



## Biography, Context, and Substance in Interplay

### 3.1 TURMOIL AS TURKISH CONTEXT

The distinctiveness of Fethullah Gülen needs to be understood within the context of a Turkish society in ferment between traditionalism and modernity. During the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire increasingly came to be referred to as “the sick man” and/or the “sick man of Europe.” In the face of the Empire’s relative economic, political, and military decline, and seeing the apparent inter-relationship between industrialisation, modernisation, and the development of the new European colonial powers, groups of people within the Ottoman Empire began to look towards “the West” for inspiration. Among these were the so-called “Young Turks” (who officially later became known as the Committee for Union and Progress, or CUP). They favoured the replacement of the absolutist imperial rule with what might now be described as a “constitutional monarchy.” Their agitation eventually led to the 1908 so-called “Young Turk Revolution” in which a form of multi-party democracy was established.

But the most far-reaching upheavals and revolutionary changes came about following the First World War (1914–1918) in which the Ottoman Empire was involved in what was ultimately the losing side of the Quadruple Alliance along with Germany, Austro-Hungary, and Bulgaria. The changes that followed were intimately connected with the life and influence of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) who, having been an officer during the First World War, led the Turkish National

Movement in the successful Turkish War of Independence (1919–1922). This was during a period in which the victorious allied powers might have colonised what was left of the Ottoman Empire. Under his leadership, the provisional Government of the Grand Assembly in Ankara was established, followed by the 24 July 1923 *Treaty of Lausanne* and the 29 October 1923 founding of the modern Republic of Turkey. His importance for the national narrative of Turkey is reflected in the title ascribed to him of Atatürk (meaning in English, “Father of the Turks”) and to this day, his image remains almost omnipresent in Turkey.

One of the early and far-reaching consequences of the foundation of the modern state of Turkey was the subsequent abolition, in 1924, of the *Caliphate* that had been associated with the Ottoman Muslim rulers. The idea of the *Caliphate* is closely connected with the political unity of the global community of Muslims (the *ummah*), which was understood as having begun with the death of Muhammad and the appointment of the first Caliph, Abu Bakr Siddiqui. Even with the emergence of the Shi’a Muslims and other groups, when Islamic unity was fractured, the term also continued to be applied to the rulers of various historical Sunni Muslim empires including, eventually, the Ottoman Empire. The abolition of the Caliphate therefore represented a major social, political, and religious rupture with the previous order which had an impact on Islam and Muslims both in Turkey itself and also worldwide which echoes down to today as can be seen in the aim of groups such as ISIL/ISIS (Islamic State in the Levant/Islamic State in Syria) to re-establish a *Caliphate*.

By contrast with that inheritance, the ideological perspectives of the form of government adopted in Republic Turkey, and often called “Kemalism,” emerged in a historical period where other forms of secular and statist ideology were in the ascendant, such as that of the Bolshevism of the Russian Revolutions of 1917 and which eventually led to the formation, in 1922, of the Soviet Union. In the case of “Kemalism,” its key principles can be summarised in what were known as its “Six Arrows.” These were: *cumhuriyetçilik* (or, Republicanism); *halkçılık* (or, Populism); *milliyetçilik* (or, Nationalism); *laiklik* (or, Secularism); *devletçilik* (or, Statism); and *devrimcilik* (or, Reformism). In the shaping of modern Turkey, these principles operated on multiple levels in the context of a society in which traditional Islam met revolutionary modernity. As the British historian Arnold Toynbee (1948) put it in a mid-twentieth century essay on “Islam, the West and the Future”:

Here, in Turkey, is a revolution which, instead of confining itself to a single plane, like our successive economic and political and aesthetic and religious revolutions in the West, has taken place on all these planes simultaneously and has thereby convulsed the whole life of the Turkish people from the heights to the depths of social experience and activity. (p. 196).

Because of Kemalism's successful resistance against western colonial and imperial powers, the history and inheritance of Turkey is, in many ways, different from the kind of disruption between Islamic traditionalism and secular modernity experienced by most other countries of Muslim majority populations and Muslim former rulers and which was the product of a more purely external and colonial imposition.

The kind of changes that occurred in connection with Kemalism in Turkey were both symbolised by and give effect in, among other things, the so-called *Hat Law* of 1925, which outlawed the wearing of the traditional fez and turban and required that male head coverings should in future be in the western style of hats, which were promoted as an expression of modern civilisation. In 1928, the Arabic script was abolished and replaced with the Turkish script. The Turkish language had been enriched with various sources including many words of Arabic and Persian origin. But its "Turkification" was an important dimension of the nationalist project of the modern Turkish state within which, as in so many other nationalist projects that found their origins in the nineteenth century, the wish for a common language became politically significant. As a by-product of that, Kurdish (which was the historical language of the many people in south-east Turkey and of a significant minority throughout the country) was for many years not recognised by Turkish governments for use in the public sphere—an issue that has continued to be contentious despite some recent developments and openings in that regard.

The overall shift from relative Ottoman traditionalism and plurality to a Turkish nationalist approach built around notions of "oneness" and of modernity has taken place not only in relation to cultural and linguistic matters, but also in relation to religion. Ironically, this is because despite the generally secularist approach of the Kemalists, a complete separation of religion and the state was not established in relation to Turkey's Muslim traditions, networks, organisations, and institutions. Rather, after a period in which there was a Government Ministry of Religious Affairs and Charitable Foundations (1920–1924), a Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyānet İşleri Başkanlığı) was established under the 1924 *Law 429*. Its

remit was to carry out and oversee work concerning the beliefs, worship, and ethics of Islam, to enlighten the public about their religion, and to administer places of worship.

In 1925, what had been the previously very important and extensive network of Sufi Orders in Turkey but which had generally been seen by Kemalists as both corrupt and as hindering the modernisation project of the new Turkish Republic, were abolished and their lodges were turned into museums. One of the by-products of these developments is that the Sunni Muslim orientation of Diyanet and, indeed, of Turkish nationalism in general, in many ways disguises the degree of religious diversity that actually exists among Turks described as Muslims, since according to some estimates perhaps up to as many as 25 per cent of the population are, in fact, Alevi or Bekhtashis—traditions which connect Sufi influences with Shi'a Muslim traditions.

With regard to the relations between believers and non-believers in Turkey, it is important to understand that the form of secularism espoused by Kemalism was not that of the Anglo-Saxon tradition largely of a pragmatic separation of religion and state. Rather, it was a more ideological and radical version that Yavuz and Esposito (Eds. 2003) call a “radical Jacobin laicism” in which secularism is treated “as above and outside politics” and in which, therefore, “secularism draws the boundaries of public reasoning” (p. xvi). One of the consequences of this approach was a series of moves to exclude religious identities and identity markers from public life and institutions. Beyond the previously mentioned *Hat Laws*, was the especially symbolic 1982 ban on women civil servants wearing headscarves which, in 1997, was though a further interpretation of the law, extended to the wearing of headscarves in universities.

Alongside the tensions between traditionalist Islam and revolutionary modernity, Turkish society has also experienced very sharp cleavages and fractures between the political Left and Right which came about partly because of its geopolitical position in the Cold War as located between the Communist “East” and the Capitalist “West,” in relation to the latter of which, despite its ruling party having historically been quite “statist” in domestic politics and economics, Turkey has been a member of NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) since 1952. Especially in the 1970s, external Cold War tensions and internal Turkish conflicts were played out on the streets of Turkish cities in violent confrontations between leftist and rightist forces. This led to several thousand deaths, until the military intervened in a coup in 1980. In some ways, this coup (and the

earlier ones in 1960 and in 1974) could be seen as a response to civil disorder of a kind that at times was verging on civil war by the armed forces in their role as historical guarantors of Turkish independence and stability. But the coup resulted in around 50 executions; the imprisonment of around a half million people; and the death of several hundred of these while in prison.

### 3.2 DISTINCTIVE SCHOLAR, TEACHER, AND INNOVATOR

It was such an overall context of religious and political turmoil that saw the emergence of a vigorous brand of what the subtitle of political scientist Sena Karasipahi's (2000) book on Muslim thinkers in modern Turkey calls "the revolt of the Islamic intellectuals." Among the public figures identified by Karasipahi in her book as belonging to this group, Gülen appears in neither the index nor the bibliography, although Nursi appears in both. The book does, however, discuss six prominent Turkish intellectuals of the 1990s, namely: Ali Bulaç, Rasim Özdenören, İsmet Özel, İhlan Kutluer, Ersin Nazif Gürdoğan, and Abdurrahman Dilipak. These she describes as "influential" and belonging to a "single coherent school with their novel understanding of Islam, which sees Islam not as an alternative but the only and single solution." (p. 1).

She argued that these Muslim public intellectuals did not seek to be apologetic about backwardness, but strongly critiqued Western civilisation, while also being distinguished by "their attempt to deconstruct traditions and conventional interpretations of Islamic discourse." (p. 2). However, perhaps somewhat ironically, she also considered them to be "products of Kemalist modernization in the post-1950 period" (p. 2) in the sense that "they owe their intellectual endowment and their ability to diffuse their ideas to a large number of people to modernity." (p. 7). To this extent, at least, she argued that "their uniqueness among other Islamist intellectuals lies in their rejection of both 'the Islamization of modernity' and the 'modernization of Islam'." (p. 7). In arguing that, she pointed out that "their arguments and thoughts are not original in comparison to those of Islamist intellectuals in other parts of the Islamic world." (Karasipahi, p. 8).

At the same time, she argued that an understanding of these figures is of great importance not only because of "the transformation they engendered in Turkish intellectual life in general" (p. 2) but also because she predicted that they would "be the role models for young

people – specifically ‘upwardly mobile’ high school and university students both in provincial towns and in big cities generally from traditional and conservative circles – in the future.” (p. 2). It was, of course, such a group of young people that were also part of Gülen’s vision for the creation of a “Golden Generation” (Sunier 2014) of pious Muslims who could also be fully active, contributing and holding responsibilities at all levels in all parts of Turkish society. As Haylamaz explained it, it was among such young people, as well as businesspeople who wanted to live an Islamically authentic life, that Gülen and his teaching became inspirational. Thus:

From the 1960s onwards Hojaefendi emerged as a very influential preacher who travelled around the country and delivered many sermons as an itinerant preacher who also took some personal initiatives to go and meet people. Many were inspired by him, and asked this question: what can I do for these higher, loftier goals that this preacher is asking or calling us to? People from different walks of life have noticed his presence and have taken a direction in their own fields and disciplines to be a part of Gülen’s work. You can see this huge diversity of people coming from various backgrounds who have been influenced, or at least inspired according to their own capacity, in different levels, and basically came forward. Some of them became more prominent and emerged in their locality, and they established especially foundations and institutions.

While it might generally be argued that one cannot properly understand the teaching or theology of any religious figure without at least some insight into their biographical, historical, and sociological context and what might be called the ‘passive’ and sometimes ‘unconscious’ effects of these, the central argument of both this book and its companion volume (Weller 2022) goes beyond such a position. Rather, it argues that specifically in the case of Gülen and Hizmet, there is an ‘active’ and at least sometimes also partially ‘conscious’ co-productive hermeneutical circle at work. This is such that one cannot understand the teaching of Gülen without understanding the context of his life, his person, and the combined effects of the practices he has inspired in others, also as these ultimately loop back and impact upon the further development of Gülen’s own teaching. Among those of whom, of course, one needs to take special interactive account, is the influence and teaching of Nursi whom Gülen himself cited when asked about influences on Gülen’s emphasis on love as being at the heart of Islam, explaining this as follows:

I have not met Said Nursi in my life, but I met some of his students, whom I thought exemplified this same centre, love centre, especially the Tahiri Mutlu. He was such a person he treated everybody, including young children, with such respect. I met him many times, but he never called me with my name. As a child, you know, it's cultural to call young people or children with their names, but he always referred to me with some kind of an adjective like "Bey", or some other adjective of respect. Hulusi Efendi was another student of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi. So these people I believe represent the spirit, the philosophy of the Prophet's life, and the centre of Islam.

Nursi's work itself, and the relationship between that; the *Nurcu* (the name given to those inspired by and following Nursi's work); and Gülen's own emergent thinking and teaching is integral to the contextual development of Gülen's teaching and practice as well as the characteristic activities of Hizmet as they developed with that teaching. As will be discussed in a more detailed way in Sect. 6.3, the story of the *Nurcu* is in many ways not only of relevance to the historical, ideational, and religious emergence of Gülen, but also to debates about Hizmet's own possible future trajectories.

Nursi is known to his direct followers and also among many other Muslims by the honorific title *Bediüzzaman*, meaning "Wonder of the Age" (Mardin 1989; Turner and Hurkuç 2008). This reflects a widespread belief among Muslims, that in each "age" a Muslim leader arises who is appropriate for that time and who has the task of renewing Islam within it. As a Muslim scholar of ethnically Kurdish background, in contrast to Muslim traditionalists who saw Islamic civilisation as in conflict with modernity, Nursi became generally known for his conviction that it was possible to unite Islam with science in the modern world. However, he did so in a way that is very different to the largely instrumentalised approach of Islamist thinkers who see secularism as the main enemy of Islam, by identifying ignorance, disunity, and poverty as the main enemies of humanity as a whole. In both of these aspects, one can identify themes that were later taken up and further developed by Gülen and Hizmet, especially in terms of concrete social initiatives.

The followers of Nursi are often referred to as a *cemaat* (or, community) and several streams developed among these, both inside and outside Turkey (Doumont 1986). Nursi himself had been deeply influenced by the Naqshibandiyya Sufi order (Weissman 2007) but never joined it, arguing that the decline of Muslims in the face of Western science and

modernity called Muslims to other priorities to which he gave expression, during the 1920s and 1930s, in the collection of writings known as the *Risale-i-Nur* (or, *Epistles of Light*). In common with the Islamists, the aim of this writing was, through engaging with the Qu’ran rather than with Muslim traditionalism, to restore the pillars of Islam, and to expound the relationship between the divine, nature, and human beings in its multiple (and not only socio-legal dimensions). Prior to Gülen, Nursi was the last leader of a *cemaat* to meet a Turkish Prime Minister when, in 1960, not long before his death, he met Prime Minister Adnan Menderes.

After Nursi’s death, those who followed his teaching were uncertain about how they might continue his legacy and a debate developed in which some advocated that one overall leader should be identified, while others argued for a consultative council to be established. A group from among the longstanding and senior followers elected Zübeyir Gündüzalp to head up the movement, on basis of an evaluation of him as being the most altruistic among them. However, this did not finally resolve the debate and, in time, a tension that has already existed during Nursi’s life came out into the open between those who had copied the *Risale* (or tractates) of Nursi by hand and those who preferred the printed version in Latin letters.

Following the 27 May 1960 coup in Turkey, the former tendency became an identifiably separate group under the leadership of Hüsrev Altınbaşak. Others proposed founding a political organisation, and yet another group, associated with Müslüm Gündüz from Elazığ, believed that the time had come to spread the Nur philosophy through an armed struggle. Gündüzalp believed that these conflicting directions could only be resolved by having a strongly centralised administration. In due course, house number 46 in Kirazlı Mescit Street in Istanbul was rented and became the central office of the *Nurcus* in which all key decisions were taken. This ranged from those on the printing of Said Nursi’s books through to the opening of new Nur circles, to the extent that sometimes the community even became known by reference to the address of its headquarters—as the Kirazlı Mescit Cemaat.

Many people currently in Hizmet acknowledge a connection with Said Nursi’s teaching as, for example, testified to by AS4 when she said that “We read Gülen’s books and Said Nursi’s books, the *Risale-i-Nur* and we read those especially – and Qur’an, of course.” However, it is also the case that historically when Gülen was in Edirne and Kırklareli between 1963 and 1966, he only rarely invoked the name of Nursi. Indeed, in many



ways, he behaved distinctively in comparison to all of the *Nurcu* groups. As interviewee Mustafa Fidan (see Acknowledgements)—an early Hizmet participant who became, and has remained close to Gülen—explained it:

I was one of the early participants of Hizmet, but I had originally met with the *Risal-i-Nur* first and foremost, and what I liked about *Risal-i-Nur* was that the style Bediüzzaman speaks and then writes is much easier, it actually facilitates for us understand the deeper concepts of theology. It is basically showing that “look this thing really makes sense.” You’re a part of this not because you are a part of a larger culture, but you believe because it makes sense.

In how Fidan explains this, one can see what was attractive to many about both Nursi and Gülen was the emergence of an Islamic praxis that was rooted in seeing the historic religious sources as living contemporary resources for personal and community life rather than primarily in terms of an historical and/or wider ‘cultural’ inheritance. As one of the products of both a quite secular familial background, but also of a Hizmet school education, Yeşilova explained this attraction and sense by reference to a dream that his father had in which:

He saw in this dream that he and my younger brother enter a mosque to pray and then somehow my younger brother goes to lead the prayer, and he can see other people unhappy seeing a young man to lead the prayer. My father turns and shouts at them, “Look he is young but he knows Islam better than you.”

Commenting on this, Yeşilova reflects that “You can tell from this, if we have to make psychoanalysis of this, many people were unhappy with the way those so-called Muslims were practising Islam and they constrained the religion to their narrow way of living, which when I was very young I did not like at all, and I was not attracted at all.” Expressing this in very modern terms concerning the existential meaning of life, Yeşilova testified that:

I later started listening to Gülen’s sermons and I thought as if he had this way back in time and he was making the images of the example of the Prophet and his friends so visual as if he was there. It would not be possible to keep your heart unmoved when you listened to his emotional sermons.

When you listen to him, you feel that there's a meaning to this life. It's not just what you repeat, what your parents used to do, it's something else. So you can see as you listen to him you know you have to do something for this life; you have to do something for people; you have to do something for God; you just cannot stay here as you are, you know.

Tekalan's descriptions of Gülen's early days in Izmir, out of which came the development of the schools by which Gülen and Hizmet became so well known, also show the roots of this kind of religion in Gülen's contextual and dialogical approach to engaging with people, combined with a focus on discernment of the religious heart of things, differentiated it from merely cultural and traditional inheritances. As Tekalan explained it:

I really liked this method. He explained very well what Islam is: What is our responsibility to God? And as a Muslim, of course, what is our responsibility to our service, to our society? What is our responsibility to the will of Allah? Unfortunately, our prayers were not regular as five times a day, as a Muslim should do regularly. But as I got more sound information about Islam, I began to consciously practice my prayers. I have continued to learn gradually what Islam is and what Islam requires, and I still do. I didn't speak Arabic, but I started to understand the Qur'an and Islam better. After the last prayer of the day, Fethullah Gülen was in the mosque, especially on Fridays, for questions from all people, especially those who could not perform his prayer regularly. People would come and write their questions, then they would direct them to Fethullah Gülen and he would answer these questions one by one.

Tekalan then went on to highlight the dialogical and inspirational momentum that emerged out of this such that:

At that time, not only in Izmir, in other cities and later in the countries where Turkish community grew, there were meetings and conferences where people asked him all kinds of questions in mosques and large conference halls. People were asking questions about the Prophet, about religion, about the hereafter, about today's responsibilities. Our friends later published these questions in the form of books and series. I personally learned a lot from these conferences. Not only young people, but the elderly, too, were coming and learning about religion, and those people were learning the right information about Islam. From 1970 to 1980, for about ten years, he explained Islamic issues not only to the university students but also to the

people from all walks of life be it in smaller gatherings, or in mosques, then in conference halls and later in homes, coffeehouses.

Summatively speaking, Özcan explained Gülen's overall methodological approach as being that, "Hojaefendi is looking at the issues from the perspective or angle of human beings, the universe, creation and God Almighty the creator and the relation of all these three elements in a sense, in a balanced way. But this balance is established again through, in the light of Qur'an and the *sunnah*." What was particularly attractive about this is, as Özcan put it, that "Hojaefendi is going to the true and authentic, mainstream resources of Islam" but also that he does this "according to the needs and the requirements of this age."

Indeed, this is of crucial significance in understanding the importance of Gülen's teaching since, as Özcan articulated it: "So, it is not only a simple understanding of religion, but its applicability, its practicability for the modern times and needs and then also appealing to and responding to the needs and the understanding of both believers and non-believers." Fully rooted in Islam, Özcan explains that Gülen also draws on wider sources and therefore: "While he is doing this he doesn't only benefit only from the Messenger of Islam only, Prophet Muhammad, but he uses all the Messengers of Islam, in a sense biblical Prophets in the past so that he can take this understanding to human beings properly." For the majority of those in Hizmet who have never personally met Gülen, it has been this kind of understanding and vision of Islam as found in his writings that came to have a formative influence on their lives. As AS1 testified, it was his reading of books by Gülen that first brought him into the movement:

No one gave me these books. I was in Istanbul staying in a dormitory, and I saw the books there. I just first read one book and I found many answers to the questions I had in my mind for many years and to which nobody had been able to give an answer to these questions. And I was shocked. This was a great motivation to me to finish. This was also how Mr. Gülen was doing his questions and answers in the mosque. It was also very attractive for me and gave me a very great motivation to finish one book in one day! – however many pages.

And, as AS1 went on to explain of this: "I read many books, sometimes one book per day. I finished nearly totally one hundred books. I was actually searching. I tried to improve myself and find my way. It was so

educating for me. It took two years. And I found a chance to know the Hizmet followers closely.”

It is the sense of this combination in Gülen’s teaching—that, while he is deeply and properly in the tradition, he also takes seriously and addresses contemporary questions, which has proved so attractive to many over the years. At the same time, interestingly and significantly, and as already to some extent explained in Sect. 2.6, nearly all of those who spoke about the impact of Gülen’s teaching also testified to what was actually a combined effect of his teaching together with their experience of some aspect of Hizmet. As AS3 elaborated this:

The first stage I liked the people; I liked to talk with them; I liked many things with them. I said that for me, by myself, they are not bad people, they are good people. I can go easily with them. They don’t hurt me or give any bad things because they are doing their job, they are working. In Turkey there are many different ways to learn religion, many movements. But some of them are not so easy to come into....But the Hizmet movement is easy to come in, and to know people is so easy, because it is everywhere in Turkey – in our classrooms, our friends: they are not so different from us.

It was only then, according to AS3, that he and his wife, AS4, went on to what he described as “the second stage.” Through these and many other similar testimonies, it can be seen that alongside the specific impact of the Hizmet schools and other educational initiatives, the reception and impact of Gülen’s teaching has been strongly shaped and impacted by its mediation also through individuals’ wider experience of the Hizmet community and its activities. At the same time, alongside those who have remotely encountered and been shaped by Gülen’s teaching via cassettes, printed publications, and more recently, digital media too, for those who have encountered him personally, it is also important to recognise the impact of the Fethullah Gülen himself, as what might be called an ‘embodied teacher.’

This was underscored by CA1 (see Acknowledgements), an anonymous close associate of Gülen who explained in relation to the effect which the person of Gülen can have that “I keep telling my friends here, that they need to introduce him to whoever you they meet, because Hojaefendi is not just for Turks, you know, take people whoever you meet to him so at least in their lifetime they can see a person who prays.” In support of this,

CAI went on to recount his own “amazing first encounter” with Gülen, in the context of which:

I could tell he was a very godly person. So, this is an unusual person. I mean you could tell it in the first experience, in the way he approached where he was to stand to prayer; the way he stood up long in prayer; the way he opened his hands, you know, I mean that was something I never saw, I had never witnessed in my life, a person in such a deep connection with God. That was amazing too, I mean you could see as he was doing this. I mean he was kind of lost, he was kind of not with us. We were standing behind him and I shouldn't have been looking to him, you know, I should be looking down, but I meant, what's going on? – this man is not with us. This doesn't mean he's intoxicated, no, but you could tell when he prays.

In expanding on this personal experience and perception, CAI also cited a South African Muslim community leader known to him and to whom a friend had given a copy of Gülen's important four-volume work on Sufism, *Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism: Emerald Hills of the Heart* (Gülen 2004a, 2004b, 2009, 2010). After reading this collection, that leader testified that “You cannot write these if you have not made that journey.” Hakan Yeşilova, when reflecting on Gülen as a person, said:

It's perhaps not possible for a person like me to fully comprehend Hojaefendi's depth of devotion to God. But for those who are there, who are having similar experience can make that appreciation much better because they are also taking a similar journey of devotion; of repentance; of asking for mercy; of asking for *ihسان*; that perfect bearing of witness to him.

Yeşilova also recounted what he referred to as another story that Gülen “repeats all the time, that *ihسان* Hadith,” and of which he said that it “explains a lot about the kind of person Hojaefendi is”:

The Prophet was sitting with his friends and this man comes in and he's wearing white clothes. Nobody has ever met him before, but he doesn't look like a traveller because his clothes were just so white and clean. He comes close to the Prophet, sits in front of him, knee to knee, and then he starts asking questions and everyone is watching. He asks him what Islam is, and the Prophet says: you bear witness to him, you pray five times, you go to *hajj*, you give charity, and fast in Ramadan. And then the man says “you have said the truth,” confirming him. Everyone is curious, “who's this guy confirming THE prophet?” And then he asks what is *iman*, what is faith? He

says it is belief in the uniqueness of God; to believe in angels; to believe in afterlife; to believe in destiny and six of those – and scriptures, not just the Qur'an that all are part of the faith too. And, again, he said you have said the truth. And then he asks what is *ihsan*, and the Prophet says *ihsan* is being conscious; to pray as if you are seeing God and being in the consciousness that even if you don't see him, that He is seeing you.

Yeşilova argues that the reason why Gülen refers to this story so frequently is because “Islamic scholars consider this as being the ultimate capacity of a human being in that awareness that we are in the presence of the divine and being in that consciousness twenty-four hours a day, all the time, not just when we go to mosque to pray.”

In the light of the testimonies about the effect of Gülen as an embodied teacher and person of prayer, one of the particularly valuable and illuminating things for the author in conducting the research that informed this book and its companion volume was the opportunity to meet and interview Gülen in a context of participant observation of Gülen himself; of some of Gülen's close associates; and a number of his students and other visitors who were present at the same time as the author over a few days in December 2017 at the Golden Generation Retreat Centre in Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania, USA, where Gülen is now based.

On entering the room where the author was due to meet Gülen for the formal interview, there was at its end a large chair where one might at first have imagined Gülen would sit. However, the author found himself being ushered to that seat as the honoured guest, with Gülen sitting in another seat to the author's right-hand side. When thanking him for making the time and space to be interviewed; explaining the particular interest of this research as being concerned with how Gülen's engagement and understanding with the deep sources of Islam have interacted with his life in terms of people, in terms of places and in terms of periods through which he has lived; and expressing the hope that the research and any publications arising from it might make some small contribution to truth, Gülen replied “That's out of your humility.”

Noting that the author had, according to custom, removed shoes, Gülen asked “Do your feet feel OK?”, with the translator at the time adding the explanatory note that Gülen was concerned that the author's feet might feel cold. In addition, on discovering that the author was sleeping in one of the ordinary dormitory rooms of a guest house in the Centre's grounds, Gülen said that the author should rather have been allocated his

own former bedroom. In relation the presentation of gifts taken by the author, which included the recitation (see Sect. 3.6 in this chapter) from the Beatitudes of Jesus, an anonymous translator for the interview with Özcan later reported of Gülen that, “He liked it, he expressed his appreciation of your kindness.”

At the time of recitation, the author explained to Gülen, “That’s my prayer as a person of faith” and that “I will do my best in my academic work in the service of truth,” to which Gülen responded that: “We wish to reciprocate you in all these goodness and good intentions and services.” Again, towards the end of the second interview, Gülen said: “I thank you out of your humility you see me as somebody deserving to be asked questions. I don’t see myself as such but I thank you for making the effort to come here all the way.” Finally, although clearly unwell, Gülen personally took the initiative to offer to take part in a second interview, this time conducted in the presence of a wider group of his students.

While in Saylorburg, the author also had opportunity join in participant observation of Gülen leading the prayers and conducting his teaching circles with his students. This observation made very clear, in the proper sense of the word, the traditional character of Gülen’s way of being and working with students, albeit that along with sitting on the floor and as well as getting out their hard copies of important texts, they also had their electronic devices. In many ways, author’s experiences during this visit echoed those reported by Rabbi Dr. Alan Brill (2018) who wrote at greater length and detail about his own visit to, and meeting with, Gülen and his students. When asked by this author what he hoped for from his students in the future, Gülen responded:

What we discuss and say throughout our discourse, it is what we expect our students here both to learn and exemplify – that is themselves first to internalise respect for all shared human values, and then to become people of heart and spirit, to have a very strong spiritual life, and also have a strong knowledge and foundation of religious disciplines, if they are students of religion, while at the same time be able to read the universe and have some level of knowledge and expertise and observation capabilities in the sciences.

In summarising this hope, and in echo of Said Nursi’s overall approach, Gülen expressed his conviction that “The integration of these three dimensions – the positive sciences, the material sciences, life of the heart and the religious disciplines... will lead humanity into a Utopia-like

atmosphere.” At the same time, Gülen’s clear conviction in this matter was balanced by a realistic assessment of human ambiguities, when he noted that, “But, of course, never in the life of humanity has a Utopia happened” since, as he put it:

There has always been people who harmed people, there has been evil deeds, devilish people. But at some point in history this negativity can be localised, so at least part of the world can be safe from this negative force, and then the remainder of the world. especially with communications technology, recognising each other, they are not after destroying each other, that they have the capability to live in harmony this idea can be disseminated, if not to 100% of the world, much of the world.

### 3.3 SOURCES, PLACES, TIMES, AND REVELATORY DYNAMICS

The importance of context in relation to an understanding of the distinctiveness of Fethullah Gülen is not only something that is being argued by this book as an external interpretive framework for his life and teaching, but also links with Gülen’s own particular approach to, and understanding of, revelation. The interplay between the teaching of this Turkish Muslim scholar and preacher, rooted in the Islamic sources noted above, and the development of the Hizmet inspired by his teaching and example as extended into diverse places and times, as can initially be seen in the original Turkish contexts of Erzerum, Edirne, and Izmir, as explored in Sects. 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4. As Ahmet Kurucan summarises, these contextual influences had significant substantive impact in the development of Gülen’s thinking and teaching:

When he moved to Edirne and Izmir, the very West of Turkey, where there is this extreme secularism and very little practice of Islam, he moves forward from orthodoxy to conservatism which is a progress, and he comes to a point where he makes this categorisation of ‘norm’ from ‘form’. So, there are the essentials of faith and there are the secondary issues – there are the essentials of belief, but it might have different forms, which are the secondary issues. That’s a huge progress.

Citing one example to do with gender relations of the influence of such contexts on the development of Gülen’s understanding and teaching, Kurucan noted that:



As example of this progress from Istanbul after Izmir until 1992, you could see the way ladies in his family were dressing, you know. Back in Erzurum and before Hojaefendi came to Edine, and Izmir and Istanbul, they were wearing those full gowns, from top to toe, and usually they wouldn't show their faces, you know. They were previously stricter with men and women relationships when they used to stay in different quarters in the house. But they could now interact more easily after Hojaefendi's coming to Izmir and Istanbul.

Then, in terms of how this contextually impacted developmental change in Gülen's understanding had a further outworking in terms of new developments in Hizmet educational practice, Özcan explained that following the early 1990s:

Up to that time we had only student girls' houses and he convinced people to establish student hostels also for the girls. He also encouraged people include other people, not from our community, who would not send their students to other schools because of so-called moral concern – for their girls to attend he convinced people in the provinces to establish girls' schools, girls' colleges, so that not only those girls, but also the other people in the community's girls would also attend. So up to the 1990s the system is very well established: houses, boarding houses or hostels, schools for the boys and the girls, and schools to prepare the students for the university entrance exams. And this became a symbol almost for the community and this became almost, in a sense, what I mentioned as progenitor movement stated to set a good example for others to follow up with their own initiatives.

Thus, while Gülen's teaching does not depart from the basic sources of the Qu'ran, it also does not see the truth or revelation as being either historically 'isolated' or 'imprisoned' in the 'frozen' historical deposit of an ideal past. Rather, as Öztürk seeks to explain it, for Gülen, revelation is something vital and present:

Revelation is not something that was revealed fourteen hundred years ago, but is something that is being revealed to each and every one of us right now, right in this moment. And how we are going to understand that message in this time and space, and actualise it in our relations with nature, with the environment, and with the rest of the human beings.

As also within Islam more classically and broadly speaking, Öztürk additionally underlines that, of fundamental importance to Gülen's

approach is the example of the Prophet Muhammad, in and through whose historical life, examples of how what is believed to be the divine revelation can be seen as having been actualised. And this not in the life only of an historical figure, but also as an exemplar for contemporary possibilities in the human reception of divine revelation. Thus:

In addition to acknowledging that the divine message is being continuously revealed, constantly to each and every one of us, it is also important to recognize the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, as the very first person who got that message and did his best to put it into practice in his society, in his time. If this is so, then how should we look into his role model so that we can understand the message today in our own conditions?

Öztürk also highlights the importance to Gülen of the early adopters of Islam, again both in terms of their historical examples, but also in terms of the methodological practice of arriving at *ijtihad*s through which “Mr. Gülen now tries to interpret the time we are living in and define how we should formulate our interactions with the rest of the society, the human being as well as the environment” and this finds connection with, and purchase in, changing historical conditions:

So, in Gülen the first thing was the Qur’an, the second is the Prophet’s traditions and his role in understanding the message. And the third, Gülen considers the first three generations, the first three centuries after the revelation of the Qur’an, as a time where there was this very quick, rapid dynamic of reinterpreting the message and where they came up with new reasonings, *ijtihad*s, to understand that message, which actually laid down a very strong foundation for us to go to refer to when we aim to understand that divine message, which period we call *salaf-e-saliheen*, the very first pious predecessors, that followed the Prophet and his Companions.

Alongside the importance of recognising the emergence of change out of the interplay between Islamic sources, contextual learning, and practice development, when reflecting on the relationship between continuity and change as manifested in Gülen’s teaching, Tekalan noted that “If you compare his speeches in Turkey twenty-five years ago with his current speeches you will almost always hear the same things.” Tekalan does not mean by this that Gülen has not changed. Rather the “same things” that Tekalan means are what might be called the ‘main things.’ So, although

Gülen has articulated various matters in different periods of his life with different voices and emphases, there is that which is constant, namely:

To know, to understand the existence of God, Allah; and secondly, the hereafter. If you can understand and explain to yourself very nicely the existence of Allah, of the God, the hereafter, and if you behave also very properly according to Holy books, the people would understand the main goal. Whether you are a doctor, or the President of the country, or the President of a University, or you are very rich, the poor are not so important. What is important is being human.

What therefore is constant for Gülen is that he brings to bear what is both a deeply religious and concurrently deeply human perspective on life in which the eternal connects with the temporal. But, along with this consistency, Tekalan says “That doesn’t mean he’s always the same. He was saying things at first, and he’s saying things now. But, over time, he also makes statements based on new developments.” Tekalan furthermore explained that by taking and building on the foundations of the four main sources of Sunni Islam—namely the Qur’an, the Hadith (Prophet’s words), *ijma* (opinions of scholars), and *qiyas* (comparison to find out similar cases in history)—“He added two more things to them. The requirements of your location and the requirements of your time,” which is reflected in the title of Albayrak’s (2011) edited book on Gülen and his teaching called, *Mastering Knowledge in Modern Times*.

In other words, what is important to recognise in all of this is that, not only is it a social fact that temporal and geographical contexts profoundly affect and shape Gülen’s interpretation and application of Islamic sources, but it is also the case that Gülen *consciously* takes these contexts into account when working with these sources. Thus, Tekalan noted that, “if an engineer or social scientist was explaining something new, he listened very carefully. He was trying to understand new developments in the world of science. That’s what he was doing, and that’s what he’s still doing now.” As an example of this, Tekalan cited that when the internet was invented Gülen underlined its importance as a development that everyone needed to know about. And it was the same with solar energy, of which Tekalan said “He told us to install solar energy at Yamanlar High School.”

As another concrete example of the significance of this kind of approach for obscurantist readings of Islamic legal manuals, Kurucan gives the

example of the handling of water and cleanliness, which plays a significant role in Islamic ritual practice:

Classical manuals for Islamic law and practice usually start with how clean is the water. Water certainly is very significant, especially in our practice, as we have to wash ourselves for our ablutions, for our prayers. So there have been volumes of discussions on the size of the well; if a rat falls into it, is it clean or not; how much water should we remove from the well; if the animal is swollen or not, you know there are pages and pages of these questions.

In contrast to such an approach, Kurucan says that when Gülen's disciples started reading these classical books, "Hojaefendi basically grinned and said, 'Look there were no devices to measure the Ph levels of the water in the past. Now, you check with that and then you're done, you don't have to consider all those measurements and spend this amount of scholarship for this'." But Kurucan acknowledges that, more broadly, despite this:

Unfortunately, still even the latest printed books on that classical scholarship start with the same discussions on how much water should go from the well, and there are many groups still spending a lot of time for that, although they are not using wells anymore in their homes; such a huge waste of time.

Kurucan also highlighted some of the wider implications of such instances for Islam, Muslims, and the world when he summarised that: "So, you know, just imagine a world where a group is reading these classical textbooks and they come out as the Taliban." In contrast, he points to "Another group, which Hojaefendi is leading, is reading the same classical books and this Hizmet is coming out." In summary, Kurucan notes "So that's a huge contrast, and that's how we should perhaps appreciate the value of how Hojaefendi considers that scholarship to be dependent on time and space. So, the conditions that were developed fourteen hundred years ago in Mecca and Baghdad certainly doesn't work here."

When Kurucan was asked about what he perceived to be at the heart of Gülen's teaching, in common with the key things already underlined by Öztürk, Kurucan commented that, "The first thing that comes to my mind in relation to what I understand of Hojaefendi and Islam is his deep connection to the Qur'an, Prophets, *sunnah* and traditions and the tradition of oral Islamic scholarship." However, in relation to these sources,

what Kurucan went on to highlight from his own experience as a student of Gülen, is an integrated and balanced approach:

The way you presented the classes to him or he organised his teachings is a proof of the way he is following that tradition from the Ottoman scholarship of touching on every discipline under Islamic sciences. He made sure, that we are knowledgeable to a certain extent at least in all those disciplines, from Sufism to *Hadith* and jurisprudence.

On this, Kurucan cited Çapan's (2011) book chapter on "Gülen's Teaching Methodology in his Private Circle" in support of his own view, which Kurucan summarised as follows:

Hojaefendi represents that old Ottoman scholarship tradition where scholars were considered not experts in a single specific field, but in all disciplines and in this regard Hojaefendi's scholarship follows in that route where we could consider him as a full expert on *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis), traditions, *kalam* (theology), *tasawwuf* (Sufism), in all those Islamic disciplines, not just an expert in one discipline.

In the year following the end of his classes with Gülen in 1988, Kurucan explained that Gülen was still "advising us to study not just one discipline or one area but all of them but like reading bit by bit every day, like three pages from *tafsir*, three pages from *kalam*, three pages from *hadith*." At the same time, Kurucan admits that "I was a preacher. I was also travelling and I was busy with other things. I was now in the world. So, I tried to do that, like, for six months but I said, look there's something wrong here, Hojaefendi thinks we are like him, which is impossible" and because Kurucan recognised that he was not *hafiz*, he explained that he opted to focus on jurisprudence.

Thus, although context and environment play a key role in the development and re-evaluation of interpretation that one sees across the periods of Gülen's teaching, such development and re-evaluation comes about because of his solid and, in many ways (properly) traditional (rather than 'traditionalist') bedrock. However, and of great importance, this needs to be understood in combination with what Kurucan highlights concerning Gülen's basic methodological approach which is that everything else should be open to question. As illustrated again from Kurucan's own experience of Gülen's pedagogical practice:

On October 23 1985, when we started our first circle with Hojaefendi, we picked up some of those classical books from the main literature of Islamic scholarship, like Bukhari, and others. He said before we started reading, I'm not asking you to adopt scepticism as a profession, but you should be sceptical with whatever deductions I may come with those readings. You should always ask the reason and the main ground for those arguments. So that's how we started off. But, certainly, we worked with the Qur'anic scripture and *hadith*; this literature has everything very clearly defined. With the exception of these sources, there is nothing else that you should not approach with scepticism.

Overall, then, Gülen's teaching would therefore very much appear to be an example of that of the tradition of a religion being reinvigorated by a questioning and contextualised encounter with what is at its heart. And it is this contextualised understanding which those inspired by Gülen translated into the concrete and historical manifestation of Hizmet initiatives. As Fidan explained it: "With Hojaefendi's teaching, we saw in Hoja an expansion of the real focus of the *Risale-i Nur* of Bediüzzaman which was focusing so much on the faith in God and that divine awareness and consciousness" and that:

In Hojaefendi's work we saw why we need to be aware of this divine, why we need to worship Him, why we need to engage in charity and good work. Without that capital, you know, quite a majority of us were very lacking before, although by name, nominally we were Muslims, was actually introduced by the teaching and example of Hoja.

Indeed, Fidan went on to emphasise how those who encountered this deeply religious awareness also developed a consciousness of the need for the actualisation of this in terms of its implications for practice, not only in ritual obligations, but also in social works. Thus, when asked about what he perceived to be at the heart of Gülen's teaching, Fidan responded from the perspective of a businessperson looking for practical expressions of genuine religion, in a way that bears repeating at some length for the insight that it gives into the impact of Gülen via the combination of both his teaching and his practice on those first inspired by him:

To make an analogy with running a business: to be able to run a business you really have to have some capital. In this case of Hizmet, the real capital for these good services is a true faith. Yes, we already knew the principles of

Islamic practice from our past. We knew how to pray, we knew how many and what sort of a ratio we should give out of our annual wealth, and we knew also that our religion was teaching this through the Prophet's words: "if your neighbour's hungry, you're not one of us"; "if you are leaving him or her hungry, you are not one of us." Yes, we knew this but who was really caring for their neighbours?

And, as Fidan continued:

Well, I mean, we're a Muslim nation back in Turkey. We are Muslims, our fathers were Muslims, our grandparents were Muslims, so we lived in that traditional Muslim life. But we also thought, in a way, that we were fulfilling our religious duties: when it is time for us to give charity, when it is time for us to go on *hajj*, then we'll be done, we'll be finished with our responsibilities. But that was, more or less, a traditional way of understanding religion.

By contrast with this, because Gülen's teaching issues into social action, Fidan concluded that:

As time passed, we saw the fruits of these services when our younger generations were really growing, living like the friends of the Prophet with their relationship with God, with the way they engaged in an honourable life with others, and we saw the fruits of it, so this is why we believed in this person.

As Gülen himself articulated it, his teaching and work has been seeking to address the problem of what he calls the "appearance of Muslimness"—in other words, that of being a Muslim in just appearance or form and not in substance, in relation to which Gülen said:

Indeed, at this time this is widespread. The so-called 'Muslim world' is devoid of truly devout individuals. One of the famous columnists in Turkey who is not known to be a very, you know, devout Muslim – nevertheless he was a believer, so he expressed his view that many of the pilgrims, Muslim pilgrims, don't appear to be really sincere and devout, as if they are performing simply as an empty ritual. Indeed, that is the picture that is put forward by many Muslims, unfortunately.

Thus, as Fidan put it: "What I believe is the most influential thing in Gülen's thought is the fact that he lives up to that ideal forms of living that has been described in the scriptures. He lives the Qur'an that he's

teaching. He lives that out. He acts the way he teaches.” And as Öztürk noted, “If we take a look at where Mr. Gülen started in that remote part of Turkey, in that village in Erzurum, and compare it where he has arrived, we can see the results this interaction can produce” in relation to the questions of the time for Muslims as articulated by Öztürk in terms of: “1. How do we live under the conditions of this worldly life? 2. How can we aspire to become ‘perfect human beings’ within the conditions of the time and space in which we are living? 3. And how can we have influence on the rest of the world?”

It is in his willingness to go beyond the limitations imposed by inherited taboos as further explored in Sects. 3.4, 3.5, and 3.6) that makes Gülen such an interestingly creative Islamic figure who does not conform to expected stereotypes. By contrast, as Kurucan emphasises it, “I mean what you would expect from a normal *imam* or preacher in Turkey and in the rest of the ‘Muslim world’ is to curse Israel, to curse America, to curse Europe, that’s what you would expect because of the Crusader mentality.” However, not only does Gülen not conform to such stereotypes, but as Kurucan puts it: “the kind of the human being Gülen is idealising in his own way” is one who, “accepting his own natural physical capacity and weaknesses, yet has this trajectory that goes beyond that and who does not imprison himself within those boundaries.” In the course of this overall biographical and pedagogical trajectory, Ergene underlines the importance of realising that:

Hojaefendi has taken a lot of risks. Yet, this has not been fully credited neither in the Islamic world nor in the West. Decades ago when he said that he cried for the children of Israel because of those suicide bombers, he was excommunicated and cursed by Muslims. But he was actually saying something from the very basis of religion: that Islam is not allowing you to kill people in that way. Islam does not deny the reality of war; it is a part of human condition, but it brought rules to war. What Gülen was saying, as an *imam*, as a preacher, was referring Muslims back to those essential principles of Islam that you don’t have the right, whatever the conditions may be, to kill innocent people. But he was excommunicated.

Succinctly summarising the impact of Gülen’s teaching and practice, as Keleş put it, Gülen “broke a lot of taboos, you’ve got to think about this” which Sects. 3.3, 3.4, and 3.5 of this chapter now seek to highlight and explore in relation to key secular-political, national-cultural, and religious boundary taboos.



### 3.4 OVERCOMING SECULAR-POLITICAL TABOOS

It is arguable that Gülen's particular understanding of Islam in engagement with both rich Islamic tradition and contemporary realities could probably only have originally emerged in a Turkish context. This is because one of the things that is contextually distinctive of Turkey as a majority Muslim context as outlined in the first section of this chapter is its inheritance of a particular form of secularism alongside deep and strong traditions of Islam, combined with a particular flavour arising from the Ottoman inheritance as enriched by a number of Sufi-related traditions.

By contrast with this, in most other parts of the majority 'Muslim World,' the broader contextual shaping of the engagement between the religious and secular was characterised by the importation of the latter along with colonialism and imperialism. This was not, however, the case in Turkish history where, if it would be in any way correct to speak of colonisation it would be in terms of what might be called 'partially indigenised secularism' and the political parties associated with it. At the same time, as briefly discussed in the second section of this chapter, some have taken a stance of advocating for what one might call an integral 'Islamist' alternative.

In the case of Gülen and of Hizmet as it emerged from his teaching, they have had to position themselves with reference to the secular, Ottoman and Sufi heritages of Turkish public life, and the related challenge of the secular-political, national-cultural, and religious diversity taboos in relation to which Ergene has said that "Gülen's nature was always to go beyond the limits." Within this, with regard to engagement with "Western Enlightenment thinking and the challenges of the secular," as Ergene notes:

In *madrasah* when Hojaefendi was reading books from other disciplines, his own scholars, his own teachers, actually, they did not accept him reading them. "How come you go beyond the literature available here?" So, you see, on the one hand, he had that search; and on the other hand, there was this very deeply constrained understanding of the time. In the Middle East, if you are trained in a *madrasah* there is no pathway or gateway to anything like western literature. But you see this young man, Hojaefendi, going beyond, wherever he got them, wherever he found them, he was reading this western philosophy, literature, and classics, all of them, he finished them when he was very young.

But both Gülen and Hizmet engaged not only with western philosophical thinking, but also with the concrete impact of aspects of this as embodied in the powerful secular current created in Turkey as mediated also through the historic role of the military as guardians of the Kemalist secular order and also of political parties that were supportive of this. The outworking of such engagement can be seen clearly in the work of the Journalists and Writers' Foundation, established in 1994, of which Fethullah Gülen was the Honorary President and especially in the work of the work of its so-called Abant Platform (Weller 2022, Sect. 2.3).

The early meetings of the Platform, for example, dealt with such challenging topics as "Islam and Secularism" and "Pluralism and Social Reconciliation." From 2006 onwards, the Academic Co-Ordinator of the Abant Platform was Professor Dr. Mete Tunçay of Bilgi University—who referred to himself as, "a person who believes in agnosticism in religion." This approach to engaging with the secular also embodied a way of steering a course in relation to the political realm that was, on the one hand, different to that of the political 'Islamists' but also different to that of Nursi's broader identification of politics as ultimately being to do with the devil.

Giving a flavour of the times in which Gülen originally emerged as a preacher and leader living and working in Izmir, as Özcan put it from his perspective, Marxist-Leninists and other leftists "were rampant and were causing havoc at the universities and were preventing people from even attending the universities." In this context, Özcan explained in relation to Gülen's work with university students "Some people were criticising him that, you know, you cannot go much further with this bunch of students," but that:

He was consistent in all his efforts and when even these students and the other students were having this chaos and skirmishes at the universities, he always convinced people that this reactionary way of acting will not be the solution for Turkey and the students. So, he stood at the right place. He always preserved that status and standing, and he always convinced people that they should be constructive, constructively thinking and acting, rather than being reactionary. And he didn't, he was not against any group, any race, any ethnicity. He didn't make a fuss about all this, but he directed all his efforts and teachings and lectures and lectures and convincing arguments to the need for appropriate education.

Nevertheless, among the various criticisms of Gülen, a more politically inflected criticism is that, especially in his earlier life, he was aligned with the political right. Indeed, according to Nurettin Veren—who knew Gülen since his sermons in Kestanepazarı Mosque in Izmir in 1988 and was one of original 12 people who founded the Akyazılı Foundation—Gülen stands accused of working for the USA’s Central Intelligence Agency in the Cold War struggle against Communism and in the interests of the USA. As noted in Sect. 1.3 where reference is made to Koç’s identification of various tropes that have been deployed to criticise Gülen, at least in relation the matter of US interests this is, in many ways, a self-contradictory trope when used alongside that Gülen being an Islamist ‘wolf in sheep’s clothing.’

Overall, according to those who at that time were closely associated with Gülen and have remained so since, the reality was more complex. According to Özcan, in Izmir “At that time we said he was not against any ideological group or other things,” although as a religious leader he was perhaps unsurprisingly critical of the philosophical, ontological, and epistemological stance of atheistic materialism. Thus, as Özcan recounted, while Gülen was in Erzurum “there was an anti-Communist newly established organization and he was invited there to give some kind of moral lectures over that, not political.” In relation to this, a close associate of Gülen, Muhammad Çetin (see Acknowledgements), further elaborated, as follows:

I have asked him if he became a part of this thing, and he said, no they just asked me to give moral lectures, and I only lectured once or twice he said. This is clarification by himself, so this is directly from Gülen. He was not constantly part of them. Among their activities there is this moral teaching and in that one he talked about Rumi, and his love of God and how he deals with the people and embraces all people, that sort of all-embracing love – the issues – he didn’t go into the political issues... Thus, Hojaefendi said at that time that the, in a sense struggle against Communism or such trends could be only through faith, along with reading the modern times properly so that faith and the requirements of the modern times, if they are given to people, then they will not need such ideologies to make any progress for themselves or their country. So, faith along with reading the realities of the modern times and coming with a synthesis in a sense – faith and modern remedies.

Gülen's apparent stances in relation to the role of the military in Turkish society have also been a focus of criticism. This has been particularly so on the part of leftists in Turkey who, despite the suffering also at various times of Islamists and Nationalists at the hands of the military, have arguably disproportionately experienced this. From an analysis of Gülen's writings and statements in the period concerned, it would seem not be inaccurate to see Gülen as having had a general tendency towards the right of politics than to the left, primarily on the basis of his being at odds with the ideological atheism of many Marxists, but also because of his strong sense of both Ottoman and national inheritance in which Sunni Islam has played such a strong role. This combination, in turn, made him not unsympathetic to the so-called "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis" that was propagated by the military rulers in the 1980s to counter both Islamism and leftist politics.

Nevertheless, it is also the case that Gülen also has a history of suffering at the hands of the military. Thus, in the context of the 12 March 1971 coup, when Gülen was in Izmir, he was arrested and held with a large group of other people at Bademli Military Prison and charged with belonging to the *Nurcu* group. A number of those imprisoned with him acknowledged this and defended their position with some being acquitted while others were given relatively short sentences. Gülen, however, did not admit to being a *Nurcu* but, on the basis of the allegation that he was involved in an attempt to change the secular nature of the State, on 20 September 1972, he was (without legal representation) sentenced by the Izmir Martial Law Military Court to three years imprisonment and disbarment from acting as a civil servant, which meant he could no longer act as an *imam*. In practice, the court sent him to one year's house arrest in Sinop, on the Black Sea and when the guilty verdict was later confirmed by the Military Court of Appeals (9th Division), although the original punishment was judged to have been too harsh. Thus, when in 1974, an amnesty was announced under Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit, Gülen was released.

As previously noted in Sect. 2.1, the English translation of the title of an early Turkish biographical source (Erdoğan 1995) for the biographical details of much of Gülen's early life is *My Small World*. Prison is, in many ways, the smallest world one can experience. Here, Gülen also encountered people of various backgrounds and had opportunity to evaluate at least some of his previous assumptions. As Öztürk explained, "Turkey has this history of military intervention that took place every ten years. When

the military intervened they would arrest people both from the right and the left. Gülen was in jail for about five months, but he had the chance to live side by side with ....those who were from leftist groups.” In commenting on this, one of the anonymous translators of the interview intervened to note that Gülen has a saying that “you know people better when you are travelling, when you are eating together,” but also even more so that “you know people better when you are in prison.” As a result of this experience, despite coming from a background that was far removed from an ideologically atheist Marxism, Gülen positively evaluated some leftists, although Öztürk also noted of Gülen at the time that:

He also had the opportunity to observe what those extreme leftists would do if they really were to come to power in the country. So, he also sets his measures in his relationship with them. I remember that he repeatedly said that his experience with the leftists there, where Hojaefendi was critical of the ideology or an idea of Marx, but one of those leftists was offended and said, “do you want me to start with your God and with your Prophet?” And then he said he realised this was not the way to go. “I don’t want anyone to curse my Prophet, so I’d better stay quiet.”

At the same time, Gülen also had some closer experience with students of Nursi who were in prison too, in relation to which Öztürk summarised of Gülen that “He was able to see them much more closely and how they reacted to conditions more difficult than come in civil life” and that, as a consequence of this, “he saw from that spectrum or window how different some students of Nursi were than Nursi himself. Then he realises that’s not a long-term relationship he was going to build on with them because they were differing in many ways from his ideals.”

By the time of the next military coup on 12 September 1980, a seeming contradiction emerged. On the one hand, Gülen wrote referring to the anarchy and chaos of the times in terms of soldiers coming to the rescue. As Gülen later put it:

Some people were trying to reach a goal by killing others. Everybody was a terrorist. The people on that side were terrorists; the people on this side were terrorists. But, everybody was labeling the same action differently. One person would say, “I am doing this in the name of Islam.” Another would say, “I am doing it for my land and people.” A third would say, “I am fighting against capitalism and exploitation.” These all were just words. The Qur’an talks about such “labels.” They are things of no value. But people

just kept on killing. Everyone was killing in the name of an ideal. (Gülen 2004c, 189)

At the same time, during this period posters also came out showing Gülen as a ‘wanted person,’ during which time he travelled around in Anatolia continuing his work and trying to evade arrest. On 12 January 1986, he was finally detained in Burdur, although after only one night in police custody, Prime Minister Turgut Özal—who was broadly sympathetic to Millî Görüş, but also to the ideas of Gülen—intervened and Gülen was taken to Izmir where he was released.

When it came to the 28 February 1997 postmodern coup, Gülen appeared on television and the following day, his words that “the government should go” made the headlines in all the newspapers. This was on the basis that they were taken as being supportive of the position taken by the National Security Council. However, in interpreting both this and his earlier references to soldiers coming to the rescue, it is important to bear in mind that for an Islamic scholar such as Gülen, the dangers and threats that come from an apparent state of anarchy are generally evaluated as being more problematic than those associated with authoritarian and military rule, however problematic the latter might be.

With regard to the relationship between Gülen’s own personal predispositions and those of the movement, Keleş commented that it is clear that “This is a social movement. Gülen doesn’t need to issue a memo to everyone you know. It becomes clear where affinities lie: in the movement people, it’s clear that there is no force on people to vote in a certain way.” With regard to individual political figures, Gülen actively connected at one time or another with leaders from across a wide spectrum, including Prime Ministers ranging through Tansu Çiller (True Path Party); Bülent Ecevit (Democratic Left Party); Necmettin Erbakan (Welfare Party); and Mesut Yılmaz (Motherland Party), and in relation to individual politicians, Keleş noted that:

It’s also clear that Gülen was more amiable to one politician over another. For example, the leader of the left-wing party, Bülent Ecevit. Bülent Ecevit was actually very supportive of Gülen, and at an intellectual level there was a confluence between the two. And Demirel less so, perhaps, than the two people I have mentioned, Gülen was also in communication with him, and Demirel, I think, was also supportive of the schools in Central Asia and so on.

Until the rise of the AKP, Keleş argues that Gülen and the movement “took a more measured approach” to any alignment with other movements and/or political parties, albeit significantly, as added as a footnote from Keleş—“with the exception of an antagonism towards the political Islam project.” With the rise of the AKP, however, according to Muhammad Çetin who, in 2017, counted and checked photos of the meetings that took place in the Golden Generation Retreat Centre with Turkish politicians, as many as “Twenty-nine Ministers including Tayyip Erdoğan and the President Gul, and ninety-two Members of Parliament from the AKP alone came over to this country and visited Hojaefendi,” although it was also noted that Erdoğan’s visit was made before he became Prime Minister.

Nevertheless, Keleş underlined that the existence of such visits should carefully be distinguished from the question, as Keleş put it, of “supporting a political party in the way the movement subsequently did,” when many within Hizmet did move into a much closer alignment with the AKP (Weller 2022, Sects. 4.1 and 4.2). With regard to the later and more direct relationship that developed between Gülen and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and which some have presented as originally having been of the nature of a close personal alliance, Keleş recounts that by 2010, when he was getting ready in a UK seminar to say that Hizmet and the AKP are not ideologically aligned, someone from the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s Turkey desk said to him “We believe that Erdoğan sees Gülen as a challenge and threat.” Keleş furthermore suggests that, even at this time, Gülen’s view of this was much more nuanced than many have suggested, explaining that “I believe that Gülen’s view of this was: ‘Is this long-lasting? Is this sincere?’ And I think he had his doubts from the very beginning.” In connection with how Fethuallah Gülen’s doubts grew, Keleş refers to a letter sent, in 2006, by Gülen to Erdoğan, of which Keleş says:

Gülen mulled over it for a long time. One of Gülen’s close students showed me a copy of the letter. Gülen is obviously aware of the ongoing profiling in the state, against all category of people, including those sympathetic to the movement. This continues during the time of the early Erdoğan government as well. I suspect Gülen was writing to him about this, although he doesn’t specifically say in his letter. In that letter, respectful though he is, he says something along the lines of, if they are forcing you to do this, either leave it or remain true to yourself, do not allow them to force you to change. But then he relates this dream that two different Hizmet people had allegedly seen – they had the same dream apparently. And it’s a derogatory

dream, in the sense that they see Erdoğan entering a building with a group of others. Among them, Erdoğan is the only ‘ordinary’ looking one. The others have scary and somewhat ‘abnormal’ features. On exit however, Erdoğan has morphed to look like them. This letter was delivered to Erdoğan in 2006.

Overall, then, as with many Sufi figures in Islamic history, Gülen’s relationships with the governing ‘powers-that-be’ have been varied, with him experiencing at various times in his life being in the public eye and celebrated, while at other times needing to be ‘on the run’ and/or being locked away in prison.

### 3.5 OVERCOMING NATIONAL-CULTURAL TABOOS

Sunier (2014) argues that what has been produced by Gülen in interaction with those inspired by him is what he calls, in his article of that title, a “Cosmopolitan Theology.” If Sunier’s evaluation is correct, then one should not underestimate how substantial a development this is. This is not least because, for example, as interviewee Termijón Termizoda (normally known as Temir) Naziri (see Acknowledgements) from Spain and a Tadjik by origin highlighted, “I can say that every Turk is very nationalistic by default, I can say that. And this is the product of, I think, if it is before I don’t know, but at least it is the product of the Republic of Turkey.” In this, Naziri was alluding to the foundational ideology of Turkey as a nationalistic unity—one religion, one language, one ethnicity, and of which Naziri says “They have managed to put it in every piece of the society, no matter which background, they really do have this, OK.” Indeed, in important ways such identity also played a historically significant role in the emergence and spread of Hizmet itself, not least into the culturally resonant Turkic regions of the former Soviet Union.

Importantly, if there is at least some truth in Naziri’s evaluation in relation to the nationalistic tendencies of Turkish people in general then such an evaluation at the least implicitly raises the question of how far this might also have applied and/or still applies to Gülen himself. And, indeed, such a question was anticipated by Naziri who, after making his clear statement about the widespread influence of nationalism on Turks, went on to say of Gülen’s engagement with his own Turkish heritage “And by the way, I suppose that Fethullah Gülen used this positively, positively”



because “It was Turkish reality, the reality of Turkey, you know, the interlocutor, so you have to use some code, some expressions etc.”

Indeed, and especially but not exclusively in his early teaching, Gülen used a lot of both Turkish and Ottoman referents alongside those of Anatolian Sufism. Of course, a love of a country and of its heritage which Gülen clearly demonstrates should be carefully distinguished from a more populist or ideological form of nationalism, and Gülen’s role as a national-cultural taboo-breaker can perhaps be illustrated by reference to his stances in relation to Turkish membership of the European Union; the positions that he took in relation to the MV Mavi Marmara incident with Israel; and finally the positions he has increasingly been taking in relation to matters of Turkish and Armenian history and present-day relations, with each of these being explored in the remaining section of this chapter.

It was in relation to the debate around Turkey’s possible future full membership of the European Union that Gülen revealed himself more strongly and clearly as a breaker of national/cultural boundary taboos. In the early years of the AKP government, the debate about Turkish membership of the EU became stronger and more insistent, both inside Turkey itself and within the EU itself. Such debates have tended to act as a microcosm for a wider range of key issues, both within Turkey and beyond, concerning the nature of the appropriate relationships between economics and politics, religions and cultures, and states and societies. While some EU member states have supported eventual Turkish accession, others have argued that the cultural and religious differences mean that full accession is not appropriate, including on religio-cultural grounds. In Turkey itself, some supporters of EU membership have seen it as a major economic opportunity for Turkey: while others have seen it as a means through which to further development and entrench human rights and civil society over and against the continued shadow cast by Turkey’s history of military coups; and still others have opposed membership on either nationalist and/or religious grounds.

Overall, the country’s predominantly Muslim population; coupled with the strongly secular heritage of its public life over the past century; its geopolitical location at the crossroads between the predominantly ‘Christendom’ Europe, the Eurasian landmass of newly independent countries of the former Soviet Union, and the predominantly ‘Islamic’ Arab world means that the issues clustered around this debate are of great importance for the future of both Turkey itself and of the EU and, in many ways, Gülen contributed to a climate in which Turkish membership

of the EU could become more thinkable, both among Turkish Muslims and in the wider Europe.

Indeed, as already explored in relation to the taboo of the secular, Gülen's more general teaching and perspectives had arguably effected a shift in some of the debate's preconceived frameworks, suggesting that Hizmet might have been able to play a helpful role in the internal and external civil society dialogue that would be a necessary part of any EU enlargement to include Turkey. In contrast to the 'clash of civilizations' approach espoused either by secular or Christian new 'cold warriors' or by contemporary Islamists, Gülen has argued the positive case that Turkey could be a bridge across Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East and, specifically, supported the aim of Turkey's accession to the EU (Gülen 1994; Weller 2013). However, as time went on, the AKP began to pivot away from EU and towards the idea of Turkey re-establishing a strategic regional focus and role, and Hizmet's ability to act in the way that it had previously done within such debates, came to an abrupt end with July 2016 and its aftermath. This resulted, on the one hand, in the complete dismantling of Hizmet's infrastructure and capacity within the country and, on the other, while formally remaining a member of NATO, in the Turkish government's new foreign policy orientation towards cultivating relationships with Iran and the Russian Federation.

Another major indicator of Gülen's readiness to be a national-cultural taboo-breaker—as well as of how Erdoğan and the AKP were increasingly pivoting into directions divergent from those of Hizmet—was the so-called MV Mavi Marmara incident (Weller 2022, Sect. 4.3), and of which İsmail Sezgin (2014) said that:

In my opinion, this incident provides one of the most important pieces of evidence that show the difference between the 'political Islamist perspective' in Turkey and the 'civil Islam' that the Hizmet movement seems to represent. Political Islamism strongly advocated a military response, while the civil Islam representatives were a bit more cautious before they reacted. Gülen prefers to stay away from politics, while political Islamism willingly champions a political cause even in the guise of charity.

In many ways Sezgin's analysis of the situation is also reflected in the opening chapter—"Responsibility in Practice: Testing the Blockade"—of Simon Robinson's (2017) book that discusses Gülen's approach to ethical

responsibility within the wider context of Islamic thought and which says of Gülen in relation to this that:

Here was a Muslim thinker who seemed to be supporting Israel, and certainly wasn't supporting that were perceived by many to be the liberating efforts of a largely Muslim non-governmental organisation (NGO). This meant that for others, inside and outside the Hizmet movement, his message was surprising or even shocking. The case serves to introduce a person who is hard to categorize. (pp. 10–11).

To support his argument, Sezgin identifies a series of what he calls “some of the principles that Gülen and the Hizmet movement follow.” First of all, integrity: Gülen situated his response in the same advice he had been giving on methods to the Hizmet-inspired relief organisation, *Kimse Yok Mu* (Weller 2022, Sect. 2.4), which was also delivering aid to people in Gaza as well as other parts of the world. Second, the “positive contribution” (*musbet hareket*) principle: in Gülen's evaluation, the Gaza flotilla operation seemed to be aimed more at creating awareness of the blockade and getting it lifted would not “lead to fruitful matters.” And, indeed, instead of aid, it actually resulted in nine additional direct victims, injuries to many indirect victims, as well as new hostility between Turkey and Israel. In relation to this, Gülen argued that nobody has a right to perform an act of “heroism” (*kahramanlık*) at the expense of creating further troubles for others. Fourth, non-political activism: Gülen believes that virtuous actions should be, ideally, carried out for the right reasons using the right methods.

Fifth, the law of the land: that people should try to be respectful of the law of the land and, when they do not agree with the law and are pursuing their rights, they should use democratic, peaceful, and non-violent methods to change it without oppressing other people. Sixth, respect for the ‘other’: responsible people should be looking for ways to achieve our aims that do not impose force on another but instead show respect for all people, their identity, and their beliefs, especially when dealing with people with whom we do not agree. Seventh, balance of action and outcomes: and within that the importance, in our moral responsibility, of distinguishing struggle and achievement, in the sense that our main responsibility is for the way in which we work to achieve moral goals rather than for the outcomes. Eighth, legitimate goals with legitimate means: there is an important inter-relationship between these. Ninth, responsibility of action

and outcomes: Gülen argues that the moral accountability of a person may even include unintended outcomes of their actions, quoting an *ayah* in the Qur'an (*Surah Az-Zumar*, 39: 47), which states that people will be confronted with things that they had not taken into account.

On the basis of having examined the applicability to the MV Mavi Marmara incident of these identified principles, Sezgin argues that this shows how, if Gülen's response to the incident had been any different than it was then it "would have contradicted the main principles of Hizmet." Therefore, in taking the stance that he did, "Although these comments were not welcomed by the political authority," and despite the fact that Gülen may "have gained some public support in the short term," in the longer term, "He would have dismissed his own principles and would lose his ethical standards."

A final example of national-cultural taboo-breaking on the part of Gülen, but also one that underlines how the wider experience of Hizmet has itself contributed to change and development in Gülen's own thinking and previous stances, concerns the place of the Armenians in Turkey's self-understanding. In relation to what happened to the Armenian people in the former Ottoman Empire during 1915–1916 and also during the 1920 war between the then new Turkish Republic and Armenia, the Turkish state, and the vast majority of Turkish people have, over many decades, been in a state of denial of the nature and degree of what occurred. As summarised by Keleş, also Gülen's original view was of what happened was that "it wasn't necessarily a genocide."

However, following a challenge based on historicity coming from Hizmet intellectuals involved in the media and in academia who, as recounted by Keleş, said "Hojaefendi, you know, it wasn't that, you are mistaken, your reading on such and such is historically flawed," Gülen wrote an article for publication within which not only did he acknowledge the historic Armenian experience, but he also argued that "Armenians should be paid...reparations, and they should be apologised to." In relation to this, Keleş recounts that "Unfortunately *The Financial Times* at the time didn't publish it" because, apparently, and somewhat extraordinarily, it felt that "it was not newsworthy, although it was newsworthy in a Turkish context." Nevertheless, as Keleş notes, this remains an important example of how, when challenged, Gülen can and does change his views, even when such views might be deeply embedded in his culturally inherited perspective "especially if it relates to the movement which is so important to him" that "you have to be able to go at it and tell him that."

Especially through this example, one can discern an interactivity of development between Gülen and many in Hizmet, and in relation to this there are an increasing number of reports and examples of how the experiences of Hizmet people in terms of their own persecution and exile has been feeding into a re-evaluation of how to understand and describe such profoundly difficult and sensitive issues. Having themselves reflectively learned from Hizmet's own experience of itself having become a persecuted, shocked, and traumatised group, increasing numbers of Hizmet people are now able to see how such things could have happened to others in a way that they had not previously perceived, nor even have had a readiness to consider the extent to which an exclusive and defensive form of learned Turkish nationalism might have clouded the necessary historical honesty, analytical clarity, and human empathy required for the development of sufficient civic courage to question and challenge otherwise socially dominant perspectives.

For example, on the other side of the events of July 2016, Tekalan reflected on how much he had learned in this regard from his own experience of becoming 'de-centred' from Turkey: "Of course, it's a book in itself" and "I've learned a lot from this process" explaining that this is because "When I was in Turkey, the way Syrian people were crossing the Mediterranean made me cry. I'm in the same situation now. I'd also like to say that in the process, I've learned that it's very important to be human. Regardless of colour, tongue, thinking."

In fact, one of the remarkable things that has come out of the movement of Hizmet and other asylum-seekers from Turkey is, as Tekalan says, "When they crossed into Greece, the Greeks asked them, 'Welcome, what do you need?' There are a lot of examples of that. Not only the Greeks but also the Armenians behaved the same way. They treated those who had to leave Turkey just like their relatives." Further illustrating the revised thinking that this trauma has brought about for many Hizmet people, Tekalan says "We were always told that Greek and Armenian people were enemies of Turkey and that those countries were very dangerous countries." However, significantly, even with reference to the relatively distant past, Tekalan testifies that "I remember Fethullah Gülen said about twenty-five years ago: 'Why are we made enemies with each other? We're from the same geography. Maybe we come from the same background'."

### 3.6 OVERCOMING RELIGIOUS BOUNDARY TABOOS

In relation to religious boundary taboos, it is the case that those which exist within a broad religious tradition and related groups can sometimes be stronger and deeper than those which concern people of completely different religious traditions. In this connection, it is important to understand that Gülen has also been a taboo-breaker within Islam and the Muslim community itself. With reference to the Muslim community itself, Keleş says of Gülen that “He is actually telling us, as Nursi did, he is saying to us, don’t be defined by religious form and religious ritual and these types of outward symbols. Rather, focus on what the meaning is.” As examples of this, Keleş highlighted not only that “Gülen broke the taboo of mosques” but also that on shaking hands with people from the opposite sex. Furthermore, Keleş highlighted that:

He does a sermon in the 1980s about the musical sound of the Qur’an and, you know, he does it by going up into the pulpit and playing the Qur’an audio from a tape player, and putting his microphone next to it, and stopping it and rewinding it, and talking to the congregation about the musical melodies of the Qur’anic recitation- I mean even the word music and Qur’an side by side is a problem! I mean, ten years later Turkey would debate whether the *Azhan*, which is not the Qur’an, could be read from a microphone – ten years later!

As noted in the previous section on Gülen’s relationship with national-cultural taboos, in relation to religious traditions other than the predominant Sunni Islam, Turkey has historically been a context in which the reality of the social diversity of religion has usually been suppressed in the context of the Turkish state’s promotion of “One religion, one language and one people” that can be found in both religious and secular nationalist forms.

Where this came from historically can be understood, as explained in Sect. 3.1 of this chapter, in terms of an historical context of the founding of the Turkish Republic most of the rest of the so-called ‘Muslim World’ had been subjected to external military colonisation. But Turkey is in reality much more ethnically, religiously, and linguistically diverse than allowed for by either secular or religious nationalisms. Such diversity was already a part of the Ottoman inheritance in which ethnic, national, and religious diversity as was only allowed to exist within a framework of acknowledging the military, political, and religious hegemony of the Ottomans. But

overall, it has not been uncommon for traditional Turkish Muslim leaders to point out and appeal to the relative tolerance of Islam, especially in its Ottoman forms as compared with many other historical configurations for the relationships between religion(s), state, and society. Indeed, some of Gülen's earlier contributions in relation to matters of religious diversity might be seen as unexceptionally similar. However, while there are many other Islamic scholars who speak about religious diversity, with regard to Gülen, one needs to look at what Gülen says in combination with his contextualised *actions* and, as Bekim Agai (2003) pointedly explained it:

Although many Islamic leaders may talk of tolerance in Islam, it may be problematic to put it into practice. Gülen himself has shown that he has no fears of meeting leaders of other religions, including the Pope and the representative of the Jewish community in Istanbul. He also crossed the borders of Islamic discourse to meet with important people in Turkish society who are atheists. These activities were not easy from a religious perspective because Islamic discourse in Turkey has definite boundaries that do not appreciate close ties to the leaders of other religions and nonreligious persons. Also, his support for the Alevi was not very popular among most Sunni-Islamic groups. (p. 65)

When generally discussing how Gülen's views and perspectives have changed over the years, Kurucan cites the example of wider inter-religious relations and dialogue as illustrative suggests that, as with other things, for a rounded understanding of this one needs to set Gülen's changing positions in the context of the ongoing interaction between sources, places, and revelatory dynamic:

The way he understood the Qur'an and the way he preached in late 1960s and 70s was not much different than the classical approach, which was like the classical approach. An example is in the very first chapter of the Qur'an where there is a reference to those who have diverted from the main path. And this has usually been interpreted by almost all the scholars as Jews and Christians who have left the main path of belief, of true belief in God, and that we should not be following that route. So, you could hear Hojaefendi speaking in those early years repeating almost the same thing because he later actually confessed that I might have misunderstood the Qur'an and, secondly, I basically repeated the way classical scholars understood those passages. There are other verses in the Qur'an about the people of the Book in which they are being censured, but the classical approach considers these

censures as if they were for those Jews and Christians. But Hojaefendi is now saying I understand that the Qur'an is speaking to the Muslims and that the censure is not to a certain people, but to the attributes and if Muslims adopt such attributes they are also an addressee to that criticism. So, if I did that, in that sense, I was wrong, in that classical approach.

As Kurucan says, “Back in those classical, early years, Hojaefendi was within four walls, filled with books, and he was basically studying with his students, but he was not really with the world. So, things have changed when he stepped out of those four walls.” But “especially since 1994 with the establishment of the Journalists and Writers Foundation and the start of his initiative for inter-faith dialogue you see this huge, much broader approach to the Qur'anic scripture where he is probably moving forward from the classical approach.”

In many ways, indeed, it was Gülen's emergent ability as a traditional Muslim scholar to recognise and at least to begin to deal with religious diversity, linked with his ability to encourage and enable Hizmet people also to begin to do some of this, which has been one of the most distinctive and important markers of the contribution of his teaching and practice in engaging with what is one of the greatest challenges of the contemporary world. This challenge is so important because even when one lives in a relatively homogenous geographical environment, as the British historian Arnold Toynbee put it, we are living in a world on the other side of “the annihilation of distance” that has come about through the means of modern transport, even though the recent Covid-19 pandemic has underlined the fragility of these interconnections, while at the same time making clear that through the emergence and spread of the internet and of social media we increasingly live in a practically unbounded digital universe that is even more diverse than the world to which one can have more immediate physical access. Since one cannot escape such diversity even if one wished and tried to do so, the question for all, including for Muslims, is that of how one relates to that diversity and deals with it. As well as being the expression of Gülen's understanding of the centrality in Islam of the love of God, Gülen (2004c) also warns against the illusion that the uncomfortable plurality of the modern world can be wished away—whether by believers or by non-believers:

The desire for all humanity to be similar to one another is nothing more than wishing for the impossible. For this reason, the peace of this (global)



village lies in ensuring that people appreciate these differences. Otherwise it is understandable that the world will devour itself in a web of conflicts, disputes, fights and bloodiest of wars, thus preparing the way for its own end. (p. 249–250).

Indeed, the Qu’ran itself teaches that, if God had willed it, God could have made all peoples one, but in fact made them different in order to compete with each other—but as Yeşilova reflects, many traditional Muslims nevertheless prefer to remain within their ‘comfort zones.’ Sharing an example of a more traditional perspective from within his own family which underlined why “they did not understand what Hizmet was about” Yeşilova cited one of his traditional relatives as asking: “Why do you go and meet other people? Why do you visit their churches? Why do you engage with them? Why do you spend time with them?” With regard to this, Yeşilova commented that:

I did not understand them, why they were asking me these questions. I thought many times that I was wasting my time in Turkey trying to deal with this mindset which was not able really to read the world. They are just are happy with their own comfort zone, and they don’t want to move beyond it.

By contrast, as Yeşilova explained it: “What Hojaefendi brought to us was that the world is, as he kept saying, a global village now, you have to go anywhere you can to interact with the world; give whatever you may; but also learn from them. And this is the true nature of our times.” Of course, if something has been part of one’s background environment, unless a life experience such as migration brings an inevitable disruption, one does not particularly have to think about it or need to articulate why one does this or does that. Rather, it is only in interaction with ‘the other’ that generally speaking, that one is forced to face the question of whether that particular form of one’s religious practice is ultimately of the ‘essence’ of what one is doing, or whether it is merely ‘cultural.’ Rather, it is in interaction with others that one has to face these things.

Of course, such questions are far from simple because, in the end, once one starts to distinguish between an essence and a cultural form, it can be a bit like an onion: and the question arises as to whether one ends up peeling all the bits of the onion away and then finds that there is nothing left! Therefore, while there is a good argument to distinguish between primary

and secondary things, and between form and substance, it is important to understand that, for things to exist at all in this world, form is necessary. The ‘secondary’ things are therefore also a fact of life since primary things cannot be transmitted without cultural forms. Therefore, as Yeşilova explained it:

It’s a risk and you have to answer when you go out there, people ask you questions, and you don’t want to answer those questions if you are not confident enough. That’s one thing I liked a lot about Hojaefendi, why shouldn’t we be engaged in dialogue with others? If you’re not willing to do so, this means you’re not confident enough about your faith.

How this works itself in practice can be seen in Yeşilova’s observation that:

What lies in the heart of all those things if I am going to call this Hizmet, as someone who grew up in a very secularist setting I could see in the example of these people (my encounter with Hojaefendi was much later) was that what these people are telling me is that I can, yes, be a good Muslim but still relate with the rest of my family who are not practising Muslims. That is possible. I don’t have to separate myself from the rest of the society. I can still be a proud Muslim, but I don’t have to push myself away from the rest of my environment. So, I think that was a great thing, that was a great confidence that came with me because, you know, we are living in modern times and people question faith. They want to believe in things they can reason with. They want to visualise. They want to see and touch things, and when you talk about faith you’re talking about responsibilities; you’re talking about accountability; that there is this God who is out there, and whose watching over and who is aware of what you’re doing, yet He is also very compassionate, that He is also very understanding. So, the way I looked into religion, the way I am understanding faith and the world around me has certainly changed a lot and it brought me confidence with my encounter with Hizmet.

Consistent with Yeşilova’s observations, in many ways it was indeed also through Gülen’s travel beyond the geographical boundaries of Turkey, and as he increasingly encountered the wider non-Muslim world, that he developed some of the themes that are now quite characteristic of Hizmet. As Tekalan recounted: “I wasn’t there when he first visited America. But on their second and third visit, I was with him as a doctor. He talked about

the necessity and importance of visiting people through dialogue, invitations. He was always motivating people to do these things.” Tekalan gave the example that:

In the early days in New Jersey, he was asking everyone what they were doing to dialogue with others. No one showed up for the second week. Because they couldn't. Because they couldn't do anything to tell you. In the third week, friends started coming. Yes, one of them was saying that “I invited my neighbour.” The other one was saying that “I visited the church.” It motivated the younger generation.

In terms of the Hizmet vision of dialogue through *hosguru* (or, hospitality) which, over time, developed so strongly in terms of the organisation of groups of international visitors to Turkey, Tekalan reports that Gülen advised that “You should not only invite people to Turkey, but also to your home.” Tekalan also explained that through this “especially our young friends from America” but also “businessmen, journalists, congressmen, academicians,” and so on “were brought together.” And when they visited other countries where Hizmet schools had been founded, “After these trips, those people visited our homes and learned about Islamic culture, Turkish culture, Turkish tradition, and then they invited us.” As a result of these kinds of exchanges, Tekalan concluded that “We, as the Turkish people, have learned about their religion, traditions and cultures, not only in the United States, but also in other countries. Through these contacts, we have improved our perspectives on Christians, Jews, Buddhists, other Muslims and so on.”

When meeting Gülen in Saylorsburg, and bearing especially in mind his health and the experiences being faced by many in Hizmet, the present author felt moved to recite the Beatitudes of Jesus from the Christian New Testament Gospels (Matthew 5 v. 3–10). As the recitation of the Beatitudes took place, the Muslim call to prayer was broadcast into the room such that the two mingled and, in relation to that, Özcan later explained that:

After the Beatitudes, Hojaefendi asked for the translation and we checked on the internet and the Turkish Christian sites, and he says that Jesus (peace be upon him) didn't limit to any person. He mentions that such people then and there and in the future will be those people. So exactly the same way.

This was, in principle, an example of very good New Testament exegesis. In addition, Çetin also explained in relation to the reading that:

Hojaefendi liked it and he said that I either I have been writing on this issue most probably will use that one again, so this reminds him of something. He was writing a series for a new monthly journal in Turkish and he's writing the editorials, and he comes with a series and you know, about the, in a sense, the weaknesses and the, what do you call it, the negativities of the modern human beings and how we could overcome this. And he said that he would write from the Sufi Masters some of the things, but knowing that Prophets (peace be upon them all) are the true teachers and the examples of this, so I should stop writing about this from the Sufi tradition and I start it from the Prophet history. So that just comes on time and timely.

And indeed, in relation to the place of Jesus of Nazareth and his teaching, Ergene explained that in Sufi tradition:

We mentioned about the Perfect Man [*insan al-kamil*] when we started discussion this morning. In that tradition you make your journey to the Perfect Man by stopping at stations where they are spiritually nourished by a different Prophet. Without benefiting from them they cannot make the journey. Without visiting these Prophets, their journey to the Prophet cannot happen. In a way, visiting them they witness all the divine revelation and *sunnatullah* (to the tradition of God) that came down to Adam, to Prophet Muhammad, and all those in between.

With regard to the Sermon on the Mount in particular, which had been recited by the author at the end of the first interview with Gülen, Ergene says:

It's the same thing, it's the same divine message that has come through all the Prophets. It's no different than what we would have been taught. In a Qur'anic verse the Prophet is told to say "I'm not bringing you anything new. I'm just reminding to you, that's the tradition that I'm reminding you of."

When interviewing Gülen, the author asked if a person of another than Muslim religion—for example, a Christian—came to him and asked for

advice about how to be a better lover of God, what his advice would be, Gülen said that:

Indeed, different religious traditions they do have their differences. But when we consider the pillars of faith, we see the essences of these pillars of faith are so similar. So, the way we talk about the roads, the paths that take a servant to the path of the love of God, to become a lover of God and the beloved of God, I believe those paths are essentially very similar. So, I would say the same thing. I would encourage them to strengthen their belief in the pillars of their faith in the existence and the attributes of God, in the concepts of the Prophets of God, the Messengers and in the formulas, the methodology that they bring in order to uplift humanity to an angelic life from an animal level of life – their belief in the resurrection and the blissful eternal life.

In relation to this, Muhammad Çetin noted that he knew a couple of adults who visited Gülen to say that they would like to be Muslims and they would like to give up Christianity. And he reported that Gülen's response to them was "That there is nothing wrong with Christianity, there is nothing wrong with Jesus (peace be upon him). If you have such a thing you shouldn't give up anything from your own culture and belief, otherwise these are the same things." Therefore, because of this, in relation to the possibility of changing religion from Christianity to Islam, Gülen says that "You shouldn't – this could be changing of a room in the house, but it couldn't be change of the house in a sense."

Özcan added to this the following observation that, "Changing the faith community, or from atheism to even Christianity or Islam or whatever, it should be a personal choice and should be through freewill and not be by compulsion. Even we Muslims we become happy when an atheist become even a Christian" and that "With any compulsion or force if anyone changes their religion they do not become Muslim, they become hypocrites." When Gülen was later questioned by the author of this book about the possibility of those which are not part of the historic or sociological community of Muslims being able appropriately to respond to the love of God, which is the heart of Gülen's teaching, he responded:

Of course, what as Muslims or just humans, what we expect from others depends on how well we are representing the things that are our core beliefs and values. There cannot be an expectation without exemplifying what you claim to believe in. If we are representing through our life what we believe

in, then we can expect others to embrace shared values and beliefs. So, when we consider the life stories of the Prophets, we see that, yes they convey God's message to people and they emphasise the importance of God's words, but their life was equally impressive upon their communities, and in their lives we see our examples and we see that this same message of love and caring for others, we can see this same message in the lives of all these prophets.

In illustrating this, Gülen went on to cite an example from the life of Muhammad:

When Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was hurt, was wounded in the Battle of Uhud, rather than praying for himself or other things, he was caring about other people, he was worried about other people, and he was relating the story of a former, previous prophet. He was relating that this former, previous prophet when subjected to this the level of animosity and enmity, he said: "Oh God, please forgive my people because they don't know; they don't recognise me, my role, my relationship and this religion. And we can see the same story in the life of Noah, in the life of Abraham, in the life of Moses.

And addition, Gülen also cited Jesus himself, as follows:

When we look at the life of prophet Jesus, peace be upon him (peace be upon him). In the Qur'an when God questions him about his people, he says if you forgive them that is so suiting to you. If you decide to punish them, those are your servants. But you can see his sadness at the possibility of his people being punished, and his seeking God's forgiveness, compassion. Properly translated in the Qur'anic narration of Jesus' dialogue with God, "If you chose to punish them you punish them, those are your servants; but if you choose to forgive them you are indeed most forgiving, most wise."

Thus, in relation certainly to the Abrahamic faiths, Gülen said that "When you consider the Abrahamic faiths, their scriptures, yes you will see that they disagree on some details, but they agree on these pillars of faith." Or, as Ergene put it, expanding on his understanding of Gülen's teaching in this matter:

All the time, of course, people adhere to slightly different ideologies, but referring to one *ayah* in the Qur'an, the book invites people to "come to a common word between us, which is God." It doesn't mention Christianity,

or any other religion, or Judaism or Islam, but our common word is God. It is not an invitation to leave one's Prophet or faith. The essence of all religions are the same, that's what Gülen is emphasizing. It is not a possibility to bring all religions together and make a 'soup'. No religions, even man-made belief systems, would not accept such a thing. This is against nature.

Interestingly, however, despite this clear evaluation, Gülen is not one of the signatories of the call drafted by Prince Ghazi and issued by a large number of Muslim leaders to Christian leaders, under the title of *A Common Word Between Us and You* (Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, The 2007). At the same time, while there are quite a number of other Muslim scholars who will affirm a spiritual kinship in relation to Christians and Jesus, Gülen has gone even further than this to say that:

You can even argue that in the Upanishads and Vedas, or the Buddhist tradition, and even the similar other traditions, they have their own rituals and forms of worship that prepare their soul and a person for eternal life. So, the essence of this path is to leave behind the corporeality of human life and to go into the life of the heart and spirit, and to reach this integration of the heart and mind, and to live in the angelic qualities as much as is possible in the human domain. So, the elements of the path and the discipline will not differ that much for those other traditions.

At the same time, although this might seem to represent a relatively new development in Muslim thinking being extended beyond the Abrahamic family of religions, one of the faults to which 'Western' thinking can be prone is an emphasis on the 'new' being likely to be most authentic and helpful. This, of course, contrasts with the general starting point of many classical civilisations in which the 'old' is more likely to be elevated. When approaching the topic of dialogue in the teaching and practice of Gülen and of the movement inspired by his teaching, in many ways it is important not to fall into what could ultimately be a false dichotomy in looking for either 'newness' or 'oldness' as a criterion for authenticity. As Ergene explained:

When you have in philosophy new ideas, you have new theories, they have come to oppose other ideas that came before me. But this religion doesn't say that, it says I come instead to complete the religions that came before. It's talking about process here, an ongoing tradition.

If you come with something as a new movement, as a new idea in philosophy or politics, you try first to show how different you are from the previous ones, so you surface the differences between people, push your ideology or your religion or your faith forward, so that you can be more visible and construct your identity. But Islam doesn't say that. Yes, it does bring in many new things. But the last revealed verse is warning in a way: "do not take this to a wrong direction; this is not something new."

Thus, in many ways, although this extension of Gülen's understanding of the love of God as going beyond the Abrahamic religions could be seen to represent a new development in Muslim teaching and practice, it is not an 'innovation' in the sense that it departs from Islamic norms and values. Rather, it is something that arises because it is thoroughly contextualised in current socio-cultural conditions while also being firmly rooted in an Islamic inheritance. Indeed, the power and effect arising among Muslims of Gülen's teaching about Muslim relations with people of other religions and the important of inter-religious dialogue is effective precisely because it is clearly rooted in Islam or, as Naziri articulates:

The perspective is from that of a Muslim scholar who advocates and also promotes inter-faith co-operation, and then also explaining that this also has to do with, the origins in the traditional Islamic teachings. It is convincing, I mean. It is very important that very many Muslims throughout the world, come to know and have to listen at least and then they will accept it or not accept it, I don't care. At least explain this approximation into welcoming the difference, welcoming the diversity, and celebrating it.

And, as Naziri added:

And this is my comment, and being very sincere in it, not using it like a tactic, be sincere, really sincere, because there is a Qur'anic *ayah* that everyone could be one nation. If He (God Almighty) wanted so, it could be homogenous. If He didn't want it to be all homogenous, who are you to make it, to try to make it homogenous. Its good to be heterogenous. The diversity, I look at the diversity through this glass. It's very important.

Thus, one can say that Gülen's inter-religious dialogue connects with the times. And indeed, unlike a number of other Muslim emphases on dialogue which have developed reactively to events such as 9/11 in the USA, and the Madrid and London bombings, it is important to



understand that Gülen's efforts on behalf of dialogue already pre-dated the impetus to dialogue that came about as a result of these terrible events.

Therefore, even in his earlier period within Turkey, one can see Gülen's commitment to dialogical engagement and learning through concrete praxis when, for example, Özcan noted of Gülen that "When he was in Edirne as a young nineteen-year-old *imam*, he was the only *imam* going to the synagogue to listen to the Psalms of the Jewish people, even though the Jewish people were very few and concealing themselves. At that time, he was the only *imam* going to the synagogue and listening to the Psalms and how they recite even from their tune and their Hebrew language, tried to benefit." This biographically and contextually rooted point is well made because, although it can certainly be argued (as noted earlier by Kurucan) that Gülen's view on dialogue have developed, there are critics who see Gülen's statements about dialogue, either as something merely reactive to events such as 9/11 and/or as purely 'instrumental' in the sense of them being deployed to gain a sympathetic hearing on the 'Western' and Christian facing side of a two-faced strategy in which Muslim and Islamic dominance remains the main aim. Özcan, however, argues that: "This understanding was not conjunctural and is not in a sense strategic in that sense ... of, you know, being close to other communities and to interact and benefit from them." And Tekalan testified of Gülen that "He was perhaps the first person in Turkey to visit other religious leaders. He invited them to where he lived, and they came. After these invitations, the visits became traditional. Then they invited Muslim people." Tekalan explains that these local beginnings were then taken to another level in that "In the continuation of this process, Gülen visited Pope John Paul II in Rome from Turkey; he was perhaps the first religious figure in Turkey to do so. Many people in Turkey said it was completely wrong. They said a Muslim could not go to Rome to visit the Pope."

Tekalan says of Gülen that, basically, overall, "He motivated Muslim people to engage in dialogue with Christians and Jews...and we learned about these behaviours by communicating with people who are Christian, Buddhist, atheist, Jews. What they have in common is being human." Therefore, while being rooted in a traditional and Turkish-inflected Islam, Gülen is a 'border transgressor' who advocates the primacy of the human over national, ethnic, or even religious identity, including Muslim identity. Thus, as Eugene summarised the approach of Gülen:

Since the 1970s he's trying to inculcate in us not to look at the world from that same prism – from around twenty years ago, when he met the Pope, that picture is still being used by those extremists in very embarrassing forms – secret Cardinal. That was one of the best things he did in his life. That's what our Prophet did. When the Christians came from Najran, the Prophet did not just meet with them, but he also gave his mosque for them on Sunday to pray when they asked to go outside the city, he said this is my mosque for you.

In terms of Muslim antecedents, like the thirteenth century Muslim poet and theologian, Mevlana Jalal al-Din al Rumi, Gülen's approach is richly theological and spiritual. Indeed, Gülen (2004c) cites Rumi's famous saying that "One of my feet is in the centre and the other is in seventy-two realms (i.e. in the realm of all nations) like a compass" or a "broad circle that embraces all believers" (p. 199). While nowadays it might be relatively more commonplace to say that engagement in dialogue requires a confident rooting in one's own religious heritage, Gülen's teaching goes beyond that. This is because, as with Rumi, the fixed point of pose is ultimately not one's religion, shaped, informed, and limited as that is by historical circumstance, accident, and accretion but, rather, that to which one's religion points. In this, Gülen invites those who are inspired by his teaching to focus on seeking out those whom both Rumi and Gülen call "the people of love" and to follow the example of those who understand Islam as a message of love. In making this invitation, Gülen cited Rumi who said:

Come, come and join us, as we are the people of love devoted to God!  
Come, come through the door of love and join us and sit with us. Come, let us speak one to another through our hearts. Let us speak secretly, without ears and eyes. Let us laugh together without lips or sound, let us laugh like the roses. Like thought, let us see each other without any words or sound. Since we are all the same, let us call each other from our hearts, we won't use our lips or tongue. As our hands are clasped together, let us talk about it. (Gülen 2004c, 6)

Summing up the risk-taking nature of Gülen's border-transgressing and taboo-breaking are a series of observances made on this by Enes Ergene when he was interviewed and which, although extensive, seem to this author to be worth quoting in full:

Perhaps there is no other intellectual in our lifetime that has taken this much risk, which has put him in many big dangers up to the point of perhaps never having the possibility to return back home anyway. And when he said “Muslims cannot be terrorists; terrorists cannot be Muslims” after 9/11 he was excommunicated again by Muslims. The risks were not understood by the West either. This is perhaps because they do not know the inner dynamics of Islam and Muslim community; or perhaps the Muslim world is not open to be discovered.

When he says “dialogue” he is opening himself, his hard disk, up to others, and he asks others to open themselves too, so they can be discovered as well. Because of his dialogue efforts, he has been accused to represent “moderate Islam” (not real Islam). Because he lives here in the US, many people think he is under the protection of FBI and CIA, living a luxurious life, and that we are all American spies, first and foremost for Hojaefendi himself, in the eyes of the rest of our Turkish people. This thesis is getting stronger.

So, he always took very huge risks to the point of being refused by our own nation. But, all right, our fellow Muslims cannot see this. But what is so disappointing is that the western world is also almost blind to this reality, to the role he can play in the world. They see not enough appreciation of the risks that is taking. One cannot count too many examples from the among intellectuals in the West who took this much risk in their lives. Take the example of Heidegger, the great philosopher; he sided with Hitler, you know, so he didn’t take the risk. But now, Gülen’s risk is a very fatal one. He’s facing charges where the threat is his execution. If he believed all the problems would go away, he would be ready to go and face death there, because he is already waiting for the day for that reunion with the divine. He is in love with God, and he doesn’t really fear death at all. So, it’s not the danger, but that is the risk that he is taking, that risk of an intellectual, the risk of a human being who is facing death.

I mean for us to be able to measure the importance of the risk he is taking, I remember when I came here, probably it was 2000 and I was in New York, and the time for prayer was about to finish, I threw myself into a church and asked the priest to allow him to pray there. You know, imagine this happening in Turkey, or in the rest of the Islamic world, a Christian going into a mosque and asking the imam to pray there – this is a reason for a revolution, this a reason for a coup, you know. And now think of what Gülen is saying when he meets with the Pope and he does other inter-faith initiatives in such a context. That means much more than a normal time, you know. The themes that he brought up are untouchable things, they are reasons for huge danger, that’s a big risk to take on.

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