

The Divan Center as an Islamic Peace Movement

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Introduction

I first heard of the Divan Center in 2012 when a couple of Turkish immigrants came to my office at the UNCG Center for New North Carolinians to ask if I would speak about immigration in North Carolina to their Turkish immigrant organization in Greensboro. I said, "I would, except that I don't know anything about Turkish immigration in North Carolina." They went on to explain that they knew about Turkish immigration, but they wanted to know about immigration in general in the state. So, I agreed. Calling themselves the Divan Center, they gave me a place and time. I didn't give the planned speaking engagement much thought, since I often spoke about immigration as part of my job as director of the UNCG Center for New North Carolinians.

When I went to my speaking engagement, I expected a dozen people or so for an evening chat, in a hotel conference room. I discovered that it was their annual meeting with a couple of hundred people and a community dinner with many local representatives beyond the Turkish immigrant population. Similar events were held in the Triad and Triangle annually. I learned that the Divan Center has community offices in the Raleigh Triangle area (Cary), and Greensboro, to serve population clusters in these regions. The two clusters include joint community activities from time to time. Activities include community dinners, educational programs, and discussions to connect with the broader North Carolina community.

The Divan Center organizes annual seminar trips to Turkey for invited guests from North Carolina, designed as cultural and educational bridge building events. These trips target academics and community leaders. Divan Center associates serve as group leaders for these ten day long trips each summer. The guests visit historical and cultural sites, meet and dine with Turkish families in several Turkish cities, and visit schools there. The Divan Center covers many expenses for these educational tours. They are organized through a network called "*Hizmet*" in Turkish, which translates into English as "Service." *Hizmet* was inspired by a Turkish imam, Fethullah Gülen. It interprets Islam as a service movement and has focused especially on education as a way to serve others.

In 2013 I became one of the seminar participants. Our delegation started in Istanbul and traveled to a few other cities around the country: Konya, Cappadocia, Kayseri, and Izmir. We visited cultural and historic sites, famous mosques, social service projects, and several schools, both primary and higher education institutions. Where schools were in session, we visited classes and chatted with the students. We sometimes stayed in dormitories of residential schools and had dinners with families who asked us about America, our own families, our professions, and our religious practices. The host family would typically give us gifts: small prayer rugs or other cultural artifacts, fresh fruit, and so forth.

At one *Hizmet* sponsored university we visited, the center of the campus had a large building that looked like a mosque. We went inside and saw that it was the university library. The university president explained to us that a wealthy donor wanted to build a mosque for the university. They persuaded the donor to build the library in the shape of a mosque because a mosque is the symbol of truth and wisdom. And in a university, the library is the source of truth and wisdom. At the peak of the central dome is written the Arabic word for

Truth, the first word in the Koran.

My experience with *Hizmet* and the Divan Center raised important questions for me. Most importantly, can *Hizmet* and the Divan Center be considered an Islamic peace movement.

Historical Background as an Antecedent to a Peace Movement

Modern Turkey is a bridge between Europe and Asia. The Middle East was under Turkish Ottoman Empire domination from the 15th to 20th century. Eastern Turkey, known as the Anatolian region, borders Syria, Iraq, Iran, Armenia, and Georgia. Western Turkey touches Bulgaria and was part of ancient Greece until the Roman Empire overtook the area.

By the fourth century AD, present-day Turkey had been subsumed by the Roman Empire. Roman Emperor Constantine declared this eastern area to be the Eastern branch of the Roman Empire. Byzantium (later called Constantinople and now called Istanbul) was its capital. When the Roman Empire disintegrated in the fifth century AD, Constantinople continued as the seat of the Eastern Orthodox Church. This Byzantine Empire gradually expanded to include parts of the Middle East, Western Asia, North Africa, and Southern Europe- a very multi-ethnic empire.

By the 7th century, Islam emerged, building on the religious history of the Jews and Christians and expanding across the Middle East into the Byzantine Empire. In 1453 Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks, the Turkish speaking tribes of Asia Minor. This Ottoman Empire survived until the Twentieth Century with the emergence of nation states and the modern warfare of World War I. The time of the Ottoman Empire was also the time of the crusades, when Western powers sent crusaders to fight the Ottomans. The crusades continued for centuries and were attempts to expand political power under the banner of Christianity. They were largely unsuccessful and resulted in death and suffering, but they did contribute to cultural exchange.

The 13th Century Sufi poet and mystic, Rumi, developed his Sufi order of scholars in Konya. Rumi and his followers lifted the spiritual dimension of Islam and other religions through poetry, song, and dance. They called on their followers to become one with God, to see God in everything around them, to dedicate themselves fully to God. The Sufis were to become an important component of the still evolving Islam. This understanding of Islam relies on divine knowing, looking inwardly for insight and understanding, as opposed to a legalistic theology, building on external authority.

Ancient Greek philosophy, especially Platonic idealism, also contributed to the culture. In addition, Eastern Orthodox Christianity drew heavily on mysticism and gnostic philosophy as the path to truth. Rumi drew on these traditions as well as Islam for religious insight and tied them to the importance of education and learning as a path to God.

Sufism, through Rumi, spread to many parts of the world. Indonesia, Egypt, India, Somalia, and elsewhere have Sufi influenced expressions of Islam in their cultural traditions. Most countries with large Muslim populations will find Sufi traditions along with more orthodox understandings of Islam. Orthodox Islam is not always friendly toward this smaller sect, and fundamentalist believers of Islam will sometimes target Sufism as heresy.

As the Ottoman Empire expanded over much of the Middle East, North Africa, and Southern Europe, the empire absorbed additional cultures. The Ottoman sultans developed councils of elders and scholars to advise them about this expanded and fast changing world. The empire's different cultures and religions were typically represented amongst the sultan's advisors. This body of advisors became known as the Divan, the gathering place to sit and discuss ideas. Hence, one of the synonyms for the modern couch is "divan" or place for people to sit and talk. The North Carolina Divan Center derived its name from this as a place to

bring people together to share.

The Ottoman Empire began to weaken with the emergence of new nation states and crumbled in World War I when they allied with Germany. Following World War I, a new secular state was created by the new Turkish leader, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The new order, known as Kemalism, transformed the country, striking down most old religious practices and reinstituting a push toward science and technology. Women and men were forbidden from wearing traditional head coverings. Education was re-emphasized with strong government schools. The Turkish language was transcribed into Latin script and adopted by the governmental schools. A strong military was prioritized for this modern world. While some religious practices were allowed, they were tightly controlled by the secular state. Turkey was trying to position itself as a Twentieth Century power in new alignments after World War I. Along with the new secular and growing urban and educated population, people were allowed to continue their Muslim worship practices in restricted formats with government appointed imams (religious leaders) who passed governmental exams.

Fethullah Gülen

Fethullah Gülen was born in 1938 in Erzurum, eastern Turkey. Eastern Turkey, known as Anatolia, was more rural than Western Turkey which was molded by Europe and the domination of the international city of Istanbul. People from Eastern Turkey were more likely to be religious, to be poor, to be more sensitive to the Kurdish minority who lived in that area, and less likely to advance in the highly competitive government regulated education system of the new state.

Gülen was an excellent student who studied both science and religion. In 1958, he passed the rigorous state examination to become an imam, a Muslim preacher and scholar. He had been heavily influenced by a Muslim theologian whom he had studied, Said Nursi. Nursi was considered a brilliant Islamic scholar who was willing to take issue with Atatürk and the secular government from time to time. He survived the religious purges of the new republic through his popularity and demonstrated brilliance, and he influenced the young Gülen.

Gülen, newly authorized as an imam, was assigned to a mosque in Izmir, a large city on the edge of Anatolia. Here he reached out to the poor and to the college educated. He addressed social issues and drew from Sufi traditions in his scholarship. Gülen began to shape his own message and cultivated the concept of *Hizmet*, or service, as the key to a good religious life. He developed programs to help the poor and to educate those who were unable to go to government operated schools. He extended his preaching and his message across Anatolia, reaching the more traditionally religious and marginalized.

The *Hizmet* movement attracted a large following, especially the religious and the poor. *Hizmet* programs tutored children in preparation for exams to enter into the competitive government schools. *Hizmet* private schools and colleges became part of the movement. Students at *Hizmet* sponsored schools and tutoring programs were not required to be *Hizmet* followers, but they were influenced by the supportive environment of the movement.

The faithful were encouraged to contribute heavily toward these schools and to other human needs programs as expressions of their love for God. Graduates, who were well educated, disciplined, and steeped in an ethic of service, moved into government and human services jobs, including the police and military service professions. Successful businesses emerged and significant sub-strata of the population were devoted followers of *Hizmet* while additional people internalized the values and service commitments without claiming to be followers.

Gülen's sermons preached democracy, commitment to moral values, openness and

communication with others- including different faiths and cultures. He preached that science and religion were compatible, and dialogue was important. Gülen retired as a government sanctioned imam in 1981 but continued his lectures and writings. His teachings were published and widely distributed by his followers. *Hizmet* schools and institutions continued to develop with his message of inspiration. The schools were locally developed and supported but continued a mission of service. The mission component expanded the schools and some of its outreach programs to many countries across the globe.

In the meantime, modern Turkey had its political challenges. The modern secular state became uncomfortable with an influential religious movement. In addition, secular forces clashed with one another resulting in multiple military coups. Sometimes Gülen and his movement were considered to be a threat. In 1971 Gülen was arrested and briefly imprisoned. Controversies emerged again in the late 1990's with allegations that he sought to overthrow the secular state. In 1999, Gülen moved to the US for medical treatment for a heart condition and diabetes. At that point he chose to remain in the US and was eventually granted Legal Permanent Resident status. In 2000 he was again charged in Turkey with attempting to create a theocratic state. In 2006 the charges were dismissed by a high court. In 2014 Recep Erdogan, the popular mayor of Istanbul, was elected President of Turkey. Gülen and the *Hizmet* movement continued to be persecuted and face allegations by the Turkish government with charges of treason.

Researching Hizmet as a Peace Movement

Divan Center participants and members of similar *Hizmet* affiliated movements elsewhere do not generally identify their movement as a peace movement. To identify their movement as a peace movement as such would be redundant. They are Islamic, and Islam means peace. Those who do not practice peace are not true Muslims in their world view.

Following my initial trip to Turkey, I maintained contact with the North Carolina Divan Center, including community meetings and occasional invitations to dinner. I attended a conference sponsored by the Rumi Forum in Washington DC where scholars from around the world reported on *Hizmet* related activities and relationships with other communities. The Rumi Forum is supportive of the *Hizmet* movement and hosts ongoing events in the DC area for the broader community to promote religious diversity and tolerance. Events include speakers from different backgrounds around the world, interreligious gatherings, and seminars. Special efforts are aimed at reaching out to Jewish and Christian communities who are considered to be part of the same religious heritage.

Outside the Rumi Forum 2013 International Conference, I met and talked with Turkish American protesters who alleged that the Gülenists had infiltrated the US, having established about 150 private schools here plus hundreds of nonprofit organizations. Their literature claimed that Gülenists had now infiltrated all levels of US government agencies, including the military, CIA, FBI, IRS, and others. I also saw other anti-Gülen literature that claimed, among other things, that he was secretly a Jew or a Christian. A cursory review of the Internet shows that this anti-Gülen movement alleges that the emergence of *Hizmet* inspired charter schools in the US demonstrates that Gülen is seeking to infiltrate the US and turn it into an Islamist state.

The following year I traveled to Turkey again to see activities not under the auspices of *Hizmet*. I was in route to Rwanda at this time and discovered by accident a *Hizmet* school in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. That school demonstrated the characteristics of the *Hizmet* schools in Turkey. It was characterized by high academic quality and an interreligious staff (including Turks, Rwandans, and a couple of former US Peace Corps volunteers). There was a diverse student body, and the philosophy was student centered, with learning stations,

extended student activities, and engagement in “learning by doing.” It was an international example of the progressive education movement articulated by John Dewey that became the norm for US Twentieth century education.

I decided to do empirical follow up research on the Divan Center and *Hizmet* movement in North Carolina. North Carolina has three major urban clusters. The Triangle includes Raleigh, Chapel Hill, and Durham as well as several additional smaller communities such as Cary. It also includes the renowned “Research Triangle” and several top tier universities such as UNC Chapel Hill, North Carolina State, and Duke. The Triad includes Greensboro, Winston Salem, and High Point as well as additional smaller communities. The universities there include UNCG, North Carolina A&T, Wake Forest, Winston Salem State, and High Point University, among others. The third urban cluster in the state, the area surrounding the city of Charlotte, does not now have an active Divan Center site, though some people come to Greensboro from Charlotte for occasional Divan Center activities.

There is another Turkish organization in Raleigh not connected with the Divan Center, but I seldom heard about them or their activities. It is noteworthy also that I was renting a room to a Turkish international graduate student at this time who was adamantly opposed to the *Hizmet* movement. She was a politically active Kemalist (term for the Turkish secularist movement) and was afraid that the Gülen followers were connected with President Erdogan in trying to dismantle the secular state. From Istanbul, she was an active protestor against the Erdogan regime. (This was prior to Erdogan’s public allegations that Gülen was a terrorist and *Hizmet* was a plot to overthrow his regime.) I discussed my research with her regularly, and she was eager to discuss. However, she was unaware that some of her close colleagues at UNCG were associated with the *Hizmet* movement. My observation here is that *Hizmet* followers do not proselytize, do not wear distinctive clothes or name tags, and are generally seen as kind and polite people, often good listeners.

The two Divan Center sites share a 501 (c) 3 nonprofit status, and have the following mission statement: “To promote understanding, friendship, tolerance and thus seeking Harmony within Diversity among cultures of the world through dialog. This serves to bridge the gap in knowledge about the others thereby reducing fears, prejudices and misconceptions of the unknown.”

Both Divan Center sites have rented community centers in office parks, and each includes a gathering room, kitchen, and prayer room. Neither of the sites has a *Hizmet* affiliated mosque in their geographical areas, though there are multiple mosques in both areas. In the *Hizmet* belief system, attending Friday prayer or other mosque activities is quite appropriate but not obligatory. Regular prayer can be done at home or at other sites. Community resources are more often funneled into community projects. In my experience with mosques in North Carolina, they seem to emerge along ethnic lines with shared languages. For example, in the greater Greensboro/High Point area the mosques include a predominantly Sudanese mosque, Palestinian mosque, and Pakistani mosque though anyone can attend any. In fact, mosques do not usually play the same community organizing role that churches often serve. Their role is more that of a shrine, a place to hear the call to prayer, but not a primary place to socialize with friends. The imam is a preacher and teacher but not necessarily a pastor and community leader.

Within the Divan Center in North Carolina there is no designated imam. Leadership is shared though each site has a designated coordinator or spokesperson for the broader community. For purposes of this research, the Greensboro site deferred to the spokesperson in Cary to coordinate for both sites.

Methodology

As Senior Research Scientist at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) I planned to conduct the research under university guidelines. An abstract was submitted to the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review and approval to assure that methodology appeared appropriate and subjects would not be exploited. As Director Emeritus of the Center for New North Carolinians (CNNC) at UNCG, I also had access to the advice of a diverse group of Research Fellows associated with CNNC. By training, I am a cultural anthropologist specializing in religion, which includes participant observation, review of literature, and other empirical data collection methods. We strive to see from the inside of the community and are professionally bound to reflect the community perspectives as accurately as possible as well as providing external analysis.

I requested and received approval from Divan Center representatives, and they agreed to help recruit active Divan Center participants for my survey and interviews. They invited participants in both the Triad and Triangle clusters with English language skills, to respond to my electronic survey and follow up interviews. Few, if any, were native English speakers, but their English was sufficient for my work without an interpreter. UNCG approved the research project. Most of the empirical data related to surveys and interviews was collected in the spring of 2014, prior to the present conflict in Turkey.

The working hypothesis of this research is that Divan Center participants are part of a peace movement within Islam, influenced by the teachings of Gülen.

Literature Review

A brief literature review did identify Sufi movements and influence in Islamic practices of several countries. Followers in other countries were not generally followers of Gülen, but of other religious leaders in their own countries. The movements were often in competition or operating alongside more orthodox or mainstream Islamic traditions.

A review of English language political science perspectives on modern secular Turkey has shown few references to Gülen or the *Hizmet* movement. An exception is *The New Turkish Republic* by Graham Fuller, published in 2008 by the United States Institute for Peace. At the time of publication Fuller was at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, BC. He is also former Vice Chair of the National Intelligence Council at the CIA and lived in the Middle East and Asia for seventeen years. This was his third book on Turkey. His discussion of Gülen was in a section called "The Reemergence of Turkish Islam" (p. 56-66). The general theme of his analysis was that Gülen was very influential amongst Islamists and his message was one of peace and reconciliation emerging out of Ottoman intellectualism. He says that the Gülen movement is committed to education as the route to social change and renewal, and the movement is not opposed to governmental secularism. Fuller notes that the movement is skilled in use of the media and rejects violence and extremism of any kind. Though Gülen does not criticize the military, Fuller says that Gülen members are barred from military or security services. (This does not preclude that there are people in the military who went to *Hizmet* affiliated schools and support the concepts preached by Gülenists.) Finally, Fuller notes that the movement is often under attack by both right and left political nationalists, along with suspicions of his cooperation with Christians and Jews.

Another noteworthy book is *The Gülen Movement* by sociologist Helen Rose Ebaugh, 2010, published by Springer Media Publications, New York. She was a professor at the University of Houston and invited to speak at an interfaith conference in Sweden which she discovered was sponsored by the Gülen movement. Intrigued by that, she made several visits to Turkey to look at the impact of the Gülen movement, and this sympathetic book documents her research in Turkey.

Other materials include a plethora of books and journals published in Turkey by Gülen supporters and translated into English. An organization in Istanbul, “The Journalists and Writers Foundation,” linked to the movement, has been active in documenting Gülen’s international ties and honors. These include publicity of meetings Gülen has had with Pope Paul the II, Greek Orthodox leaders, seminars to promote intellectualism, interfaith dialog, and so forth. This foundation has maintained its website and appears to be still active even during the Turkish government censorship and closing of nongovernmental media sources.

Gülen speaks and writes in Turkish. An excellent collection of sermons and papers is *Love and Tolerance*, 2006, by The Light publishing in New Jersey. It comes with a foreword by a Catholic priest in Rome who identifies himself as a longtime follower of the movement who sees it as a spiritual message for today’s world. The bulk of the book is written sermons that are shared and circulated among followers. They are organized into sections with themes such as: “Love and Mercy;” “Forgiveness, Tolerance, and Dialogue;” “Sufism and Metaphysics;” “Education;” and even “Jihad, Terrorism, and Human Rights.” The Gülen printed message is consistent and well received among his followers.

Since the attempted coup in Turkey in 2016, the government has generated extensive propaganda attacking the *Hizmet* movement and Gülen as part of their strategy to blame the coup attempt on the movement and justify persecution. That literature is beyond the purview of this study.

The View from Within

There is no formal membership roll of Divan Center associates, though the community knows who is active in community activities. They are usually family groups though there are some individuals involved. Community leaders provided me with email addresses for active associates, equally divided between the two community centers. I sent them each an email explaining my research project, assuring them of confidentiality, and inviting them to click on the link to respond to the survey. If interested, they could have a follow up interview with me and request an interpreter if desired.

Twenty-seven invitees responded to the survey. Most agreed to follow-up interviews. Follow-up interviews were conducted with eleven respondents. The age range was 23 to 43, with a mean average of 33 years, fairly evenly distributed. Sixteen males were 59% of sample, and 11 females, 41%. 81% were married, and 19% single. In response to the question: “How long have you lived in NC?” 22% reported less than one year; 30% reported 1 to 3 years; and 48% reported more than 3 years. This was largely a population of young married families.

Education

About half, 48%, first came to North Carolina for higher education, 44% had come for jobs, and the remaining 8% were accompanying family members. Approximately half came directly from Turkey. The other half listed other states, including: Massachusetts, California, Maryland, Nevada, Oklahoma, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, and Georgia. Almost a third reported that they now have doctoral degrees. Another third have master’s, and the final third have bachelor’s degrees. Only one reported a secondary or high school degree. This is a well-educated community.

Over half received bachelor’s degrees before they came to the US. One reported a high school or secondary school degree. A fourth reported master’s degrees, and three reported doctoral degrees before they came. One reported “other.” Clearly, further education in the US was a major characteristic for most of the respondents.

Almost half, 48% respondents, reported they had attended a *Hizmet* school in Turkey. Those respondents were asked why they had gone to those schools, and 12 responded. All

indicated that it was because of high education standards. Some said that it was to prepare for university entrance exams. A couple mentioned the reputation for quality science and math that *Hizmet* schools had. None said they chose a *Hizmet* school for religious reasons. Most did not come from *Hizmet* affiliated families in Turkey.

Level of Divan Involvement

About 13% said that they had been involved less than a year; 33% in the 1-3 year range; 29% in the 3-5 year range, and 25% in a 5-9 year range. About 60%, identified themselves as very active; 24% said moderately active, and 16% said occasionally active. About half talked about the importance of friendship and maintaining ties with Turkish people, traditions, language. A third of the responses specifically mentioned their positive experiences with *Hizmet* education in Turkey and a desire to find similar experiences here. A third also mentioned the importance of dialogue, multicultural situations, chances to share cultures, and opportunity to meet American visitors.

One person, fluent in written English, said, "Vision and mission of the Divan Center lead to my involvement. I would like to contribute to the efforts of building bridges even in our local community so that there is open dialogue and better understanding, and eventually a peaceful, healthy society."

Almost all respondents mentioned terms like speaker series, seminars, and dialogue. About half included the words food, breakfasts, dinners, or cooking classes. Food, often through community pot luck dinners and cooking classes, is an ongoing component of many of the ongoing Divan Center activities. A third of the responses included words like: organizing, planning events, attending board meetings. A couple of people mentioned visitation with other groups like churches and synagogues. Only three mentioned children's activities, though I observed children's play activities that seemed to be taken for granted at every event I visited. Participation in Divan Center activities varied from three who said "daily" to one who said "monthly", with once a week as a mean average. All but one said that they were followers of the *Hizmet* movement and/or Mr. Gülen.

Testimonies

Testimonies about Gülen and the movement were poignant and go to the heart of their commitments. Several touched on peace, education, mutual understanding, and communication. One said, "I believe his dialogue activities in the world will make the world a peaceful place. Misunderstandings will decrease. There will be sharing among cultures." Another said, "Mr. Gülen inspired me to [make] contact with other people regardless of their background. His ideas show me that why I need to get education and why I need to share my ideas while learning from others. I learned helping people without any expectation which is the best thing in my life." Another: "I am inspired by his ideas about education and peace." And one more: "Yes, I respect his ideas and find them very helpful to bring the world more peace. Nowadays we can see hatred everywhere but never and ever I heard one word that contains hatred from Mr. Gülen.... I believe people need to have a goal in life rather than career/money. And Mr. Gülen helped me to find my ultimate goal in life. Know each other and spread peace."

Gülen's scholarship was cited in several instances. "Mr. Gülen has taught many moral values to me individually through his books, teachings, and to the Turkish community. He has guided a generation to become one that has a perspective looking at life and hereafter; and that sees itself as responsible parties in contributing to world peace and better understanding. He not only thinks of this generation, but also of all generations who will be coming; and that our responsibility is to create a better environment through education

(science, math, and religious); and humanitarian work.”

Other comments regarding Mr. Gülen’s scholarship and inspiration include: “I think he is one of the few modern scholars of Turkey;” “I have been reading Mr. Gülen’s books and listening to his speeches for so many years. I really like his message of promoting education and helping others. He always encourages positive action, peace, dialogue and friendship with everyone and discourages conflict. With *Hizmet* movement’s activities I can see Mr. Gülen’s message in action. I do my best to be a part of it;” “I read his books, follow his speeches via Internet. I care about his thoughts;” “I read his books and like his ideas. He is the one I inspired from;” “I (am) impressed from Gülen’s ideas about social life and religion.” And one more short statement, “I feel I am enlightened by his talks and writings.”

Someone not from Turkey said, “I am from other country than Turkey. I get Turkish high school in my country which is belong to *Hizmet* movement. After I finish my school I participate most of activities of movement around Istanbul. I dedicate myself to help people, to teach them about Islam and normal education.” Another person who seems to be looking in from the outside said, “I believe they represent the honest humble face of Islam. They always talk about education, science, understanding, respect to each other and peace. I need that. I want that.”

One quote captures much of what others said.

Our world is getting smaller every day and there are many possible frictions. I think Mr. Gülen gives a general idea that we are living in a very mixed world with many different cultures and understandings, as different as every single human on earth. He suggests being in peace with people, cultures and traditions around us, accepting everyone as they are. He also suggests that peace does not come by itself, and one has to work for it. I try to embrace this idea and apply to my life. Also coming from a Muslim background, I like his idea that serving to people is a kind of service to God, and be a good Muslim. *Hizmet* movement is greatly inspired by his suggestions, and I think it helps to build better and healthy relationships. I am happy and satisfied to be considered as part of this movement.

This seems to reflect the overall sense of what the *Hizmet* movement means to these practitioners in the context of their Muslim faith and Turkish heritage. Another lengthy and eloquent comment begins, “I try to embrace, internalize and practice the characteristics of ideal human being he describes. Basically believing human beings are good, moral, ethical, and sensitive and receptive to one another’s needs but we are affected by our surroundings and how we consume information....”

All respondents identified as Muslim. When asked if they embraced and practiced *Hizmet* activities when they lived in Turkey, all but one said “yes.” Typical comments pivoted around educational activities and/or perspectives on Islam. A sample comment was, “First time the people, in *Hizmet* movement impressed me in a good way. I saw their honesty, friendly, and humanitarian way. They were so sincere and happy. I asked myself if you want to be happy you need to be with them. I was also a kind of conservative. Their open minded ideas, high education, and being religious at the same time impressed me to involve the movement.”

In orthodox Islam there are 5 Pillars (practices) that indicate a faithful Muslim. They are: 1) Declaration of faith: “There is no god but Allah (God), and Mohamed is the messenger of God.” 2) Prayer: a standard prayer to be recited 5 times a day which includes the declaration of faith. 3) Zakat: All things belong to God and as trustees of this, we are obligated to provide for those in need. 4) Fasting: during the month of Ramadan. 5) Hajj: a

pilgrimage to Mecca is expected for those physically and financially able at least once in their lifetime. I asked them what Muslim practices they observed.

All respondents included elements of the 5 Pillars. Almost all mentioned prayer. A majority also mentioned fasting. A few specifically mentioned the 5 Pillars, and a few specifically mentioned the 5 Pillars except for Hajj. When I asked what being a good Muslim meant, the answers generated aspects of the 5 Pillars plus comments about being of good character: honesty, trustworthiness, practicing peace, submitting to God and following the prophet, love people, follow Islamic rules, being close to the Creator.

Eleven respondents received follow up interviews. The interviewees selected the sites, including homes, worksites, Divan Center, and, in two instances with married women, at a coffee shop and a public park. They were encouraged to expand on their survey answers if they so desired. Most interviews lasted close to an hour.

Though I did not specifically ask about vocation, it became clear that almost everyone was engaged in higher education as a student, faculty member, or researcher, and/or their spouse was in that position. Most had been engaged as graduate students at various universities, focusing primarily on hard sciences such as math, biology, engineering, computer science.

Most talked about various Divan Center programs that were important to them: organizing and oversight, cooking classes, discussion groups, volunteer counseling, helping with weekend tutoring programs for children, teaching Turkish, Turkish art projects, and outreach to churches and synagogues.

Some wanted to clarify for me that *Hizmet* is not a political movement, it is not about politics. It is also more than religion. It is making life meaningful, a philosophy of caring. Poverty and ignorance are the enemies. The main goal is to give love. A couple of people said that they were motivated by their Muslim religion, but it is a message for everyone regardless of religion: love your neighbor. Someone explained that government was from the top down, and *Hizmet* was from the bottom up. We are inspired by love, not politics.

Several talked about reading Gülen's books and listening to his sermons on the Internet. A couple of people mentioned Said Nursi, making the point that both were inspirational in interpretation of the Koran. A couple made the point that the current government of Turkey is corrupt and tries to undermine Gülen and *Hizmet*. They cited Gülen to say that governments would be critical of them because they are about love.

Almost everyone said, in various ways, that Islam is central to their lives. Most try to pray five times a day. Some go to mosque on Fridays but most said they did not feel that they had to go to mosque. There was some interest in a mosque in Cary where a group of Turkish speakers go, but they wanted me to know that it does not matter what mosque a person goes to. Some mentioned fasting and celebrating Ramadan as expressions of their faith.

One person wanted me to know that *Hizmet* is the same message for Christians and Jews. It is about love and democracy. Another explained that it is to "make yourself zero. You are nothing. No ego. The goal is bigger than everyone. Gülen says we should take education to all."

When I asked if *Hizmet* was a peace movement, the response was unanimous: Yes! Definitely! Of course! Some elaborated. It is more than a peace movement. It is feeding the hungry, looking after relatives, building trust. A couple of people emphasized that they are not missionaries. They just want to make this a better place. It is a bridge to peoples and civilizations, looking for peace and harmony.

Analysis

Regarding the initial thesis of this project, is this a Muslim peace movement, the

answer seems to be an unqualified “yes,” though participants don’t typically describe it that way. They are adherents of Islam, and Islam means peace. The question is like asking a Christian if s/he is a Christian. Why state the obvious? Those who are identified as Islamic terrorists in the world media, are not Muslim, they would say. Those people do not understand Islam.

This is not a peace movement in Islam like the Mennonites and Quakers are in Christianity who sometimes take absolute vows of pacifism. The movement has not taken a stand against the military or police forces, though it does take a stand against violence and exploitation. The *Hizmet* mission and understanding of Islam is to serve others. The vision comes out of the mystical Sufi interpretation of Islam.

A secondary finding was that there are similar movements linked with the Sufi tradition of Islam in other countries. These are expressed in various ways and have varied impact on those countries. The literature indicates Sufi influence in Somalia, Indonesia, and elsewhere. In some cases, it has been a major influence on the Islam of the country and in others it has been marginalized. The movement was strong in Sudan, previously, but its main proponent was martyred in the 1980’s. I have personally experienced the hospitality and openness of Muslims in northern Ghana on multiple occasions. Though they did not describe their Islam as Sufi related, it reflected the strongest characteristics of respect for others and caring for the needy.

Personal Experience for Divan Center Hizmet Participants

It is clear these participants consider their *Hizmet* experience as core to their spiritual lives, the driving force that anchors them spiritually and provides committed community support in an alien country. They are following God’s plan and doing God’s will. It is the essence of Islam. Islam is peace and Islam is service (*Hizmet*). Gülen, and his mentor Nursi, have been able to discern the intent of the Koran and Islam for today’s world. It is about educating everyone to the best of their abilities, respecting all people, helping the poor and needy.

This population is exceptionally well educated. Almost all came to the US for higher education, mostly graduate school programs. Many are finding professional work in the US because of their professional skills. Most were enrolled in *Hizmet* related schools or tutoring programs in Turkey, but most did not enroll for religious reasons. They took part in *Hizmet* educational programs to prepare for Turkish governmental exams that determine eligibility for higher education. While engaged in *Hizmet* programs they became influenced by this kind, humble, and moderate perspective on Islam.

The movement is strong in Anatolia, the poorer, rural, more religious, and more marginalized area in Eastern Turkey. Some are of Kurdish descent or mixed families. All recognize Kurds as a marginalized minority who deserve equal rights. None talked about the Kurdish independence movement or Kurdish rebels. This would be beyond their focus. Presumably, many from Anatolia would not have continued into higher education without the help of *Hizmet*.

On my *Hizmet* trip to Turkey, I first believed it was a movement of wealthy people because most our first family hosts were wealthy. They had successful businesses, lived in well to do houses in well to do neighborhoods, and gave our delegation generous gifts. A couple of Divan Center associates explained to me that Gülen says that it is fine to accrue wealth so that you can give more generously to the poor. If *Hizmet* provides high quality education, then those who went into business could become quite successful.

Our *Hizmet* delegation visited Izmir, a large metropolitan city of almost 3 million people on the western edge of Anatolia. It included a large population of low income people,

many who migrated there in search of work. Early one morning we visited a women's center in a poor area. I thought to myself that now I can see some of the outreach work that *Hizmet* claims to do. We arrived at dawn at the center, a walk-up flat on the fifth floor of a housing project. The women, residents of the neighborhood, had been there since 3 AM to prepare our food. These devout women modestly showed us craft projects they made together to raise money for the *Hizmet* school in Rwanda that I visited the following year. They were not the recipients of *Hizmet* services, they were the providers. On that same visit, a dinner for us was hosted by two families in that neighborhood. There were not enough chairs to seat us, the flats had no dining rooms, and we sat on the floor with newspapers spread on the floor to serve as table cloths. They were living their faith by hosting this delegation from the US.

The devout attitude of *Hizmet* practitioners was apparent to me in visits with Divan Center participants in North Carolina as well. My wife and I were invited several times to have dinner at people's homes in the Greensboro area. There was no agenda or purpose to the dinners beyond the realm of friendship. We did not overtly discuss religion or politics. I noticed that the adults would take turns to discretely leave the room for a few minutes before the meal. They were leaving for evening prayer but did not want to proselytize or offend their non-Muslim guests.

Divan Center Organization

The Cary/Triangle Divan Center Facebook page says that it was founded in 2005, and the Greensboro center was founded in 2008. Each declares that they are nonprofit organizations. I am told that the Greensboro center was organized by the Triangle center, and they operate under the same 501 (c) 3 umbrella.

The Cary Facebook page declares its mission to be:

“To promote understanding, friendship, tolerance and thus seeking Harmony within Diversity among cultures of the world through dialog. This serves to bridge the gap in knowledge about the others thereby reducing fears, prejudices and misconceptions of the unknown.”

It goes on to state:

“Divan Center attempts to achieve this by organizing seminars, conferences, multi-cultural festivals, dialog dinners, community services, art performances and cultural trips where people from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds can meet and find common ground.”

The Greensboro Facebook page is not as carefully maintained and has less information as of early 2018 but has over twenty pictures of food events. There are other links to the Divan Center but most look like earlier attempts to be web based and were not maintained. In this researcher's visits to both centers in the last few years for dinner based programs, there would typically be 25 or 30 Turkish American adults and a small handful of American supporters and attendees. Children would usually be playing in another room.

There are similar organizations in other states where there are significant Turkish American populations, especially where there is an abundance of universities. They are not centrally organized and may have different names than Divan Center. There is some communication through *Hizmet* media. The Rumi Forum in Washington, DC, appears to be the main national voice.

Islamic Hizmet Cultural and Historical Context

The Middle East is sometimes called “the Cradle of Civilization,” though this does not do justice to the wisdom of the Far East. However, within this cradle are many philosophical themes which have shaped the contemporary expression of *Hizmet* as a peace movement.

Ancient Judaism, as it evolved in the Middle East, contained both experiential testimonies on the power of God to transform and the community's role as a voice for righteousness. Judaism also preached the importance of the communal life, the laws to protect and preserve one another as a way to honor God. Jesus, a Jew, preached this in his admonition to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. This message is also in *Hizmet*.

Christianity built on this and on philosophical underpinnings of classical Greek philosophy, especially the ideals of Platonism and Neoplatonism. Paul, the first Christian missionary, was a Jew and a Greek. He became the instrument that spread primitive Christianity across the Middle East. Parts of ancient Greece where Paul preached are now parts of modern Turkey. As the early church grew geographically, it organizationally drifted apart. The West came to be under the rules and structure of the Catholic Church, centered in Rome. The Eastern Orthodox Church, centered in what is now Istanbul, looked more inward for its message, focused on knowing God from within (gnosis), a mystical tradition focused on meditation and ritual prayer, a message that is also part of Sufi Islam.

Mohamed was born into an environment that had these cultural traditions as well as specific political realities of his own time and place in the Middle East. His prophecy, as expressed in the Koran, contained much of the same stories, the awesomeness of God, and the principles of conduct on which they were based.

Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, drew from a complex of multifaceted philosophical traditions which are expressed with different contexts and interpretations. Rumi, the seventh century poet and scholar, born in Afghanistan but who spent his adult life in Anatolian Turkey, drew heavily from these traditions as he developed his school of scholars rooted in prayer and meditation. The Sufi movement highlighted an intense mysticism in Islam as well as a truth-seeking tradition that drew on the work of a diverse set of scholars. This scholarly tradition became part of the Islamic world under the power and outreach of the Ottoman Empire which dominated the region for centuries.

The twentieth century brought about the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Secularism defined the new Turkish nation state. However, that did not eliminate the Islam of the cultural fabric of the region. Islam surrendered only its political role in modern Turkey. Imams and scholars such as Nursi and Gülen maintained and promoted the mystical expression of Islam. Other imams and scholars in other Islamic nations also fostered the Sufi strain of Islam elsewhere. Sufi Islam often comes under pressure and attack in countries that have an autocratic political order. Those political leaders do not want another source of authority calling for the hearts and minds of the people. The Sufi tradition is now a minority position in Islam, just as peace movements in Judaism and Christianity are also minority movements in most modern nation states.

Current Political Situation in Turkey

When this research was conducted in 2014, the *Hizmet* movement knew the criticism of them in Turkey. Modern secularists were afraid that the movement might move the country back toward an Islamic state. Some thought Gülen was conspiring with President Erdogan to recreate an Islamic state. However, the Erdogan government was threatened by the power and influence of *Hizmet*. Gülen was scapegoated for government problems. Criticism was muted, and Gülenists remained committed to their path of service, believing that love would conquer all.

Over the last four years, Turkey's government escalated its criticism of Gülen. Turkey asked the US to extradite Gülen back to Turkey so he could face charges of treason. These requests were denied by the US State Department, which determined that there was insufficient evidence to justify extradition. European governments, including Germany and

the United Kingdom, declared that there was no proof that Gülen was behind the attempted coup in 2016 though there were people involved in the attempted coup who may have gone to *Hizmet* related schools in their youth.

In the meantime, the Erdogan government began harassing and closing *Hizmet* schools and tutoring programs across the country, cutting off opportunities for thousands of youth to continue their education. Erdogan also faced increasing tensions with the PKK, the Kurdish Workers Party in Turkey and Iraq, revolutionary nationalists who were pushing for establishment of a Kurdish national state. This was not part of *Hizmet*.

Following the attempted coup in the summer of 2016 by members of the Turkish Armed Forces, the Erdogan government dismissed over 10,000 soldiers from the armed forces. The Rumi Forum Media Report (February, 2018) reports that an additional 150,000 government workers were fired and many arrested. More than 125,000 citizens are detained and 60,000 are under arrest. Most independent media outlets have been shut down. Zaman, the country's leading newspaper, supportive of Gülen, has been closed. Over 20,000 teachers lost their teaching licenses and were terminated from Gülen inspired schools, essentially eliminating this educational resource.

It is beyond the purview of this research to determine if Gülen orchestrated the attempted coup. However, hundreds of thousands of government workers had attended Gülen inspired schools and been influenced by the principles of integrity and fairness that underline *Hizmet* inspired education. Even if they were not *Hizmet* members, they might have felt called to address the allegations of corruption that plague the Erdogan administration.

There is nothing in any of the Gülen readings that this study has seen that calls for violent revolution. His extensive writings that have been translated into English are clearly religious in nature. In Christian theology, theologians are sometimes divided into two types: apologists who apologize for or explain religious beliefs to those outside the faith; and dogmatists who clarify religious dogma or teachings to the faithful. In this scenario, Gülen is a dogmatist, clarifying religious dogma to the people of the faith. The Koran is interpreted as a spiritual message to love God and love one another. None of the devout *Hizmet* interviewees talked of revolution or of politics at all. It is also hard to imagine that a 78-year-old man who is in frail health and has lived in exile for almost two decades could be in a position to initiate a coup attempt.

Since the attempted coup, almost all the Divan associates and their counterparts across the US have family members in Turkey who have lost their jobs, their means of income, been jailed, and worse.

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