The last year represents one of the darkest periods in modern Turkish history. In lectures around the world, I once argued for the geopolitical significance of Turkey, which at the time was functioning as an impressive, democratic bridge between East and West. Here was a deeply devout Muslim nation that stressed democracy and civil liberties, a country that modeled an authentic religious identity and yet was not afraid of science and the secular world.

And then all hell broke loose. Our world is no stranger to ruthless and megalomaniacal leaders presiding over brutal and immoral regimes. And yet even by these standards, the Erdoğan regime has set records over the last years. The government's attack on freedom of speech and education is particularly dangerous:

The numbers surrounding other educational sectors are mind-boggling: 44,000 staff from the Education Ministry, the great majority of them teachers, 1280 schools, 800 dormitories and 550 foundations (many of them educational).

Upwards of 90,000 civilians have been detained, with roughly half arrested, and more than 120,000 have been fired or suspended from their jobs... So consequential was the purge of deans that at one university, the Rector, Prof. Dr. Ihsan Gunaydin, became the dean of six faculties (Celik, 2017).

The brutality of the purges and the suffering they have caused are self-evident and are being covered by other authors. In this article I wish to explore a different question: how is one to understand the conflict between good and evil, and peace and violence, this disastrous year in Turkish history represents? Why does the dictator label the peaceful imam a terrorist?

Hizmet, the movement inspired by Fethullah Gülen, and falsely accused by the Erdoğan regime of plotting the 2016 coup attempt, is known publically for its service projects around the world. In an age when many non-Muslims often associate Islam with violence and terrorism, Hizmet exists as an informally structured movement

of religiously inspired individuals who engage in acts of goodness. Although Hizmet is especially known for building schools and offering high-quality education around the world, organizations inspired by the movement have been involved in charity around the globe: famine relief in Somalia; disaster relief after the tsunami in Japan; responses to earthquakes in Pakistan, Peru, and Haiti; involvement after the Bangladesh floods; and medical treatments offered to many poor communities in Africa.

In the United States, people are most likely to have participated in friendship dinners and public forums. In his book on Hizmet, the famous American scholar of religion Martin Marty comments:

When, on occasion, we and our colleagues were challenged to point to forms of Islam that could be called "moderate," "open," or "dialogical," we explored a Turkish-based but international movement often called Hizmet... This same interest had drawn me to study Hizmet as a model or exemplar of a promising way of being religious in Islamic contexts (Marty, 2015, 2).

In North America, Hizmet's interfaith dialogue activities stand out. Over the last two decades, religious differences have been used by certain groups to incite violence. Hizmet interfaith dialogues explore ways that religious differences can become constructive, not destructive. One might even say that *because* Hizmet is a Muslim movement, it seeks brotherhood/sisterhood across the families of Abraham.

There are skeptical voices. Fethullah Gülen is above all else an imam and scholar of Islam, working primarily in the Sufi tradition. He teaches and practices traditional Islamic purity and calls his followers to personal piety. Consider this passage from his *Pearls of Wisdom*:

There is no limit to doing good to others. Those who have dedicated themselves to the good of humanity can be so altruistic that they live for others. However, such altruism is a great virtue only if it originates in sincerity and purity of intention, and if it does not define the others by racial preferences.

But can such pious language really speak to the complexities of the modern world? Or does it represent an escape into internal spirituality? Or worse, is the strong focus on "sincerity and purity" merely a cynical front, while behind the scenes Mr. Gülen pulls the strings of power, seeking to bring down governments and put himself into positions of political power?

One can only say that, if overthrowing regimes is his goal, he is singularly bad at it. As Graham Fuller asks, "Why would Gülen choose to attempt a coup that's contrary to all his views, and at a time of maximum weakness vis-à-vis Erdoğan?" (Fuller, 2016). Studies of the July 2016 so-called coup attempt reveal that it was never a

serious effort to bring down the Turkish government. It would require a massive conspiracy theory to connect Gülen with the gun-carrying rebels. For example, one would have to say that all of Gülen's teachings for three decades were merely a hypocritical pretense. All his claims that violence is never justified in the name of religion were merely a way to mislead opponents while Gülen orchestrated violent political actions aimed at putting him and his followers in charge of the Turkish government. He only preached peace because he really wanted to wage war.

It doesn't make sense. As Goshen-Gottstein notes, "[Gülen's] views respecting democracy, the rule of law, and opposing terror and violence have been consistent for decades" (Goshen-Gottstein, 2016).

If the charge is absurd, then the interesting question becomes: why is it made? Politically, the answer is obvious: Erdoğan adds to his power by finding a scapegoat. Labeling the Gülen Movement a terrorist organization also gives him an easy excuse to cripple the strongest civil society organization in Turkey, which helps him in his drive for absolute power.

But I want to ask the deeper "why" question. My goal is to understand the relationship between peace on the one hand, and striving for power through violence on the other. In service of this goal, I'll set the question against the backdrop of the Qur'anic verse, "And not equal are the good deed and the bad" (Surah 41, verse 34).

The greatest challenge to a dictator is a movement of people who are ready to make great personal sacrifices based on their belief in God. (By contrast, the greatest gift for a dictator are people who will kill others based on their belief in God.) After all, the dictator's army and police together with his control over laws (the legislative

branch of government) and how they are enforced (the judicial branch) can suppress his direct opponents and small movements within the state. But a strong enough civil movement will ultimately remove him from power. To use only one of myriad examples, think of the peaceful rebellion of East Germans that brought down the wall in 1989. This is why dictators often become obsessed with charismatic cultural and religious leaders: their power is of a completely different sort than that of political strongmen. Dumanli clearly expresses this insight:

A peaceful civil society movement called Hizmet, or service, focusing on democracy, education, interfaith dialogue and social welfare efforts has become the primary object of Erdoğan's obsession. In its mission and values, Hizmet is similar to the U.S. civil rights movement. Its supporters are ordinary citizens drawn from a cross-section of public or private institutions, but Erdoğan equates their presence in the bureaucracy with a legal coup. The government has purged thousands of police, prosecutors and other public officials. Erdoğan's attack machine has also cracked down on Hizmet in the private sector, going after institutions and businesses affiliated with its supporters. (Dumanli, 2015).

He argues that the movement's growth and impact both inside and outside Turkey position both its leader and its followers as indicative of a "post-political" turn in twenty-first century Islamic political identity in general, and illustrative of Turkey's political, economic, and cultural transformation in particular.

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The answer to our guiding question now begins to emerge. Dictators like Erdoğan crush religious leaders like Gülen because the two inhabit completely different realities. One reality is the logic of power. A person who is addicted to ruling over others will maintain his power at all costs, because power is his central reality. But people who subordinate worldly power and prestige to the call of compassion have their eyes focused on a different reality. Their religious ideals are incomprehensible to dictators. Consider the way Mr. Gülen formulates his goals:

...if we are able to implant in the young firm belief, pure and sound thoughts, a strong feeling of love of nation and country; if we enable them to come together around a sacred cause to which they should be made to dedicate themselves; if we bring them to prefer such values as honor and dignity over passing pleasures; and if we inculcate in them the duty of loyalty to the country and working for its good... then the young will maintain their essential identity against mental and spiritual corruption (Hendrick, 2013, 123).

As Hendrick comments, “[Gülen’s] objective is to cultivate *action-oriented people of service* who dedicate their personal and professional lives toward the realization of a better future” (ibid., 101).

The anthropologist can demonstrate the different social and cultural worlds that these two men inhabit. The philosopher will argue that they live by two different “logics.” For the religious observer, however, the differences cannot be expressed without using the terms “good” and “evil.” In the Christian New Testament, it is said of Prophet Jesus, “He was in the world ... and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not” (John 1:10). Martin Luther, the Christian leader who is called “the Father of the Reformation,” described two kingdoms: the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of heaven. In the contrasts between Erdoğan and Gülen, we surely see examples of this distinction.

Of course, many religious persons are walking their own journey from one kingdom to another. (Perhaps this is one meaning of *hajj*.) Religious people do not live perfect lives. If the distinction is between light and darkness, we are often struggling our way toward the sunrise (or, perhaps, the sunset). What we do believe, however, is that the categories of light and darkness express real realities in human existence. Moral questions are raised not only in individual lives, but also in the history of kingdoms and countries. The Christian scriptures describe the difference: “Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword” (*Matthew*, 26:52), whereas “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience,

kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (*Galatians*, 5:22).

And not equal are the good deed and the bad. ▲

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