

Dying for a Cause:
Youth, Violence, and the Gülen Movement--
Beyond Tolerance and Dialogue

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ABSTRACT

Among the most troubling global challenges of the recent past has been the participation of young people in various forms of violence. Youth have been dying for a cause, ranging from “sacrifice” for one’s nation in military operations to “glory” attained by suicide bombing. Many commentators have noted how violence becomes attractive to youth, and experts, including M. Fethullah Gülen, have often offered “tolerance” and “dialogue” as a means to alleviate violence.

Now, tolerance and dialogue are surely to be desired among all people, including youth. Furthermore, the emphasis on both tolerance and dialogue within the Gülen Movement is impressive. But as I argued in my *Youth Ministry in Modern America* (1999), and suggest further in *Blessed Brutalities: The Religious Origins of American Violence* (forthcoming, NYU, 2009), tolerance and dialogue might not be strong enough practices to engage youth when the *religious* factors that implicate youth in dying for a cause come into focus. Building on the work of scholars such as Bruce Lincoln, Mary Douglass, Mark Juergensmeyer, Ronald Grimes, Catherine Albanese, Scott Appleby, Eboo Patel and Patrice Brodeur, I will sketch how both militaries and terrorist groups challenge youth to die for a cause through religious

discourses and practices focused on nationalist or sectarian utopias of transcendence. Using the example of American culture, I will invite discussion about how the Gülen Movement might offer youth transcendence that does not require death or violence, but that invites the full participation of young people in civil society--in *living* for a cause.

Engaging Muslim youth in such practices that extend beyond dialogue and tolerance to the forging of more just and peaceful civil societies on a global scale will require a broader set of interreligious coalitions than previously engaged by members of the Gülen Movement.

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How much can we hope to understand those who have suffered deeper anguish, greater deprivation, and more crushing disappointments than we ourselves have known? Even if the world's rich and powerful were to put themselves in the shoes of the rest, how much would they really understand the wretched millions suffering around them?

--Orhan Pamuk, Snow

Among the most difficult global phenomena to understand in recent decades is the escalating participation of young people in various forms of violence (Daiute, 2006). From Darfur to London to Medellín, from Baghdad to Ilankai to Los Angeles, youth have been dying for a cause (Bøås and Dunn; Boyden and de Berry; Cunningham; Riaño-Alcalá; Samad and Sen). Some young people have died as soldiers; as “sacrifices” for nation-states in military operations. And some youth have died as “martyrs;” as suicide or homicide bombers in terrorist attacks. Many commentators have noted how “youth” is a crucial marker for enlistment in violence (Appleby; Austin and Willard; Khashan; Levi and Schmitt). Some experts, including M. Fethullah Gülen, have offered “tolerance” and “dialogue” as means to alleviate this violence.

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ance and dialogue within the Gülen movement is impressive. But tolerance and dialogue might not be strong enough practices to engage youth when the *religious* factors that implicate youth in dying for a cause come into focus. Building on the work of many scholars, I will first sketch briefly how both militaries and terrorist groups challenge youth and enlist their allegiance through religious discourses and practices focused on nationalist or sectarian utopias of transcendence. Both militaries and terrorist groups, I suggest, enlist young people to kill and die by promising them glory that transcends the miserable agony and crushing disappointment that so often attends coming of age. Displacing the fear of death, militaries and terrorist militias condense desire into a strategy of killing and dying for a cause.

After this initial overview, I will ask how the Gülen movement might offer youth transcendence that does not require them to kill or to die premature deaths. I will build a case for situating the Gülen movement within the broader global interfaith youth movement that features both tolerance and dialogue yet also engages young people in direct action as citizens (Patel and Brodeur). Three crucial institutions or social practices within the Gülen movement will be shown as particularly amenable to this sort of engagement with transcendence. Together, these institutions or social practices suggest the emergence of vernacular rites of passage for youth into a self-critical Islamic ethic of nonviolence and reverence for life. I envision these three institutions or social practices as concentric, expanding circles. The first are the *dershanes* or lighthouses for which the movement is well known. These transitional sites exist between family and civil society to serve as sacred places. In them, young people can encounter vernacular rites of passage into Islamic democratic social practices, and through them young people can experience what Turner (1969) called *communitas* as a vision of living in a beloved community that is engaged with forging the common good. A second set of social practices can be located in the many educational institutions founded by the followers of Gülen.

These schools can cultivate among Muslim youth self-critical abilities, as guided by the important ideal for Gülen of *al-insan al-kamil*, or “the ideal human.” Such a standard can promote participatory learning regarding crucial questions of scientific, civil, and moral life, and can lead youth to explore such questions in a context of trust and mutual accountability (Gülen, 2006a). Such participatory learning can provide young people with experiences of “ecstatic asceticism” that do not require death or killing (see Appleby). As Yilmaz (2003) suggests and Carroll (2007) implies, these social practices extend beyond dialogue into a pluralist Islam characterized by *ijtihad* and *tajdid*--interpretations of Islam that push toward social renewal (not just ‘tolerance’) through public theology, in which youth play a crucial role as a “golden” or “brilliant” generation. Such practices of public theology may also, following Stout (2004), be constituent elements in democratic tradition. Finally, the third and broadest social practice to engage youth in *living* for a cause is to reclaim the term *jihad* from its current abuses, by extending it into a holy war *against violence*. Here, the meaning of Islam as peacemaking is turned toward *intolerance of violence* in all of its forms--terrorist, military, economic, and cultural. In this *jihad*, properly understood, young people are engaged in living together nonviolently in deep respect for life (including environmental sustainability), and in resistance to any effort to hijack the peacemaking that is Islam (or any religion!) into violent purposes. As Albayrak (2007) has suggested, this understanding of *jihad juxtaposes* Islam to violence. *Jihad* thus becomes, in a classic phrase of William James (1906), the “moral equivalent of war.” Such a conflict might truly be a “holy” war--waged without violence and against violence.

Now, each of these three aspects of the Gülen movement and its work with youth will require some transformations in current practices to reach full potential.¹ Yet, I will contend that the furthest horizon of the movement--building on its Sufi foundation, is toward truly global and interreligious partnerships. Such partnerships move

beyond the dyads of dialogue and into the fragmented, internally pluralistic, improvisational, socially entrepreneurial, and multicultural patterns of responsible globalization. In partnerships with the global interfaith movement, the Gülen movement can effectively engage youth in modes of transcendence that do not deny finitude and death, but that invite youth through the precarious fragility of every passage into mutually fulfilling and responsible living. Furthermore, I also believe that this horizon, toward what we might call a “coming religious peace,” is one toward which many members of the movement are already tacitly, if not explicitly, committed, in juxtaposition to both nationalist and terrorist violence. *Living* for a cause marks the Gülen movement in its many dimensions, as each generation seeks to help the next be “brilliant.”

DYING FOR A CAUSE

That young people are dying for a cause around the globe is a historical fact. The average age of a recruit who graduates from the Marine Corps training facility at Camp Pendleton, according to Col. Jeff Bearor, is just over 19 years old (Bearor, 2003). And the median age of a Palestinian suicide bomber, according to Harvard economist Efrain Benmelech, is 20.5. In both cases, the young men (usually) are indoctrinated to “sacrifice” themselves for a cause. Now, discourses of “sacrifice” are conventional in warfare (see Frantzen; Marvin and Engle; Mosse; Purcell; and Strenski). Yet, it may be *precisely* the widespread and unquestioned use of this euphemistic religious language that makes the practices of killing and dying in warfare palatable or even attractive to youth (see Carrasco; Denton-Hoag). For one recent example, President George W. Bush has repeatedly invoked a discourse of “sacrifice” to explain and justify sending youth to die in Afghanistan and Iraq. In a speech on September 7, 2003, Bush claimed that “these months have been a time of new responsibilities, and sacrifice, and national resolve and great progress,” thus associating warfare with all kinds of loaded ethical discourse (Bush,

2003). Later in the same speech, the President reiterated again that the war “will take time and require sacrifice.” For one more succinct example, in a speech at the U.S. Naval Academy on November 30, 2005, President Bush asserted that “a time of war is a time of sacrifice”(Bush, 2005). Such language, again, associates a religious practice (sacrifice) with killing and dying in warfare. Classically, of course, sacrifice is often linked to projects of purification, cleansing, or catharsis (Girard; McClymond). Sacrifice for the nation thus takes on utopian connotations. The state symbolically hijacks the power of transcendence traditionally identified with religion in the service of warfare--a brutal, if not genocidal, national cause (Weitz). As Talal Asad bluntly puts it: “The state authorizes the killing of human beings, [and] demands the ultimate sacrifice of its citizens when they are at war”(Asad, 2007, p. 19).

In a stunning symmetry, the actions of suicide bombers have often been described as directed toward a similar sacrificial cause. Sheikh Ahmad Yasin, founder and spiritual leader of Hamas (who was assassinated by Israel in March 2004), once claimed that “[When] we have warplanes and missiles, then we can think of changing our means of legitimate self-defense. But right now, we can only tackle the fire with our bare hands and sacrifice ourselves”(in Bloom, 2005, p. 3).² Note well the parallelism Yasin sets up between the weapons of a State--“warplanes and missiles,” and the actions of sacrifice in suicide bombing. A similar parallel appears in Jean Baudrillard’s reflections on “The Spirit of Terrorism.” In a suicide attack, he suggests, “The aim is no longer to transform the world . . . but to radicalize the world by sacrifice. Whereas the system aims to realize it by force.”(p. 10). And Robert A. Pape (2005) argues that “suicide terrorist organizations commonly cultivate ‘sacrificial myths’ that include elaborate sets of symbols and rituals to mark an individual attacker’s death.”(p. 29) Osama bin Laden’s description of the suicide attacks of 9/11 manifests this tendency: “A group of young believers,” he writes, “sought to be with God, and . . . poured out the water of

life.”(Lawrence, p. 194). Bruce Lawrence succinctly concludes that suicide bombing represents a “hypertrophy of sacrifice”(xxii).

Now, while “sacrifice” links soldiers with suicide bombers in official rhetoric, it hardly exhausts the meanings of being a soldier or a suicide bomber. Soldiers, for instance, might die for honor, for glory, or for the cause of a nation (O’Neill). And suicide bombers, similarly, might die for honor, to be with God, or to get to heaven.³ Both identities, in short, not only incarnate a sacrifice--but both also compress or condense *desire*. Soldiers--to take the first case, at some level must come to love war. Many have reported finding in warfare experiences of brotherhood, intensity, or imagined victory that transcends the ordinary and makes possible both killing and dying (see Nadelson). As the former U.S. Marine and Vietnam Veteran William Broyles, Jr once put it, “I miss [war] because I loved it. . . . War is an escape from the everyday into a special world. . . . It is, for men, at some terrible level the closest thing to what childbirth is for women: the initiation into the power of life and death (Broyles, 1984, pp. 70-1, 74). Broyles goes on to point out that wielding awesome weapons and engaging in acts of destruction surrounded by a community of peers can be intensely attractive. Indeed, as many war films have clarified, war even has its own aesthetic; its own “beauty.”

Talal Asad highlights a similar trajectory among suicide bombers. While suicide bombers obviously die in the flesh, at a more profound spiritual level they live on symbolically. They are “living martyrs,” as the *Qur’an* puts it, alive with God, if not with their families and communities. “As such,” Asad concludes, “the *shahid’s* death constitutes a triumph rather than a sacrifice.”(p. 49). Pape suggests another way suicide bombings compress desire or produce symbolic immortality (Lifton). Noting that secular suicide bombers also exist (notably the Tamil Tigers), he contends that suicide bombings are “mainly a response to foreign occupation.” This contingency suggests that suicide bombings tend to be “part of a larger campaign by an organized group to achieve a specific politi-

cal goal”(p. 21-22). In short, suicide bombers, like soldiers, are dying for a cause. Whether this cause is secular or religious, it tends to be framed as a sacrifice in which death earns the individual some reward. Death is displaced and desire focused, in short, through some compressed symbols of transcendence.

Of course, what is missing from the previous analysis is how both soldiers and suicide bombers tend to be young. What difference does this fact of the *youth* of soldiers and suicide bombers make? My conclusions are speculative, but I hope not without merit. Adolescence and young adulthood across cultures often serves as a liminal or transitional phase to discover the limits of finitude and to explore acceptable means of transcendence (Grimes, 2000; Pahl, 2000). As they come of age, societies create tests through which young people become aware of their own mortality. This experience of limits occurs over and against the non-differentiated (if not irresponsible) imagination of childhood omniscience and omnipotence. Many societies accomplish this task through rites of passage. These rites might be official or unofficial; established or vernacular; associated with traditional religions or with secular institutions.

In both the “sacrifices” of warfare and of suicide bombings, then, we might see curiously mimetic forms of *modern* rites of passage. Young people are engaged in “tests” of their willingness to embrace the highest ideals (the most strenuous challenges) that a society offers--either through military sacrifice or the sacrifice of martyrdom. For young people who anticipate such tests, of course, it is the *risk* (as much as the reality) of dying that offers glory, in what Scott Appleby calls a pattern of “ecstatic asceticism.” Such a prospect of glory through suffering is an indisputable feature of many rites of passage (Mahdi, 1996). Young people are “tested” in their willingness (and ability) to endure suffering. They seek out experiences of ecstatic participation that unite them to one another, and that gain them access (literally or symbolically) to whatever status is valued among “adults” in society. If adults happen to value

killing, dying and other forms of violence, then youth will do the same. Youth are above all imitators (Smith and Denton, 2005).

Now, in a global perspective what this suggests is that when young people are fortunate they are a bit like the young Siddhartha Gautama. Released from a world of parental nurture and comfort, young people awaken with a jolt to the reality of suffering. In such moments, it dawns on young people that they, too, are vulnerable, and that they too must choose how to engage in or respond to the causes of suffering. For many, such awareness is anguishing. For far too many more, such awareness comes at a very young age. Living in the midst of poverty, deprivation, disease, military occupation, or open warfare, youth face repeated disappointments, traumas, and violations. Indeed, every young person today lives with awareness of violence once known only to combat-hardened soldiers. Some young people experience this more pointedly and directly than others. But as our epigraph from Orhan Pamuk was intended to suggest, it is difficult for those of us living in the midst of (relative) plenty to understand (or remember) how the young who face such challenges internalize the violence adults have unleashed around them. Yet if our hypothesis is correct, the Gülen movement will be most helpful to young people if it can help them understand the *religious sources of violence*. That is, the Gülen movement will help protect youth from violence when it helps Muslims, Christians, Jews and others recognize how nation-states and terrorists alike seek to hijack the symbolic power of religions for violent ends. At the same time, the Gülen movement has the capacity to offer youth social practices and engage them with institutions that might be as persuasive and challenging as the rites of passage into violence. Such alternatives will have to engage more than “toleration” and “dialogue,” however, to match the compressed desire and displaced fear of death that being a soldier, or being a suicide bomber, holds forth to youth. If soldiers and suicide bombers are willing to kill and die for a cause, any effective global interreligious youth movement must articulate discourses and practices--and build communi-

ties and institutions, that give young people hope to *live* for causes that are at least as intense and challenging as those offered by participation in the military or martyrdom (Lincoln, 2003).⁴

DERSHANES AND LIGHTHOUSES: VERNACULAR SACRED PLACES AND RITES OF PASSAGE

As is well known, the Gulen movement builds on social practices established by followers of Said Nursi (1873-1960), namely the formation of *dershanes*--"reading circles" or networks of small groups of people gathered to discuss works read in common. As profiled by Yavuz (2003), these groups "are spaces for socialization and community-oriented virtues, enacted through conversational readings, discussions, and prayers (p. 13)." Yavuz further profiles how these groups have accomplished three aims:

First, they showed how the diverse policies of the state, the new privatized market conditions, and new communication opportunities can create counterpublics in which the "new" Muslim actor may be constituted. Second, they facilitated not only the formation of a global ethics of engagement with internal and external others, but also the construction of a new religious consciousness. Third, they challenged the boundaries of public versus private, national versus transnational, and secular versus religious. The *dershane* circles have demonstrated the role of normative foundations of mixed public and private spaces and the utilization of privately formed "social trust" to shape new public goods.(p. 14)

Similar small-group-centered renewal efforts have been constitutive of youth movements from the era of Pietism in the seventeenth-century of the history of Christianity to the present (Pahl, 2000). They create vernacular, as opposed to official, sacred spaces where vernacular rites of passage might be engaged.

What makes these small-groups attractive to young people is the way they release the liberating power of reading and debate as social practice, while also creating strong bonds of intimacy--what the

anthropologist Victor Turner identified as *communitas* (see also Nafisi, 2003). A classical instance of how a young person can discover the liberating power of language and literacy is found in the coming of age story of Frederick Douglass, perhaps the most famous ex-slave in American history. According to Douglass, it was when he was *prohibited* from learning to read by an oppressive slave-owner that he discovered “the white man’s power to enslave the black man. . . . From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom”(29). Douglass then learned to read through picking up tips from children with whom he played in his Baltimore neighborhood, and his path to freedom was secured. Such *communitas* among young people provides experiences of solidarity that can be particularly attractive when posed in contrast to regimes of social control or repression. As Yavuz, again, concludes: “five or six same-sex students live together within an atmosphere of sincerity and develop a powerful sense of religious brotherhood or sisterhood to protect each other from the excesses of the secular system”(33). Just as warriors and suicide bombers experience the ecstasy of strong bonds with their regiments or cells, so do members of lighthouses or *dershanes*. The difference, of course, is the end toward which the groups are turned through rites of passage--whether toward violence or toward peaceful civil engagement.

Fethullah Gülen explicitly identifies the lighthouses as “sacred places,” and a bit more reflection on the significance of this phrase might be worthwhile (Yavuz, 2003, *Ibid*). Sacred spaces are, among other things, “thin places,” or zones where a transition from one stage of spiritual existence to another can be accomplished (Pahl, 2003). Gülen, significantly, uses martial language to describe the lighthouses. In them “soldiers of spirituality” are developed. These “soldiers” do not use traditional weapons, but are armed with “the Qur’an in one hand and reason in the other.” Such weapons of the spirit help young people “flourish on the way to the conquest of the world in spirit and reality.” This conquest is not accomplished by force, but through persuasion--through the social practices of “deep

trust” and skills in negotiation forged by gathering together in lighthouses (Valkenberg, 2006). Transcendence here takes on an immanent element; one experiences a “beyond” not by the destruction of life, but by engaging fully in life’s flow so that time and space evaporate in the shared tasks of engagement (Csikszentmihalyi).

It is, perhaps, not surprising that the Gulen movement gained much of its initial impetus from summer camps, for such venues exist on the margins of established civilizations, and have often been attractive to young people as ways to find freedom from oppressive structures and to engage in reflection on alternative visions of public life (Miller; Paris). Camps can serve as liminal or threshold gatherings. As Yavuz cautions, the “military discipline” associated with lighthouses (akin to camps) can be oriented toward destructive ends--toward social control, negative asceticism, religious exclusivism, or the formation of anti-sexual, gender-biased enclaves. Under the conditions of globalization, however, and in the context of the interfaith religious youth movement--which tends to be gender inclusive and is inherently pluralistic, many of these potential problems in the lighthouses can be mitigated, and the military discipline in them turned toward nonviolent civic engagement that promises mutual fulfillment for all participants. As group members learn skills of persuasion and negotiation, they turn these habits into social capital in economics, politics, and the arts. This is especially true if the individual has also been shaped in one of the Gülen schools, where they learned habits of self-criticism and modes of articulation associated with the Muslim ideal of *al-insan, al-Kamil*.

SCHOOLS AS CENTERS OF SELF-CRITICISM AND PUBLIC THEOLOGY

In his classic treatise on education for liberation, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire contrasted “banking concept” education with what he called *conscientização*. By this latter Portuguese term, Freire meant to point to an education that both communicated

accurate information and which engaged the context, consciousness and conscience of an individual in practical projects to promote the common good. By and large, such education has marked the Gülen-inspired schools, according to many commentators (Agai; Aslandoğan and Çetin; Michel). Wherever such schools have been founded they not only raised academic standards; they also engaged young people in self-critical reflection leading toward participation in public life--sometimes on a theological foundation. This latter matter--of the “public theology” of the Gülen-inspired schools, is tricky--due to the separation of religion and politics in Turkey, and the pluralistic religious background of the students in other countries.⁵ Yet as Eboo Patel suggests, “in addition to knowing one’s private language of faith, there is an urgent need to learn also one’s ‘public language of faith,’” which Patel defines as “a language that emphasizes how one’s commitment to a particular faith tradition enriches the broader society”(Patel and Brodeur, 20). It may be this kind of indirect and implicit learning that often happens at schools informed by Gülen’s teachings, through the example of “the ideal human,” or *al-insan, al-kamil*.

I have long been fascinated by this Sufi notion, which received perhaps its fullest exposition in Ibn ‘Arabi (1165-1240) and Abd-al-karim al-Jili (1365-1424) (Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society). As developed by Fethullah Gülen, the ideal human--who historically has been associated with the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) preeminently, and other prophets more generally, has at least four characteristics against which any student can be measured. The first is willingness to endure testing. Gülen writes:

Ideal people know that they are being continually tested and refined so that they may attain bliss. Even though they face catastrophes and fall into the most terrible whirlpools, even in the most helpless and distressing moments, they hear comforting and consoling whispers from the other world; whispers that come from their inner most soul, and they bow in gratitude and admiration.(2006b, p. 129)

Such an individual finds transcendence not in an act of destruction, as in a military operation or suicide bombing, but in the challenges of *creation*--even through “whispers.” What we might call an “attitude of gratitude” that follows from this experience of transcendence can lead students to tackle difficult problems and endure difficult assignments, not only for the sake of an extrinsic reward, but for the intrinsic experience of life (the bliss) that follows from intense engagement with a challenge.

A second feature of ideal persons for Gülen is interdependence, or a cooperative spirit; in a word--harmony. Schools where teachers are mentors as much as instructors can foster this sensibility. Such a spirit is at the core of Islam, or the ideal of “submission” to God, and can be expressed implicitly as well as explicitly. Explicitly, of course, the harmony of interdependence is expressed in worship. Gulen writes:

If worship is the placing of a consciousness of being bound to God into one’s heart, if it is the liberation of one’s self from all types of slavery, if it is the title of seeing, hearing and feeling the beauty, order and harmony that belong to Him in every molecule of existence--and there is no doubt that it is this and nothing else--then worship is the most immediate way to turn our face to God, with everyone and everything, the soundest and most immediate way of associating everything with Him; it is also a way in which we can renew these apparent and genuine bonds at every minute of the day. (125)

This is to speak the “private language” of faith; the explicit devotion to God that orients everything. But such harmony can also be articulated implicitly, in more public form. Gulen writes of this ideal:

Submission, the state of being a subject of God in its broadest sense, is the celestial title of being in harmony with existence and things, of being well-adjusted to the world and all that is in it, of making one’s way through the mysterious hallways of the universe without getting lost, in short, of protecting the balance of one’s inner harmony with existence. The righteous person

should put up his [sic] standard at the point where the fundamental principles of existence and the orders for rules of conduct meet; without providing such a balance it would be impossible to continue on the way, respecting and protecting human values (123).

This is to put in practice what Yilmaz has called “*tajdid* by conduct,” or renewal in which the harmony that flows from submission is implicitly exemplified, more than didactically communicated. Schools, through mentors, are natural venues for such lessons to be learned, through sports, scientific study, or even through one’s choice of apparel.

A third feature of ideal persons according to Gülen is self-criticism or humility. He writes about such “heroes of faith” that they:

Carry a prophet-like heart in their exchanges with people. They love and embrace everyone; they turn a blind eye to the faults of others, while at the same time they are able to question the smallest faults of their own. They forgive the faults of those around them, not only under normal conditions, but also at times when they feel angered; they know how to live peacefully with even the most irritable of souls. . . . God loves these people, and they love God. They are always stirred by the excitement of love and experience the dazzling delights of the feeling of being loved. Their wings of humility always rest on the ground and they need to become the soil in order to attain the joy of giving birth to roses (98-9).

Here, humility becomes a path to transcendence. By “becoming the soil,” one gives “birth to roses.”⁶ One of the teachers at a Gülen-inspired school, profiled by Özdalga, expressed the ideal well: “First of all, you become a slave, that is, you start to criticize yourself . . . [through] humility, getting away from being egocentric. This is at the very foundation of religion, and Hocacéfendi [i.e., Gülen] represents a very good example for us in this respect. A human being who takes these beliefs seriously becomes like an angel. The gentleness I have encountered in this community has made me gentle also.”(95)

It follows from the above that a final feature of the ideal human according to Gülen is peacefulness, which is perhaps the crucial mark that would define a young person as part of a “brilliant generation.” Gülen writes:

Muslims must keep at bay things that will harm others, whether physically or spiritually, and must do their best not to harm others. . . . True Muslims are the most trustworthy representatives of universal peace. They travel everywhere with this sublime feeling, nourished deep in their spirits. Far from giving torment or suffering, they are remembered everywhere as symbols of safety and security. In their eyes, there is no difference between a physical (direct) or a verbal (indirect) violation of someone’s rights. In fact, in some cases the latter is considered to be a greater crime than the former (90)

Again--how schools communicate such an ideal can vary widely, but it clearly holds up a standard of nonviolence against which any student can measure one’s self.

Such a standard is, of course, a classical feature of ethics in many traditions. It is implicit in the Christian theology and ethics of as notable a figure as Paul Tillich, who described the ideal as “new being” guided by “the courage to be” or the “courage to accept acceptance (2000; 2005).” Such an ideal communicates that it is in the challenges of living, rather than in the destructiveness of dying, that one finds transcendence--not as an escape from humanity, but as its fullest realization. This entails risk, or what Lutherans like Tillich would describe in parochial terms as a “theology of the cross.” In public, however, the ideal becomes the practice of self-critical testing, motivated toward interdependent participation in peacemaking--no matter the cost. This is to risk any theology in public, submitting its truth claims to the open market of ideas, testing them in debate and in the pragmatic processes of holding each other responsible for how moral claims play out in policies and social practices. Following Jeffrey Stout, then, we can conclude that an implicit public theology about “the ideal human” might engage

students at schools inspired by Gülen to live for a cause of participation in democratic society. Stout writes:

The authority of any state to exercise political constraint depends on the success with which it protects or cultivates the expressive freedom of its citizens. This thesis in political theory has an ethical counterpart, which is the notion that how to make appropriate use of expressive freedom in the development of one's character and individuality is the central question of ethics. Preoccupation with rights and wrongs, however important this may be when horrible injustices need to be opposed, threatens to engulf individuals in resentment and to distract them from taking full responsibility for what they have become as human beings. The most challenging democratic thinkers care at least as much about character and selfhood . . . as they do about the rules of proper conduct. . . . What they want to promote in society generally and hope to exemplify in their own lives is excellence--and, if possible, spiritual greatness (282-3).

From this perspective, in the global marketplace of ideas, Fethullah Gülen is a profoundly democratic thinker. He offers a public theology guided by an ideal, *al-insan, al-kamil*, of ethical excellence and spiritual greatness for each student at the schools inspired by his teachings.

A LOVE JIHAD?

In the expanding, concentric circles of social practices through which young people might be invited to live for a cause, the broadest circle in the Gülen movement belongs to the spiritual or social practice of *jihad*. This Qur'anic term has been hijacked by militants and militaries (Bonner).⁷ Together, both militants and militaries have associated jihad with violence and force--with physical destruction. Yet Gülen's teaching about jihad makes clear a very different meaning. Jihad "means using all one's strength, as well as moving toward an objective with all one's power . . . and resisting every difficulty." (2006d, p. 62) Far from being only a physical war, this "greater jihad" is an internal, spiritual process--striving in the path

of God. Gülen defines it as “the effort to attain one’s essence.” The objective of *jihad* is never dominance, but peace. *Jihad* is about “overcoming obstacles between oneself and his or her essence, and the soul’s reaching knowledge and eventually divine knowledge, divine love, and spiritual bliss” (Ibid).

To be sure, Gülen admits that there may be historical situations when no option other than physical force remains open for a nation to defend itself against unjust attack. History is riddled with conflict. “There are always going to be battles,” he claims (Ibid., 98). Gülen cites as examples of just conflicts the Turks’ defense of their territory as the Ottoman empire declined, in battles such as at Canakkale and Tablusegar—where Mustafa Kemal established his reputation. To clarify his realism, Gülen turns to satire: “You have come to make us civilized. That’s good of you. Welcome. Look, you’ve brought soldiers!” (Ibid.) In such a desperate situation, even Gandhi counseled violence rather than masochistic abandonment. But defensive war is the “lesser jihad.” Only Westerners who are “consumed with hatred,” and “immature Muslims” mistake physical warfare as the primary meaning of jihad. Thus, self-styled “jihadis” like Osama bin Laden and other terrorists receive direct criticism from Gülen. “The rules of Islam are clear. Individuals cannot declare war. A group or an organization cannot declare war. War is declared by the state.” (129) Even more directly, Gülen claims “A Muslim cannot say, ‘I will kill a person and then go to Heaven.’ God’s approval cannot be won by killing people.” (Ibid) And on Bin Laden Gülen directly writes: “[He] has sullied the bright face of Islam. He has created a contaminated image. . . [and] replaced Islamic logic with his own feelings and desires. He is a monster.” (132) Such criticism is founded, by Gülen, upon a verse from the Qur’an that he cites repeatedly: “If one person kills another unjustly, it is the same as if he or she has killed all of humanity; if one saves another, it is the same as if he or she has saved all of humanity.” (5:32)

The greater jihad that Gülen recommends, then, is waged *against* violence, and is waged through love.⁸ Such a rigorously ethi-

cal life-path promises to engage not only youth, but to engage any human in a set of challenges that will more than encompass a lifetime's labor. The primary obstacles to be overcome by jihad are not infidels or enemies, but internal dispositions and habits. "Malice and hatred are the seeds of hell scattered among people by evil," Gülen contends (2006d, 51). And in contrast to these seeds of hell, heaven awaits--and in some sense is already present among, those who love. "Whoever has the greatest . . . love is humanity's greatest hero, one who has uprooted any personal feelings of hatred and rancor. . . . These lofty souls, who daily light a new torch of love in their inner world and make their hearts a source of love and altruism, are welcomed and loved by people. . . . Love, the most direct way to someone's heart, is the Prophet's way"(Ibid., 49). This love is theological, as well as psychological and social: "God created the whole of creation out of love and Islam has embroidered the delicate lacework of this love. . . . Love is the *raison d'être* for the existence of creation"(99). Success at what we might call this "love jihad"—which begins by recognizing with gratitude the gift of life, leads not to violence, but to altruism. "People consciously participate in [God's] symphony of love in existence, and developing the love in their true nature, they investigate the ways to demonstrate it in a human way. Therefore, without neglecting the love in their spirit and for the sake of the love in their own nature, every person should offer real help and support to others. They should protect the general harmony"(124). A love *jihad*, in short, leads to justice, peace, and all the other virtues. About their attainment in history, Gülen is relentlessly hopeful: "Goodness, beauty, truthfulness, and being virtuous are the essence of the world and humanity. Whatever happens, the world will one day find this essence. No one can prevent this."(54)

At root, then, what the Gülen movement offers to young people is a reframing of the religious discourses--such as "sacrifice" and "jihad," and of rites of passage--such as testing in struggle, that have been co-opted by nation-states and terrorists toward violent ends. The Gülen movement turns these discourses and practices

away from destructive activities and toward the challenging matters of forging a civil society. As Bonner writes, young Muslims have in recent years turned the jihad against themselves in suicide attacks, but these attacks must be understood in the context of the pseudo-transcendence that nationalist militaries claim for themselves and communicate to youth. Only this broader context can clarify the suffering of youth pointed to so powerfully in Orhan Pamuk's prose. Bonner puts it well:

One thing that the internal [i.e. greater] jihad did not involve [in its classical articulation] . . . was deliberate, physical violence against oneself. This is one reason why the "jihad against the self" of classical Islam does not help us to understand the inner torment of those Muslim youth in our own day who turn to radical Islam and the new jihad. Some of these young people seem to experience a violently split self, in which one of the halves connects to a European or American identity. Again, this is not a holdover from the classical . . . jihad against the self: the practitioners of that jihad combated a self that was largely exterior to them and, furthermore, they almost always emerged victorious from the struggle. The struggle and split in today's youth is of a different kind. At the same time, for many of them, the classical jihad provides a frame of reference, and perhaps also a measure of relief from individual pain (170).

Gülen's reframing of jihad builds on the classical notion of the struggle against the self, grounded in the central Qur'anic theme of generosity (and mercy), by turning jihad into a struggle against violence, or what Bonney calls a "jihad for justice"(418) or even "jihad against militant jihad (420)."

What such a struggle opens up, then, is the prospect of what we might call, following the Buddhist scholar Thich Nhat Hanh, "engaged transcendence." That is, one does not experience glory in detachment, much less in destruction, but in the midst of the processes of living generously, mindfully, creatively, and compassionately out of commitment to justice. This is, as I understand it, consistent with the Sufi way of Rumi and others (see, for instance,

Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, 2004). It also happens to accord with perhaps the most influential modern thinker in my own tradition of Lutheranism, Albert Schweitzer (Barsam). Schweitzer called the ethic he tried to live by “reverence for life,” and he exemplified this ethic in his scholarship, music-making, and medical missionary work (see also Charny). Such an ethic does not confuse life with God, but sees God as life-giver who invites our reverence through the abundant gifts of the material world that have been provided for our delight. Among these gifts, of course, are the limits of life--notably the fact that each life (other than the one that is Eternal) is finite and bounded. Such a fact is denied by religious utopias that enact violence either through military adventures or through suicide bombings (see Keen). It is, in contrast, when young people learn to embrace the apparently fragile power of words, worship, and witness that this fragility can turn into collective power on the side of life (Arendt). As young people across traditions learn to experience and embrace this power, perhaps it is not inconceivable that they will forge a “brilliant generation,” turning the passion of religion into a passion against violence, and toward a “coming religious peace” (Pahl, 2009). Such a horizon--in which the vast collective resources of religions are turned away from destructive efforts to deny death and toward the life-giving power of love, is I believe the ultimate horizon that the Gülen movement shares with the global interfaith youth movement (Becker). As the famous Qur’anic passage, quoted often by Gülen, puts it: “there can be no coercion [violence] in religion” (2:256; Gülen 2006b, p. 27). This is not an easy lesson to learn. But it is vital, and the Gülen movement can help youth around the globe to learn it.

NOTES

- 1 I cannot develop these points here, but I see as “growing edges” for the movement in relation to the global interfaith youth movement its practices regarding gender inclusivity; tendencies toward a negative asceticism; anthropocentrism; some theological exclusivism; and the difficult question of the relationship between the movement and Turkish nationalism and the military.
- 2 Bloom, 2005 cites only *The Daily Star* (Beirut), Feb. 8, 2002 for this quote.
- 3 Dekmejian (2007) sets up a helpful continuum of violence along State and anti-State lines, and macro-micro impact, p. 10.
- 4 Lincoln (2003) utilizes these four domains--discourses, practices, communities, and institutions--to describe the scope of any “religion.”
- 5 I like Jeffrey Stout’s definition of a “public theology,” namely one that “addresses people as citizens,” rather than (or in addition to) as members of a particular faith community. See *Democracy and Tradition*, pp. 112-13.
- 6 See also Cragg on the significance of birthing as a metaphor in contrast to the destructiveness of militaries and suicides, p. 3.
- 7 Bonner resists the idea that the notion of jihad has been “hijacked” by terrorists, but this fails to see how the notion has also been constructed by the militaries (and ideologues) of the West as the “primitive” opposite to the supposed rationality of modern warfare by nation-states.
- 8 This can clarify what Bonner sees only as a “tension” in the doctrine of *jihad* between Qur’anic “generosity” and historical violence. As he writes, the Qur’an is a “text that adamantly opposes waste and indeed, violence, within the community of believers,” p. 173. The problem, of course, then becomes how one defines that “community.” Suffice it to say that Gülen seems inclined toward an expansive definition--but that topic is beyond the scope of this essay.

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