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Trudy D. Conway

# Cross-cultural Dialogue on the Virtues

## The Contribution of Fethullah Gülen

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# Cross-cultural Dialogue on the Virtues

The Contribution of Fethullah Gülen

 Springer

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ISBN 978-3-319-07832-8      ISBN 978-3-319-07833-5 (eBook)  
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-07833-5  
Springer Cham Heidelberg New York Dordrecht London

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014942049

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*To my children, Sedira and  
Daniel Koucek, from whom  
I have learned so much about the virtues  
and who bring endless joy into my life*

# Preface

I welcomed the encouragement by the Rumi Forum of Washington, D.C. to write this book on the virtues in relation to the Gülen movement for its reflection is tied closely to my personal journey over the past 35 years. In marrying a devout Muslim from Iran, I began a journey of understanding and dialogue with people of the Islamic faith and culture. The journey has enriched my life in countless ways and has brought me to value the virtue of hospitality deeply and a range of related virtues central to such understanding and dialogue. I am grateful for the rich opportunities I have had to interact with people of the Islamic faith from Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Egypt, the Arab Emirates, Azerbaijan, and Turkey. They have taught me much about our common humanity and the rich diversity of cultural and religious traditions. Numerous books approach the Gülen movement through a political or sociological lens with the critical aim of identifying both strengths and weaknesses of this movement. The critical analyses of these studies are undeniably important. In contrast, this work pursues another type of inquiry. It seeks to explore the movement through a different lens by offering a descriptive account of the fundamental virtue orientation of this influential, peaceful, Islam-inspired international movement. It argues that this virtue orientation enables one to understand best both the origin and the telos of this movement. All subsequent critical analyses, focused on assessing the movement's principles, practices, projects, and institutions, must begin with understanding this foundation and orientation.

My initial interest in the virtue of hospitality developed in response to the very positive experiences I had of Middle Eastern hospitality while living in Iran from 1977 to 1979, after accepting an appointment to teach Philosophy at Pahlavi University (currently Shiraz University). During this turbulent period of the Iranian Revolution, I was welcomed graciously by family members, students and colleagues of Shiraz University, neighbors in our Shiraz community, and Iranians I met in travels throughout Iran. I was fortunate enough to have additional positive experiences in the Arab Emirates, where I interacted with students from a range of Middle Eastern societies studying at the American University of Sharjah. Given these experiences, I welcomed the opportunity to attend philosophical conferences in Turkey and to participate in a Council on International Education Exchange seminar in Turkey focusing on religion and politics. Interactions with all these peoples of the Islamic faith were characterized by the hospitality I came to associate

with Islamic culture. But the experience that engaged my strong personal and philosophical interest in exploring this virtue was my participation in the 2007 intercultural dialogue trip through Turkey sponsored by the Rumi Forum of Washington, D.C. This trip introduced me to members of the Gülen movement and the movement's key emphasis on the virtue of tolerance. The Turkish term *hosgörü* is commonly translated into English as "tolerance," but as this study will argue, the term has a far deeper spiritual meaning closer to the meaning of the virtue of hospitality. While tolerance means to refrain from harming, to put up with in a way characterized by forbearance, *hosgörü* fosters welcoming interactions among diverse people. Gatherings of members of the Gülen movement in their universities, schools, hospitals, media centers, homes, and dialogue centers clearly manifested this virtue which I had come to value as most characteristic of these people. These gracious and welcoming encounters sparked my interest in reading the works of Fethullah Gülen and the seminal works that inspired him. I hoped to discover both the role the virtue of hospitality played in shaping this movement, and what people of all cultures, but most importantly contemporary Western culture, might learn from reflection on this important virtue and its related virtues and practices.

During these years of interaction with people of the Islamic faith abroad and in the United States, another story came to influence my reflections. Upon my return from Iran, William Collinge, a colleague in my university's Theology department, introduced me to the story of the people of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, France—a community who lived the virtue of hospitality in ways that evoke deep admiration within students of ethics.<sup>1</sup> My reflections on and interest in hospitality were deepened by the story of the lives of these rural peasants in southern France during World War II. Moved by accounts of these French Huguenots who welcomed Jewish refugees into their homes at grave personal risk during the Holocaust, I brought to campus members of this community, both Chambonnais who did the welcoming and refugees who survived because of such welcoming. I remain convinced that the efficacious moral goodness of these people embodied the kind of human community Fethullah Gülen sought to encourage and model. Their story supports his conviction that there are universal moral virtues found within different religious and cultural communities. The Le Chambon story confirms that if persons could be encouraged to practice the virtue of hospitality in their everyday lives, then such a virtuous response would come naturally even in times requiring great moral courage.

The Chambonnais respected the refugees who came to their doorsteps as human persons who shared a common humanity while at the same time had robust cultural and religious identities. They revealed what the philosopher Elaine Scarry calls "generous imaginings" which enabled them to place themselves in the life experiences of foreigners different from themselves. They welcomed foreigners

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<sup>1</sup> There are a number of accounts of the community of Le Chambon, but the most extensive philosophical study is Philip Hallie's *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994). Pierre Sauvage's *Weapons of the Spirit* (1989) offers a cinematic account of his being a refugee saved by the Chambonnais.



into their midst and did so without requiring that either of them abandon their own deep moral and religious commitments. Rather than simply tolerating their guests' differences, they respectfully affirmed them, encouraging and helping the refugees to live as practicing Jews. They actively sought out opportunities for interactions that advanced their mutual understanding of their respective beliefs and practices. Similar to the convictions of Fethullah Gülen, they believed the people of the Abrahamic tradition are called by God to welcome and respect all human persons as persons. The Jewish philosopher Levinas captures well the spirit of hospitality embodied in the Le Chambon community when he writes,

That a people should accept those who come and settle among them—even though they are foreigners with their own customs and clothes, their own way of speaking, their own smell—that a people should give them an *Akhsaniah*, such a place at the inn, and the wherewithal to breathe and live—is a song to the glory of God ... (98)

The Chambonnais could offer hospitality to refugees in such dangerous times because the practicing of the virtues was at the very core of their communal identity. The texts they read, the hymns they sang, the sermons they heard, the actions they witnessed, the lessons they passed on to their children—all focused on the living of the virtues. In a similar way, the virtues one immediately notices in encounters with members of the Gülen movement are rooted in the ways lived by the Prophet Mohammad and members of the first Islamic community, ritualized in prayers and practices, and explored in the writings of Fethullah Gülen. As with the Chambonnais, central among the virtues of the Gülen community is the virtue of hospitality. Their hospitable welcoming enables others to learn of the insights of their founder and thriving worldwide community. In turn, reflection on what is encountered in these texts and interactions enables others to extend and deepen their own exploration of the virtues and the role they play in a well-lived life.

I have appreciated the opportunity to engage in this exploration. It has extended philosophical reflections developed in my book *Wittgenstein on Foundations* and articles exploring the writings of contemporary Western philosophers as they bear on the conditions and possibilities for cross-cultural dialogue and the virtues central to it. It has also extended the discussion of the virtues developed in my recently published work *Where Justice and Mercy Meet*. My interactions with members of the Gülen movement enabled me to move from abstract philosophical conceptualizations and theorizing on these issues to reflections on the lives of people living them.

The completion of a work always evokes feelings of relief followed by a sense of gratitude for those who played a role in its creation. My work has always centered on the activity of teaching and learning from students. I appreciate the conversations I have had with students in courses exploring the virtues in general and hospitality in particular, especially in my courses on Moral Philosophy, Intercultural Dialogue, Virtues and Vices, Tolerance/Intolerance, Forgiveness and Mercy, and Compassion: East and West. I also appreciate my good fortune in teaching at a university with a strong Core curriculum that provides ample opportunity to explore the virtues with colleagues in faculty development

programs and informal interdisciplinary conversations. These conversations with students and colleagues led to scholarly presentations and publications strengthened by discussions with philosophers at conferences and with my brother, Jeremiah Conway, with whom I share common philosophical interests and have enjoyed philosophical conversation for decades. I am grateful to Andy Fiala, the journal editor of the *Society for Philosophy in the Contemporary World* for granting permission to draw on segments of my works published in their journal.

Philosophical readings and exchanges have deepened my reflection on the virtues. But in the end, most of what I have learned about the virtues in general and hospitality in particular has been through witnessing the practicing of the virtues by others. In early childhood, I was impressed by my parents' interest in and respect for people of other faiths and cultures, attitudes I failed to see in many others in our local community. In our local Catholic school, my mother was the only teacher in the 1950s to bring students to visit the local synagogue and other houses of worship and to invite persons of other religious faiths and cultural backgrounds to speak in her classes. As my parents aged and the religious-ethnic makeup of our New York City neighborhood dramatically changed, I was impressed to see them begin Spanish language studies at a nearby university and volunteer to tutor Chinese immigrant children in our home. Their interest in other religions and cultures likely brought me to be open to my good fortune in meeting my husband, Abdolreza Banan, who first introduced me to the Islamic faith and culture. Our own journeying between cultures and traditions has deeply enriched our lives and marriage and helped us raise two wonderful children, Sedira and Daniel, who move with ease amidst diversities of race, religion, class, and culture. We are grateful for our very good fortune in meeting members of the Rumi Forum of Washington who introduced us to the beliefs and activities of the Gülen movement. We are especially grateful for the very gracious hospitality of Dr. Ali Yurtsever, former Director of the Rumi Forum of Washington, and Ms. Jena Luedtke, Director of Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue, during and after our intercultural dialogue trip to Turkey, and Emre Celik, current Director, in subsequent years. Through them we have had opportunities for ongoing encounters with worldwide members of this movement at symposia, Iftar and friendship dinners, lectures, and conferences. For all of these gatherings which so embody the hospitable spirit of the poet Rumi, we are most grateful. Over time, members of the Gülen movement have begun to characterize their international movement as the "Hizmet movement." This characterization avoids misrepresentation of the movement as a cult focused on a religious leader. Hizmet translated as "service to humanity" captures well the fundamental ethos of the movement, which originated under the inspiration of Fethullah Gülen but went on to develop rich and highly varied ways of developing and embodying this service-to-others ethic throughout the world. Given the aptness of this more recent description focused on a religiously inspired ethic of peace and dialogue, it is fitting to use it throughout this work.

The hospitality and support of the Rumi Forum of Washington made possible this study. Raising children in a bicultural family brings one to recognize the

importance of actively promoting understanding and dialogue across cultures and religions. Raising our children during three decades of heightened tensions between our countries (Iran and the United States) made us deeply value the good work of the Hizmet movement. The size and impact of this movement has grown at an amazing rate over the last three decades. Scholarly accounts face the challenge of keeping abreast of the numbers of schools, charitable organizations, and dialogue centers associated with this expansive movement. It is evident that Fethullah Gülen has developed an efficacious spiritual movement that speaks to the needs of our age, rooted in the conviction that peaceful relations among persons and communities must be rooted in commitment to mutual understanding and dialogue. Gülen's writings and, even more importantly, the living witness of those he has inspired bring us to see how central the practicing of virtues is to the furthering of such understanding and dialogue. It is my hope that this book may introduce readers to the Hizmet movement's understanding and practicing of the virtues and thereby deepen their own cross-cultural exploration of the virtues. I am convinced understanding of this Gülen-inspired movement is best understood through the lens of the virtues they foster and live. I remain convinced that we have much to learn from these steadfast supporters of peaceful relations and dialogue. Through them we can begin to understand better what is most needed within our families, local communities, and global interactions.

Trudy D. Conway

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# Biography

**Trudy D. Conway** received her Ph.D. in Philosophy from Fordham University in 1981. After teaching at Shiraz University (formerly Pahlavi University) in Iran, she began teaching at Mount Saint Mary's University in Maryland where she is currently a Professor of Philosophy. In addition to two other books, *Wittgenstein on Foundations* (1989) and *Where Justice and Mercy Meet* (2013), she has published a range of scholarly articles on contemporary philosophy, the virtues, and crosscultural understanding and dialogue. She has served as president of the Society for Philosophy in the Contemporary World and Delta Epsilon Sigma, held two endowed professorships, one sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and received numerous teaching, social justice, and service awards. She is active in a number of organizations promoting crosscultural understanding and social justice initiatives. She teaches undergraduate courses in the history of philosophy, contemporary philosophy, ethics, and specialized courses on the virtues.