

# Progress Through Piety: *Sohbetler* (Spiritual Gatherings of the Women Participants in the Gülen Movement

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## ABSTRACT

The view that modernization, the sole path to progress, can only be achieved through secularization, and that, by extension, Islam, like other religions, promotes stagnation, ignorance and oppression has prevailed among of those who adhere to Kemalism, or the ideas of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Turkey, as well as among other 'liberal secularists' throughout the Muslim world. Since the 1980s, a growing number of Muslim men and women have been questioning this dichotomy. Viewing their faith and piety as a source of guidance and strength, they are reviving Islam's message of equality, social justice, education and progress as a means to societal improvement. Like many contemporary Islamists and Sufis, the participants in the Gülen Movement are exploring modes for promoting peace and understanding through education and dialogue with other Muslims and non-Muslims. 'Liberal secularists' in Turkey actively oppose Gülen's strategies claiming them to be a cover for a hidden plan to establish an Islamic state that will bring oppression, in particular towards women. By contrast, a growing body of scholarship on the impact of Gülen's teachings on women participants shows that some of them have found direction in their lives, forging career paths in Gülen schools (Ozdalga 2000), while others have been inspired to seek

dialogue with their spouses to negotiate changes in their personal lives and relationships (Stevenson 2005). This paper contributes to this scholarship by investigating the significance of *sohbetler* (religious gatherings) held weekly in Kansas City for the women participants. It examines the participants' views on the role of their faith and piety in their lives, the contribution of the Gülen's teachings to defining this role and the impact of their participation in the *sohbetler* on their personal development. Furthermore, it explores their perspectives on the controversy surrounding the role of faith and piety in society today.

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## INTRODUCTION

Muslim and non-Muslim scholars influenced by commonly held attitudes in Western thought frequently assume that secularization is a prerequisite to fostering progress and development in all areas of society today. Religion is often viewed as the source of oppression, inequity, discrimination and hostility, and therefore a hindrance to progress and development in the eyes of most liberal secularist. Liberal secularist and feminist scholarship characterized has endeavored to document the ways women other oppressed groups directly or indirectly, wittingly or unwittingly, cope with, circumvent, challenge, resist and even struggle to eliminate structures, proponents, practices and institutions that are based on and perpetuate what they view as oppressive ideologies including Islam. There is a long tradition of liberal secularist and feminist scholarly literature on women in general, and Muslim women more specifically, to uncover evidence of their resistance to structures, proponents, practices and institutions based on Islam. Veiling, understood as the donning of any of a number of regionally varying forms of head coverings by Muslim women, is often viewed by liberal secularist worldwide, in particular in Turkey, as an outward sign of oppression, and the conscious decision by educated urban

women to veil as active adherence to an oppressive ideology, while the opposite, the conscious choice to unveil, is often perceived as a victory in the struggle against oppression.

More recently, scholars have come to realize that religiosity, piety and ritual practices are not only private endeavors that have little or no bearing on the rest of the practitioners' lives except for defining their political perspectives in today's world where religion and religious affiliation has become highly politicized. Awareness is growing that these endeavors are integral to practitioners' sense of identity and to their temperament as well as their approach to many other aspects of their daily lives at home, school and work. More importantly, these endeavors have repercussions in other areas of their communities and societies beyond the boundaries of the spheres in which these endeavors are undertaken. Many recent studies have revealed some of these repercussions in the case of Muslim women. This literature demonstrates the ways in which women practitioners are altering older traditions of women's ritual practice, or creating new ones, in order to participate in the ongoing reassessment and revision ideologies and configurations of gender status, roles and relations in their local contexts (Raudvere 2003; Torab 2007). Other studies reveal the way different groups of women have carved out niches for themselves by expanding and resignifying the meaning of existing practices and creating new ones in order to renew and enhance their own sense of commitment to Islam and to encouraging others in their communities to follow their example, advice and instruction. These studies underscore the potential of these women's increased commitment to Islam for opening up opportunities and offering techniques which foster improvement in women's daily life circumstances, in some cases, enabling them to replace oppressive conditions with channels for agency and empowerment (Deeb 2006; Mahmood 2004). These and other recent studies demonstrate that the structures, proponents, practices and institutions promoting oppression derive

from other aspects of local culture and are based on extreme interpretations of the foundational texts of Islam.

Similarly, the existing scholarly literature on women participants in the Gülen Movement seeks to investigate the impact of their engagement with the teachings of Fethullah Gülen and Said Nursi on their lives. This literature highlights the ways their involvement in the Gülen movement has fostered personal developments that have expanded their educational and career opportunities and improved the conditions of their daily lives by enhancing their skills in communicating with family members and spouses and their self of identity and self-esteem. It has shown that, contrary to the views of 'liberal secularists' in Turkey, their all-encompassing commitment to Islam has broadened rather than narrowed their awareness of their choices in their daily lives and future endeavors.

In her article on Fethullah Gülen's perspective and realities at the court and among the elite of the Ottoman Empire with regard to women's rights, Bernadette Andrea (2007) emphasizes the discrepancy between the early limitations and late development of women's rights in regions subject to the Judeo-Christian tradition and the much more advanced rights of Muslim women in particular at the time of Lady Montagu's "Embassy" to the Ottoman Empire in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, she reiterates the findings of several scholars on existing misunderstandings of Europeans with regard to Muslim women's daily life conditions originating in the colonial period and earlier. Andrea describes Lady Montagu's surprise at finding conditions among the Turkish women she met and socialized with very different in reality from the way they were described in the travel accounts she had read. Besides having property ownership and other rights not available to contemporary European women, they were dedicated to charitable endeavors and piety instead of debauchery and decadence as purported to characterize the lives of Muslim women according to male authors of travelogues. Though not explicitly articulated, her article demon-

strates the potential in the Qur'an, recognized and applied historically and currently by Fethullah Gülen, for training pious behavior and ethical comportment and for establishing gender equality, a potential, which was lacking in the "generally accepted Christian canon," or simply overlooked, misinterpreted and not applied through law and daily life practice in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Europe.

Similarly, scholars studying contemporary women participants in the Gülen Movement in Turkey and the United States, in particular Austin and Houston, Texas, have reported that their strict commitment to religiosity and piety has not hindered these women from pursuing higher education and careers or from demanding the cooperation of their spouses in household tasks in particular the care and upbringing of their children. Elisabeth Ozdalga (2003) investigates the lives of three young women employed at three different schools established by participants of Gülen in Turkey. Drawing on interviews with these women, she demonstrates the way their discovery of and personal engagement with the teachings of Fethullah Gülen and Said Nursi have led these women to carve out and structure their marital relationships, family life and careers as teachers in ways that were beneficial to their personal development and life goals. Anna J. Stephenson (2007) draws on findings collected during research for her masters' thesis on women participants in the Gülen Movement to describe case studies of participants residing in Houston, Texas. She emphasizes the effects these women's engagement with the teachings of Gülen and Nursi and their involvement in activities of the Gülen Movement in the U.S. and elsewhere prior to their arrival on their ability to define different aspects of their educational and career goals and of their marital relationships. In her article based on fieldwork conducted among young women participants in the Gülen Movement residing in Austin, Texas, Maria F. Curtis (2005) explores the personal development of these women beginning with their experiences of immersion while living among other young women in *dershaneler*, or dormitories, established and administered by participants in the

Gülen Movement in the vicinity of universities in Turkey and ending with their participation in variously formatted *söhbetler*, or spiritual gatherings, in Austin. She underscores the transformations undergone by these women in particular with regard to their views of their identity as Muslims, as members of the smaller and larger community of participants in the movement and as Turks, and their relationship to the Turkish state resulting from these forms of identification. All of these scholars demonstrate the ways in which the women participants' engagement with the teachings of the movement and their involvement in activities and institutions established by other participants have led to improvements in their personal lives, to their access to the public sphere and to their aspirations to make a mark, to leave their footprints, in the society where they are residing and working.

Together these studies present a broad picture of the ways engagement with the teachings of Gülen and Nursi and participation in the activities and institutions of the Gülen Movement has enabled women participants to expand their understanding of and adherence to Islam, while simultaneously opening up opportunities to them rather than placing limits on them, and assisting them in struggling to eliminate rather than fostering oppression in their lives and the lives of others. Conspicuously missing however is the role of faith and piety in the process of development and refinement undergone by the women participants. The women participants in the Gülen Movement residing in Kansas City on which this paper focuses emphasized the fact that their faith and piety are integral to moving forward, to improving themselves and their lives and to making progress in this process. Faith and piety constitute the main distinguishing feature of their approach in particular in comparison to liberal secularists in their view. This paper investigates these women participants' understanding of the role of their faith and piety in this process, and their perspectives on the controversy surrounding the role of faith and piety in society today.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on field research conducted during *sobbetler*, or spiritual gatherings, held weekly in the homes of the participants residing in Kansas City. The *sobbetler* are residing in Kansas City and nearby towns. The community of women participants attending the *sobbetler* currently consists of fifteen young women from Turkey, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan who have been in the United States for between one and five years ranging in age from twenty to twenty-five. One participant is an American mother of three, married to a Turk, who, though previously employed as a school-teacher, is currently temporarily a stay-at-home mother until her youngest reaches school age. All but two of them are married. Eight of them have one or two children. Five are enrolled in programs of undergraduate or graduate studies at local universities, five are employed as teachers or researchers in their communities and five are currently exclusively mothers and housewives.

Like other aspects of their current life situations and their backgrounds of origin, their knowledge of the ideas, teachings and works of Said Nursi and Fethullah Gülen and their connection to the local and wider communities of participants of these two scholars and teachers before coming to the United States varied widely. The five young women who are currently stay-at-home mothers and housewives had limited awareness of this school of thought and little or no direct contact with its adherents prior to marriage. They became aware of the teachings, activities and institutions of the Gülen Movement through their husbands who, in the case of four, brought them to the U.S. The initial involvement of the fifth young woman participant, an American convert to Islam, began with her acquaintance and eventual marriage to a Turkish participant. The other ten had read some works and were actively involved in *sobbetler*, or spiritual gatherings, and *bizmet*, or service, networks in their countries of origin. In the case of two women, their parents were directly or indirectly involved in local community networks

and activities. Currently, all of these young women are committed to applying the teachings in their daily lives and actively participate in activities and institutions to the extent that the circumstances of their daily lives allows them to.

The field research consisted of attending, observing and carrying out informal conversations, group and individual, with the participants. The paper presents both the perspectives of the women participants as a progression from initial responses to final conclusions reached by the group as a whole and individuals. Their responses were elicited by open-ended questions regarding their experiences throughout their involvement in the Gülen Movement from their initial contact with participants to their eventual participation in various activities and institutions. It includes their perspectives that emerged from their deliberations the role of faith and piety in society today, the controversy surrounding the position of practicing Muslims in Turkey and elsewhere and the potential for mutual understanding and collaboration between Muslims and non-Muslim, practicing and non-practicing Muslims and participants in the Gülen Movement and liberal secularists in their mutual efforts to work towards progress and development in society in general and towards the improvement in the circumstances of women's daily lives in particular.

Three themes, which emerged in the initial group and individual conversations about the importance of the Gülen Movement for them, expressed as: "setting higher standards," "a bucket with a hole" (or "progress through piety") and "*ablalar* as role models," serve to structure the main body of the paper. A discussion of the distinguishing feature of the path of women participants in the Gülen Movement, in relation to that of liberal secularists, concludes the main body. The conclusion of the paper summarizes the women participants' perspectives on reassessing the controversy surrounding the role of faith and piety in society today and on resolving the tension among groups bearing different perspectives and approaches, perspectives which emerged from the research conversations.

“SETTING HIGHER STANDARDS” THROUGH EDUCATION,  
DIALOGUE AND *HIZMET* (SERVICE)

The first theme mentioned by the women participants in the Gülen Movement in Kansas City when asked about the most important aspects of their involvement in the Gülen Movement was “setting higher standards.” Setting, working towards and achieving higher standards, the women participants agreed, took place within the realms of education, *hizmet*, or service, and dialogue. These three realms are interrelated and contribute to the pursuit of “higher standards” on a number of levels.

Education, on one level, encompasses the secular learning program offered in the Gülen schools established throughout the world. Education at this level is pursued by the women participants and is offered by the participants teaching in the schools to the rest of the community. This education raises the level of general knowledge of the pupils. On another level, these schools seek to transmit higher standards in terms of moral values and ethical principles through the example offered by the behavior of the participants working in the school. All of the levels of learning described here correspond to the expectations generally encompassed by educational institutions.

The difference in the way the women participants understand one’s motivation for obtaining an education, and in particular pursuing higher education, was related to their commitment to Islam and to their faith and piety. In addition, they view it as an opportunity to apply the teachings of Gülen in their lives, as the woman participant articulates in the following quote:

“When I read Gülen’s teachings about education, they rang a bell with me since I really believe in power of knowledge. Gülen’s interpretation of the very first revelation to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is very unique and gave me a fresh perspective. The first revelation begins: “Read! In the Name of your Lord, Who has created (all that exists).” Gülen emphasizes that this command

from God is very relevant today and that it illustrates the importance of education. I have applied this concept to my life by embracing books even more than I had before and by targeting the goal of attending medical school.”<sup>1</sup>

Here the choice to pursue higher education is tied to Gülen’s interpretation of a chapter from the Qur’an. Furthermore, just as they viewed every other positive endeavor in their daily lives, the women participants perceived their pursuit of higher education as a means to seek God’s approval, to fulfill His command and imitate the Prophet Muhammad’s example in their daily lives. This participant, like others, also explained that her decision to pursue higher education and her career choice were directly linked to the opportunity to serve the community through her future employment, which would expand her opportunities to seek God’s approval. To the women participants, education allowed them to raise the “standards” in their lives both on an intellectual and spiritual level.

*Hizmet*, or service, is broadly understood as any action undertaken to assist others. It encompasses the smallest act that responds to the needs of someone encountered at any moment in daily life. *Hizmet* includes performing any task that will benefit others, whether fulfilling requests made by others in one’s daily life or offering one’s services in the context of communal institutions, such as participating in activities organized by Gülen participants on any level, as described in the following passage by a woman participant.

“I have participated in number of events organized by people who share a common vision. These activities included community outreach activities, volunteer-tutoring of younger students, leading and participating in youth group-like activities, participating in big-sister-like activities, participating in Ramadan dinners with various members of community, fundraising activities for orphanages and so on. The degree of my participation varied in these activities. In some of them I was responsible for organizing, preparing and leading the activity. In some of them I was simply a participant who attended the event, in particular the Ramadan dinners. Whereas in

others I co-shared the responsibility with others in coming up with a plan and in executing what needed to be done. Participating in these activities is very important to me because this is what I believe in. I believe in helping others in any way I can and leaving a positive imprint in this world and in my community. I believe in the importance of interfaith and intercultural dialogue.”

Performing *hizmet* opens up opportunities for interaction and dialogue and can result in a learning experience on a number of levels, as emphasized in the following quote.

“Being involved in these activities with people who share the same values has changed my life for better because it makes me feel like part of something big and important instead feeling alone and isolated. It is part of human nature at times to feel alone and isolated and as if nobody knows what one is going through, whereas by being actively involved with a community I have realized that we have so much in common with others and that others can benefit from my experiences and how I overcame or dealt with certain issues just as much as I can benefit from theirs. Another benefit of being involved in these activities is that we motivate each other and help each other to sustain our conviction and our dynamics. One last benefit I would like to mention is that no matter how much desire one possesses to do good and carry out certain actions, there are always times when we need help in achieving those goals because they are not a one-person-job, thus this is where a few sets of hands, legs and brains come in very handy!”

As this woman participant points out, *hizmet* fosters interaction, dialogue and learning between those offering the service and those receiving it, but also among those sharing in the preparatory work for larger service activities. Most importantly however, according to the women participants, *hizmet*, regardless of the time and energy it involved, was offered voluntarily, without any expectation of recompense, monetary or otherwise, and it enabled them to please God.

Dialogue is the third means for promoting “higher standards” in one’s own life and in society, in the view of the women partici-

pants. Dialogue is integral to the education or any learning process because it makes possible an exchange of ideas. Dialogue encompasses any level of communication, whether embedded in an organized activity of the movement or simply between two individuals, that involves a conscious effort to understand the thoughts, ideas, attitudes and perspectives of others. Dialogue can lead to a rapprochement between individuals and the groups they belong to. It eliminates misunderstanding and dissolves tension that harbors conflict. It opens up space for and channels meaningful interaction. The women participants emphasized intercultural and interfaith dialogue but included dialogue between members of different groups residing in the same country, bearing the same cultural background and adhering to the same religion. It falls into the category of *hizmet*, as it was aimed at improving the lives of others and society as a whole. Engaging in conscious, reflected dialogue also entails setting an example for others, and constitutes yet another means to gain God's approval.

At the conclusion of the conversation on "setting higher standards" for themselves and promoting them in society through education, *hizmet* and dialogue, the women participants began to re-examine their terminology. They acknowledged the fact that there was no official set of standards, and that their goal was to promote improvement in moral values and ethical principles in society. In their own lives, this improvement also encompassed acts of faith and piety, as expressed in the following quote:

"There is no exact definition of having higher standards. The idea is that we believe that we are in a struggle in this world and we should always try to be a better person. For example, if you are giving charity, try to give more, pray more, be more altruistic and helpful etc. We never think that certain amount of praying is enough. We should always try to get closer to God by increasing good deeds and decreasing and eventually ceasing to commit bad deeds and considering pleasing God in every aspect of life."

The word “higher,” all of them agreed, is appropriate because it underscores the goal of striving to improve one’s own attitudes, expectations, levels of knowledge and awareness and modes of behavior as well as of encouraging others to do the same. Ultimately, what emerged through the discussion of the phrase “setting higher standards” and the three realms of activity described above for working towards setting and reaching higher standards is the idea that one can and should constantly reassess one’s develop standards by stepping back and scrutinizing one’s attitudes, expectations, levels of knowledge and awareness and modes of behavior with regard to every aspect of one’s daily life existence. This is an important element of the approach of the Gülen Movement in the view of these participants. This element entails an emphasis on continuous forward movement, advancement of knowledge, improvement in comportment and personal transformation, all of which are indicative of progress.

#### A BUCKET WITH A HOLE: PROGRESS THROUGH PIETY

Making progress is the second important goal of their mission, according to the women participants. The progress, expressed in simple terms, entails making each day different from the preceding day, learning something new each day and to improving their behavior and actions from one day to the next. As one woman participant explained it, one can understand the meaning of this goal by envisioning oneself as “a bucket with a hole,” a bucket in which water can never remain for a long period of time. Stagnant water, she explained, collects impurities and becomes contaminated, whereas water that is regularly replenished, or that flows as in a river, undergoes constant renewal.

This idea stems from ‘Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, according to the women participants. As one participant explained further,

“Hazrati Ali had very high standards and his knowledge was exceptional. Nonetheless, he said that his knowledge is like a drop

of water in an ocean. So how can we say that we are well educated? All of us have something to learn. So our purpose is to learn at least one new thing in each day.”

Here the emphasis is on learning, but it encompasses both knowledge one might learn from reading or attending an educational institution but also knowledge acquired through every day life experiences.

The progress cannot be made through the acquisition of knowledge and experience alone. This acquisition is supported and fostered through spiritual development. Spiritual development entails increasing the number of prayers and devotional recitations one performs. Furthermore, emphasis is placed more on the progress in one’s capacity for behaving in accordance with moral values and ethical principles and the increase in devotional observance that results than on the content of the knowledge and experience acquired. One of the women participants elaborated her views on this process as follows:

“Daily life is a constant struggle. We believe that human being has the ability to be even better than angels and at the same time fall to lower than devils. God gave us the ability to separate what is good and bad and let us free in our choice. This world is like an examination, and we are trying to score as high as we can. There is no certain score for passing the examination. We should try to answer all the questions. In other words, we can never be sure about ourselves, there is no guarantee for going to heaven even if we are practicing Muslims. Therefore, we always try our best not to stay at a certain level in terms of practicing religion. But of course we can never be perfect. Faith is between fear and hope. We always hope for forgiveness. In addition to that, we do not know which question will receive a higher score. I mean God may forgive us because of a very small good deed. It is not a math calculation. If you pray a lot but break someone’s heart you might be in trouble. Making each day different means trying to improve spiritually by praying, doing good deeds and trying to have a better personality and have good morals.”

Here emphasis is placed on the renewal and improvement of one's moral and ethical standards and spirituality, on the mutual support of the actions in the private spiritual and the public, everyday realm and on the individual nature of the process. The progress is measured on an individual level but the outcome and repercussions of the individual renewal and improvement has benefits for the individual and for society. Individual progress entails an increase in one's ability to provide more service to society and to be more effective as an example to others through one's comportment.

There is however no specified set of standards, no way of measuring one's performance or progress, they all agreed. Instead the process of monitoring one's progress depends on personal scrutiny and judgment but there is a network of support and assessment to guide and facilitate one's progress, as described in the following quote:

“The highest standard is to gain the approval of God. Nobody knows if he or she gains or does not gain this approval. And also whoever thinks that he or she is a very good person, that he or she is better than the others and that he or she has gained the approval of God and will enter paradise, he or she will start to fall down immediately. We can say that these standards are not our creation. Our purpose is to follow the way of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his companions. Of course, consultations with those who are spiritually more advanced than we are help us to reach higher standards and to constantly improve ourselves. They guide us to better ways and higher levels in all our thoughts and actions.”

This response indicates that humility is central to the assessment process and that, while the process is individual in nature, assistance can be sought from those who are spiritually more advanced. Seeking assistance especially at early stages in one's spiritual development is highly advisable and beneficial, according to the women participants. *Ablalar*, or big sisters, in particular within the context of *sobbetler*, or spiritual gatherings, headed by them, most commonly serve to provide this assistance in most cases.

## ABLALAR AS ROLE MODELS

Ten of the women participants had participated in regular *sobbetler* and progressed under the guidance of *ablalar* for two or more years. They viewed this experience as enriching and integral to their initial spiritual development. This experience established the firm foundation on which they are now able to build. They learned to monitor their personal development and the balance between their spiritual growth and their capacity to apply the moral values and ethical principles they acquired in the initial phase of supervised training with their *ablalar*.

In recounting this initial phase, many of the women emphasized the importance of the role their *ablalar* played in their development, as in the following quote:

“*Ablalar* try to affect us both by being a role model, a living example, and by persuasion. When you see them around always helping others, you just admire them and want to be like them. Some *ablalar* have considerable knowledge about Islam, Gülen’s books and they try to share what they know with us. Generally, this happens during daily *sobbetler* in lighthouses. Sometimes, they kindly warn you if you make a mistake and try to help you correct your faults. I can tell that the most influential point of *ablalar* is they exercise what they tell us, you actually see them living according to their beliefs.”

All of the women acknowledged the two-fold nature of the role of the *abla*, her function as a teacher and as a role model. In their function as teachers, besides actually reading the texts under study in the *sobbetler* and guiding the discussion of the texts, *ablalar* monitor the progress of the participants by collecting lists of their weekly activities. These lists encompass additional prayers and recitations and *hizmet* performed by the participant. This function encourages the participants to improve their activities from week to week and assisted them in learning to eventually monitor their own progress.

Most of the women underscored the significance of the *abla*’s function as role model, as articulated in the following quote:

“*Ablalar* help their students to improve themselves. They try to motivate them and try to help with their homework for school. They also try to teach them something about religion, if possible. But the most important and beneficial way to learn something from an *abla* is by observing her. Her attitude and behavior are more effective than what she says.”

Some of the women described the deep admiration that they developed for their *ablalar* and their desire to emulate every aspect of their behavior. Some of them continue to maintain contact with their *ablalar*. In addition to the opportunity of learning from the *abla* by observing and attempting to imitate her, the *sobbetler* provided the possibility of developing a sense of belonging to a group and of group support, as well as nurturing atmosphere, all of which enhanced the participants’ capacity for personal and spiritual development, as expressed in the following quote:

“*Sobbetler* in the U.S. and Turkey are almost the same. We gather and one *abla* reads an Islamic book. It could be a book by Gülen, an interpretation of the Qur’an or Risale-i-Nur. We discuss whatever we read and try to figure out the implications of reading and ways we can apply those to real life. *Sobbetler* are interactional. They are not like lectures. Everybody who attends tells what she understood. There is a very nice and harmonious atmosphere in *sobbetler*. Sometimes we go jogging, eat delicious food after the *sobbet* and have fun together. When I was in college, during daytime, I was always busy with courses and worldly issues. When I returned home and attended the *sobbetler*. The *abla* kept me focused on the other world, on my responsibilities and on the idea of struggling to be a better person. I felt like I was getting my spiritual food from *sobbetler*.”

Most of the women underscored the importance of the nurturing atmosphere and group support as well as a source of friendship and social activities provided by the *sobbetler* in the initial phase of involvement in the movement.

*Sobbetler* vary widely according to the needs and expectations of the composition of the group of participants and the broader

community in which they are located, as described in the following quote:

“There are different types of group depend on their situation. Their levels are different. In Turkey these groups are distinct, though not always homogeneous. The distinction is based on the level of knowledge about religion and the movement. At beginning level *sobbetler* are like meetings with some supplemental social activities. The purpose is to acquire the basics. At intermediate level, *sobbetler* are more advanced in terms of expectations. In some cases, the group starts to participate in activities organized by the movement. At the advanced level, the group is aware of and committed to the goals of the movement. They participants are expected to begin to actively help other people and to eventually serve as *ablalar*. There are other levels of participation as well. For example, my father is no longer a teacher in a Gülen school. He is now a businessman, but he is still involved with the movement. He attends *sobbet* and he tries to find finance support for the movement. My mother is a housewife but she is very involved socially in the movement. She attends to *sobbet*, excursions and conferences. She coordinates fundraising activities to support the finance of poor students.”

This quote reveals that *sobbetler* vary widely in their structure, content, purpose and the composition of their participants. In this way, they serve the various types and levels of needs of expectations of the participants. Likewise, their current *sobbetler* provide the women participants with the necessary regular contact and mutual in maintaining their efforts in monitoring and enhancing their spiritual development.

#### DISTINGUISHING FEATURE OF THE WOMEN PARTICIPANTS: ‘BEING CLOSER TO GOD’ AS A GUIDING PRINCIPLE

The final line of inquiry encompassed the controversial role of faith and piety in society today, and the tension between practicing Muslim and liberal secularists in Turkey. I pursued this line of inquiry in my

dialogues with the participants in the *sobbetler* by specifically addressing the difference between the activism of the women participants and women belonging to non-governmental women's organizations in Turkey and the possibility of collaboration between the two groups. Drawing on my research with the latter, I described my findings that many of these organizations, like the women participants, are seeking to improve the circumstances of women's lives in their society. These organizations have been actively assisting rural women and women of rural origin living in urban centers to improve the conditions of their daily lives. As members of these organizations, many women activists, in addition to their successful campaigns to change the Turkish penal code to prevent early marriages, oppressive behavior and honor killings as well as all of the ensuing side effects like suicide among teenagers, have been actively engaged in teaching them communication skills to improve their relationships with their parents, spouses and children and to realize and demand their rights and the rights of their daughter to secondary and higher education and to the pursuit of employment. In spite of their firm commitment to women's education, the responses of these women activists to my inquiries regarding their lack of advocacy for lifting the headscarf ban are similar. Although the headscarf ban excludes some Turkish women from pursuing higher education or working in fields that would otherwise be open to them based on completed degrees or forces them to pursue degrees in other countries, none of the women's organizations to which the activists belonged were involved in supporting efforts to have it revoked. While some activists diplomatically claimed that their resources are limited, and that joining the struggle to lift the ban was not one of their current priorities, most explained that the ban was hindering only women who were wearing the headscarf as part of a political agenda that was ultimately aimed at establishing an Islamic state and forced veiling for all women as in Iran.

In response to my presentation of these findings and my inquiry into the distinguishing features of the participants in the Gülen Movement compared to these activists who are also strug-

gling to improve the lot of women in Turkish society and into the possibility of the two groups working together, the women participants in Kansas City offered the following responses. According to one women participant:

“This is a tough issue. Both devout and less devout women can seek progress. They can be very successful and influential members in the society as long as they have the motivation to do so. The difference is that devout Muslim ladies pursue higher education and seek to be active members of the society not just for this world. For example, I want to be a professor, but this is not only for showing people how smart I am and for gaining reputation. I want to serve God through my job by serving as a good example to my students and by changing people’s mind through my publications. Hopefully, if I can become a professor one day, my real purpose would be in the other world, not in this world. We should use worldly opportunities and our positions as a tool to achieve and promote higher standards in terms of spirituality and being closer to God. The idea is to serve God by serving society and to do whatever you do for the sake of God, for becoming closer to God.”

Another woman responded by stating that:

“I think they could work together and it might be a good idea. The problem is that some of these organizations are secular. They see religion as an obstacle to modernity and progress of women whereas women participants in the Gülen Movement get strength from religion. For some secular women, criteria for modernity is taking off the scarf and wearing less clothing, therefore they do not even want scarved women to have education and high status in society. It depends on which organizations are being considered. This prejudice does not hold true for all organizations. But please note that sometimes there is bias on both sides. For example, some religious women think that those secular women spoil family structure. In fact, I think the situation is getting better. There is less tension and more respect between secular and practicing women.

Once they have interaction, they realize that they have a lot in common and there is no point in looking each other as if enemies.”

Another woman responded as follows:

“I think it is most honest to view this issue from the perspective that practicing Islam does make a difference. What some scholars are trying to say is that practicing Muslims face the same challenges as non-practicing ones. They too deal with temper tantrums or teenage issues. They too have problems in their financial, family and business life and so on. However, what is being overlooked here is the DIFFERENCE IN RESPONSE to all these issues. Of course we are all human. We have similar human tendencies, whether positive or negative. However, the way a practicing believer responds to these challenges or even to the blessings of this life is significantly different. For example, when a nonbeliever accomplishes a great success or is blessed with a child, it is very easy for that person to become arrogant and conceited. Whereas when a believer faces the same situation, the first inclination is to give thanks to God immediately. The same is true for hardships. It may be difficult for a non-practicing person to deal with problems since they may question the reasons behind them and become outraged with the facts. Whereas, for a believer, there are so many consolations for even the tiniest problem that it would require me to write a few pages just on this topic. Some of those consolations are: there are worse things than what we are challenged with; we still have so many more blessings than some people; in the realms of the global world and destiny, there are too many reasons that justify the existence of the certain problem; this may be just a small reminder to us that we are going astray and that God is warning us while we are still in this world so that we can correct our ways and repent before its too late; and if nothing else, with a proper response, this can be a way for some of our sins to be erased.”

These responses demonstrate the centrality of the faith and piety as defining various aspects of their own approaches to life in general and to resolving important problems in today's society.

They recognized the differences and acknowledge the difficulties but welcome opportunity and value the benefit of cooperation between participants in the Gülen Movement and liberal secular women activists.

## CONCLUSION

During the course of the conversations that evolved from my research inquiries, the women participants in Kansas City reflected more intensively on the goals of the Gülen Movement and their roles in working towards those goals. These reflections encompassed pondering the situation in the world today in broader terms and the position of the movement within that broader framework. This exercise in reflection and dialogue led their formulation of two important conclusions.

First of all, they concluded that today's world is wrought with many problems, a large of which have resulted from a weakening in the transmission of moral values and ethical principles for daily life from one generation to the next. Parents are the primary transmitters of these moral values and ethical principles. Schoolteachers and other community role models serve to enhance or correct this primary training. Historically, religion provided the source and foundation of moral values and ethical principles in society. The ongoing recession in religious affiliation, belief and practice has contributed to the weakening in the moral and ethical foundation of society. Like religious practitioners, parents with a secular perspective are equally capable of inculcating moral values and ethical principles in their children during the upbringing process. Today, however, moral and ethical training must be even more deeply ingrained in each individual than in the past as the world today is filled with people at all levels of society who have ceased to honor moral values and ethical principles in many areas of their lives, and the temptation to follow suit is great. Many people today feel that they must participate in

immoral and unethical practices in order to compete on a number of levels, or simply to maintain their current positions.

Secondly, the women participants recognize the urgent need for organizations and groups to work together to struggle against this situation. They acknowledge the fact that their commitment to Islam may create a barrier in some instance. The fact that most, though not all, of the women participants cover their heads increases the likelihood that they will encounter challenges to their attempts to interact with people. They realize that this practice and their all-encompassing commitment to their faith and piety is viewed as problematic by some groups of people in Turkey and the U.S. They are aware of the common view of liberal secularists in Turkey that a woman who consciously chooses to veil has a veiled mind, as does her spouse, as one liberal secular activist in Turkey once explained in justifying her rejection of women with headscarves in Turkey.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, they feel that that being a practicing Muslim does not interfere with other aspects of their lives and that veiling does not necessarily hinder women from having fulfilling, happy and even career-oriented lives. They are committed to seeking to change the attitudes and behavior of the people they encounter in their daily lives and to their contributions to the goals of the Gülen Movement to work to bring about understanding and peace through its ongoing initiatives to encourage interfaith and intercultural dialogue.

In this paper I have attempted to show the degree to which the women participants' adherence to Islamic belief and practice is central to every aspect of their identity and lives. Their commitment to their faith and piety is integrally intertwined with their daily life activities, their ongoing personal development, their education and career goals and their interpersonal interactions and relationships. In their view, their faith and piety, their constant pursuit of God's approval and their unceasing endeavor for self-renewal and improvement all serve as a means of support and a source of enrichment. It is their faith and piety that provides the

foundation for establishing equitable, healthy and mutual enriching forms of interpersonal interaction at every level in their lives.

## NOTES

- 1 This woman participant is currently enrolled in a pre-med program at a local university.
- 2 This activist was referring to the wife of the current prime minister of Turkey. She explained that his wife is veiled, which means he is also veiled, in other words, his mind is closed to the possibility of change and progress, in particular with regard to women. Interestingly, this integral connection between women with headscarves and their husbands had other repercussions in Turkish society. Threatened with losing their jobs, many men in prominent positions were forced to conceal the fact that their wives wore headscarves by secluding them in their homes, or relocating them outside the urban centers where they worked.

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