

A MEDITATION ON PERSECUTION

JON PAHL, PHD

The Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

Among the many gospel hymns and spirituals that have provided strength for a suffering people over the decades, one has stayed with me in recent weeks. That song—sung by the great soul artist Sam Cooke, and covered by many gospel choirs – is entitled “I’m So Glad,” but I remember it as “Troubles Don’t Last Always.” Among its key lines, as performed by Rev. Timothy Wright and the Chicago Interdenominational Mass Choir, is the following:

“Weeping may endure for a night, keep the faith it will be alright. Troubles don’t last always.”

Since July 15, 2016, following a failed coup whose origins are still unknown while many signs indicate it may have been orchestrated by the Turkish government, people associated with the global Hizmet movement have been targeted for persecution. This persecution, however, is not new; it has been going on for decades. The rationales have constantly shifted.

The failed coup is just the latest excuse.

Christians like me, who follow the example of Jesus, know that goodness is always targeted by those committed to corruption. The Apostle Paul, in his 2nd Letter to the Church at Corinth, wrote of the early Christian community: “We are pressed on all sides, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (4:8-9).

Among the people of Hizmet, Fethullah Gülen knows from his own life-story, which I am writing at present, that those committed to good often face persecution. But those troubles don’t last. Goodness wins.

Gülen’s father, Ramiz, knew this truth. He wanted to name his eldest son Muhammed Fethullah, after the Prophet (peace be upon him), but the registrar of the secular government thought the name “too Islamic.” But Ramiz kept the faith, and eventually succeeded to register him



three years later with his newborn second son.

Gülen’s mother, Refia, also knew this truth. She had the capacity to teach the Qur’an to other women, but at the time such public teaching was illegal in Turkey. But she kept the faith, and women in the villages of Korucuk and Alvar, and the city of Erzurum, eventually gained a deeper knowledge of their religious traditions.

In his own life, Gülen has faced repeated troubles and oppressions. When he served in the military (1961-63), not all commanders found his faith admirable. At least one made it so difficult for Gülen that his health failed, requiring a leave of absence. During his second appointment as an imam, in Edirne, when his reputation as a preacher began to grow

and crowds came to hear him, he drew the interest of the police. On one occasion, he received a death threat. On another, he was arrested and detained. That case went to trial, but Gülen was eventually exonerated. These troubles have always preceded greater success.

It is, of course, impossible to predict the future. The most recent persecutions have destroyed livelihoods and lives. Our collective voices should oppose and resist the authoritarian actions of the Turkish government. We must organize to protect the innocent and to shelter them from ongoing harm, insofar as possible. But persecutions cannot destroy the good, the true, and the beautiful.



Such eternal realities are beyond the reach of the corrupt and violent, just as they are also beyond their understanding.

As the one whom people of Hizmet call Hocaefendi, or honored teacher, put it himself, quoting Surah Al-Ma'ida 5:8 from the

Holy Qur'an: "Let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice."

Or as the gospel song put it, again: "Weeping may endure for a night, keep the faith it will be alright. Troubles don't last always." ▲

Gülen has faced repeated persecutions throughout his life. (Above: Gülen (in the middle) on trial in Izmir, Turkey, in State of Emergency Court after the military intervention in 1971.