

Chapter 2

The Importance of the Virtues in General and Hospitality in Particular

In his book, *Islam the Straight Path*, John Esposito describes Islam as a religion that focuses on orthopraxy (correct action) rather than orthodoxy (correct doctrine) (85). He explains how in Christianity theology is the queen of all sciences, while in Islam (as in Judaism) conformity to God's law in practice has pride of place. *Shariah*, the Divine Law, is conceived as a road on which all Muslims journey. Such journeying consists of the performance of good actions and submission to the will of God that bring joy and peace. Of course Islamic right action is interwoven with religious belief. Islam has a rich and sophisticated tradition of theological and philosophical reflection which develops in great detail fine points of Islamic metaphysics, epistemology and jurisprudence. The writings of the contemporary Islamic scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr provide a rich overview of the philosophical and theological writings of the Islamic tradition in dialogue with those of the Western tradition. But, as Esposito emphasizes, the vital core of Islam is most fundamentally a way of living—an *ethos*—tied to the five pillars of Islam. Muslims *proclaim* belief in one God and affirm Mohammad as the Messenger of God (*shahada*); Muslims *pray* five times daily a ritualized prayer (*salat*); Muslims *share* annually a set percentage of their assets to promote the social welfare of their community (*zakat*); Muslims *fast* during Ramadan, and if financially and physically able, Muslims *make the pilgrimage* to Mecca (*Hajj*). These central practices define Muslims and from them flow other practices which shape their daily lives. And central to this way of living are the virtues. Often identified unofficially as the sixth pillar of Islam, *jihad*—the inner and communal struggle to live a good Islamic life—calls Muslims to aspire to live virtuously. Staying on the straight path of Islam is synonymous with living a virtuous life. Living this life is the source of both personal and communal peace.

Interactions with members of the Hizmet movement reveal this aspiration. Key virtues define the movement, the lives of its members and the practices of its institutions. Accounts of encounters with members strikingly focus on the virtues they live rather than fine points of doctrinal belief. And of all the virtues they embody, the most prominent and most frequently mentioned in these accounts is the virtue of hospitality. (An example of written accounts can be found in *When I Was in Turkey* published by the Rumi Forum of Washington, D.C.) For this reason

a study of the virtues, but most especially the virtue of hospitality, within the movement and in relation to other traditions may provide a key to understanding the Hizmet movement.

The virtue of hospitality has played a predominant role in the Hizmet movement since its inception. This is not surprising given the role this virtue plays in the Middle Eastern world which was the originating locus of the message of Islam. This virtue holds prominence in a number of religious and cultural traditions, but not to the extent to which it is revered in Islamic societies. Since the Gülen movement seeks out what is common in varying traditions, and hospitality is directed toward welcoming the other in a way which both emphasizes commonality and appreciates difference, it is not surprising that this virtue is so esteemed and practiced by followers of Gülen. Hospitality is a pivotal virtue, for it enables persons to open themselves to others so that they may both discover what is common and begin to explore what is richly diverse. Through hospitality we learn of each other. Hospitality allows the commencement of a journey which deepens our understanding of the human condition and sustains hope for dialogue and understanding among persons.

The virtues provide a lens through which Gülen's beliefs, practices and legacy can be understood. The Sufi tradition which deeply influenced Gülen places strong emphasis on the formation of inner character manifest in words, actions and even gestures. One's way of living in the world is shaped by one's inward character. The Sufi conception is in agreement with Aristotle's understanding that one's character (*ethos*) fundamentally shapes one's way of living and interacting with others (one's *ethic*). The personal and communal living of a virtuous life remains central to the Hizmet movement, and the emphasis on virtues in general and on particular virtues shapes all of its education, media, service and peace-building initiatives. In *Cihad veya l'la-yi Kelimetullah (Jihad for Raising the Word of God)*, Gülen describes "the greater jihad" as a person's inner striving to develop and practice moral virtues. Living a virtuous life is seen as the fundamental calling of all Muslims (Ünal 70-1). The excellence of the virtues is seen as bringing to fulfillment the possibilities of human nature, allowing persons to flourish and live in a way attuned to their nature as created by God. As Gülen states in *Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism*, "There is a mutually supportive and perfective relation between an individual's actions and his inner life. We may call it a 'virtuous circle'...[d]etermination, perseverance, and resolve illuminate one's inner conscience and the brightness of his inner conscience strengthen his willpower and resolve, stimulating him to higher horizons" (v). The devout Muslim is called to wage the greater jihad, understood as an inner struggle to cultivate virtues and avoid vices, as supported by the lesser jihad, the communal struggle to develop local institutions that promote the formation of virtues and practice of good works. While distinguishing the greater and lesser jihad, Gülen more importantly recognizes their interdependence. He writes that, "Reaching spiritual perfection and helping others to do so are points of consideration. Attaining internal perfection is the jihad; helping others attain it is the lesser jihad. When you separate one from

the other, jihad is no longer jihad" (Ünal 74). Many of the Hizmet educational and service initiatives can be understood as stemming from the interdependence of these two conceptions. Gülen strongly argues against the misunderstanding of jihad rooted in political ideology that emphasizes the waging of violent war against non-Muslims. Islamic jihad is fundamentally a matter of striving to attain and promote Islamic virtuous living which enhances the well-being of both self and others and resisting what undermines them. Muslims are called to a lifetime pursuit of deepening understanding of the virtues and lifetime struggle to live virtuously.

The virtues are found in all cultural traditions and shape related cultural conceptions and practices, and yet often persons fail to attend explicitly and thoughtfully to the extent to which understanding of the virtues shapes their attitudes and actions. In addition many persons are exposed only to the understandings of the virtues passed down within their own religious and cultural traditions. They rarely encounter people outside their own tradition, and when they do, even more rarely do they begin a journey affording deepening understanding of other traditions. Through his emphasis on the central virtue of hospitality, Gülen opens a shared space in which persons can deepen and enrich their understanding of their own and others' conceptions and practices regarding virtues. Because of his valuing of hospitality in word and deed, Gülen was able to open himself to the riches found in varied cultural, religious and philosophical understandings of the virtues. This encounter brought him to recognize the human commonality found across all cultural and religious traditions and to value the richness of varied cultural traditions.

Gülen's virtue-based approach to moral living resonates well with contemporary discussions of Aristotelian ethics, continuing an ethical legacy historically preserved and appropriated by medieval Islamic philosophers. Aristotle is the most noteworthy thinker within the tradition of Western virtue-based ethics, and his moral reflections were valued by Islamic scholars for centuries. It is not surprising that a Turkish thinker influentially situated at the nexus of the Western and Islamic traditions reveals this influence of Aristotle's ethical reflections.

Understanding the Virtues

In an important scholarly article, Martha Nussbaum, a prominent contemporary American philosopher, explores the centrality of discussion of the virtues to contemporary philosophical debate (Nussbaum 1988). Recognizing the limitations of both Utilitarian and Kantian ethical frameworks and the importance of tying ethical theory to the concrete experience of persons in particular life circumstances, Nussbaum explores Aristotle's virtue-based ethics and the rich conception of the virtues it offers. She values such an account for it directly engages particular contexts, historical traditions and life experiences. While emphasizing the concrete

circumstances of human lives in their multiplicity and mutability, this approach does not succumb to the negative implications of a moral relativism that denies the existence of any criteria of moral living beyond those articulated in local traditions. Aristotle's conception focuses on a broad universal account of human flourishing that is always instantiated and played out within the cultural diversity of humankind. At the same time it builds on a conception of humanity that lies deeper than local traditions and thereby enables critical assessment of traditions and grounds the hope for understanding persons of differing traditions.¹ This account which affirms both commonality and diversity sets up an understanding of the virtues which opens the possibility of cross-cultural dialogue, so central to the Hizmet movement. Gülen's reflections on the virtues draw on the moral writings of the Islamic philosopher Ibn Miskawayh (c. 930–1030), specifically his work *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq* which builds on the Aristotelian conception of virtue as a mean situated between two vices, characterized by extremes of excess and deficiency. Gülen envisions virtue as the center of a circle and vice as entailing movement away from the center. As one moves further from the virtuous center, the vice becomes stronger and more powerful. Rather than a median (virtue) point on a line between extreme end points (vices), the circle imagery illustrates how there is a nuanced range of variations on the vices surrounding the central virtue (*Essays-Perspectives-Opinions* 70).

Both Gülen and Aristotle emphasize a conception of the virtues affirming both human commonality and diversity. On the basis of this understanding of the virtues and the role they play in human flourishing, Aristotle articulates an account of the virtues that is both universal, as tied to our human condition, and culturally specific, as tied to the ways of people as lived within particular cultural-historical traditions. Each of the virtues focuses on a sphere of human experience that plays a role in all human living and flourishing. Each sphere displays a particular human circumstance in which persons face choices and may choose wisely or unwisely. As Nussbaum notes, each virtue “names a sphere of life with which all human beings regularly or more or less necessarily have dealings” (35). Aristotle is famous for his conception of virtue as a mean situated between two extremes (vices) of excess and deficiency which influenced Islamic philosophers' moral theories. For example, courage is the mean between rashness and cowardice; moderation is the mean between intemperate overindulgence and insensibility; generosity is the mean between wasteful prodigality and miserliness. The virtues, which consist of hitting the mean at the right time, in the right way, and for the right end, are difficult to develop and depend on habituation over time. Given their importance to living well,

¹ Nussbaum emphasizes that this account provides a basis for critiquing the practices of local traditions which neglect or hinder the development of important virtues (33). In another essay entitled “Internal Criticism and Indian Rationalist Traditions”, Nussbaum stresses the importance of internal criticism of local practices, recognizing the resources within traditions for critical self-examination and reform. As a modernist, Gülen emphasizes the importance of such examination and reform within dynamic, vital traditions which can engage contemporary circumstances and challenges.

they are worthy of concern and care. For this reason Aristotle stresses, “It is not unimportant, then, to acquire one sort of habit or another, right from youth. On the contrary, it is very important, indeed all-important” (Aristotle 1999, 1103b, p. 19). Consistent with this understanding, later chapters will explore how character formation in youth is central to the design of all Gülen schools.

In observing various cultures, one can recognize these virtues at play, even if one has not been involved in serious and extensive reflection on the virtues. In one’s travels, one recognizes other persons performing courageous, compassionate, or generous actions. Scholars seek to define broadly the virtues, offering a thin account of what is entailed in choosing wisely in such particular spheres of human living. For example, courage has to do with choosing wisely in relation to risks of harm, temperance with choosing wisely in relation to bodily appetites and their pleasures, and generosity with choosing wisely in relation to the sharing of one’s material goods. Within varying cultural traditions, there develop thick accounts of these universal virtues, that is, concrete, fleshed out specifications of these universal virtues. In travelling to other cultures, we can identify shared conditions of human existence. We can discern types of situations all persons face and in response to which they must choose and can begin to explore and reflectively examine specific cultural accounts of wise choosing. Such encounters deepen our moral reflection, broaden our moral imagination and enable us to explore insightfully what is involved in human persons choosing and acting well in response to circumstances we all face as human. To offer one illustration, in all societies there is a notion of “good temper”, a wise moral response to perceived slights or wrongs. In ancient Greek society, “justifiable anger” or good temper was considered to be a virtue. Whereas in traditional Buddhist society, the virtuous mean would be more closely identified with a mildness rather than temper, for the Buddhist attends deeply to the suffering temper inflicts on both self and other. But interestingly, in some translations of Aristotle’s discussion of “justifiable anger” the mean is translated as “mildness” in recognition of the wise person’s always veering away from the excesses of anger and the harm they cause. Consistent with this understanding, later chapters will discuss Gülen’s emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation in response to harms done to persons. Courage, in all societies, is associated with the response to anticipated risks or harms. Nussbaum stresses that the ancient Greeks initially conceived of courage as a matter of sword-waving in response to life-threatening situations but over time refined their sense to a more inward and civic understanding of wise behavior in such threatening circumstances (Nussbaum 1988, p. 38). In this sense, someone like Socrates was esteemed for his courage in facing an unwarranted death sentence in a way that maintained his fundamental convictions. Rather than escaping and thereby risking the undermining of respect for civic institutions and the rule of law, Socrates faced his trial and execution with courage and equanimity. Gülen’s own personal life story models well the virtuous response to situations in which one risks or is subjected to wrongful judgments and harmful actions. Like Nursi, Gülen honorably endured court charges and investigations before being finally exonerated or acquitted. And both men did so in peaceful ways that remained faithful to their fundamental convictions.

Ongoing critical inquiry enables persons to grow wiser in their understanding and practicing of the virtues. Encounters with others from different traditions help us to articulate, refine and examine critically our local conceptions of the virtues. Thus Aristotle's approach as developed in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* views "the beliefs of the many different societies... not as unrelated norms, but as competing answers to questions of justice and courage (and so on) with which all the societies (being human) are concerned, and in response to which they are all trying to find what is good... [They are] the ways in which different societies have solved common human problems" (Nussbaum 1988, p. 39). With this account, persons seek a wiser understanding of human flourishing rather than a passive, uncritical perpetuation of established norms and practices.

This Aristotelian approach resonates with the approach that Gülen takes in his own ethical reasoning. Gülen attends closely to the virtues, emphasizing the universal importance of understanding, cultivating and practicing them. He states that, "Such moral standards as truthfulness, chastity, honesty, respect for elders (especially parents), compassion, love, and helpfulness are always universally accepted values" (Ünal 59). He conceives of the virtues as grounded in common dimensions of human living, recognized and addressed by all human communities. For this reason humans can identify and respond to shared needs, conditions, concerns and aspirations. On this basis we can take an interest in and develop concern about the well-being of others. But at the same time, Gülen values highly the rich diversity of cultures which present variously nuanced conceptions of and practices regarding the virtues. Through exchanges with persons from other traditions, we are better able to articulate, refine and improve our understanding of what is good and true, thereby enabling us to live better human lives. Growing in wisdom requires such commitment to ongoing inquiry and refinement. It appears that both Aristotle and Gülen believe that growing in wisdom requires the recognition of both the worth of tradition, as the home of one's inquiry and formation, and the need for ongoing critical reflection on one's tradition. For, as stressed by Aristotle, human persons are always searching for the good, rather than just preserving the way of our ancestors. And if our traditions are to remain vital and dynamic, they must have the capacity to address and respond to contemporary conditions and challenges.

Interaction with persons of other cultural traditions helps us refine our understanding of the virtues. Such exposure brings us into contact with cultures that have deeply attended to specific virtues, enabling insightful articulation and highly refined practicing of specific virtues. For this reason some cultures are noted for very fine attentiveness to particular virtues, enabling them to be "finely aware and richly responsible".² Thus encountering persons of these cultures can deepen and refine our own ethical sensibilities.

² In "Finely Aware and Richly Responsible": Moral Attention and the Moral Task of Literature", Nussbaum provides a detailed analysis of the novelist, Henry James' understanding of the moral life as bringing persons to be "finely aware and richly responsible".

For example, cultures deeply influenced by Buddhism reveal heightened attentiveness and sensitivity to the virtue of compassion. Buddhism offers a rich legacy of exegetical writings on compassion and a panoply of practices tied to this virtue. Not without good reason is compassion seen as the hallmark of a Buddhist way of living. Contemporary Western societies are distinguished by their heightened preoccupation with the distinctly modern, liberal virtue of tolerance. Western legal systems have produced extensive theoretical analyses and systematic articulations of legal protections stemming from this definitive concern with the virtue of tolerance judged to be essential to the civic life of pluralistic democratic societies. Middle Eastern culture, deeply influenced by Islam, is perhaps best known for its longstanding and central emphasis on the virtue of hospitality. In many local contexts this virtue is seen as trumping all other virtues in pressing circumstances. Muslims' daily prayers bring them to reflect repeatedly on both compassion and mercy as Divine attributes they are called to emulate. One can turn to such varied cultural traditions to deepen one's own reflection on the virtues for a variety of reasons. It may be that one's own culture insufficiently attends to particular virtues, neglecting what was once of concern within one's tradition or what has rarely been the focus of attention. The other culture may push one to critically examine the assumptions underlying one's own culture's understanding, pushing one to raise questions that have not been explored within one's own tradition. The other culture may also bring one to recognize what is well worth preserving and cherishing within one's own tradition.

The fruitfulness of such cross-cultural dialogue on the virtues becomes more evident through an exploration of two virtues strongly associated with Western liberal society and Islamic societies. Though related, the different understandings of these virtues may prove highly illuminating. Both societal traditions are associated with virtues tied to choosing wisely in response to the human fact of diversity. Western liberal societies are noted for the central emphasis they place on the virtue of tolerance, while Islamic societies are noted for the central emphasis they place on the virtue of hospitality. Interestingly, the Hizmet movement, originating in Turkey which lies at the nexus of the interaction between Western European societies and Middle Eastern societies, places great emphasis on the virtues of both tolerance and hospitality. Within this movement tolerance is seen as a minimum virtue, undeniably valued and encouraged, but appreciated primarily as opening the path to the more esteemed virtue of hospitality. Turkish scholars emphasize that the Turkish word *hosgörü* is difficult to translate into English. Often translated as tolerance in English, it is understood to be a richer, more robust virtue than "tolerance". It seems that a major commitment of the Hizmet movement is to lessen intolerance and call people to tolerance with the hope that they will begin a journey enabling them to move beyond tolerance to hospitality as richly understood within Islamic and other religious traditions. In so doing, the Hizmet movement reveals concretely the value of cross-cultural dialogue, whether focused on the virtues in general, specific virtues or a wide range of related topics. Central to this movement is the call to reflect on and live the virtues.

It is hoped that the following consideration of the virtues of tolerance and hospitality from two different traditions will exemplify the rich insights that can be gained through a cross-cultural exploration of the virtues. Such consideration also brings us to explore the richness of Gülen's reflections on both these virtues and the constellation of related virtues which have played such an influential role in shaping distinctive practices of the Hizmet movement.

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<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-07832-8>

Cross-cultural Dialogue on the Virtues

The Contribution of Fethullah Gülen

Conway, T.D.

2014, XV, 128 p., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-07832-8