“Ours is not a caravan of despair”

THE HIZMET MOVEMENT OF FETHULLAH GÜLEN AND THE COMMON GOOD
A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE UK

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The Hizmet (service, in Turkish) movement associated with the Turkish teacher Fethullah Gülen [b. 1941] is part of the emerging “European Islam” which has its own diversity in the expression of Turkish-Muslim identity. The movement is active globally in education, media, inter-religious dialogue, finance, and relief work. In Britain, Hizmet has been particularly active in education and interfaith dialogue, and has made a significant contribution to the common good over the past twenty years. Hizmet is a living expression of Mevlana Rumi’s assertion that faith in the One God is far from being “... a Caravan of Despair” (Citlak & Bingul 2004, 8).

This article is being written at a time of national stress in the UK and Turkey. In the latter, following the July, 2016, coup attempt, Hizmet followers have faced extraordinary pressure, most of it illegal, from the ruling AKP government. Without providing any evidence, the government has claimed Hizmet – a hitherto benign, pro-social, pro-democratic, and apolitical movement – plotted and carried out the coup attempt. Thousands of citizens suspected of association with the Hizmet movement have been imprisoned, exiled, or dismissed from their professions by the AKP government. A critical analysis of such hostility is essential.

In the UK, the same time period has been marked by a divisive Referendum on the nation’s membership in the European Union, four terrorist attacks in Manchester and London, and a housing tower block fire in London, which claimed over 80 lives, including those of many immigrants.

When looking at the UK, one must examine the key role faith communities such as Hizmet have played in uniting divided societies over racism, Islamophobia, economic inequalities, and weakening public services. Christian, Muslim, and Jewish national and local leaders have come together to establish a common platform of accord and mutual respect. Hizmet, with its educational and inter-faith dialogue centres in major English cities such as London, Birmingham, and Manchester, has offered both spaces and opportunities for mutual engagement, as well as Qur’antically based understandings of the dynamics of successful religio-socially plural national cultures.

Islam, a rich and strong tradition that thrives across many diverse societies, is both a living faith and has enabled generations of Muslims to address social developments, justice, and both corporate and individual questions of identity and ethics. Drawing on the Qur’an, Hadith, Sunnah, and fiqh, new Islamic social movements have constantly formed fresh public spaces in which new identities and lifestyles could emerge, not least in the UK.

Some of the finest expressions of Islam have occurred under the most pluralist, religio-social circumstances, where intellectual...
discourse, educational achievements, and social harmony have flourished. Amongst contemporary Islamic thinkers who are professedly concerned with interpreting historical sources and practicing their faith in an “Islamically correct” manner, Fethullah Gülen is the spiritual father of what is probably the most active Turkish-Islamic movement of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

In considering Hizmet, one soon realizes that Fethullah Gülen is neither an innovator with a new and unique theology nor a revolutionary. His understanding of Islam is oriented within the conservative mainstream, and his arguments are rooted in the traditional sources of Islam. They stand in a lineage represented through al-Ghazali, Mevlana Jalal ud-Din Rumi, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, and in company with Muhammad Asad and Muhammad Naquib Syed Al-Attas, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

This movement – one amongst many on a spectrum which verges from pro-social civic based groups to aggressive factions – is distinctive in emphasizing high quality educational institutions, both in Turkey and internationally. Schools have been founded and staffed by Turkish nationals in developing states as well as in powerful, economically developed countries such as the USA and the UK. Hizmet members have also organized many academic conferences throughout the last 20 years, drawing international panels of academics and researchers to explore issues of human exploration and co-operation.

While Hizmet members have been organizing these schools and conferences, the current AKP government has adopted an aggressive version of political activism abusive of Islamic faith, which brooks no contrasting expressions of a benign Islam, asserting its autocratic style by dismissing academics, teachers, judges, public servants, and military officers, amongst others, in an effort to consolidate its power over the Turkish state. This has led to a “state in exile” for many suspected of association with the Hizmet approach.

What, however, mechanisms have allowed these extremist elements to emerge and seize such power? It’s worth examining, so we can fully understand the value Hizmet brings to the world.

Defensiveness is pathogenic
In today’s complex and globalized world, migration and interculturalism have become the norm. In many countries there is no official, shared, “public” religion.

In a sociological analysis of why high rates of strict religion for developed countries such as the UK and other European states, Steve Bruce formulated the concept of “cultural transition and defence,” explaining how defensiveness can bolster extreme types of religiosity, including those that advocate violence (Bruce 1996, p. 165, 197). A significant issue here is lack of a Western center of Islam that makes it necessary for Muslims to study abroad. Cesari and Ramadan assert strongly that an independent Western Islam must emerge in order to solve problems associated with radicalization (Cesari 2004, and Ramadan 2004). The Hizmet movement is in prime position to offer such a model of Islam.

The central majority of a religion often used social pressure to control extremists. If the central mass of believers dwindles in numbers, the growth of literalist and extremist factions will likely continue unchecked.

Sectarian literalism
Historically, there has always been a contention between monotheistic traditions and other traditions of faith, just as that contention has existed among themselves. While the Abrahamic religions affirm monotheism, resist deviation, and oppose constructed deities, their core values emphasize openness to diversity. Textual literalism, however, has made the new monotheism politically sectarian, schismatic and aggressive, while social and moral laws have been deemed inferior by this new emphasis. This development has heralded a new type of political order inevitably hostile to all other civic ideals (Fenn 2009, 135). This irrationality has had, and does have, serious and deadly consequences.

Typically, uncritical literalists aim to cleanse “false believers” from their midst, or to separate
themselves from them. This is why literalism can lead to violence and usually leads to schisms (Harris 2004, 409). To be a literalist is to destroy the majority of depth and emotion of any written religion. The only advantage of the literalist’s uncritical attitude to scripture is that it caters to the simplistic mind craving order. Such is the strategy and mindset of the AKP leadership and its persecution of devout people influenced by Hizmet and Fethullah Gülen.

Disdaining pluralism

Extremists enforce strict moral codes in accordance with their beliefs, and sometimes, such as during the Christian Medieval periods, they violently suppress dissent. They disdain pluralism as abnormal: *cuius regio, eius religio*.

During such times, minority religious groups have no choice but to argue for religious plurality as a matter of self-survival. But even during less stressful times it is critical to value pluralism, which lifts up minority voices and ensures a diverse society, where different voices and beliefs are given equal footing.

When a singular political ideology such as the AKP’s that abuses religion becomes entrenched and encroaches upon the arenas of public education and politics, a dangerous possibility emerges: its leaders, comfortable in power, will no longer see the need for pluralism, which is the seed-bed of a healthy normal society. Such an order needs to be reminded of a possible new dark age.

The need for fixed stars, for certainty in the midst of our tenuous lives on an unpredictable planet, is real and understandable. Political and religious leaders who can package and deliver absolute truths find receptive audiences, but do not create healthy societies. A movement such as Hizmet, with its openness to contemporary human enterprise, research, education, democracy, and diversity, threatens such rigidities. We need to think of such an expression of Islam as the Hizmet movement does: with support for a full menu of pluralism, democratic and constitutional freedoms, universal human rights, and religious diversity.

These beliefs are exemplified by Hizmet, a de-centralized polymorphic social movement, which in less than thirty years has made significant contributions to inter-communal and national peace, inter-religious dialogue, economic development, and education. These contributions are evident in the Movement’s activities, research, platforms, and creative influence in the UK and around the globe. In a time of anxiety and despondency, Hizmet represents a “Caravan of Hope” rather than a train of despair.

References


