

Fighting Poverty with Kimse Yok Mu

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ABSTRACT

It is almost a century since Said Nursi called for modern believers to struggle against the “real enemies” of humankind. He identified those enemies as three: ignorance, poverty, and disunity. Today the Gülen community has taken up Nursi’s challenge and is struggling to combat ignorance through more than 600 schools in 100 countries. The community combats disunity through its many efforts at dialogue: dialogue and cultural institutes, *Iftar* dinners, trips to Turkey, etc. My paper will explore how the community, through its Kimse Yok Mu? projects, is combating poverty.

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1. THE ENEMIES OF HUMAN SOCIETIES

Almost a hundred years ago, the prominent Turkish thinker Said Nursi analyzed the situation of Muslims in the modern world and came to the conclusion that, at the deepest level, the real enemies of Muslims were not one or another group of Christians, nor even one or another civilization of nonbelievers. In fact, the true enemies of humankind were not human at all. Rather, Nursi personified humankind’s enemies as *Lord Ignorance*, *Sir Poverty*, and *Master Disunity*.¹ These three destructive forces in human society – ignorance, poverty, and disunity - threaten not only Muslims but the followers of all religions; they are thus common enemies that must be faced together.

Although Said Nursi died in 1960, his writings, in the form of a 6600-page commentary on the Qur'an named the *Risale-i Nur* (Message of Light), continue to influence millions of Muslims, especially in Turkey. One of those whose thinking was stimulated by the writings of Nursi was Fethullah Gülen. Gülen came to know the writings of Nursi in 1958, when he was about 20 years old, and he acknowledges that he reaped much benefit from studying the *Risale-i Nur*.

In fact, Gülen is sometimes accused in Turkey of being a Nurcu, that is, a follower of Said Nursi. Gülen does not deny that he learned much from reading Nursi, just as he profited from reading many other Muslim thinkers. However, he rejects his being categorized as being a disciple of Nursi in any sectarian sense. In an interview he noted:

The word Nurcu, although it was used a little by Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, is basically used by his antagonists to belittle Nursi's movement and his followers and to be able to present it as a heterodox sect. In life, everyone benefits from and is influenced by many other people, writers, poets, and scholars. In my life I have read many historians and writers from the East and West, and I've benefitted from them. Bediüzzaman Said Nursi is only one of these. I never met him. On the other hand, I've never used suffixes like -ci, -cu [meaning – "ist"] that refer to a particular group. My only goal has been to live as a believer and to surrender my spirit to God as a believer.²

Thus, while admitting the influence of Nursi on his own thinking, Gülen added his own emphases, interpretations, and directions to the original teaching of the *Risale-i Nur*. Turkish scholars suggest various ways of relating the thought and social program of Gülen to that of Nursi before him. According to Hakan Yavuz, Gülen was one of those who "reimagined" Nursi³; alluding to Gülen's appropriation of Nursi's ideas, Ihsan Yılmaz speaks of "economic, political, and educational transformations,"⁴ and Mustafa Akyol refers to "new approaches of his [Gülen's] own."⁵

One striking difference of emphasis between the directives given by the two men is where Nursi stressed *study*, Gülen puts the accent on *service*. There is no contradiction here, but the focus is shifted from an inner, spiritual transformation brought about by the study of the Risale-i Nur to a transformation of society through the efforts of a community of committed, generous agents of change.

2. FIGHTING HUMANKIND'S TRUE ENEMIES

In this light, one can understand Gülen taking seriously the triple challenge posed by Nursi early in the 20th Century and his concern to mobilize his followers to combat ignorance, poverty, and disunity. In the early years of the movement, in the 1980s, the emphasis was placed on the battle against ignorance. Much has been written about the pedagogical theory and the accomplishments of the over 600 schools and six universities founded and run by members of the Gülen community.⁶ These schools, as well as the other educational efforts of the community, such as the *Zaman* newspaper, the Samanyolu television network and the more than 35 professional and popular journals which they produce, are all evidence of the Gülen community's commitment to struggle against the pervasive phenomenon of ignorance.

Later on, in the 1990s, a second emphasis came to the fore with the establishment of Dialogue Centers and Institutes in many parts of the world. The "flagship" dialogue institute set up by the Gülen community was the "Writers and Journalists Foundation," inaugurated in Istanbul in 1994. This foundation, which has promoted interreligious encounters such as the international Abrahamic seminars in Harran/Urfa (2000) and Mardin (2004), which brought together Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars to explore together monotheism's Abrahamic roots, as well as the civil "Abant Platform" encounters to discuss issues of concern in Turkish society, became the model for local and national dialogue initiatives in many countries. Much notice has been given in recent years to the many

Dialogue Centers and Institutes around the world that are inspired and maintained by the Gülen community. There is no catalogue listing these centers, which might exceed 50 in the United States alone. These dialogue institutes are a direct attempt to fight disunity by breaking down the barriers of misunderstanding, suspicion, and half-truths that so often characterize interreligious relations.

Following upon their commitment in the 1980s to combat ignorance through education, and that in the 1990s to combat disunity through dialogue, the first decade of the new century has seen the creation of a movement to combat the third great enemy, poverty, through benevolent works of mercy. Compared to the well-documented reporting on the schools and dialogue centers run by members of the Gülen community, relatively little has been written about the struggle against poverty, perhaps the most pervasive of the enemies of modern societies identified by Said Nursi. In this paper, I will try to outline the efforts of the Gülen community to combat poverty through aid and relief efforts and their founding of *Kimse Yok Mu* as an institutionalization of this concern.⁷

3. ORIGINS OF KİMSE YOK MU

Kimse Yok Mu is a new but quickly-growing organization that has its origins in 2002 in a television program with the same name on Samanyolu TV. The television program was aimed at conscientizing the audience to the plight of “unfortunate, needy, unhappy, and hopeless people.” The title of the program, *Kimse Yok Mu*, is a Turkish phrase which means basically, “Doesn’t anybody care?” or “Isn’t there anyone out there who cares?” The television program was a success, which led to the founding of the organization that has now become the main channel of aid and relief for the Gülen community.

The organization’s original focus has been more on relief rather than poverty alleviation. They directed their attention toward supplying emergency relief and assistance to the victims of natural disasters as well as toward the victims of endemic poverty. At first,

the focus of their activities was mainly directed towards the victims of poverty in Turkey, and from there they moved to respond to international calls for help. The magnitude of the problem was daunting for a new organization addressing the issue of poverty. As Mehmet Z. Özkara, Chairman of the Kimse Yok Mu Executive Committee noted: “After we had started such social solidarity and aid activity, we saw that the dimensions of poverty in our country were beyond our imagination.”

4. KIMSE YOK MU PROJECTS IN TURKEY

Nevertheless, various programs were set up which were aimed at alleviating poverty. The “Sister Family Project” seeks to “twin” middle- and upper-income families with poorer families to help the needy families confront their economic crises, support the education of children, and reach a dignified standard of living. What is interesting about this project, which has found hundreds of sister families for those in need, is the emphasis on the personal interaction of family life; the family twinning is an effort to avoid the “faceless charity” which can fail to maintain the self-respect of the recipients of aid projects.

A second project initiated by Kimse Yok Mu is that of food aid. In June, 2004, the Istanbul Food Campaign provided various staple foods for over 600 families that had applied to the association. In the same month, over 200 packages of foodstuffs were distributed to the victims of an earthquake in Doğubeyazıt on the slopes of Mt. Ararat in eastern Anatolia. In the following year, a greater number of food packages were distributed to families in Karlıova in Bingöl province, also in eastern Anatolia, after an earthquake in midwinter of 2005. In 2006, after severe flooding struck cities in southeast Turkey such as Batman, Urfa, Mardin, Iskenderun and Diyarbakir, the equivalent of almost 2 million Euros of foodstuffs were distributed to the victims.

In August 2006, a forest fire destroyed half the village of Yaylatepe in the Cankiri district of Central Anatolia. Kimse Yok Mu helped rebuild homes and the mosque and distributed refrigerators, home furnishings, blankets, food and clothing to families who had taken refuge in tents.

In addition to the emergency relief extended to victims of natural disasters, Kimse Yok Mu set up Ramadan Tents in various neighborhoods of Istanbul and other big cities of Turkey which provided an open invitation every evening during the month of Ramadan to anyone who wanted to break their fast with an evening meal. The tents were located in those parts of the city where poor families and individuals could have easy access. Once again, as with the Sister Family program, a formula was found by which the needy and the comfortably placed would be brought together in human interaction, in this case the sharing of food at an *iftar* dinner, rather than relying on impersonal hand-outs.

During the month of Ramadan in 2007, Kimse Yok Mu fed over 1,800,000 people both in iftars and with food packages. In 2006, Ramadan tents were constructed not only in seven cities in Turkey but also in the Philippines, Indonesia, Pakistan, Lebanon and Ethiopia; by 2007, the number of fast-breaking tents reached 22 cities in Turkey and in another ten countries (Mongolia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Lebanon, Sudan, Afghanistan, Kenya, Ethiopia and the Philippines.) In the city of Denizli alone, over 4000 persons were fed daily during the month of Ramadan.

The programs of Kimse Yok Mu have an educational dimension. By means of their aid projects, in which the general population is encouraged to participate, the Kimse Yok Mu association tries to educate people that they have a religious, moral, and national duty to help concretely the victims of poverty and misfortune. In recognizing Kimse Yok Mu's efforts to feed the hungry during Ramadan, Prime Minister Erdoğan of Turkey noted, "I thank [you] for the activities you accomplished as Kimse Yok Mu Association . May God be pleased." It should be noted that although the Charter

of Kimse Yok Mu permits cooperation with governmental, non-governmental and private agencies, the association is explicitly forbidden to interfere in politics.⁸

The assistance extended to the needy is not limited to providing food. In 2005, pajamas were distributed to patients in the Bakırköy Mental Hospital in Istanbul and stoves and fuel oil were provided for the needy during the winters of 2004 and 2005. Over 1000 students in various regions of Turkey were aided with books and other educational supplies during the school year of 2006. In September, 2004, the association participated in a literacy program and cooperated with an agency created to find employment for street children. Visits to homes for the elderly, clothing drives, and assistance to the physically handicapped are among the projects undertaken by the 22 local branches of the association.

5. INTERNATIONAL AID PROJECTS

Although the Kimse Yok Mu Association began by striving to address the question of poverty in Turkey, their efforts quickly moved into the field of international aid and relief. After the underwater earthquake and resulting tsunami in the Indian Ocean that on 26 December 2006 devastated parts of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, and Thailand, and produced a death toll of over 128,000 people in Indonesia alone, Kimse Yok Mu was one of a host of international agencies that provided emergency relief and engaged in the effort at reconstruction of the region. Kimse Yok Mu undertook a campaign to raise funds for the affected regions and delivered clothing, food, and medicine to those who had taken refuge in camps, and provided chemicals to purify drinking water. The association funded repairs to houses and schools and reactivated a school destroyed by the tsunami.

After the devastating earthquake in Kashmir, Pakistan, in October 2005, Kimse Yok Mu erected three tent cities for the victims. The association rented a cargo plane to provide instant emer-

gency relief and also took responsibility for supplying the food and clothing needs for 5000 refugees for a period of six months. 29 tractor trailers with emergency aid were dispatched from Turkey to Pakistan, including the meat of over 400 steers. The association built and furnished ten prefabricated schools, each with a capacity of 350 students, and handed over these schools to Pakistan's Ministry of Education to administer.

After the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in July, 2006, Kimse Yok Mu responded with humanitarian aid for victims of the war, mainly women and children. Thirteen tractor-trailers filled with flour and dry food were sent overland from Turkey and delivered to the Jordanian Embassy to Palestine. The aid was distributed by the Palestine Red Crescent Society. Another three tractor-trailers with flour and dry food were sent directly to Lebanon, with a second convoy of ten tractor trailers filled with food following shortly thereafter.

In 2007, Kimse Yok Mu began its aid programs in Africa. Beginning with Ethiopia and Kenya, the association now assists people in Niger, Uganda, Central Africa, Cameroon, Senegal, Guinea, Congo, Burkina Faso, Chad, Togo, Ghana, Liberia, Madagascar, Benin, Mauritania and, since March 2006, a special campaign for Darfur in the Sudan. In Asia, the association has projects, in addition to those mentioned above, in Bangladesh and the Philippines. In Bangladesh, the association dispatched rescue and relief teams after the 2007 hurricane.

The most recent campaigns have been responses to the recent tragedies in Myanmar and China. Already in May, 2008, the first team of volunteers and aid supplies from Kimse Yok Mu arrived in Myanmar and were given permission to distribute emergency assistance — vegetables, rice, drinking water, and disinfectant materials - to victims of the cyclone. It was teachers in the schools run by members of the Gülen community already in Myanmar who were able to coordinate the humanitarian relief efforts.

Shortly after the volunteer effort in Myanmar, Kimse Yok Mu announced a second campaign to collect funds for victims of the earthquake in China. On 21 May 2008, the association announced

the new campaign, which was personally inaugurated with a \$15,000 contribution by Fethullah Gülen.⁹

6. LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

By 2007, aid programs administered by Kimse Yok Mu had reached 37 cities in Turkey and 42 countries around the world. Although the majority of these were in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, Kimse Yok Mu has also carried out aid and relief programs in six European countries and in Peru in South America. The organization has achieved much in the relatively short time since it was founded in 2002. I know of few organizations that have grown so quickly or accomplished so much in such a short time.

The association has already gained a niche in international aid circles. For example, publications of works on humanitarian aid published by Kimse Yok Mu will be on display at the London Book Fair to be held in London in April, 2009. The association is not afraid to try innovative methods to pursue its ends. A campaign to gather funds among Turkish youths for victims of violence in Darfur was carried out by encouraging young people to make a 5 YTL contribution by sending an SMS message through Turkey's major mobile phone operators.

As the organization looks to the future, the association is already speaking of instituting a volunteer corps of aid workers tentatively name "Kimse Yok Mu Volunteers" who will carry on aid activities in Turkey and other countries. One wonders whether, as the association continues to grow and develop, like many other agencies, it will eventually spend a greater part of its time and efforts at addressing the systemic causes of poverty, and relatively less on emergency responses of immediate assistance to those in need.

Kimse Yok Mu is an initiative inspired by the highest ideals of Islamic teaching and life. The model of the assistance given by the Helpers (Ansar) to the Emigrants (Muhajirun) during the lifetime of the prophet Muhammad roots the ideals of the association in the

experience of the earliest generations of Muslims. The Islamic Feasts have become occasions for concrete expressions of concern for the poor. Ramadan has become a focal moment for drawing the attention of Muslims to the poor. "Sacrifice 2007" sought to take the occasion of Id al-Adha, the Feast of the Sacrifice, to distribute meat to the needy in many countries. The initiative involved 1500 volunteers who slaughtered and distributed meat to the poor, Muslim and non-Muslim, in 42 countries. By Id al-Adha 2008, over one-and-a-half million people in more than 50 countries were recipients of meat packages donated and distributed by Kimse Yok Mu.¹⁰

Although Kimse Yok Mu finds its spiritual motivation in the teachings of Islam, the aid offered to the needy is not limited to Muslims. Emergency relief efforts in Myanmar, China, Peru, and Sri Lanka, and the distribution of meat packages on the occasion of Id al-Adha without distinguishing the religion of the aid recipients show that the association's concern is not limited to the needy within the Islamic *umma*.

Christians, Jews, and others will recognize many of the programs of Kimse Yok Mu as being similar – in some cases, identical – to those carried out by other philanthropic agencies of religious or secular inspiration, including other Muslim agencies such as Islamic Relief. The websites of Kimse Yok Mu and Catholic Relief Services, for example, show such close similarities that the two associations could seem to be sister organizations. This convergence should not surprise anyone, for the common inspiration of one God who cares deeply about the plight of the poor is a common element of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions. Kimse Yok Mu can be seen as the latest and very welcome expression of the followers of Abrahamic faith to put that commitment into concrete practice.

"Eid Helps Boost Unity in Turkey," *Today's Zaman*, 1 July 2008.

NOTES

- 1 Said Nursi, *Mimâzarat*, (Ott. ed.), p. 433, cited in Şükran Vahide, *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, Istanbul, 1992, p. 95.
- 2 Fethullah Gülen, cited in Lynne Emily Webb, *Fethullah Gülen: Is There More to Him than Meets the Eye?*, Paterson, N.J.: Zinnur Book, n.d., p. 96.
- 3 M. Hakan Yavuz, "Islam in the Public Square: The Case of the Nur Movement," *Turkish Islam and the Secular State* (ed. By M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito) Syracuse: Syracuse U.P., p.
- 4 Ihsan Yilmaz, "Changing Turkish-Muslim Discourses on Modernity, West and Dialogue," paper delivered at the International Association of Middle East Studies (IAMES), Berlin, 5-7 October 2000, footnote 33.
- 5 Mustafa Akyol, "What Made the Gülen Movement Possible?" in *Muslim World in Transition: Contributions of the Gülen Movement*, London: Leeds Metropolitan U.P., 2007, p. 28.
- 6 E.g., Thomas Michel, "Fethullah Gülen as Educator," *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, pp. ??
- 7 The official title in English is "Kimse Yok Mu Aid and Solidarity Association." The association website can be found at www.kimseyokmu.org.tr/en/
- 8 "Charter of Kimse Yok Mu Solidarity and Aid Association," art. 3.
- 9 "Kimse Yok mu, Cin'e de yardım eli uzatıyor," *China Turk*, <http://www.chinaturk.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=178>