

Concordance between Asceticism and Activism: The Numinous Dimension of an Islamic Community Movement

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The modern saint not only deeply believed in his cause; he turned the mission of converting souls into a profession.
(Michael Walzer)

The Religious as a Non-Reducible Category

According to Robert Wuthnow one important development in sociology of religion has been its recent interest in spirituality which “can be defined as a state of being related to a divine, supernatural, or transcendent order of reality or, alternatively, as a sense or awareness of a suprareality that goes beyond life as ordinarily experienced” (Wuthnow 2001: 306-307). Although there are various “empiricist” studies about the analysis of Turkish religious communities or community movements, most of them are missing this spiritual characteristic of religious motivation or seeing it as an epiphenomenon, as a secondarily important matter or sometimes completely insignificant factor in the analysis of religious movements; hence these approaches are relatively unable to answer the question “How are the thousands or millions of participants motivated to follow the common path of a religious collectivity?” This criticism is not to deny the effectiveness and justification of empiricist works or empiricist methodology when applied in their appropriate place. Yet this methodology does not give us an inquiry into the profound commitment or devotional practice persisting through deep “religiosity.” In fact, devotional practices, as Wuthnow points out, “have generally been regarded as an essential aspect of religious life in all religious traditions” (313). But for the factual empiricist, anything coming from inside suffers from the prejudice of being regarded as suspicious, deceptive or somehow wrong. In contradistinction, the numinous experience is the primary phenomenon in the religious life. The grave and immediate religious assurances are not obtained from pure reason or the empirical world and are not accessible by reasoned evidence. Inner faith is entrenched in the experiential, emotional, affecting, exciting, insightful and intuitive profundities, in something more cavernous than the *rationale*. The very mature form of any religious community cannot be expressed as an *a priori*, already given situation. *Alreadiness* of a religious collectivity (if this term can be accepted), is not less problematical than its empirical, rational, reasoned characteristics. The spiritual nucleus of religiosity which operates at the

heart of a religious community is conducive to its development and subsequent growth. As a unique part of Muslim religiosity, numinousness is an inexpressible, transcendental idea of all embracing significance, which deeply encourages a worldly asceticism. One should bear in mind that there is no rational substitute for the *numinosum*, which is conspicuously active in the communal conscience or collective psyche within a religious community.

Numinosum was first coined by Rudolf Otto in his *The Idea of the Holy*. For him, what is numinous is a non-rational and non-sensory experience or feeling. The primary object of this experience is outside the self. It is the non-rational element of religious experience, euphoria, a perception of the divine, a mystery. Otto's concept sets a model for the study of religion that focuses on the need to realize the religious as a non-reducible category. Yet he also scrutinizes the relationship between the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and the rational. The primary form of *religio* is the essence, the working basis of all religious collectivities, and to understand the significance of this essence one needs to analyze "non-public, latent, less visible forces of motivation," which is expressed in this essay as the numinous dimension. This dimension forces us to proceed from the individual to the community, from the inside to the outside, from the part to the whole. Personal experience is the most fundamental aspect of religion. What is to be studied then is not religion as simply the moral teachings, theology or ideology but religion as it is experienced by the self. In order to deal with this abstract order, I want here to take a close-up look at the sociological and socio-psychological processes of the dialectical relationship between individual and religious collectivity through the case study of the widespread and controversial religious community in Turkey, the Fethullah Gülen community –as it is named after its leader. The empiricist methodology is not adopted in this study, as mentioned before. Although I used a few quotations from in-depth interviews conducted with some students in Boğaziçi University who identified a close relationship with the community in the late 1990s, this essay is not an interview-centered one because of the limitations of the interview with such reserved personalities, who were suspicious of and intimidated by the interviewers; rather it is a discursive analysis stemming from the religious idiom and the religious imaginary constructed in the written and audio-visual texts of the community, like the sermons and the books of Gülen (many of his books are produced from his sermons or journal articles), some media interviews with him, community publications, i.e. the symbolic exigencies of a religious discourse (see the bibliography). The essay is based on a deep reading of these sources and written with sociological inspirations during this process. It should be read more within the tradition of the interpretative standpoint of sociology that operates through a sort of hermeneutics whose task is to restore a connection between data/knowledge and the imagined self which is under investigation. This approach is conducive to Otto's idea about the non-reducibility of the religious. In short, the aim of this study is

to draw a discursive profile of the aforementioned community movement with respect to social meanings that are constructed to shape the Islamic identity of the community participants. First, I have tried to describe the dynamic process of meaning formation, which is established through religio-conservative values and missionary projects. Secondly I have contextualized this problem on the societal level by depicting the transformative influence of the sacred-private over the profane-public. I try to show that this community movement attempts to carve a space for the creation of a conservative model of publicness through the discursive practices of an Islamic inner world.

The apparent feature of this community has been a vision of power operating through life-strategies such as self-sacrificial social behavior, which can be expressed as a form of Islamic altruism or austerity as well as worldly asceticism, Weberian *par excellence*. Contrary to the de-sacralised social life, one can sense the communitarian attempt of transforming the self through Islamic faith, which is itself a means of altering the normative framework of the purely profane or a-religious forms of sociality. The approach developed in this essay is based on the effort of grasping the significance of this pietistic character of the movement. By analysing the case of the Gülen movement, it is possible not only to point out the crucial role of an Islamic-based network of intrapersonal bonds in achieving socio-religious mobilization and its relation to publicness but also to develop an interpretative analysis to show the salient features of religious convictions and motivations within Islamic communities.

The concept of “community movement” is only used here to enhance our understanding of the variety of forms of collective activity (Buechler 1990). It emphasizes the importance of informal networks and alternative institutions. Community movement is a network of individuals and groups, multiple goals and actions, and is related to a collective identity that affirms participants’ common concerns (Taylor and Whittier 1995: 104-33). The concept is helpful for the aim of analysis in this work but not the most proper expression because the participants of the movement in question do not always exist by virtue of individuals’ establishing a common boundary between community and society; they are not created simply in a communal structure but in the course of the dissemination of Islamic faith. This voluntary attempt unfolds the intersection of the community and the movement. Community participants move to influence or recruit others, transforming outsiders into insiders through a change in religio-psychological affiliation and personal identification by the emotional attraction of Gülen’s religious discourse. Thus, community is not used here in the context of the sharp contrast between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, and the usual aspect of community as its territorial domain is not the focus of analysis. Instead, other conditions associated with community, including voluntarism, a sense of belonging, a body of shared values, a system of social organization, solidarity and interdependency can be emphasized to go beyond the conventional meaning of the

term. Voluntarism seems a more appropriate term because it expresses reliance both on volunteers and voluntary contributions.

The core of the community looks like the constellation of worldly ascetics, and this core develops through a particular interpretation of Islam, which gives distinction to the movement. In the words of Gülen:

(...) man, in this world is the representative of two different powers, namely the spirit and the flesh (...) they are usually observed to conflict in such a way that the victory of one results in the defeat of the other (Gülen 1992a).

Here a type of saintly personality is suggested to design a life-project to triumph over the pleasures of worldliness. If Islam as a religion is relocated into such a pietistic community-based movement, it naturally requires high commitments and self-sacrifices. The commitment is understood as the abandonment of the carnal desires, the lusts: "When one sacrifices his enjoyment of material pleasures, he grows perfect as long as he frees himself from selfishness and self-seeking, but living only for the others" (Gülen 1992a). According to this Islamic doctrine, those fettered by desires cannot perceive metaphysically defined *nur*, light. In this discourse, the world should be abandoned in the soul, not actively and externally, and such believers should represent the active units of social life. In many other written and oral texts their basic motto is defined as living to tell/represent the truth of Islam¹. Here of course working as a committed and pious teacher, doctor or engineer is strongly associated with this maxim, which provides the most basic discursive nucleus of the collective action of the movement in terms of its cognitive and symbolic functions. This essay can be read as an interpretative attempt to understand the latent incentives behind religious community movements. Although it is realized through the case study of one movement by focusing on its metaphysical background and piety-based character, it can be applied to comparable religious communities in a similar style, manner and approach.

A Biographical Sketch

Every religious collectivity emerges with the personal religious experience of its originator, and the religious community exists for the purpose of initiating its believers into the experience of this founder. The followers of the Gülen movement appear as the most mimetic of their charismatic leader. He is the one and the only one, the natural leader of the community, and there is no challenger or successor for the time being. However one should also approach the Gülen movement by tracing its continuity with the well-established movement of *Nurculuk*. The Gülen community stands on the fertile ground cultivated by the religious

¹ See bibliography for a list of Gülen's books.

action, initiated by Said Nursi (1876-1960)², i.e. has its roots in this previously triggered collectivism which paves the way for a considerable, ready-made psychology of religious solidarity. The informal organizational networks as the platform from which movement formation occurs are important touchstones of the Gülen community, and in this context the saliency of pre-existing networks of relations in collective action should be emphasized (cf. McAdam 1988). The basic dynamics of the *Nur* movement inspires the Gülen community to reinterpret their situation in light of the available religious frame of Said Nursi. Preexistence of this frame constitutes the cultural resources that facilitate the emergence of the Gülen movement. Said Nursi started that movement of Islamic revivalism in the 1910s. His writings, which argued that there is no conflict between religion and science, had an important impact on Gülen's thinking. The *Nur* movement spread throughout Turkey after 1950 and had special success among the young and those educated in the secular institutions. The religious culture of the Gülen community is to a certain extent tied to the social and psychological inspiration of the *nur* doctrines. Continuity between the *Nurculuk* and Gülen movements is provided by Nursi's written discourses of *Risale-i Nur* (Treatises of Light), voluminous doctrines of belief and the interpretation of the Koran, which contribute to create the text-based characteristic of Gülen's faith movement. But a brief evaluation of Gülen's life history and religious personality traits seems necessary because the religious morphology of the community is extensively influenced by his particular interpretation of Islam and his own identity characteristics.

Born in the city of Erzurum, eastern Turkey in 1938, Gülen was raised in a clerical family. According to the findings of an auto-biographical book of serial interviews with Gülen, conducted by Latif Erdogan (1995) (who was the first director of the Foundation of Journalists and Writers established by the community), his ancestors arrived at Erzurum from Bitlis, the city in which Said Nursi was born. Bitlis was historically the place of expansion of the most influential Sufi movements, like the Kadirilik, and Erzurum was an environment in which Sunni orthodox Islam and Turkish nationalism were very pervasive throughout the city. The social reality of this city influenced the internal dynamics of Gülen's psychology in terms of his dedication to the revitalization of Islam. His father, who was the preacher at the village mosque in Korucuk, taught him Arabic and activated in his psyche the emotional ties with the Prophet and his companions. He received further training in Sufism from Sheikh Muhammed Lutfi, called Alvarli Efe, who was the most influential personality in his early education. He attended both the informal religious seminary and the Sufi order. In the same auto-biographical interview, he refers to this situation as the collaboration

² For an elaborate analysis of *Nurculuk* and participation in the *Nur* movement, see Mardin 1989.

of reason and emotion (Erdoğan 1995). His education in Sufism strongly affected his ongoing spirituality.

Gülen initiated his calling as early as 1953. In 1958, he moved from the east to the far west of Turkey. He was appointed to teach in the Üç Şerefeli Mosque in Edirne, as an official preacher paid by the state institution of Directory of Religious Affairs (the only legal position a preacher can hold in Turkey). In 1966, he moved to Izmir. While in Izmir, he did not restrict himself to preaching in a single mosque. He began to travel to various central Aegean cities to give sermons in different mosques and to visit public places like coffeehouses in order to convey the message of Islam. Drawing inspiration from life histories of the Prophet's companions and other early Muslim saints, Gülen invites and encourages the faithful not only to attend public services but also to allocate time in their personal lives to prayer, contemplation, personal silent chanting and inspirational reading of *Risal-i Nur* (cf. Wuthnow 2001).

His style of preaching is quite spiritual, metaphorical, full of symbolism, allegories and aphorisms, yet instead of canonical interpretation, the esoteric interpretation of religion and religious activity is preferred in his usage of the Islamic idiom.³ For instance, the process of continuous religious action is symbolized by a numinous spiral curve which is also the shape of time and history in his understanding (see Gülen 1992b: 104). A spiral curve best represents the opposite motions of rising and falling. Metaphorically, it represents eternally continuous upward or downward movement better than a circle which is a closed-ended finite shape. For him time and history are not linear or circular, but a spiral which may be imagined as the connection of open ended circles through which it is both possible to rise up and to fall down. Gülen calls his followers to uphold the responsibility of raising Islam to the rising lines of the spiral continuum of time. Spirality of time is a legitimization process, with the unique capacity of this shape being that it locates human phenomena within a cosmic frame of reference in order to justify the social and historical realities. Here religion legitimates so effectively because it relates the precarious social constructions of empirical reality with ultimate reality. It reminds us not only of the rise and fall but of the processes of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction. Existence of real time as a condition of appearance, disappearance and reappearance is an incessant phenomenological world of existence and re-existence of things (*bakiki zamanın viçudu levh-i mahv ve isbattır*). This understanding of spiral time also alludes to the matter of resurrection, like the death of some plants in the winter and their new lives in the spring. Even the rise and fall of Islamic power is also similar to the processes of death and resurrection in his view. Everything "here below" has its analogue "up above." Religious legitimization as of the shape of a spiral curve

³ Many of the inferences made about his discourse in this article are obtained from recorded sermons and talks of Gülen. See bibliography.

claims to relate the reality of the world to ultimate, sacred reality. In this rhetoric, humanly constructed systems are given a cosmic status; it is the divine structure of the cosmos, that is, the conception of the relationship between the social world and cosmos as one between microcosm and macrocosm.

Through similar uses of the richness of a literary/poetic address, there is the frequent emphasis on the self-transcendent experience of life. In this religious attitude, the ultimate goal is defined as the full and complete closeness with the Divine Being. The desires and interests of the flesh are dramatically devalued in his ascetic approach. The worldly pleasures and self-centered individualism vanish in this all pervasive ocean of divinity. However, his mystical profile does not imply complete retirement from the world in which the ascetic will escape all forms of worldliness, as the dervish of the Sufi lodge. The Islamic idiom is easily transferred from the high level of sacred gratification down to worldly attitudes. The reason for this ease lies in the absence of a radical dualism of the divine and the profane. Actually in his discourse, there being really no strong duality, plurality of reality is even more deceptive, since all separate forms are said to be originating in the indistinguishable divine unity, the sacred oneness.

Izmir has been the central city of the formation of his community; however, as his spiritual reputation grew in the 1970s he was often invited to give conferences in different cities, especially in Western Anatolia, on a variety of subjects related to Islam in the modern world, such as “the Quran and contemporary science,” “the Islamic perspective on Darwin’s view of nature,” “social justice in Islam” and so on. His religious performance in the evaluation of such topics seems to be directed to reconstruct the correspondence between the Divine Being and human subjects, to support the discovery of laws of creation in an attempt to prove the harmony between science and religion. In his view, the more Muslims witnessed the perfect order of nature by the use of various positive sciences, the greater their euphoria of understanding the attributes of God.

Although Gülen’s inspiration was generally carried out by his travels throughout the country in the 1970s and 80s to address public gatherings, fast and practical accessibility of the movement to the public was made possible by modern tools of communication, through the duplication of Gülen’s sermons. Thus the movement transmitted its spiritual frame by using audio-visual instruments. By the circulation of sermon cassettes, the boundaries of the community became extremely diffuse. The transmission of such tapes contributes to the aim of creating a spacious counter community of pious discourse. Each person joining in the task of disseminating Gülen’s doctrine of faith becomes “*ipso facto*” a disciple. Such and similar flows of faith-based knowledge make it difficult to define the movement’s collective action as a form of rigid communitarian action. From time to time, especially in the months of Ramadan late at night his preaching has been shown on the community’s nation-wide television channel. Gülen weeps euphorically during these sermons. He quotes the words of early Muslims verba-

tim to reenact their well-known sufferings, and his tears serve as an expressive vehicle to establish emotional connections between early and contemporary Muslims (Özyürek 1997: 46). In such televised sermons his crying, which acts and operates as the symbol of deep religious conviction, is transferred from the privacy of community to public visibility. This is certainly the most novel representation of religiosity in the public realm of the country. In this way, the movement uses the restructurings of the Islamic idiom through audiovisual communications that provide connections between the semi-private and the public. In addition, Nursi's doctrinal way that reaches the Creator through the harmony of the universe is carried to the public by the use of visually intensive video facilities, which contextually blend the artistic beauty of nature with the rubric of the Great Artist. (Effective expressions like "everything tells of God Almighty" are juxtaposed to pastoral scenes of nature). Even the name of the community's TV channel, *Samanyolu* (Milky Way), metaphorically recalls an all-pervasive understanding of Islamic piety. The participants believe with utter conviction that from each being, from tiny particles to the planets, a window opens directly to the existence of the Divine Being.

The small group that had begun to form around Gülen's opinions by the end of the 1960s has increased rapidly and steadily ever since. The young followers, captivated by his altruism, have rendered, and still continue to render, social services through the main social institutions in public life, like educational and media structures. Gülen retired from his regular official job of preaching in 1980, having inspired a large group of students from high schools and universities. But he irregularly maintained his official preaching activity until the year 1990.

Self-Denial and Religiosity

In all my conversations and in-depth interviews with informants staying in the student houses of the community, I have asked them about their hermitic lifestyle. Although they were reluctant to talk about this matter, they confessed that they try to sleep less and eat less and that they try to fast on Mondays and Thursdays as a tradition coming from Prophet Muhammad (sunnah). These inner states of mind have certain practical consequences. Fasting and sleep deprivation in the ascetic form of Islam provide one of the principal means for the control of the inner body, emancipating the spirit from the luscious presence of the flesh, with a consequent sense of freedom from the narrow confines of the self. The shift from ego-consciousness to religiously conscious mental states creates spiritually liberating effects. These tend to be the relinquishing of the egotistical mind. The main emphasis of the participants lies in religious experience based on an intensely sensed inner reality, not pure theology. Gendered mobilization and regulation of men's and women's sexuality by means of a worldly sainthood; the control of libidinal energy; and strengthening the frequently declared "meta-

physical tension" constitute the central issues in the moralization and Islamization of the lifestyles.

The voluntaristic character of the Gülen movement provides a strong criticism of egotistical wants, and the aim in general is defined as "saving the faith of others." Egotism is seen as the weakest side of one's self:

(...) it must be removed from the character at once; it is not possible for those unfortunate ones who are caught up in the egotistical tornado to see the truth (...) The people of the truth have to give up the ego if they are to serve the truth (Gülen 2005: 48-9).

In this axiom, religious consciousness is deemed capable of transcending its ego condition. They subordinate possession of self as much as possible to possession by God and the Prophet Muhammad because they believe that if ego-seeking exists, neither genuine faith nor spiritual liberation is possible. Contents of mind are loosely connected with the subject, and greater stress is laid on ideal mental structures which include a depotentiated ego. The core of the community exalts the extinction of the selfish ego as the real goal of spiritual efforts. One of the greatest dangers and pitfalls that the believer faces is defined as the "desire for rank and position; ambition for fame and acclaim and self-advertisement" (Gülen 2005: 48-9). If this interpretation of Islam as a worldly asceticism is transferred to a community network, to a text-based faith movement, it requires high personal devotion: a kind of commitment which pervades the whole life-time of the participant; a dedication in which the compassion of God can only be attained by the community's motto of living only for others. The movement thus tends to get its human resources from devotion embedded in a self-denying way of life. This can be understood as the Muslim form of saintliness.

It is helpful to conceive of the Gülen community as a grid of particular relations which strengthen the commitment of its members to shared organizational goals. Islamic spirituality is employed to mobilize members through the adoption of the religious doctrine of Gülen, and through the creation of reading circles and informal living spaces, like student houses and dormitories, where the participants have the opportunity to practice religious experiences by way of daily prayers. The spiritual atmosphere in such spaces has been useful as a means for extinguishing the frequently mentioned egotistical self. The community depends on its members' recognition of a set of shared references to Gülen's spiritual understanding of Islam. A common mode of piety directs them toward shared goals like becoming "ideal teachers in the community's high schools" and "financiers of those institutions." In this case the development of alternative rational life strategies, the issue of the construction of meaning and cultural resistance are important aspects of sociological curiosity.

In such an intense religious context it is possible to explore the new religio-social meanings produced by the strong sense of belonging to a collective ideal, which can be generalized as "the mission of converting souls" (Tarrow 1994: 38). Participants see themselves as part of a group when this shared characteristic be-

comes salient. Instead of a confrontational stance, an open door policy is adopted towards outsiders, a strategy conducive to the integration of the latter into the movement. The movement's public achievement cannot be grasped unless we understand the basic incitement of the mobilization in the "non-public" or the private sphere. It does not generally mobilize its followers through formal organizations; rather, it is composed of informal networks, which, however, can turn into supportive mechanisms for the formal and bureaucratic organizations. Melucci (1989) defines such systems as "submerged networks." The submerged networks of mobilization are comprised of the *Nurcu*-run houses, called "houses of light" in the sub-language of the community. Giving concrete meaning to the ideal metaphysical life depicted by Gülen, these houses are inhabited by three to five participants who are university students -mostly majoring in the positive sciences. These houses provide the community with an environment conducive to the reinforcement of the Islamic belief and identity of the participants. As a result of sharing the same body of knowledge in these community spaces, they develop a separate language and a novel interpretation of the inner world. The main function of these places is to develop an atmosphere of sincerity and fraternity, to create a sacred aura of piety and conscience with collective and individual prayer, and to provide a relaxed atmosphere for the students to study for their courses. This informal space of piety socializes the participants into a collective consciousness that channels them to a spiritual environment which provides an ethical distance to the a-religious aspects of public life. The construction of the sacralized living space provides a means to withdraw from the values and lifestyles of materialistic worldliness. In the analysis of religious movements, "though the private sphere is often defined by exclusion, private life also discloses an inclusive character, which gives purpose to private life, providing it with the impetus to break out of the closed world of the self" (Cochran 1990: 22). This is accomplished by introducing outsiders to the sermon cassettes, books and doctrines of Gülen. Furthermore, the pious milieu of these spaces, where religious practices such as prayer and fasting are practiced, familiarizes the non-members with the Islamic way of life.

To reiterate, the inner culture of the community creates an ambitious commitment to the dissemination of the Islamic faith. It is a central means of solidarity, which is valued by the devotees over and above any other rewards. They plan their future through missionary projects based on Islamic altruism, that is, the cost-benefit analysis fails in the face of the participants' self-sacrificial behavior. Islamic values based on a puritan understanding of gender relations, and a particular redefinition of Muslimhood through communitarian morals constitute the basic touchstones of the movement.

A new emphasis in the Gülen community gives increasing consideration to problems of social organization and cultural integrity. The movement spreads into the public life at two levels. First, it uses collective identity structures by

producing meanings over “history and time,” “reason and submission,” “love and worship,” “faith and rationale,” “science and revelation,” “divine being and natural order.” At the second level, which bridges the gap between the individual and institutional, it tries to manipulate major patterns of societal institutions, like high schools, foundations, universities, insurance companies, finance houses, television and radio channels, newspapers and magazines. The accomplishments of the movement lie in its anti-fundamentalism and its strong effort to redefine the Muslim personality at the subjective level – a level that is quite analogous to Sufi subjectivity, but also quite different from the old Sufi remoteness from socially active units and personalities.

In fact, through this process, there is a reverse flow from the public realm into the semi-private domain of the community that also has its own semi-public (its inner circles) to conserve the participants from the effects of the western way of public life or lifestyles. Safekeeping of Islamic morality is provided by gender distinctions. Naturally, even the dissemination of the Islamic faith, which is the primary responsibility of the participants, is based on the segregation of the sexes. The movement spreads into the public sphere through this gendered mobilization. Females provide the inner transformation of females. In other words gender operates as a constitutive element of social interaction and relationships; gender distinction is an organizing principle of this faith-disseminating movement.

Some of the gender relations related to the public, like dating, premarital relations, intimate encounters and love affairs between man and woman before or outside marriage are discarded. Islam forbids premarital sexuality. Although one of the most important characteristics of today’s sociable publicness concerns love affairs during the post-adolescent period, the community participants, – mostly university students – male or female, resist these mainstream styles of socialization. The strategy of resistance against unsegregated publicness arises through altering the rules of public encounter between men and women, resetting these rules according to Islamic morality, that is, by means of Islamic conjugal bonds. According to Göle this situation could be named as “the gendered nature of the public sphere” (Göle 1997). She illustrates the centrality of women’s visibility in shaping the boundaries of the public in Muslim contexts of modernity. Parallel to her argument, in this movement, the boundaries of the public realm are largely determined by the religious principles governing gender relations.

Göle’s analysis leads us to new perspectives in understanding the contrast between Islam and modernity as it opens up a new territory of conflict. The dis-harmony arises between Islamic morality and western publicness. The community’s desire to differentiate itself from the western ethics and gender issues, such as public encounters between men and women, become a matter of central concern for the movement policies. This faith movement realizes its moral and ethical entry into the public life at the axis of “piously motivated marriage” which is

the cornerstone of Islamic conservatism. Any kinds of intimacy between the sexes, without conjugal intentions, and temptations of the flesh outside the marriage bond, are avoided.

In this context, it is also possible to argue for the concept of a communal public sphere which may be conceived of as the sphere of private people coming together as a public (Habermas 1989). By way of communal protection from western lifestyles, the participants are protected from being transformed by the outer social life. Young members withstand the seductive images of social life by the inner workings of the religious psyche, by the formation of emotional selves suffering for the people's loss of faith. Although they spend most of their everyday life at the very center of secular public spaces, it is the personal piety of participants that helps them resist the main images of western forms of socialization. In the process of the creation of the collectivist public front, the participants' private experiences in their Islamic conscience play a particularly significant role.

The answer of an informant (a male university student) to my question "How do you abstain from premarital intimacies initiated in the public domain?" was not framed in terms of Islamic ideology, which asserts that gendered moral behavior is based on divine revelation. Instead, he referred to his inner persuasion, his inner psyche, his "conscience" shaped by reading a specific book of prayer (*Cevşen*), and also by fasting outside the month of Ramadan, and performing acts of worship beyond the required ones (*nafil ibadet*) such as awaking late at night in order to pray. Although these practices operate at the individual level, they are in part produced within the community, that is, by the workings of a collective consciousness.

According to Mardin (1989: 179), C. G. Jung's approach captures the way in which this process works. Although Mardin only devotes half a page to this issue in his book on Nursi, he shows the significance of Jung's approach, namely that there is a subconscious level in the Muslim identity building process, which is related to religious symbolism. In our case this is provided by Gülen's ecstatically transmitted preaching and his highly symbolic language, and is not solely related to communal or moral obligations. Participants' ideas about God are part of a stock of symbols used for the purpose of establishing their identity. The sacred ambience provided by the community culture encourages the internal activation mechanism of the ideals or archetypes. For example, contents of hero archetypes, hero-cycles prevalent in Islamic culture, the heroic companions of Prophet Muhammad, other archetypal figures like angels and devils, archetypal places of holiness, the Kaaba, Medina, Jerusalem, heaven and hell; not only archetypal figures and places but also events like cosmo-genesis, creation, birth, death, marriage, holy emigration, miraculous events, visions and dreams of holy Muslim personalities, which all eventually leads to the discovery of the fullness of Muslim identity. Taken together, common mythical texts like the book of prayer, *Cevşen*, the *Nur* treatises, and Gülen's preaching and symbolism in his books,

produce shared archetypal God-contents as sensible effects for the participants. Archetypes are forms without contents; these empty forms can be filled with religious images and ideas, and in this case with certain images and ideas prevalent in the history of Islam.

In the effort to understand the followers' motivations, I frequently encountered their concentration on the inner experience as the all-important guide to living an ethical life. Religious experience rather than religious dogma is the real background for motivation. Here the analytical emphasis should be on the religious experience rather than the religious behavior. In order to understand the mechanisms that Gülen's preaching activates we have to see that ethics do not only consist of moral commands, but also provide means of integrating a person into an environment felt as a cosmos (Mardin 1989: 180). It is through the acknowledgement of a personal numinous experience that the participant comes to self-knowledge and to the transcendent core of his being, which can be called the Muslim Self. Through the religious experience of repentance, through their fear and hope, good deeds, submission and self-abasement the participants are influenced to propitiate the divine power.

For example, when the author asked the same male university student the following question:

On the one hand, you emphasized the individual nature of your metaphysical experience, which helps you to keep your distance from the lifestyle of the youngsters in public life. On the other hand, you live together in a communal environment. What about the influence of the others, other participants?

His answer had clear implications about the basic motivations:

(...) other friends have the same means of preservation of self. They read *Risale-i Nur*, *Cevşen*, *Hocafendi*'s (i. e. Gülen's) books and the *Quran*; they fast and resort to acts of worship beyond the required ones. These are our armor against *nefs* (carnal desires of self). All my friends need to 'strengthen their metaphysical tension'; otherwise we will be transformed by the outer life, instead of transforming that life by telling the truth of Islam (...)

Similar responses were repeatedly encountered by the researcher. These are full of implicit and explicit meanings about the pervasive deep religiosity that is common in the community. Here the domain of esoteric inspiration, gained by Gülen's preaching and *Risale-i Nur*, functions as a preparatory stage in the inner circles to resist the materialistic mode of publicness prevalent in the outer circles. The exchange of religious symbols and language supported by various texts and spiritual exercises has great significance in his mode of action. It seems that earlier conversions or spontaneous transformations of self, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood, can be replaced by special disciplinary practices of asceticism and saintly actions. The first half of the informant's response is psychically, the latter part is socially imaginable. He is spurred by religious experience and creed to superior endeavor and deed in the practical realm. This is the creation of a

new core of spiritual dynamism. His inner psyche has such a firm hold on the outer consciousness that the external environment has little chance of tearing him away from his inner roots. Worldly targets and desires which crave for external fulfillment and forge the chain that fetters him to the world of materialistic attitudes are to be abandoned. Here a high form of Islamic asceticism seeks a mental condition in which the ego is practically dissolved by fettering its carnal impulses. Actually this first level of meaning of his words has its own perils because the inner psyche gains the ascendancy to such an extent that he would be alienated from his outer being or environment and thus the inertia of personality may emerge. But what is important is the existence of a psychic and sociological state, which insures the commitment to the faith and the movement. Because in the second level of meaning hidden in his words, the physiological strata of the psyche which are subdued by metaphysical tension are not exactly denied or suppressed by a supreme effort of the will, as is customary in mainstream sublimation. Rather, the collective consciousness to tell the truth of faith to others necessitates his personal piety and activates his cause. We should not doubt the existence of mental states transcending ego-consciousness, as mentioned before. Here the Muslim mind has no difficulty in conceiving of a consciousness without personal self. All physiological and mental energies are adapted and shaped through his cause or mission. It is the assertion of religious experience over the social reality. This second level can be seen as the projection of Islamic altruism into the focus of the public domain. It is not the essentially ritualistic character of religious obligations, but an individual conscience attached to a collective ideal aiming to change the inner worlds of outsiders. Here prayer is a locus for sharpening the meaning of private life and proselytization appears as the “beau ideal” of Islam. The word “proselytism” is derived ultimately from the Greek prefix “pro” (towards) and the verb “erchomai” (to come). It describes attempts to convert a person from one point of view to another. Islamic saintliness finds expression in these proselytizing efforts, which encourage or induce an outsider to join the Islamic faith. This is a conversion to an Islamic cause, which can be experienced both by Muslims and non-Muslims. Thus, we need to expand the meaning of conversion to understand the proselytization actively operating in this movement. The close interpersonal relations, the process of fraternization initiated in the semi-private domain, later on, provide conversion into a missionary cause. Saintliness may seem an objectionable term in the Islamic idiom or context, but the ambivalence in the term points to the gist of the matter. Islamic saintliness expresses itself in a definite potency of psyche by which personal aims and concerns are exceeded and become insignificant in the light of the greater object of one’s devotion which is to tell or represent the truth of Islam. Thus, two basic religious phenomena, numinous worship and proselytizing effort exhibit the dialectics between private and public. Speaking about Islam to ignorant, uninformed or badly informed subjects, is neither a mere reflection of a rational

ideology nor a cultic missionary act. The participants act not only according to purpose but also according to values. Similarly, many participants described their inner satisfaction, inner peace, and the strength of their spiritual tension by referring to their power to resist the egotistical life goals, physical desires, lust and seductive images of western publicness. There appears first the dominance of numinously motivated spiritual interests and, second, more concrete real-life motivations and missionary projects. These two are in fact overlapping processes. As Michael Walzer has significantly shown, “the modern saint not only deeply believed in his cause; he turned ‘the mission of converting souls’ into a profession” (quoted in Tarrow 1994: 38). Priority of one over the other may change according to the diverse personal traits of members. But in all respects, their inner motivation to act in public emanates from the aptly defined “metaphysical tension” or the “inner reality” to which one feels united in religious experience. The extraordinary feeling of oneness is a common experience in the community. The individual participant’s religious experience does not take place in emptiness but in the context of the religious collectivity, and there seems no sharp contradiction between them.

The Community at the Societal Level

Islam, as a personal submission to the Divine Being, forces the participants to devote themselves to a strongly ideational faith movement. Religion in this movement radically shows the limits of politics and of the difference between politics and public life (cf. Cochran 1990). The movement even sees the women’s head-scarf problem in Turkey as a secondary matter of religion (“dinin füruyatındandır” in Gülen’s words) when compared to the emergence and development of women’s inner faith.

The movement does not advocate a holistic or systemic change, but rather competition over the realm of social institutions through the establishment of alternative structures. This results in the promotion of moral life in public through institutional channels. The movement thus penetrates just that daily routine of life in order to fashion it into a moral life in the world, but “neither or nor for this world” in Weberian terms. This may be referred to as the transformation of the public sphere from within. The community appeals to middle and upper-middle class groups, especially young urban men (religious businessmen, tradesmen, doctors, teachers, journalists and other professionals) who act as “movement entrepreneurs” and the university students who act as “adherents” or “devotees.” As the social and the spiritual leader of the community, Gülen aims to create a devoted Muslim consciousness that tries to oppose religious radicalism. For him personal or national anger, hostility and other similar motives usually move those who have adopted Islam as a political ideology. In his words:

Muslims cannot act out of ideological or political partisanship and then dress this partisanship in Islamic garb, or represent mere desires in the form of ideas; strangely enough, many groups that have put themselves forward under the banner of Islam export a distorted image of Islam and actually strengthen it" (Turkish Daily News National 2000).

The community certainly consists of the characteristics of a faith-based revitalization and does not operate on the model of a traditional Islamic sect.

It is not even easy to identify Gülen with the centuries old traditional virtuosi typology. The use of examples, references or quotations from the Western intellectual world actually is a common part of his public speeches or media interviews. When the Turkish army took over the government in 1971, Gülen was arrested, like many other Muslim leaders. After months of imprisonment, he was released and later acquitted of the charge. He describes the difficulties of this past situation with the analogy that after his imprisonment he was followed everywhere like Jean Valjean, the hero of Victor Hugo's classic novel *Les misérables*. To give some other examples from various media texts and sermons, he mentions Kant's claim that God cannot be known by theoretical reason but by the practical one, i.e. by experiential reason; he gives reference to Toynbee, uses Goethe's Faust and Mephisto to represent good and evil, and mentions the classic American movie *Ben-Hur* (1959) to exemplify how the apostles took their force only from their inner faith. He mentions the same example to explain how difficult and expensive film production is when he talks about Muslims' weak position within the movie industry. In a TV program when he was asked to comment on "February 28 Decisions (1997)" of the Turkish National Security Council, which were affirmed and signed by all of high officialdom, he made an analogy that the event reminded him of Rousseau's social contract. In the same program he used the names of Renan and Voltaire, saying that even they accepted the impossibility of religious-free man and society, and that Rousseau needed to implement the notion of natural religion (*STV, Haber Kritik*, 29 March 1997). He has also made reference to Prince Bismarck and Bernard Shaw, stating that they praised the Prophet Muhammad. In an interview, he said that he has read all the works of Dostoevsky and other Russian classics (see *Hürriyet*, 23-28 January 1995, and *Sabah*, 23-30 January 1995). He uses diverse value patterns such as good and evil, faith and trust, sincerity, belief and honesty all in a cross-cultural sense, applying them to his local contextual speech.

Gülen's followers have established various organizations to spread his ideas to the educated sectors of society. Various private companies and foundations associated with the Gülen movement publish a monthly journal, *Sizinti*, (on popular science and faith); three scholarly journals, *Yeni Ümit* (on divinity), *Ekoloji* (environmental issues), *Yağmur* (literature); and also *Fountain* (an English language journal of science and spirituality); and *Aksiyon* (a weekly news magazine). The movement established the Foundation of Journalists and Writers in 1994 as an addition to the earlier establishment of the Foundation of Turkish Teachers. The

former organizes public meetings under its motto of tolerance and dialogue. These meetings have regularly brought together religious leaders, academics and intellectuals. The movement also operates a television channel, *Samanyolu* with a global satellite outreach; a newspaper, *Zaman*, published in twelve different countries; and a few local and national radio stations. The content of public participation – participation through this media network – is both similar to and different from the commercial media, somehow more representative of the movements' needs and interests. Televised, aired and printed public participation can be viewed as a reserve that provides voice to the movement's concerns, and it offers alternative selections and sometimes non-commercial information to a tangible audience and reader. It is possible to perceive this media network as a virtual public space where general as well as particular issues central to the movement's interests are brought to the fore and regularly disseminated to the public at large. Through regular advertisement of the movement's schools abroad and by giving voice to the students' parents, for example, *Samanyolu* TV tells the public that pupils in these schools achieve higher scores on university entrance exams, the best of them winning gold medals at international scientific competitions. The public voice of the movement uses mainstream means and techniques of broadcasting but at the same time resists the exclusive standard of conventional information production. This new publicity is created through the electronic medium by including the participation of Islamic personalities who have been ignored by the mainstream media. In this way, followers of Gülen carry out their struggle for recognition.

The movement runs more than five hundred private schools in many countries. The schools in Turkey are under tight state control and use the same curriculum as Turkish state colleges, with an added emphasis on conservative values. Their faculty is staffed by graduates from high-ranking universities in Turkey. The community's businesses have sponsored the schools by collecting contributions, and schools have a vital role in fund-raising efforts. The admixture of recruited finance, expertise and media recreates educational publicness. In the post-1990 period the movement extended these education, media, and business networks to ninety countries (Gülerce 2006: 17). The movement has grown in part by sponsoring summer camps, student houses and dormitories, classrooms, cultural facilities, and communication organizations (Aras 1998: 25). The size of the giant community of sympathizers is not known exactly, but according to Aras crude estimates range between two hundred thousand and four million. In fact, trying to estimate the membership of a voluntaristic movement is not very significant since there are neither initiation rites nor formal membership. Another difficulty lies in the flexibility of the participation process in the movement's activities, and for this reason some categorizations are made to differentiate between the core followers and sympathizers in the sub-language of the community as a way of defining strong and weak commitments; however, these categories do not refer

to concrete groups or exclusive attitudes, but rather hypothetically signify the openness of participation at various degrees.

Gülen's followers participate in the "modernized" public sphere but refuse to totally assimilate to the moral values of western modernity. Piety and the moral purity of the participants become a point of reference for the re-shaping of the seemingly trivial social issues related with ways of living, expressing a desire to shape the public sphere without radical regulations but with conservative value systems.

At the institutional level, the movement tries to compensate for the structurelessness of Islamic identities in public life. The participants, who intend to move beyond communal boundaries, desire to print their mark on the social institutions, be they educational, financial or media-oriented. According to this Islamic imaginary, if participants of the community as an Islamic status group own and successfully run primary types of social institutions, this achievement would amount to the recognition of Islamic morality in public life. It is accomplished in a sort of civil disobedience, yet the participants resort to the transcendent aspect of religion as a pious motivation for their public performance. It is not protest activity in the public realm, but it demands recognition of "devoted Islamic personalities" as the competitive runners of civic institutions. There is also this awareness that every socially significant power group is in the long run recognized by other parties, unless the very existence of the latter is threatened.

In a country characterized by the absence of strong civil institutionalization dominated by clientelistic parties, which could not attain built-in political structuration, there is a heightened potential for such and similar voluntaristic movements to be successful. With its capability to create its inner collective life circles and to preserve them, the movement has been able to establish intense ties among its participants. The community, in turn, has protected the movement from the danger of losing its basic dynamics, a rare occurrence in party-centered actions in Turkey.

Conclusion

In cultural terms, the community can be conceived as a public space in which Islamic actors interact. In other words, it is a domain of (re)presentation for Islamic life ethics. The communitarian public collectivity provides a locus in which social behavior is judged according to Islamic morality. The deceptive dispute or discord between the "sacred private" and the "profane public" is firmly established and then transcended in the religious-cultural code of moral purity and in the normative definitions of proselytism. In this milieu, "religion in the private sphere" corresponds to contact with the transcendence provided by Islamic forms of worship and prayer with the consequent sense of pietism, both individual and collective; whereas "religion in the public" relates to the mission

of converting souls, not only by telling the truth of religion (*tebliğ*) but also representing this truth (*temsil*). Even in the recent discourses of community, *temsil* is prioritized over *tebliğ*. Thus, at the individual level, social life is perceived as an arena of social encounter between faithful and unfaithful, between hopeful and desperate, the latter targeted for proselytization.

While transforming the religion-free aspects of publicness, participants of the movement have invented new terms for describing the basics tenets of their mission, including “sacred emigration,” “metaphysical tension,” “victory over the flesh,” “society of tolerance,” and “interfaith dialogue.” Certified with such discourse, the followers remodel their religio-conservative identities and reveal the contestatory function of Islamic collectivity. According to Nancy Fraser (1992: 124):

After all, to interact discursively as a member of public, subaltern or otherwise, is to aspire to disseminate one’s discourse to ever widening arenas. Habermas captures well this aspect of the meaning of publicity when he notes that, however limited a public may be in its empirical manifestation at any given time, its members understand themselves as part of a potentially wider public, that indeterminate, empirically counterfactual body we call “the public at large.”

In the case of Gülen, religion has always been understood as an expression of the moral expansion of the religious collectivity towards wider publics. At the institutional axis, they open up a “conservative model” of public sphere by redistributing the stuff of the Islamic way of life, by reorganizing “minuscule” techniques of power through religious solidarity. Thus the movement shows the dual character mentioned by Fraser (1992: 124):

On the one hand they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds (...) directed toward wider publics.

This communitarian yet volunteering action is an instance of the conservative publicness touting accessibility through the pious values. The movement tends to get its resources of action from the personal commitment of its participants embedded in worldly asceticism and self-sacrificial devotion to the dissemination of faith; without such commitment, the movement cannot hope to transform the wider publicness in which it operates. Thus devoted life-strategies reactivate and empower collective morality, turning Islam into a basis of an imagined community reinforced within the realm of the sacred. The boundaries between the holy as the numinous and the holy as the baggage of intense worldly activities become mutually infiltrated and extremely diffuse.

The social experience of blurring the boundaries between the divine and the profane, the private and public, rational and non-rational, cannot be regarded as absolutely religious as distinct from secular but rather as the religious dimension of the experience of the devotees in general. The numinous dimension of community prevents the radicalization and politicization of the movement on cer-

tain issues pertaining to public life. Otto's approach to religion helps to understand this extraordinary harmony between the non-rational saintliness and rational activity operating simultaneously in the movement. For Otto, this is the intimate mutual interpenetration of the numinous with the rational:

By the continual living activity of its non-rational elements a religion is guarded from passing into 'rationalism'. By being steeped in and saturated with rational elements it is guarded from sinking into fanaticism or mere mysticism (Otto 1973: 141).

The extraordinary growth of the movement can be explained by this unconventional congruence between ascetic spiritualism and public activism.

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