

Islamic *Himma* and Christian *Charity*: An Attempt at Inter-Faith Dialogue

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ABSTRACT

It has been aptly observed that the concept and practice of “*himma*,” a principal virtue in the Sufi tradition, is a key to Fethullah Gülen’s understanding of Islam and the moral education of an ideal Muslim. Despite its centrality, “*himma*” has not come under close scrutiny in recent scholarship on Gülen’s thought and practice. Even among students of Islamic thought, its conceptual meaning and significance is not well known outside of a small group of scholars. In addition to its relative obscurity is the challenge of accurate translation. Frequently rendered as “aspiration” or “resolve,” this rich Arabic concept is difficult to translate using any one word in English. This paper aims at clarifying its conceptual meaning through a cross-cultural comparison with the Christian virtue of “charity.”

Charity, the foremost of the three theological virtues in Catholicism, has been stripped of its theological trappings under the influence of modern humanism to mean “beneficence” or “benevolence.” To understand the wider meaning that Gülen assigns to “*himma*” (“*himmet*” in Turkish), it is imperative to revisit the pre-modern understanding of charity in the Catholic tradition. The primary difference between the modern and pre-modern senses of “charity” is the latter’s emphasis on the remembrance of God in the midst of all human activities. In the

Catholic theological vision of human life, the religious duty of serving one's neighbor can be fulfilled only if it is done for the sake of pleasing God.

This paper argues that Gülen similarly emphasizes the theological aspect of "*himmah*," which also carries the connotation of striving toward God through serving one's fellow compatriots, co-religionists, and all human beings. The theological aspect of "*himmah*," according to Gülen, subsumes the more practical religious virtues and duties of charity (in the restricted sense) such as "*infaq*" (spending in the service of God), "*sadaqa*" (voluntary almsgiving), and "*zakat*" (obligatory almsgiving). The commonality between Gülen's usage of "*himmah*" and "charity" in the wider Catholic sense can be more clearly seen if we remember that the term "*agape*" (love) is the original Greek term used in the New Testament, which the term "charity" ("*caritas*" in Latin) translates. Both Christian "*agape*" and the Sufi (or Gülen's) usage of "*himmah*" warn believers against pre-occupation with worldly goods and even against expecting spiritual rewards for piety.

Showing the spiritual kinship between two major world religions, which should come as no surprise given their common Abrahamic origin and the centuries of give-and-take between Muslims and Christians, this paper contributes to interfaith dialogue, especially by emphasizing the need for sympathetic understanding of each religious creed, free from the ancient disputes over doctrinal matters, the political rivalry between Christendom and the Islamicate civilization through history, as well as the less-than-perfect empirical manifestations of each religion in time and place, all three of which have been increasingly used by partisan adherents of each religion to justify their distorted judgment of the "other" religion.

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The Islamic concept of *himmah*, as many Gülen scholars have noted, is central to the operation and growth of the Fethullah Gülen movement. This is the name for the regular local fundraising activities to

finance its wide educational network or other cultural activities within Turkey or abroad. The concept of *himmah* (*himmət* in Turkish), a spiritual virtue in the Islamic Sufi tradition, also holds a key role in Fethullah Gülen's understanding of Islam and teaching on the moral education of an ideal Muslim. The Sufi connection should not be surprising as it is well recorded that Gülen's understanding of Islam has been deeply shaped by the Sufi tradition, which has been an undercurrent of Turkish Islam since its beginning.

Despite its significance for Gülen's teaching, the conceptual meaning of *himmah* has been given little attention by Gülen scholars. A quick survey of the works conducted on Fethullah Gülen's thought or the movement he inspired delivers few results. This is understandable as apart from scholars studying the Sufi tradition, the conceptual meaning and significance of *himmah* is not well known even among students of Islamic thought. Compounding its relative obscurity among scholars is the challenge of translation. Frequently rendered as spiritual "aspiration," "yearning," or "resolve," this richly suggestive concept is difficult to translate into English with one single word.

This paper attempts to clarify the conceptual meaning of *himmah* in the context of Gülen's thought through a cross-cultural comparison with the more familiar Christian virtue of "charity." This paper begins with a discussion of the contemporary meaning of *himmah* within the Gülen movement, and moves on to discuss its meaning within the Sufi tradition in the second section. The third section examines the Christian virtue of charity, and the fourth compares charity with *himmah*. The last and concluding part will raise some questions about the practice of the inter-faith dialogue in relation to this comparison of the two key concepts of Islam and Christianity.

THE ROLE OF HIMMET IN THE GÜLEN MOVEMENT

It is widely known that the Gülen movement identifies itself as *hizmet* (*hizmāt* in Arabic), which means "service" in Turkish. *Hizmet* is the

generic name for all the disinterested public activities conducted by the members of this community to fulfill their duties to religion and nation. Specific examples of *hizmet* are inter-faith dialogue initiatives and the educational network set up in Turkey and abroad. The term is also used more broadly for self-identification by the community members. Hence, a member of the Gülen movement often identifies himself or herself as a member of *hizmet*.¹

Related to this concept and less known to the outsiders but perhaps more important in terms of Islamic history is the concept of *himmət*. It has been noted that the twin concepts of *hizmet* and *himmət* provide a general conceptual framework for all the economic, cultural, and religious activities of the Gülen community both inside and outside Turkey.² *Himmət*, as another student of this movement notes, is the technical name used for the fundraising gatherings of the community: "The meetings organized by the Gülen community to obtain financial support for its activities, especially its educational activities, are called *himmət* meetings."³ The organizers of these meetings present the past achievements and future goals or projects of the community, and appeal to the religious sentiments of the participants to collect funds for their activities. The participants, mostly local affluent business owners, pledge to make donations for the cause.

The Turkish word *himmət* derives from the Arabic word *al-himmah* (in Persian *himmət*). The original Arabic word denotes several interrelated meanings. More commonly it is translated as spiritual "aspiration" or "resolve." Its other renderings by contemporary translators and commentators include "diligence," "power," "will," "yearning," "desire," "purpose," "ambition," "intention," "concentration," and "determination," all of which are used with a spiritual connotation. Common to all these translations of *himmah* is the connotation of spiritual or mystical quest for the divine. This quest requires turning one's attention and efforts from worldly business toward more noble and urgent matters.

There are numerous phrases in the Islamic literature in which *himmah* appears with this connotation of rising above the affairs of the world. The phrase *uluww-i himmat* (lofty aspiration) was used by the Persian Sufi poet Farid al-Din Attar to mean “setting oneself high goals and not being satisfied with trivial things.”⁴ Another phrase in which *himmah* appears in relation to rulers is *himmah-i buland* which can be compared to the virtue known as high-mindedness or magnanimity in the Western tradition. For the first moralist of Islam, Miskawaih, *izam al-himmah* (composure) stands for “a virtue of the soul which causes it to sustain calmly both the happiness of good fortune and its opposites, including the distress which accompanies death.” Miskawaih defines *himmah* as a kind of courage.⁵

In a short article entitled “*Himmat: Teveccüh, İnfak ve Gayret*,” (“Aspiration: Orientation, Charity, and Perseverance”), Gülen appeals to the theological roots of *himmet* in the Islamic tradition.⁶ Gülen puts great emphasis here on the fact that there is a deeper spiritual aspect of *himmet* beyond its popular aspect associated with spending one’s wealth in God’s path. Gülen particularly notes that *himmet* must be understood first and foremost in its *tasawwufi* sense. The common practical usage among public as charity (*infak*) and perseverance (*gayret*) is subordinate to this older theological meaning. Gülen further points out the connection between *himmet* and another *tasawwufi* term *teveccüh* (*tawajjuh* in Arabic). Translated as spiritual “concentration,” “orientation,” or “attentiveness,” *tawajjuh* literally means turning the face toward something.⁷ *Tawajjuh* is often used in the context of turning one’s face toward God or God’s disclosing itself to the Sufi wayfarer (*salik*) in return.⁸ It is also used in relation to the very personal relationship between the *Sheikh* (master) and the *murid* (disciple) in the Sufi orders.⁹ In both senses it means the spiritual concentration or attention of the *salik* through which he hopes to receive the grace of God (either directly or indirectly through the sheikh). In relation to *tawajjuh*, *himmet* means orientation toward God with all one’s powers by opening one’s heart to God, and purifying oneself from all material

or even spiritual interests and pleasures. One must even put aside the thought of heavenly rewards or spiritual powers, and commit his every deed for the sake of gaining Allah's pleasure.

Gülen also notes a second related sense of *himmət* in the context of social relationships. *Himmət* means doing a favor, helping one another, coming to the rescue of another, or reaching out to the needy. This social sense of *himmət* refers to committing oneself to benevolent action with sincerity on the one hand and God's reciprocating the *tawajjuh* and sincerity (*ikhlas*) of his servant (*kul*) on the other. The servant's *inaba* (turning to God with repentance) is reciprocated by God's merciful *tawajjuh* toward the servant. God's favors and care depends on servant's constant orientation toward God (*tawajjuh*) as well as God's reciprocal *tawajjuh* in mercy. It is this sense of *himmət* which bridges over the public meaning of doing good deeds through financial means and the tasawwufi sense conceived by sufis as "spiritual power," which will be explored in the next section.

Gülen stresses that contrary to the popular opinion that equates *himmət* merely with *infaq* (spending in the service of God) the latter must be understood only as one aspect of the former.¹⁰ Reminding us of the fact that *himmət* did not have this specific meaning in the past, Gülen points out that both the public calls for assistance and people's response to these calls have come to be called *himmət* through time. The theological aspect of *himmət*, according to Gülen, subsumes the more practical religious virtues and duties of beneficence such as "infaq," (charity) "sadaqa" (voluntary almsgiving), and "zakat" (obligatory almsgiving).

Gülen also notes that *himmət* (in the second restricted sense of beneficence) can be conducted not only through wealth but also knowledge, deeds, health, and intelligence. Combining its spiritual and practical sense, *himmət* can be construed to mean making efforts in the service of one's religion and nation. *Himmət* in this sense carries the connotation of striving toward God through serving one's fellow compatriots, co-religionists, and even all humanity.

Gülen concludes his discussion of himmet by remembering Bediüzzaman Said Nursî's words in the "The Damascus Sermon."¹¹ Here Nursî discusses the notion of himmet in the context of national solidarity or fraternity and laments how this notion was successfully applied at his time in the West and almost forgotten in the Islamic world. To quote the important passage on himmet from his sermon in full:

[B]ecause of the idea of nationhood which those foreigners obtained from us, an individual becomes as valuable as a nation. For a person's value is relative to his endeavour [himmet]. If a person's endeavour is his nation, that person forms a miniature nation on his own. Because of the heedlessness of some of us and the foreigners' damaging characteristics that we have acquired, and, despite our strong and sacred Islamic nationhood, through everyone saying: "Me! Me!" and considering personal benefits and not the nation's benefits, a thousand men have become like one man.

Said Nursî goes on to emphasize the Aristotelian notion (incorporated later by Aquinas into the Catholic tradition) that man is a political or social being by nature and must act accordingly to become fully human:

If a man's endeavour is limited to himself, he is not a human being, for human beings are by nature social. Man is compelled to consider his fellow humans. His personal life continues through social life.¹²

It can safely be claimed that Gülen is in agreement with the importance of the virtue of putting the service to others before oneself in the name of God. This virtue indeed constitutes the heart of Gülen's teaching on the moral education of an ideal Muslim.

HIMMAH IN THE SUFI TRADITION

As Gülen implies in his article, the concept of *himmah* holds a significant place in the Sufi tradition within Islam. Scholars of Sufism

have noted that this is a technical term employed by greatest Sufis of history.¹³ Various late medieval Sufi masters such as Ibn Arabi, Suhrawardi, Najm al-Din Kubra, and Abdul-Karim al-Jili or Sufi poets such as Farid al-Din Attar employed this concept in their works.¹⁴ The spiritual powers of earlier mystics such as Hasan al-Basri and Rabi'a al-Adawiyya are also referred to as *himmah* in the hagiographical literature.¹⁵ This crucial term was often used by Sufis to signify the “determination of the heart to incline itself entirely to God.”¹⁶ *Himmah* in this sense is an essential quality to possess to be able to follow the arduous Sufi path. A contemporary scholar draws our attention to the significance of *himmah* to Sufism: “He who has no spiritual aspiration [*himmah*] or sincere will in seeking God in gratitude or in love cannot have an ambition to follow the path of Sufi *walāya* [authority].”¹⁷

Various definitions of the term agree in their emphasis on the fact that *himmah* involves the spiritual quest for God, and this quest demands first and foremost the further qualities of purity, sincerity, and concentration. According to a contemporary scholar of Islam, *himmah* implies “total commitment to the goal of achieving spiritual perfection and closeness to God.”¹⁸ In a classic work of Sufism *Istilahat al-Sufiyya* (A Glossary of Sufi Technical Terms), *himmah* was defined as a term “applied to the freeing of the heart for the desired objects . . . ; to the primal sincerity of the aspirant . . . ; and to the concentration of the spiritual aspirations to insure the purity of inspirations.”¹⁹ According to still another scholarly source, *himmah* is “the quality of perseverance or striving towards God” and “its opposite is al-hiss,” which means “distraction or inattention from concentration upon God.”²⁰

For the famous thirteenth century Andalusian Sufi Ibn al-Arabi, who exerted great influence on the course of Sufism after him, *himmah* is a pure force peculiar to the human being, which is either natural or acquired later in life.²¹ As an Ibn Arabi scholar notes, “The phenomenon of *himmah* is . . . something of much more than marginal significance in Ibn al-’Arabi’s thought.”²² Ibn Arabi held that

“it was only possible for human beings to come to a true understanding of the relationship that exists and should exist between creature and Creator if they were to become endowed with this power of *himmah* themselves.”²³

Ibn Arabi uses *himmah* in his major work *al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan Illuminations) especially in reference to the ideal of perfect man (al-insan al-kamil), which is characterized by “the inner condition of *sidq* [truthfulness] or pure spiritual intention (*himma*).” *Himmah*, according to Arabi, is the preserve of the spiritual elite as it is “one of the distinguishing signs of the highest forms of true faith in God” and the “natural effect of divine ‘victorious support’ (*nasr*).”²⁴ *Nasr* is a term that combines “the notions of divine assistance and the ‘victory’ resulting from that support.”²⁵ Ibn Arabi’s coupling of *himmah* and *nasr* is especially important for the purposes of this paper as this relationship between the two roughly corresponds to the close connection between *charity* and *grace* in the Christian tradition.

In *Futuhāt* Ibn Arabi uses the phrase *al-fi’l bi’l-himma* to refer to the act of “producing effects . . . in the outside world through concentration.”²⁶ This somewhat supernatural ability is closely related to the development of the faculty of imagination. The 20th century French orientalist Henry Corbin highlights this active (poetic) sense of *himmah* in Ibn Arabi’s work and uses the phrase “the creative power of the heart” to capture its richly suggestive meaning.²⁷ According to Corbin, this creative power is essentially “the very power with which God creates and sustains the cosmos, the power by means of which God brought all the cosmic domains, subtle, physical, and intellectual into existence,” but is also something that human beings can partake of.²⁸ The difference between the mystic’s *himmah* and the divine *himmah* is that “God exercises this creative power with perfect attentiveness and concentration whereas the mystic always exercises it with some admixture of inattentiveness.”²⁹

THE CHRISTIAN VIRTUE OF CHARITY

Charity in contemporary usage means “liberality to the poor, or tolerance in judging the actions of others.”³⁰ In the first sense, charity means showing or doing an act of good will toward those in need (almsgiving, benevolence, beneficence, etc.). It may even be interpreted as “a dutiful or even a patronizing regard for those one finds socially and psychologically taxing.”³¹ This is a reduction of its original meaning, which is *love*, however. In the *Summa Theologiae*, for instance, Aquinas treats beneficence or almsgiving as an outward effect of charity but not identical with it (IIaIIae.31.1). The comparability between *himmah* (in its sense of beneficence) and *charity* in its modern popular sense is clear enough.

Less straightforward is the relationship between the tasawwufi sense of *himmah* and the original sense of *charity* as love. In this prior sense, *charity* translates *agape* (love) in the original Greek version of the Christian Bible. *Agape* is the disinterested love found among human beings, or between humans and God, directed either from God toward humans or from humans toward God: “In the NT [New Testament] it was used to designate a beneficent love, a predilection of God for men, or a love of men for God or of men among themselves, i.e., a fraternal charity.”³² To distinguish it from *eros*, which is the word used more commonly in the ancient Greek literature for *love*, especially for passionate love among humans, *agape* or *charity* is also designated as the Christian love.³³

It is common knowledge that Christianity as a religion gives utmost importance to love. This can be discerned both in the New Testament and the writings of later authorities such as Augustine and Aquinas. A few examples from the New Testament should be sufficient to establish the primacy of love for the Christian tradition. Upon reading the New Testament, we get the sense that the distinctive mission of Jesus as a prophet in the Hebrew tradition is to prioritize love among all other commandments of God. In response to the question (posed by a member of the Pharisees sect) “which the

greatest commandment in the Law is,” Jesus says: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Mat 22: 34-40). Here the New Testament is quoting directly from the Books of Deuteronomy (6:5) and Leviticus (19:18) of the Hebrew Bible except that it replaces “mind” for “might” in the first quote.

Commenting on this passage from the New Testament, Pope Benedict XVI stresses the originality of Jesus’ response in his first Encyclical as follows: “In acknowledging the centrality of love, Christian faith has retained the core of Israel’s faith, while at the same time giving it new depth and breadth Jesus united into a single precept this commandment of love for God and the commandment of love for neighbour found in the *Book of Leviticus*.”³⁴ The Pope fails to mention, however, the most distinctive teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, which is almost non-existent in the Hebrew Bible: the commandment to love one’s enemies (Mat 5: 43-48, Luk 6: 27-36).³⁵ In this passage, Jesus truly goes beyond the teaching of the Hebrew Bible on love: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.” (Mat 5: 43-45).

The early disciples of Jesus recognized the originality of Jesus’ teaching and further expounded on the centrality of love. For St. Paul, “love is the fulfillment of the law.” (Rom 13:10). Paul defines Christian love as “as self-giving service for the benefit of others.”³⁶ Most famous is his ode to love in his epistle First Corinthians 13.³⁷ Here St. Paul puts love above prophecy, miracles, and faith, and concludes his ode by paying tribute to love as the foundation of all: “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” (1 Co 13:13). In another critical passage of the New Testament, the apostle John equates God with love: “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.” (1 Jo

4:16). All the above examples show that love is what is most distinctive about Jesus' message to humankind. As mentioned earlier, the word used for this kind of devotion in the Greek Bible is *agape*, and the later Latin rendition of *agape* (in the Vulgate Bible translated by Jerome) is *dilectio* (regard) and *caritas*, which too comes from the Greek *charis* (grace).³⁸

The centrality of love or charity in Christianity can also be observed among the leading authorities of the Christian tradition. Augustine, for instance, contrasts the virtues expounded in the pre-Christian Greek and Roman sources and find them both wanting since, according to him, there can be no true virtue without piety (i.e., the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity). Any claim of virtue which does not take God as its reference point, according to Augustine, is false. Virtue is actually identical with the love of God: "If virtue leads us to the happy life, then I would not define virtue in any other way than as the perfect love of God."³⁹ Augustine accepts the ancient correlation between happiness and *summum bonum* (the supreme good), but redefines the latter as eternal life in the hereafter (*City of God* XIX 4). Humans can find true happiness only in knowing and loving God.

Augustine defines love as "affection of the mind which aims at the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one's self and one's neighbor in subordination to God." (*De doct. christ.* 3.10.16).⁴⁰ Its opposite is selfish and exploitative love, lust or cupidity, which is "affection of the mind which aims at enjoying one's self and one's neighbor, and other corporeal things, without reference to God."⁴¹ Scripture, Augustine says, "enjoins nothing except charity, and condemns nothing except lust" (*De doct. christ.* 3.10.15). Thomas Aquinas, the greatest exponent of Christianity after Augustine, agrees with the general run of Augustine's thoughts on charity even though he allows, more than Augustine, for the possibility of attaining happiness in this world through moral and intellectual virtues acquired independent of the theological virtue of charity. Still, this form of happiness will remain incomplete without

the finishing touch of God's grace.⁴² In the Catholic tradition, perfect happiness can be attained only through the vision and love of God (*beautitudo*), and this can take place only in the afterlife. To prepare for this, however, one must conduct all his/her actions in this world for the love of God and not from any other motive.

THE DEEPER CONNECTION BETWEEN *HIMMAH* AND *CHARITY*

So what is the relationship between *himmah* in its tasawwufi sense—the “determination of the heart to incline itself entirely to God”—and *charity* in its original sense of love? To answer this question fully we still need to discuss the connection of *himmah* to “will,” on the one hand, and to the concept of love, on the other.

For Islam, as for the Christian tradition, will or volition (*irādah* in Arabic) is the single most important human faculty endowed by God. For some, it is even more important than reason because of its association with morality and freedom. This power is something that humans share with the divine, and is a truly distinctive human trait; neither beasts nor angels (with the exception of Satan) do possess it according to both the Islamic and Christian tradition. The beasts simply follow the laws of nature and the angels obey God's commands, but only human beings freely choose their deeds. Their moral freedom even elevates them above the angels; hence God's command to angels to bow before Adam. The foundation of the moral education of the youth (in both Islam and Christianity) is the proper training of this faculty of will to allow them to make the right decisions later in life. Temptation, however, is an ever present danger represented by the supernatural figure of Satan. The sincerity and purity of the human will can be marred and obstructed by all sorts of worldly temptations (fame, wealth, power, lust, greed etc.).

Himmah in the tasawwufi sense refers to the deliberate direction of human will toward God to flee from these worldly temptations. If we recall the sufi definitions of *himmah* presented above,

we may see its close affinity with will. *Himmah*, an Islamic scholar observes, “corresponds to what is usually called will or power of will.”⁴³ The following description of *himmah* by another scholar of Sufism stresses its relationship to will:

Al-himmah signifies the force of decision, the desire to rise above oneself or spiritual aspiration. Thus it is a quality of the will and not an intellectual faculty; none the less it should be noted that by anticipation spiritual will is intellectual. From the point of view of realization it is the most important and the noblest faculty of man. Man is only truly man through his will to be delivered, by his ascending tendency, pictured in his vertical posture which distinguishes him from animals.⁴⁴

The relationship between will and *himmah* is crucial to understand *himmah*'s connection to “love”, and this is true for both Islam and Christianity. Augustine clearly establishes a close link between “will” and “love” so much so that “genuine love and the ‘will’ are identical.”⁴⁵ This link can further be seen in Augustine’s major work *City of God*, where he declares that “the right will is, therefore, well-directed love, and the wrong will is ill-directed love” (XIV.7). Augustine’s use of the term *love* conveys “the sense in which agents’ particular choices and intentions express what they care *most* about, what their lives are directed toward generally and above all.”⁴⁶ This sense of love involving a deliberate and special choice is discernible in one of the Latin equivalents of *agape*, namely, *dilectio*, which literally means esteem or regard. I believe it is not a coincidence that one of the translations of *himmah* is “diligence,” which is derived from the Latin *diligere* (to love).

Himmah is connected with will, on the one hand, and to love, on the other. For Najm al-Din Kubra *himmah* is an effect of the mysterious connection between the lover and his desired object.⁴⁷ Frithjof Schuon, a great contemporary scholar of comparative religion, explicitly relates *himmah* to love in passing in his teaching on Indian spirituality: “For Shankara bhakti is what Muslims call *himmah* — spiritual fervor; for Ramanuja it is continuity or perpetuity

of contemplation; for Chaitanya it is limitless love, though this is but the means and not yet the end: the goal is *prema*, divine Love, Beatitude.⁴⁸

This connection between will, *himmah*, and love can further be seen in al-Ghazali's discussion of *niyyah* (intention or resolve) in the seventh Book of the Part IV of his *Revival of the Religious Sciences* (*Ihya Ulum al-Din*).⁴⁹ Here we see Ghazali using *niyyah* in a sense very close to *himmah*. This seventh book of *Ihya* is entitled "On Intentions, Truthfulness, and Sincerity" and follows the one entitled "On Love, Longing, Intimacy, and Contentment." In this book Ghazali discusses the theological or mystical virtues of *niyyah* (intention), *sidq* (truthfulness), and *ikhlās* (sincerity) in the same breath because these three are closely related to one another: "resolve [*niyyah*] is useless without sincerity [*ikhlās*], and sincerity [*ikhlās*] is nothing unless truthfulness [*sidq*] is connected to it and perfects it."⁵⁰ It is important also to note that Ghazali uses *niyyah* and will (*iradah*) in the same sense.⁵¹ "By intention al-Ghazali does not mean a passive thought or mere wish to do something good, but a firm determination (*'azm an-niyya wa l-himma*)"⁵²

Sincerity or *ikhlās* arises "when the intention is nearness to God, unadulterated by any worldly or selfish motive."⁵³ The virtue of *ikhlās* is instrumental to reach the highest station and virtue on the Sufi path, which is love (*masabba* or *subb*). As R. A. Nicholson notes, "the keynote of Sufism is disinterested, selfless devotion, in a word, Love."⁵⁴ Various Sufi figures from Rabiah al-Adawiyah to Jalal al-din Rumi are known for their discourses on divine love. *Mahbub* (Beloved) is the technical name used in the Sufi tradition for God. The love of God or divine love is central to the Sufi tradition as it is to the Christian tradition.

This common emphasis on divine love in both Islam and Christianity is not accidental for two reasons, one general and the other particular. The general reason is that Islam continues the Abrahamic tradition that first shaped Judaism and then flowed into Christianity. The more particular reason is the historical interaction

between Islam and Christianity: “the doctrine of divine love which emerged in the early stages of Sufism undoubtedly was reinforced by the Christian influence.”⁵⁵ Al-Ghazali, in his Book on love in the *Ihya*, even quotes the New Testament to establish the importance of love for religion: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” (Matt. 22: 35-37).

We often encounter, in the teachings on Christian charity and the Sufi *mahabbah*, repeated warnings against the temptation of worldly goods and even against expecting spiritual rewards for piety. “Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.” (Jam 4:4). “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” (1 Jo 2: 15-17). Similarly, Ghazali warns against the love of the world since it is “the head of every sin and is the incurable disease.”⁵⁶ The highest station on the journey to God in the Sufi tradition is love and “there is no path to it except by the expulsion of other than God from the heart and the severing of ties from all that is other than God—from rank and wealth and country.”⁵⁷ The difficulty of this task is obvious and the challenge to fulfill it passes through what *himmah* in the Islamic tradition and charity in the Christian tradition represent.

CONCLUDING REMARKS ON INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

This paper has attempted to accomplish two parallel goals. First, I have wanted to highlight the role of *himmah* in Gülen community and discuss its place in the Sufi tradition. Second, I have compared *himmah* to Christian charity both to examine its meaning further and to point toward the need for more engaged ways of conducting interfaith dialogue. In this concluding section, I will first sum up my observations on the first issue and then say a little bit more on the second issue of interfaith dialogue.

Himmah is a key spiritual concept in the Sufi tradition, and we witness its revival today in Gülen community. Although *himmah* in

Gülen community is definitely related to the Sufi *himmah* as Gülen's discussion makes this clear, it can be said that it is more commonly employed for practical rather than spiritual purposes.⁵⁸ One possible practical role of *himmah* is to unite and mobilize members of this community around service (*hizmet*), both to religion and nation in an altruistic way. As Gülen emphasizes, *himmah* is not restricted to giving away one's wealth but includes devoting one's knowledge, skills, strength, and deeds to the service of religion and nation. In this way, there are multiple venues for rendering service and fulfilling *himmah*. As the centerpiece of community organization, this concept may thus allow for more horizontal relationships among diverse community members of different ages, status, and occupations. It may also help to create a loose and flexible sense of identity among community members.⁵⁹

Himmah is not an exact equivalent of Christian charity. The precise Islamic equivalents would be "*mahabba*" (love) for charity as "love" and "*sadaqa*" for charity as "benevolence." Nonetheless, there are good reasons for a comparison between the two concepts. In theoretical terms, *himmah* is comparable to charity because it matches both the pre-modern sense of charity as "love" and the modern sense of "benevolence." To establish the latter is admittedly less problematic than the former. My claim for the commensurability between the two concepts in the sense of love has been based on the centrality of "will" to both Islamic and Christian traditions. *Himmah* in the Sufi tradition refers to concentrating one's will and directing it to the love of the divine. The Christian love, charity, on the other hand, must be understood as "the right will," as Augustine puts it. Interestingly enough both *himmah* and charity has undergone a similar process of semantic change. Their contemporary meanings are confined to benevolence but benevolent acts in every age and place are inspired by love even if this love is not immediately conscious.

The spiritual kinship between the two great world religions in their emphasis on divine love should come as no surprise given

their common Abrahamic origin and the centuries of give-and-take between Muslims and Christians. In comparing *himmah* to charity, this paper attempts to contribute to the ongoing interfaith dialogue initiatives between Muslims and Christians which aim at dwelling on and expanding the common ground on which both religions are built. The success of these initiatives depends on not only mutual tolerance but also sympathetic understanding of the principles and history behind each religion. To reveal the common core shared by Islam and Christianity, to which we can and must also add Judaism, we need to go beyond the historical disputes over doctrinal matters and the political rivalry between Christian and Islamic political powers through history or in the present (9/11 and post-9/11 events). All these causes have provided ample ammunition to the partisan adherents of each religion to justify their distorted judgment of the “other” religion.

In looking away from divisive matters and looking at what is most important to both religions, this paper follows the example of Gülen’s teaching on dialogue: “For interfaith dialogue to succeed, we must forget the past, ignore polemics, and focus on the common points.” He further makes a remark in the same context which is clearly directed at Muslims: “The West’s view [of Islam] has changed.” The West no longer holds to the “historical portrayal of Islam as a crude distorted version of Judaism and Christianity, and the Prophet as a fraud.”⁶⁰ This sea of change in the West, I believe, must be reciprocated among the Muslims by developing a more sympathetic understanding of not only Jesus (which already exists) but also Christianity.

Drawing attention to the urgent need to build bridges between Muslims and Christians in our age, Gülen speaks of the “The Necessity of Interfaith Dialogue,” which is the title of a paper he presented to the Parliament of World’s Religions in Cape Town, Australia in 1999. But what exactly is the end of (interfaith) dialogue for Gülen? What does he think will come out of interfaith dialogue? Gülen defines dialogue as “the coming together of two or

more people to discuss certain issues, and thus the forming of a bond between these people.” It is “an activity that has human beings at its axis.”⁶¹ Interfaith dialogue, in particular, “seeks to realize religion’s basic oneness and unity, and the universality of belief.” Looking at his other writings, it is clear that Gülen expects peace and tolerance to be the fruits of interfaith dialogue even though this talk on love and peace might easily be criticized given the great divisions that exist not only between Muslims and Christians but within Islam and Christianity.

Be that as it may, one must avoid the self-fulfilling prophecy of the clash of civilizations and try to strengthen the ties between Christians and Muslims. To do this, followers of both religions must open themselves to a sympathetic understanding of the other religion. To quote Gülen again, the need for discovering and bringing forth the commonalities among the three Abrahamic faiths is an imperative of our age: “Islam, Christianity, and Judaism all stem from the same root; all have essentially the same basic beliefs, and are nourished from the same source. Although they have lived as rival religions for centuries, the common points between them and their shared responsibility to build a happy world for all of the creatures of God make interfaith dialogue among them necessary.”⁶²

NOTES

- 1 *Hizmet* members prefer this identification to its alternative *cemaat* (community) for the negative connotations of the latter word when used in relation to a group organized around a particular leader or idea.
- 2 M. Hakan Yavuz, “The Gulen Movement: The Turkish Puritans,” in *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement*, ed. M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 26.
- 3 Mustafa Sen, “Turkish Islamist Entrepreneurs in Central Asia” in Birgit N. Schlyter, ed., *Prospects for Democracy in Central Asia* (Stockholm: Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, 2005), 259.
- 4 Hellmut Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul: Men, the World and God in the Stories of Farid al-Din Attar*, translated by John O’Kane (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2003), 319.
- 5 Mohamed Ahmed Sherif, *Ghazali’s Theory of Virtue* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1975), 182.

- 6 Fethullah Gülen, “*Himmet: Teveccüh, İnfak ve Gayret*,” 12 December 2005. Available at http://www.herkul.org/kiriktesti/index.php?article_id=2720.
- 7 William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn Al-ʿArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (New York: SUNY Press, 1989), 280.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), 192.
- 10 Gülen notes that *infaq* is not solely through wealth but also through helping those in needs of science, ideas, strength, and deeds.
- 11 The sermon was given in the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus in early 1911.
- 12 Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, “The Damascus Sermon” (Hutbe-i Şamiye), tr. from the Turkish by Şükran Vahide, (Istanbul: Sözlere Neşriyat ve Sanayi A. Ş., 1989). Available at http://www.nur.org/cn/nurcenter/nurlibrary/Risale_i_Nur_Collection_The_Damascus_Sermon_1737?action=download. Part of the original quote reads: “Çünkü bir adamın kıymeti, himmeti nisbetindedir. Kimin himmeti milleti ise, o kimse tek başıyla küçük bir millettir. . . . Kimin himmeti yalnız nefsi ise, o insan değil. Çünkü insanın fitratı medenidir.” I have modified Şükran Vahide’s translation slightly by changing the translation of the word “medeni” in the last sentence from “civilized” to “social.”
- 13 Lloyd Ridgeon, *Aziz Nasafi* (Routledge, 1999), 159.
- 14 Ibid., 160. See also R. W. J. Austin, *Ibn al-ʿArabi: The Bezels of Wisdom* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980); Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); B.A. Dar, Ch. 43 in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, Vol. II, ed. M. M. Sharif (Kempten, Germany: Allgauer Heimatverlag GmbH., 1966), 864-5.
- 15 Jean-Louis Michon and Roger Gactani, ed., *Sufism: Love and Wisdom* (World Wisdom, Inc, 2006), 145. This sense of *himmah* as spiritual power resembles another Sufi term *barakah*.
- 16 Thomas Patrick Hughes, *A Dictionary of Islam* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 1994), 175.
- 17 Souad Hakim, “The Way of *Walāya*.” Available at <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/wayofwalaya.html>.
- 18 Mustansir Mir in *Tulip in the Desert: A Selection of the Poetry of Muhammad Iqbal*, translated and edited by Mustansir Mir (Hurst & Co., 2000), 138.
- 19 Abd al-Razzaq al-Qashani, *A Glossary of Sufi Technical Terms*, trans. Nabil Safwat (London: Octagon Press, 1991), 67.
- 20 Cyril Glasse and Huston Smith, *New Encyclopedia of Islam: A Revised Edition of the Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* (Lanham, MD: Rowman Altamira, 2003), 181. See also Kabir Helminski, *The Book of Language: Exploring the Spiritual Vocabulary of Islam* (Watsonville, CA: The Book Foundation, 2006), 82.
- 21 Ridgeon, 159.
- 22 Jess Byron Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment* (Penn State Press, 1996), 253.
- 23 Ibid.

- 24 James W. Morris, in *Ibn 'Arabī: The Meccan Revelations*, ed. Michel Chodkiewicz, William Chittick and James (New York: Pir Publications Inc., 2002), 251-275.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Chittick, 265.
- 27 Henry Corbin, *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Ḥikm of Ibn Arabī*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 220. According to Corbin, *himma* can be taken as the equivalent of the Greek term *enthymesis*. This Greek word, Corbin tells us, means “meditating, conceiving, imagining, projecting, ardently desiring” or, literally, “of having (something) present in the *thymos* [the spirited part of the human soul]” (p. 222).
- 28 Hollenback, 253.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Thomas Rees, “Charity,” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915).
- 31 *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1, 2nd ed. (New York: Gale), p. 169.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 The Christian tradition often (but not always) contrasts *agape* and *eros* (or *amor* in Latin) as unselfish and selfish love, respectively. See, for instance, Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. P. S. Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953).
- 34 Pope Benedict XVI, “Deus caritas est” (December 25, 2005). Available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html
- 35 The Hebrew Bible anticipates the Christian position in the following verse: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” (Prov. 25: 21-22).
- 36 Bruce Longenecker, “Galatians,” in *The Cambridge Companion to St Paul*, ed. James D.G. Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 64-73.
- 37 See also Rom 12: 9-21.
- 38 Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson-Gale, 2005).
- 39 Quoted by Scott MacDonald, “Augustine” in *A Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jorge J. E. Gracia and Timothy N. Noone, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 157.
- 40 *St. Augustin's City of God and Christian Doctrine*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1890).
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Mark D. Jordan, “Theology and Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 241.
- 43 Dar, 86.
- 44 Titus Burckhardt, *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine* (World Wisdom, 2008).

- 45 John Rist, "Faith and Reason," in *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. Elconore Stump and Norman Kretzmann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 37.
- 46 Scott MacDonald, 158.
- 47 Ridgcon, 160.
- 48 Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts: A New Translation with Selected Letters*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (World Wisdom, 2008), 165.
- 49 The fourth and last part of *Ihya* concerns in general the matters of salvation (*munajjiyāt*).
- 50 Sherif, 115.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 Muhammad Abul Quasem, *The Ethics of Al-Ghazali* (Delmar, NY: Caravan Book, 1978), 171.
- 53 Sherif, 117.
- 54 R. A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), 231.
- 55 M. Saeed Sheikh, *Islamic Philosophy* (London: The Octagon Press, 1962), 23. See also Nicholson, 231.
- 56 William McKane, *Al-Ghazali's Book of Fear and Hope* (Leiden: Brill, 1962), 49.
- 57 Ibid., 50.
- 58 Short of a more comprehensive research on this topic, the following observations are offered tentatively.
- 59 I am grateful to Gökhan Bacik who read the paper and provided me with insightful comments, particularly on the practical purposes that himmet serve in Gülen community.
- 60 M. Fethullah Gülen, "The Necessity of Interfaith Dialogue." Paper presented to the Parliament of World's Religions in Cape Town, December 1-8, 1999. Available at <http://fethullahgulen.org/recent-articles/1053-the-necessity-of-interfaith-dialogue.html>
- 61 M. Fethullah Gülen, *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, ed. M. Encs Ergene (Somerset, NJ: The Light, 2004), 50.
- 62 Ibid., 231.