

The Women's Side of the Coin: The Gulen Movement in America, a New Turkish American Community Taking Root

This paper traces the development of the Fethullah Gulen movement as Turkish women who come to live in America experience it. My paper draws on my friendships and observations of this community dating back to 1997 during which time I have witnessed the Gulen community in Texas grow from but a handful of people to a veritable community . Despite the size and breadth of this community, little has been written in general about the women's side of this movement in Turkey in English¹, and still less has been written about their experiences in America. Elisabeth Ozdalga's work with Gulen adherents in Turkey has informed a great deal of this paper, and the ideas presented here are a sort of dialogue with her work. While much has been written about "Turkish Islam"² as it is understood in the context of Fethullah Gulen's writings at a more theoretical level, little or no scholarship has focused on how this "Turkish Islam" is negotiated in the daily lives of his adherents in an American context. This paper seeks to fill this very interesting space of experience in the Gulen movement, those everyday life experiences of Turkish women living in America.

¹ Ozdalga, Elisabeth

2003 Following in the Footsteps of Fethullah Gulen: Three Women Teachers Tell Their Stories. In *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gulen Movement*. M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito, eds., Pp. 85-114. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press.

2005 Redeemer or Outsider? The Gulen Community in the Civilizing Project. *The Muslim World* 95(3): 429-446.

² Yavuz, M. Hakan and John L. Esposito, eds.

2003 *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gulen Movement*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press.

There is a well known quote taken from Fethullah Gulen's writings³ that has come to represent his perspective on how human beings are to treat one another: "Be so tolerant that your bosom becomes wide like the ocean. Become inspired with faith and love of human beings. Let there be no troubled souls to whom you do not offer a hand, and about whom you remain unconcerned". This is the idea by which Gulen's adherents, women and men, orient their lives. This effort to be tolerant and expansive in thought is the essence behind Gulen's notion of a Turkish Islam. Women play a very important role in modeling Turkish Islam through the hospitality they offer their guests and in the friendships they build with their American neighbors and acquaintances. Commenting on women's role in society, Gulen states that,

"In my opinion, women and men should be the two sides of truth, like the two faces of a coin. Man without woman, or woman without man, cannot be; they were created together. Heaven is a real Heaven when both are together. Man and woman complement each other. Our Prophet, the Qur'an and Qur'anic teachings don't take men and women as separate creatures." (Ertugrul Ozkok, Hoca Effendi Anlatiyor, Hurriyet, 1/23-30-95⁴)

From this statement we understand that women have an equally important role to play in modeling⁵ Turkish Islam through their actions. From this we can conclude that when it comes to making the conscious decision to live abroad with the intention to

³ This quote is taken from the front cover of a promotional booklet that summarizes Gulen's interfaith efforts. Not meant to be a book per se, it was distributed at various Turkish cultural centers and bears no title. It was printed by The Light, Inc., and printed in Rutherford, N.J.

⁴ Ibid, p. 34.

⁵ This idea of "modeling" Islam is a defining characteristic among Gulen adherents. It is based on the idea of temsil, as opposed to the idea of teblig which "means open declaration or persuasion through preaching" (Ozdalga 2003: 86).

engage in *hizmet*, or service to greater humanity, women play an equal role in shouldering the responsibility of the larger community's efforts at outreach and to engage in interfaith dialogue. We can come to the same conclusion when following entries on women in Gulen's book Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance⁶. Although there are numerous entries about women, their role is not marked as being necessarily different from that of men, in fact in an interesting footnote Gulen explains that when the Prophet Mohammed addressed the "servants of God", he was certainly addressing both men and women (p. 220). He does not spell out specifically what men and women should do so much as very explicitly stating that they should both be active in living Islam and making the world a better place. We might conclude from his lack of specification then that women and men may engage in a variety of activities so long as the end goal is to live *hizmet*. So seriously do women take their pledge to *hizmet* in the American context that everyday activities like cooking and inviting guests take on the proportions of a sort of *hijra*, and those participating are *muhajiroun*. Though life abroad poses many difficulties and threatens to change Turkish cultural traditions, especially for those who have small children attending American schools, Turkish families look to the example of the Prophet Mohammed and to Hz. Khadija who spent their life's fortune in providing for guests and sacrificed their own personal comforts for that of the larger community of Muslims and for the greater good of humanity.

Before coming to the U.S., a number of Turkish women who follow Gulen's teachings have often spent a significant amount of time steeped in the principles of the

⁶ Gulen, M. Fethullah
2004 Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance. Somerset, N.J.: The Light, Inc. and Isik Yayinlari.

hizmet community. Many women encounter Gulen for the first time at University through their friends and in study circles (**ders, sohbet**) where Gulen's teachings combined with those of Said Nursi's are widely available. Ozdalga's work sheds light on the way a group consciousness forms through the dersane experience in Turkey. Women may have participated in a number of study circles and have taken part in Gulen communities before participating in them in the U.S. Some have disagreements with their parents over their involvement in hizmet activities if they grew up in secular homes. Some may have been "born into" the movement and had their parents or neighbors or other relatives as role models for living in the hizmet community. One woman now living in San Antonio, Texas explained to me that her experience of living in a Gulen dersane, or dormitory, in Turkey was a formative period for her. She explained that to live together in a dormitory with many other women was not easy. She compared her "nafs", or ego, to an ice cube. She explained that living in the dersane was like throwing an ice cube into a swimming pool. Her experience is like that of many who join the movement; individual egos melt into the larger community. Putting others before oneself, paying attention to not "breaking someone's heart" (kalp karamu)⁷ and avoiding "ghibet" or gossip, form the core of essential beliefs for those who are members of the hizmet community. There is a sort of melting process that occurs in the U.S. as well. Women who may have been very comfortable with Gulen's ideas in Turkey among other women much like themselves find quite a different situation when moving abroad. They must overcome language barriers, homesickness, cultural and religious differences and adapt to a lifestyle that privileges work over personal time. Building a hizmet

⁷ Ozdalga highlights this sentiment as well, particularly in her interview with a teacher in a Gulen school in Turkey named Zeynep (2003, p. 91).

community in America is not easy and requires a great deal of patience and personal stamina.

The dershanes in Turkey are places where Turkish women coming from all regions of Turkey put Gulen's conception of a tolerant Islam to the test. A kind of group identity is formed in this process and the desire to live hizmet in a different context is often what inspires women to come to the U.S. and they take part in the movement outside Turkey. The dershane experience is a kind of training for adapting to new people and new perspectives and provides a taste of what it may be like to live abroad, away from the comfort of one's own home and family. Some come to the U.S. as undergraduate and graduate students. Some may have felt obliged to study in the U.S. because they were not permitted to wear their scarves in Turkish universities. Some come with their husbands or brothers and sometimes on their own and learn English before going on to study at the University level. Some work to make ends meet. Some learn a great deal of English and make contacts with their American neighbors and organize interfaith events that draw large groups of Americans, and some may have had very little knowledge about hizmet outside the context of the study circles they had previously attended and then learn more about the greater hizmet community after marriage from their husbands. The same can also be true of men who learn about the hizmet community and its values from their wives. Some women learn English well, and some others remain more passive in this endeavor. Among the women who spend less time with Americans, learn little English, and spend little time outside their circle of Turkish friends are those that preserve an essential core of Turkish culture for the rest of the extended women's community. Women who spend time outside the Turkish

community serve as guides to how to thrive in America, and those who remain well inside the Turkish community are seen as adoptive mother and sister figures. Women, whatever role they may play, support each other insignificant ways.

In order to understand women's attachment to the Gulen movement, it is essential to first to focus on the content and organization of the study circle, or ders. In general, the study circle focuses on some piece of writing of either Fethullah Gulen, or Said Nursi. The point of the study circle is to be constantly engaged in ongoing self-improvement. Each study circle is like a step on a journey towards a sense of self awareness, a sense of one's place in the world and on making oneself aware of one's faults so as to live more harmoniously with others. These study circles can take on any number of different formats. In a group interview I conducted with Turkish women in Austin, they mentioned that the formats for nonTurks and Turks can differ greatly. The idea is that like Turkish Islam, the study circle should not be rigid, but remain an open circle; open to adaptation so as to accommodate people with different interests and different levels of religious knowledge. The format and the content of these circles vary widely and are adapted to meet the needs of those in attendance. They are purposely kept small so as to allow each person the chance to speak and ask questions. There are individual women within the larger women's community who are responsible for determining the needs of various groups of women, and a kind of informal spiritual curriculum is established and is adapted on an ongoing basis. This informal religious authority is vested in one's Islamic knowledge, one's proven ability to organize a successful study circle, one's knowledge of the corpus of Fethullah Gulen and Said Nursi's writings, and a certain amount of personal charisma. Study circles may consist of women watching Fethullah Gulen's video

recorded talks then follow with a discussion. In one mixed group in Austin that was made up of Americans of different faith backgrounds and Turks with different spiritual interests, the format changed all the time, sometimes focusing on specific works of Fethullah Gulen and Said Nursi and at other times everyone in the group would do research on a different Prophet specifically looking at how that Prophet was deemed meaningful not only in the Islamic tradition but in the Christian and Jewish tradition as well. Individual members of the group would then compare findings and contemplate the lives of central Ahl-i Kitap prophets and saints, or the prophets and saints commonly revered among Jew, Christians, and Muslims. Sometimes sources were taken directly from the internet, and the study circle was at once a lesson in the lives of different prophets as well as a subtle critique of various religious perspectives found online.

Many women that I have spoken with often claim that their faith has become more profound in America. During interfaith meetings women are asked to verbalize many of the things that they could simply take for granted among other Turks which leads them to give more thought to the details of their faith. One woman explained that her efforts were two-fold; she learned to explain Islam to Americans in a way they could understand and in doing so she looked at Islam through an English speaking lens. This influenced the way she looked at her own spirituality and served as a reaffirmation on a personal level. Ozdalga characterized the Gulen community in Turkey as being closed (2003, p. 86), but this is not the case the Gulen community in America. Study circles are constantly adapted to as to bring in new people and the conversations are never meant to be grounds for converting new Muslims, but rather for serving as spaces of interfaith dialogue. In fact, so loose in the actual study circle that non Gulen adherents may not

even be aware that the Turkish women in attendance are as attached to the movement as they are.

Within women's study circles in America, Gulen's notion of a "Turkish Islam" is understood as an Islam open to all. Because of its inherent reliance on the notion of tolerance within Islamic tradition as the single most defining characteristic, Gulen's "Turkish Islam" opens a space to non-Turks and resonates with American concepts of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. The study circle in the American context presents new experiences for all present and is markedly more heterogeneous in its adherents when compared to similar study circles in Turkey.

Before writing a final version of this paper, I circulated what I had written to a number of Turkish women for their feedback. Interestingly, they were uncomfortable with the idea of presenting the movement as Turkish Islam without a greater degree of explanation. Following Ozdalga's assessment that this movement is nonpolitical, women want to stress their loyalty to the Turkish state. Although some of them do leave Turkey to attend school because they cannot wear scarves in Turkish universities, to leave their home is sometimes a great source of sadness for them. In one study circle women discussed the fact their prayers might be answered by God more often while they are in America because they were in a state of migration, "gocmen". The Gulen movement is full of reverence for modern Turkey and at the same time admires the spiritual example set by the Ottoman state. Ozdalga discusses how the movement deepens personal attachments to the Turkish state (2005) and in some ways decreases one's sense of attachment to personal family ties. I find her model of citizenship within the Gulen movement a compelling one. Her focus on emotions overlaps with much in Gulen's

discourse about love and tolerance, and also exemplifies what Marcus⁸ calls “sentimental citizenship”. These approaches to understanding citizenship are quite apt for looking at the Gulen movement as it tries in every way to be nonpolitical, but to be rather a movement that seeks to change the hearts of its adherents. While Turkish women spend a great deal of time missing their homes, they also become comfortable in America on a number of levels. Some say that when they go home, they become “bored⁹”, that their former lifestyles in Turkey no longer satisfy them. Their constant interaction with Americans and discovering ways to interact with people from different backgrounds replaces the lifestyles they once had. They also say that Said Nursi hinted that Muslim-Christian dialogue would be most successful in America. For them, living in America is something of a realization of Said Nursi’s prophetic writings, and America takes on an imagined dimension that is different from lived experiences. While Ozdalga very convincingly argues the being in the movement deepens one’s allegiance to Turkey, one cannot ignore the implications of a movement that spends a great deal of its energy in making sure that part of the hizmet experience is knowledge gained abroad while in the state of migration and missing one’s home. This is a very ambiguous terrain and one that deserves much closer analysis by future scholars of the Gulen movement as it exists outside Turkey.

⁸ Marcus, George E. 2002 *Sentimental Citizen: Emotion in Democratic Politics*. University Park, PN: Pennsylvania State University Press.

⁹ There is a wide variety of ways to express boredom and idleness in Turkish. Most often women expressed that their “souls became bored” when going back to Turkey because they missed interfaith activities and the busy lifestyles they had become accustomed to in America.

Study circles in America and engaging in a variety of interfaith activities are empowering for Turkish women who may have struggled with their religious identity in secular Turkish University settings. Furthermore, they serve as an alternative to conventional mosque halaqas for American Muslim women who are looking for something different. The synergy that occurs between Turkish and non-Turkish study circle members is characteristic of Gulen women's unique approach to *hizmet*, or service to greater humanity. The contributions Turkish women in America make to the larger Gulen movement are great indeed. They attend church services and festivities, they entertain guests, and they organize henna parties and cultural events such as Baklava contests and Turkish craft fairs. While a great deal of the women's participation in the movement until now has often included preparing and serving food, this will undoubtedly change as the movement ages in America. Many women who come to America for studies go on to graduate school and seek professional careers and have wide interests outside of activities that focus only on hospitality. Women in Austin for example helped in preparing local hospital administration on Islam so that services might be better informed for Muslim patients. They also volunteered their time in visiting retirement homes and orphanages, and as teachers in American schools they visit their students at home and stay late after school during tutoring sessions.

Anthropological literature shows that immigrants often engage in restaurant businesses and food related ventures in the first stages of building an ethnic community abroad. Food is always a "safe" realm and one that people of different backgrounds can always come together and enjoy. If one claims that food preparation is not a courageous interfaith activity, that person has certainly never experienced what it is like to be a

young Turkish woman in post 9/11 Texas away from her family, speaking a different language to people of a different faith, often while wearing a scarf and very explicitly modeling a vision of feminine modesty that is quite different from American notions of what it means to be a woman in today's modern world. Being a veiled woman anywhere may be seen as an act of bravery, and then adding the component of serving Turkish food at Jewish synagogues and Christian churches during Ramadan becomes more complex and more interesting than simply the food that is being served. If the Gulen movement has begun to put down roots in American soil, it is in great part thanks to the enormous efforts put forth by the many Turkish women and their soulful and sincere dedication to living hizmet.