
Book Review: Paul Weller: Hizmet in Transitions: European Developments of a Turkish-Muslim Inspired Movements (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022)

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Introduction

The Hizmet movement, often called ‘Gülenists’ after the founder Fethullah Gülen, has regularly attracted the attention of researchers working on Islam in Europe. Occasionally, it has also attracted media and political attention, which has often found it difficult to distinguish between the movement and a common default position that any Islamic movement must be ‘fundamentalist’. Hizmet has to all intents and purposes been a mainly Turkish movement and has therefore followed Turkish immigrants into Europe since the 1980s, finding support especially among young, educated descendants of Turkish immigrants. Crucially, the Turkish connection has meant that the movement has regularly been impacted by developments in Turkish politics.

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However, a natural consequence of the passage of time has been the growing number of descendants of the immigrants, children and grandchildren who have grown up in their European environments and lived through European education and moved into the labour market while negotiating ways of living with their forebears' heritages. This overall process has meant that the earlier immigrant communities have provided entry points for later arrivals, often refugees, even when refugees who have not passed the various routes of integration of the earlier arrivals could disrupt the process.

Hizmet as a movement has been at the forefront of moves to integrate Muslims and those of Turkish origins with living in Europe, one of the central points that Weller makes in this book. It has been able to do this partly because of guidance from Feth-üllah Gülen and partly because the movement has tended to attract individuals with a professional background. In the Hizmet context the refugee phase, mentioned above, started at a later stage than has been the norm among Muslim immigrants. Large numbers of Hizmet supporters sought political asylum in various European countries after the failed coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016. They included military officers, members of the judiciary and academics. They brought with them an emphasis on their Turkish identity, which had been declining among the descendants of the earlier immigrants. This has caused its own disruption in Hizmet circles. Weller thence identifies in Europe what he calls a 'three-layered Hizmet' (chapter 4): the early migrants, a more recent generation which has taken over the leadership, and the new arrivals following the 2016 failed coup attempt.

Dialogue

In chapters 2 and 3 Weller identifies dialogue, especially between the secular and the religious, as having been a central element of the movement's activities from its origins and early development in Turkey. Placing Hizmet then in the European immigration context, he shows how dialogue has been a core activity, both with the secular and with other religions. The role of dialogue has been so central that the editors of the *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*² tend to assume that a Muslim organisation with 'dialogue' in its name will be related to Hizmet (although they do double check).

Of special note is the Dialogue Platform in Brussels, one of many religious and cultural movements who have established a Brussels base to have closer contacts with the European Commission. There has been a particular active network of Hizmet dialogue activity in the Netherlands, which was among the first countries to develop Christian-Muslim dialogue with both a Protestant and a Roman Catholic base. In

² *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, various editors, Leiden: Brill, annual since vol.1, 2009 vol.14 is currently in press.

Denmark a smaller group, the Dialogue Forum, has established a public profile with its annual prize awarded to individuals that have especially contributed to constructive inter-communal relations.

Across Europe the churches' growing willingness to take part in such activities can be traced back to the Second Vatican Council, which set the tone in the late 1960s, followed by the World Council of Churches in the early 1970s. These international church initiatives gave the impetus to the European churches to start working together both internally and across the national borders, increasingly with Muslim participation. This stream of activity was strengthened when in 1986 the major European church organisations, Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic, agreed to merge their Islam work into a joint Islam committee. The Dutch churches were major players in these developments.

Several major challenges to these activities appeared in the early 1990s. The year 1989 itself saw major public debates triggered by the publication in Britain of Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* and the first 'head scarves affair' in France when three teenage girls were excluded from school for wearing hijab. This was followed almost immediately by the first Gulf War following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and then the collapse of Yugoslavia and the wars in Bosnia and then in Kosovo.

These events were a major driver of the development also of Muslim organisations precisely at a time when initiatives were shifting to a younger generation. This was not only a question of mosques and associated Qur'an schools but also of associations with specific objectives, in the early 1990s particularly assistance for Muslim communities being hit by conflict in former Yugoslavia, Sudan and Palestine. There was also a growth of associations which sought to monitor Islamophobia in the media and in politics. At the same time new generations produced educated young people with strong Muslim identities broader than those linked to their parents' countries of origin. Characteristic of many of these developments was that they engaged with Christian and secular organisations which shared their objectives. At the local level across the region, it became more and more common to see the growth of local interfaith groups with Muslims as active partners and promoters. Hizmet groups were often active participants in these developments.

At a 2010 international conference held at Felix Melitis, in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and organised by the Dialog Academie and VISOR (Institute for the Study of Religion, Culture and Society) on the topic of "Mapping the Gülen Movement: A Multidimensional Approach", an opening keynote presentation by Doğu Ergil (2010) summarised the overall emergence and development of Hizmet in what this author judges to be a succinct and insightful evaluation of the movement's trajectory.

Beginning in Turkey and then spreading out through the world including Europe, Ergil identified the main trajectory as having been that of what he called “a group of listeners” who:

have become followers; have transformed into being a local congregation; a congregation growing into a national community; a community expanding to be a comprehensive international organisation of volunteers and stakeholders, that can neither be defined as a religious sect, or denomination, although it is religiously informed. (Weller 2022)

For some reason this reminded me of the 1939 conference of the Muslim Brotherhood where the movement was defined as ‘a Salafiyah message, a Sunni way, a Sufi truth, a political organization, an athletic group, a cultural-educational union, an economic company, and a social idea.’ (cited in R.P. Mitchell 1969)

Or one could look at the Jama’at-i-Islami with its three layers of adherents: core committed, activists, and sympathisers. (S. V. Reza Nasr 1995)

It is no coincidence that this is similar to the organisational form of numerous traditional Sufi orders, at one level apparently tightly organised and controlled, but at another level amorphous, fluid and ever shapeshifting to fit a new environment – after all, Gülen’s spiritual heritage lies in great part in the Nursi movement, a Sufi movement founded by Bediüzzaman Nursi in the early twentieth century.

What confuses the observer here is the difficulty – almost impossibility – of pinning down a movement such as Hizmet, especially from the perspective of the European observer. Our environment is dominated by deeply rooted bureaucratic institutions underpinned by legislation. I am tempted to identify this as a north European Protestant phenomenon. Muslims are expected to fit into that, but they tend not to, and the European institutional environment makes it difficult to function in such an amorphous manner, even though many Muslim groups have attempted to do so.³

It is difficult to find any published research on Hizmet which is not either hostile or sympathetic. Given that Weller’s research for this book has been in part funded by a Hizmet organisation, many critics will rush to suggest that this book does not break from this pattern. But the funding also means that he has had an unusual degree of access to Hizmet groups and activists with the extensive interviews which form the primary research data of this book. Weller has a respectable history of sympathetic

3 Egdunas Raciūnas discusses this process of ‘churchification’ in Islam in *Communist Eastern Europe: Between Churchification and Securitization* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

but critical engagement with Hizmet, which shows throughout this volume, and which demands to be taken seriously.

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