

## *Book Reviews*

### **Towards an Islamic Enlightenment: The Gülen Movement**

*M. Hakan Yavuz*

*New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 320 pages.*

M. Hakan Yavuz was one of the early contributors to the literature on the Gülen movement, co-editing a major volume on the subject with John Esposito in 2003 (Hakan Yavuz and John Esposito, *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement* [Syracuse University Press: 2003]). In the intervening decade the movement has grown considerably in size and influence both within Turkey and beyond, and has emerged as a major source of interest and apparently perennial controversy. *Towards an Islamic Enlightenment* is therefore a timely if ambitious book, for it sets out to provide a comprehensive account of the movement. The author opens with an analysis of Fethullah Gülen's theological teachings and then explores the movement's structure and organization, as well as its emergence and development in the context of Turkish social, religious, and political history. No other scholar has attempted such a holistic analysis, for others tend to focus on just one of its many areas of influence, namely, education (Bekim Agai, *Zwischen Netzwerk und Diskurs - Das Bildungsnetzwerk um Fethullah Gülen (geb. 1938): Die flexible Umsetzung modernen islamischen Gedankengutes* [EB-Verlag, 2004]), politics (Berna Turam, *Between Islam and the State: The Politics of Engagement* [Stanford University Press: 2007]), and economic enterprise (Joshua D. Hendrick, *Gülen: The Ambiguous Politics of Market Islam in Turkey and the World* [New York Press: 2013]).

Yavuz lays out his thesis of "Islamic Enlightenment" in the introduction by drawing a paradigmatic distinction between the Muslim intellectual tradition's literalist/fundamentalists and modernist/reformists. He acknowledges the impact of Enlightenment ideas on the major thinkers in the latter category, but notes that those ideas have historically remained the preserve of the Muslim elite and never "penetrated the masses" (p. 6). According to Yavuz, the

Gülen movement is distinctive because it has succeeded in “vernacularizing” the Enlightenment’s ideals, which he identifies as reason, tolerance, science, and public discussion. Pious believers turned this “new Islamic thinking,” which emerged against the backdrop of Kemalist secularism, into a public voice for themselves by re-casting modernity’s values in Islamic terms: “Today, more Muslims embrace the ideas of Enlightenment as the defining features of their faith and use these ideas to intervene in the otherwise historically insular, secularist public sphere” (p. 7).

The book is divided into three sections: “Man,” “Movement,” and “Meaning.” Chapter 1 provides a thorough account of Gülen’s life (something hitherto lacking in the English-language sources) where, along with a discussion of Said Nursi’s (d. 1969) seminal influence upon him, the significance of Gülen’s heritage in Erzurum’s *dadaş* (frontier) variant of Islam is also explored. This personal background is important, because it frames the nationalistic flavor of his teachings and his preoccupation with the desirability of a strong state for a flourishing of Islamic society. The following chapter promises an analysis of what Yavuz terms Gülen’s “contextual theology.” The account covers the central theological themes of Gülen’s writings – his emphasis on action as a necessary accompaniment to faith, the problem of morality (and its definition) in the modern world, and Islam’s compatibility with modernity and democratic governance – yet ultimately disappoints due to the author’s tendency toward broad-stroke generalizations and, rather surprisingly, the lack of sustained close engagement with the sources.

The book’s most valuable material, found in the second section, comprises Yavuz’s recent field interviews with three focus groups in Aydın, Ankara and Istanbul, as well as his fieldwork in Germany, Bosnia, Macedonia, and Azerbaijan. The unexplained exclusion of the movement’s American manifestation is somewhat surprising, given that its emergence and expansion is a major development of the last decade, the period of time with which Yavuz is concerned. This gap notwithstanding, chapter 3 provides an insightful analysis of the movement’s structure and the twin principles of *himmət* (altruistic giving) and *hizmet* (sacrificial service) that underpin it. The author lists four possible reasons for individuals’ financial donations: religious, patriotic, personal egotistic, and social pressure. His assessment is that while motives may be mixed, one’s desire to invest in the afterlife is of primary importance. He concludes that “in the Gülen movement, internal spiritual motives for giving are more dominant than those stemming from material benefits for the individual” (p. 83).

In chapter 4, “Education and the Creation of a ‘Golden Generation,’” the author explores the movement’s activities in secular education by focusing on

the ubiquitous *ışıkvevis* (lighthouse), which he characterizes as “information networks” and “associational incubators” (p. 101). Yet he does not mention their other important function: a gateway for potential recruits. Chapter 5, which is shorter than the others, addresses the encounter between Islamic piety and capitalism within the movement in light of the Weberian thesis by concentrating on understanding the “inner-worldly aestheticism” in Gülen’s teachings. According to Yavuz, “piety, for Gülen, is not only about fulfilling basic religious rituals, but most importantly, it is about acting collectively to change the misfortunes of the people” (p. 123).

The third (and final) section explores the movement’s underlying philosophical principles and its associated engagement in various domains of Turkish public life. Chapter 6 features a discussion that, situated in a Habermasian framework, looks at the movement’s engagement with the Kemalist project of secularization, a project that Yavuz sees as “highly intrusive” and characterized by “force[d] homogenization from the top-down” (p. 139). He argues that Islamic actors such as the Gülen movement have been responsible for the pluralization and democratization of the Turkish public sphere, which has enabled Islamic beliefs to be reformulated in novel ways to respond to contemporary social, economic, and political realities. Chapter 7 studies the movement’s preoccupation with reconciling modern science with Islam in light of Nursian thought. Characterized by a differentiation between material existence (*mana-yi ismi*) and its indicative meaning (*mana-yi harfi*), the author argues that Nursi’s philosophy of Islamic science facilitates not only the modernization of religious faith, but also its internal secularization. Chapter 8 analyzes Gülen’s theology of interfaith dialogue, which, we learn, actually tends to avoid thorny issues and “stresses practical and dialogical over intellectual engagement” (p. 191). The author observes that in recent years there has been a shift away from interfaith toward intercultural dialogue, with “more emphasis on joint action rather than on debate over theological issues” (p. 196).

Chapter 9 addresses the relationship between the movement and the Turkish state’s bureaucratic offices, as well as its enigmatic stance on political engagement. According to Yavuz’s analysis, the movement is not apolitical, for it manages to influence public debates informally, through unofficial social networks, instead of through overt political activism. The uneasy relationship between the Turkish military and previous Islamist political parties explains this muted and negotiated mode of engagement. The author presents a sustained account of the movement’s historic encounters with the military to illustrate his argument. Chapter 10 summarizes the major domestic criticisms of the movement, which come predominantly from the Alevis, the secularists, the Islamists, and the Kurdish minority.

*Towards an Islamic Enlightenment* is a bold attempt to document and explore what is surely one of the most enigmatic socio-religious phenomena to emerge from the contemporary Muslim world. While the addition of a comprehensive, introduction-level scholarly text to the literature on the Gülen movement is to be welcomed, the book does have certain limitations. For example, it is regrettable that Yavuz does not address in more depth the major and visible points of tension within the movement, namely, the questionable participation of women, the limits of its interest in the natural sciences, and the apparent restrictions on its affiliates as regards intellectual freedom. Although these issues are touched upon, they are left largely unexplored. A further shortcoming is the rather partisan tone that, far more muted than a great deal of the movement's apologetic literature, is nonetheless pervasive. This is also reflected in the structure of many chapters: a short section at the end is left for "criticisms" (of the movement) that are mostly (and swiftly) rebutted in the concluding remarks. This has the unfortunate effect of giving the book a rather oppositional structure, as well as blurring the boundary between critical sociological inquiry and the kind of perennial partisanship that characterizes so much of the debate surrounding Fethullah Gülen. These criticisms aside, the book provides a helpful general introduction for newcomers to the field and contributes some original fieldwork data that will be of interest to specialists.

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