# Book Review: Love and the Human: An Extended Review of Paul Weller, Fethullah Gülen's Teaching and Practice. Inheritance, Context, and Interactive Development (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022)

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## Interactive Development and Method

This excellent book is not a conventional study of its subject, Fethullah Gülen, the prominent Muslim scholar, activist, educator, political exile from his native Turkey, and inspirer of the global movement called Hizmet (meaning 'service'). There are several such studies available, and the author has both drawn attention to them and acknowledged some debt to them (Robinson 2010; Valkenberg 2015; Pahl 2019). But his book is of a different and more adventurous kind. It does contain the expected biography, and his second chapter tells Gülen's story well, tracing his journey – one might say 'migration' to use a word of Islamic resonance –from his birthplace of Erzurum, through Edirne, Izmir, and Istanbul to America. The book also contains some exegesis of Gülen's writings, giving particular attention to his four books on Sufism and his 2004 volume of essays *Towards a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*. But the essence of this book lies in in the words of its sub-title, 'Context and Interactive Development.'

The method of the book is largely to understand Gülen's teaching and practice through a critical account of the response to Gülen from participants in the Hizmet movement from around the world, gathered by careful qualitative research, including extended interviews. It is an ethnographic approach of studying Gülen from

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within his own community. Most of these interviewees are named, with their permission, while others –fearing reprisals from political authorities – have remained anonymous. There is a solid and convincing hermeneutical reason for proceeding in this way: Weller's argument is that Gülen's own method has been, from his earliest days of preaching, dialogical and contextual. He has been what Weller calls an 'embodied teacher' (70), and Gülen has himself has developed his teaching and practice in interaction with his students and other members of the Hizmet community. The influence he has had on others has, Weller maintains, been reflected through a hermeneutical circle into the further development of his own thought (64). Effectively, Gülen and Hizmet cannot be separated in their mutual story. Weller here appeals at a late stage of his research to the 2021 thesis of Özcan Keleş that there is an 'interplay within and between Hizmet's doings and Gülen's sayings over an expansive temperospatial axis against a range of issues' (238), but he appears to have come to the same conclusion independently for himself. While Enes Ergene suggests that Gülen's 'breakthrough' out of a closed circle of 'sterile repetition' of texts and principles came through his passionate concern for education, Weller suggests it also came from the contribution made to Gülen's life, practice, thinking, and teaching by the community of Hizmet (240).

The word 'context' in the sub-title of this book thus bears several meanings. On the one hand the author is placing Gülen's thought and practice in the context of the community that he inspired, following the track of 'interactive development'. This leads to a fascinating exploration of what the future of Hizmet might be after the death of Gülen. On the other hand, Weller finds 'context' important in terms of the situating of Gülen's thought within the synthesis created by the coming together of Turkish culture with Islam. Here he follows Ergene in finding that Gülen's model is one that re-generates a 'tolerant interpretation and understanding of Muslim-Turkish Sufism within contemporary circumstances', although offering a more socially-oriented and global vision (195–6). But third, 'context' refers to Gülen's exegetical method of contextualisation, reading the Qur'an, the Sunnah and the Hadith in a way that allows for changing contexts in space and time. Weller shows how, while rooted deeply in the traditional Islamic disciplines, Gülen always looks to the requirements of the time and location as a principle of interpretation, based in the conviction that divine revelation is vital, present, and continuous. Gülen's outlook here seems extraordinarily close to the view of the relation between scripture and tradition developed in the Catholic Church at Vatican II in Dei Verbum (Flannery 1975, 754–55), though Weller does not make this suggestion.

In turn, this particular observation about context offers an insight for the future of Hizmet that Weller shares with a number of its members. There is the hope that the movement will not treat Gülen's writings as a 'fixed deposit' to be merely preserved

(as happened with Said Nursi's writings in the Nurcu movement), but will undertake a process of 'localisation', following Gülen's own example of developing his thought in new ways in new contexts, and so adapting it flexibly in new cultural forms. Weller shows how Gülen himself adapted the traditional 'five purposes' of Islam by adding the sixth principle of freedom (including freedom of religion), which he judged to be necessary in the modern world (131), and Weller then records one member of Hizmet as suggesting that a seventh should be added in the present climate crisis – that of care for the environment (216). Weller's own suggestion for the future direction of Hizmet picks up Ihsan Yılmaz's concept of 'ijtihad by conduct', in which Islamic principles and laws can be understood in the very process of acting in a way that fits the changing needs of society. In agreement with a Hizmet participant, Abdulkerim Balcı, he suggests that this approach is faithful to Gülen's activism and would be best expressed 'ecumenically' by involving those of other religions in the making of such ijtihads or decisions of principle (225, 235).

Yet there is another level of the author's dialogical method which gives the book an even greater originality. As an 'outsider' in Islamic religion, he nevertheless places himself empathetically –though not uncritically – within the Hizmet community and becomes himself a respondent to Gülen like his interviewees. Relating personal conversations he has had with Gülen, he creates his own perspective on his subject, and it seems to me that there is just a hint in Gülen's recorded response to him (as, for example, in his positive reception of Weller's reading of the Beatitudes (75, 103) from the Gospel of Matthew) that Weller may even have become part of the hermeneutical circle of Gülen's developing thought. But, regardless of this possibility, Weller effectively offers his own 'processing' of Gülen's teaching in the spirit of the 'interactive development' he highlights, and this constitutes a valuable dimension of the book.

I mean the author's focus on the idea of love as central to Gülen's teaching and activity. He cites Ergene's observation that Gülen presents many personalities and moves quickly from one discipline to another in his writing so that 'We need to start first perhaps by systematising his way of thinking', and 'his discourse has to be processed' (230). Without over-systematising, with the idea of love Weller has in fact offered some processing, or – we might say – theologising. Here I need to be transparent about my own approach to reviewing this book, which is not from the standpoint of expertise in Islamic scholarship but from the stance of a Christian theologian who is engaged in research into the meaning and practice of 'love in religion' (see http://www.loveinreligion.org). I do therefore dissent a little from the distinction Weller makes between religious studies and theology, remarking as he does that the latter 'usually entails the making and application of normative evaluative judgements' which he is avoiding in his account (4). Good theology, I suggest, is

ready to adapt and modify norms in the face of qualitative enquiry into human community, based in the conviction that revelation is ongoing and personal rather than static and propositional (Fiddes 2022, 121–30). In presenting Gülen himself as advancing not relativism but 'distinctive normativity', or an adaptation of norms to a distinct context (195), I suggest that Weller is including Gülen within a theological framework – indeed, he claims that Gülen is doing 'constructive theology' (237), just as – I suggest – Weller himself is doing. He admits this when he comments that neither Gülen nor Hizmet can be properly understood without leaving 'open explanatory space for the possibility of the unexpected being at work in ways that cannot be completely accounted for in humanly and historically reductionist terms' (240).

## The centrality of love

In this book there is, then, a pervasive tendency to systematise Gülen's thought and action around the idea and practice of love, human and divine. The author rightly refers (twice) to Gülen's own statement that 'I think if you are going to name one thing that lies at the heart of Islam, I would say that is love' (227), and he cites Gülen's quotation of the poet Rumi's invitation, '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' (108). Weller also properly appeals to the influence of the central place of love in Sufism, which was both the ethos of Gülen's early years and the basis of Said Nursi's writings which influenced him in his youth. He records Muhammad Çetin, a close associate of Gülen, as recalling: '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.' (85) In his article on love (maddabah) in the first volume of his work on Sufism, Gülen notes that 'Sufis have defined love as the relation of the heart with the Truly Beloved One, the irresistible desire felt for Him, the struggle to comply with His desires or commandments in all acts and thoughts, and the state of being enraptured and intoxicated without "sobriety" until the time of union or re-union.' (Gülen 2009, 173).

However, for all this, we should note that Gülen does not seem to use the idea of love as an organising principle in his thought. His book *Towards a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance* begins with a profound section on 'Love and Mercy', but his succeeding sections on tolerance, ideal humanity, terrorism, human rights, education, and globalism, while they mention love, do not rely an exposition of the nature of love (on this, see further below). Although the book is a collection of essays rather than a consecutive argument, if love were at the centre of his thought, one might expect to see it taking a focal part in the kaleidoscope of issues discussed. Gülen's reference to 'complying with God's commandments' in the definition of love I have

quoted above is characteristic of the Islamic understanding that, as he notes later in his article on maddabah, love can be understood as 'obedience, devotion, and unconditional submission' (Gülen 2009, 174). Often, then, when Gülen refers to human love of God, this is equivalent to devotion to God in general rather than a specific dimension of religious experience. As he puts it in *Towards a Global Civilization*, 'Love of God is our faith, our belief' (Gülen 2010, 11).

Weller notes that Sunier and Landman (2015) find Gülen integrating clusters of concepts in his worldview: first, tolerance, love, and compassion; second, dialogue, peace-building, and co-existence; and third, responsibility, civility, and citizenship (211). Love in this analysis, we notice, is just part of one cluster, but in this book the author has in effect plucked it out and found it to be an integrating thread, highlighting it in a number of areas of Gülen's thought. This is a kind of 'processing' of Gülen's ideas, but thoroughly illuminating and (in my view) valid within a dialogical method in which the author is himself a dialogue partner. Thus, for example, in Weller's account, love is closely associated with Gülen's commitment to diversity and what Weller calls 'principled plurality' (188–9). Gülen's spirituality, life of prayer and consciousness of God is seen as rooted in an 'ontological domain of love', and the permeating presence of divine love in the cosmos (125). Love is contrasted with conflict and is understood to be basic to all human relationships (126–7, cf. 227) and for Gülen, asserts Weller, is connected theologically with freedom, and especially freedom of religion, so that tolerance is not just a liberal adaptation to the modern world, but is rooted deeply in the nature of God (130, 135).

It is surely part of Weller's method of 'interactive' study of Gülen's thought and practice that he himself feeds back to Gülen what he perceives to be the focus of his thought, asking him in personal conversation what his advice would be to a person of a non-Muslim religion who wanted to be 'a better lover of God'. Gülen's answer includes the affirmation that '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.' His advice is that the lover of God in another religion should hold more deeply to the 'pillars' and 'messengers' of their own faith, in order to lift human life to a 'more angelic life' (103). The reader senses that Weller has prompted Gülen here to a systematic statement of his thought.

## Love and the Human

The author's 'processing' or 'theologising' of Gülen's thought is most clearly expressed in his proposition that Gülen's thought is best understood as a combination of love with a concern with the 'human'. Love and 'the human', he concludes are the two keys to both Gülen and the nature of Hizmet offered by his interviewees, and he

proposes that they can be integrated in what Sufism calls 'the Perfect Human'. This is not an impossibilist perfection, explains Weller, but a dynamic state of being characterised – in the words of a Hizmet interpreter – as 'enhancing the skills of the physical and the spiritual as God wills' (220).

In his book, *Towards a Global Civilization*, Gülen offers a section on 'The ideal human' who 'pursues perfection'. He certainly mentions several times that the 'ideal human' has an inner world that 'overflows with love and affection for humankind', and that such people will be 'lovers of God' and will 'love and embrace everyone'. He calls them 'ideal spirits and heroes of love', as well as 'devotees of love' and 'people of love' (Gülen 2010, 91–4). However, these affirmations are placed alongside many other insights into what it means to be truly human: it is (for instance) to live not only by reason and experience but by conscience and inspiration, to think and act freely, to establish justice, to seek solidarity, to be truth-loving and trustworthy, to shape oneself in the 'mould' of universal and eternal virtues and values, to follow purity of life, to make others feel safe, and to devote oneself to the three principles of goodness, beauty and truthfulness (Gülen 2010, 81–90).

Because Gülen is not a systematic thinker there is no substantial unpacking of the character of love, although someone more systematically minded could build a structure of thought about love on what he says about the other characteristics of the ideal human. One can trace there the outlines of a love which is both utterly self-giving, and yet at the same time reaches towards the fulfilment of desires; in traditional western thinking this would be love respectively as agape and as eros, and it is noteworthy that Gülen stresses aspects of human life that can be placed under both of these headings, rather than valuing one above the other. One might say that it is with agapeic love that ideal human beings are ready to 'give up their own desires and wishes' and 'sacrifice their happiness for that of others' (Gülen 2010, 85, 86). But one might also say that is an eros kind of love that drives 'people of heart' to a 'longing for transcendent realms … until they reach their Beloved One'. It is also a mark of eros to seek to know 'the depths of the self and the universe' (Gülen 2010, 84, 83). But Gülen does not seek to make these connections with love explicit. To suggest, as Weller does, that Gülen's wide-ranging thought can be assembled under the connection between love and the human definitely seems a systematic project.

Gülen does explicate love in one way: it is the basis of toleration, and 'heroes of love' are also 'heroes of tolerance'. He remarks that people of the heart 'love all who seek to serve in the name of their religion' and it seems clear that this applies to those of other religions than Islam, as he continues that 'they are ready, wholeheartedly, to cooperate with anybody who is on the straight path' (Gülen 2010, 85). Weller reflects this by suggesting that members of Hizmet should use their experience of be-

ing oppressed to share in the wider human experience of suffering and injustice, and so to work together with those of other religions in creating ecumenical itjihads which can focus on 'love and the human' (225). He ends the book with a 'call to continuously renewed and contextualised engagement with religious and spiritual sources *centred on love and the human*' (241. My italics) A reviewer always wants more from an author than he or she has offered in the limited compass of one book, but it is here that more detailed working out of the implications would be welcome, as the claim for the combination of 'love and the human' is a large one, not just in exegesis of Gülen but in a programme for future activism in which the author sees the inheritance of Gülen embodied.

## Love and Vulnerability

This book is certainly not an uncritical exercise in admiration of both Gülen and Hizmet, though it is an appreciative and sympathetic account. One significant critique, which the author has adopted from Özcan Keleş (Chair of the Dialogue Society's Board of Trustees) is what Keleş calls a 'post-fact justification' of Hizmet's experience of loss and – to a large degree – defeat of its aims on its home-ground of Turkey. While the movement's ability to cope with this is rooted in Gülen's long-standing challenge to a 'heroic' image of Islam as always victorious in conflict, Keleş also detects a 'whitewashing' of loss through simply assigning 'religious causality' to events. (170–2). One Hizmet member recorded by Weller, for example, suggests that the exile was God's judgement on their failure to spread the Hizmet message beyond the borders of Turkey, and was God's way of ensuring this would happen. (169) A related diagnosis was actually made by Gülen himself, writing, 'It appears that God and destiny pushed [members of Hizmet] forcibly to live in other parts of the world so that they can display this beautiful face of Islam and tell the world that Islam cannot be represented by ISIS or Al-Qaeda'. So, he concludes, 'I see this representation of Islam in a positive and peaceful way through members of Hizmet as some good that came out of this terrible situation' (168–9). While Keleş does not deny the possibility of this interpretation, he is concerned that always taking a positive view of loss simply reinforces the connection between the blessing of Allah and material blessings and inhibits a search for mistakes made.

This critique of 'post-fact justification' could in fact be related to the centrality of love by a Christian theologian, though probably not by a Muslim with strict views of the irresistible will and impassibility of God. I mean that losses and disasters like the persecution and exile of Hizmet can be understood not as part of a predestined course of life but as pains also suffered by a God whose love is vulnerable, and whose aims can – at least in the immediate future – be frustrated by human evil. Weller, from his stance as sympathetic, participant observer does not make any such theolo-

gical move, and it would probably be improper within the constraints of his method. Gülen insists that Islam intends to 'guide a person to worldly and eternal happiness through his own will. The emphasis on his own will is important which means that any kind of pressure, any kind of force has no place in the heart of Islam' (130). Some will be able to find in these words the seeds of the idea that God acts in a non-coercive, and so vulnerable manner, though Gülen, of course, has only human force in mind here, not divine pressure in the course of history.

Also conditioning Gülen's understanding of love is a dualistic view of the cosmos, which Weller notes but does not comment upon. Commenting on the different paths to God in different faiths, Gülen affirms that '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' (105). Citing Al-Ghazali, Gülen observes that 'animal tendencies' in human life cause us to stray from 'the centre of love' (126). In his book on 'Love and Tolerance', Gülen asserts that 'the sphere of the manifestation of love is the soul' (Gülen 2010, 11). Such a view is bound to take the Platonist view that love experienced in the human body is only the first stage towards a spiritual love of the divine, so that Gülen in his article on mad-dabah writes of 'a lover who transcends his or her self with the wings of love and reaches the Lord at the points of passion and enthusiasm, and carries out his or her responsibilities toward the King of his or her heart' (Gülen 2009, 173). Similar is Gülen's definition of union with God: 'In Sufism, the world is the realm of separation, because one's spirit (his or her main existence) is not corporeal and therefore does not belong to the corporeal world. It belongs to the immaterial or metaphysical worlds, where Divine manifestations are clearer' (Gülen 2009, 200).

To create any systematic understanding of love of God and neighbour, we would need to reflect further on whether this self-transcendent love is quite as distant from corporeal love as Gülen envisages (calling it a 'metaphorical love', Gülen 2009, 177), since love of the body as well as the spirit is surely required by service (hizmet) to the neighbour. If Weller were to develop further his proposition that the combination of love and the human results in the 'perfect human being', he would need to question whether it is possible to develop this within the dualistic view that human beings need to leave behind their 'animal' nature and attain the 'angelic' in order to be the true 'mirror' or image of God (127).

But these questions from a Christian theologian only show how successful the author of this book has been in his method of creating a dialogue between Gülen and members of his movement, an interaction in which he has sympathetically, though critically, placed himself. He has succeeded in also drawing the reader, such as myself,

into the same process and it is clear from his portrait of Fethullah Gülen that this truly exceptional Hojaefendi himself would approve.

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