

World Interfaith Harmony Week 2026
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN PLURALISTIC SOCIETIES
Collective Responsibility in Countering Discrimination, Hate, and Intolerance
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**Religious Freedom, Polarization, and Systematic Discrimination in Türkiye:
The Case of the Hizmet Movement**

Thank you for the invitation to speak on this important panel.

Today, I would like to address the erosion of religious freedom in Türkiye after the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016—focusing specifically on how **a particular religious tradition, its thinkers, texts, and followers** have been systematically targeted. The case of **Mr. Fethullah Gülen and the Hizmet Movement** illustrates how religious freedom can be transformed from a protected right into a mechanism of exclusion, punishment, and social fragmentation.

What I will argue is simple but serious: in post-2016 Türkiye, restrictions on religious freedom have not been applied in a general or neutral manner. Instead, they have been **selective, targeted, and discriminatory**, aimed primarily at Hizmet-related individuals, ideas, and institutions. This has contributed directly to polarization, social hostility, and a deep threat to social peace.

1. Criminalization of Hizmet-Related Religious Texts and Authors

Following July 2016, the Turkish authorities adopted an approach in which **religious identity and intellectual affiliation** were treated as indicators of criminal intent. In practice, this meant that **religious texts, sermons, and writings associated with Fethullah Gülen and Hizmet-affiliated scholars** were collectively stigmatized and criminalized.

Books, recorded sermons, essays, and even private religious notes—none of which contained calls for violence—were nevertheless used in court cases as **evidence of terrorist organization membership**. Possession of these materials, recommending

them to others, or engaging with them in religious study circles became grounds for prosecution.

This criminalization was not limited to books and authors. In Türkiye, **numerous religious figures—both from the Hizmet Movement and from other Islamic circles—were removed from their positions, dismissed from the Directorate of Religious Affairs, and forcibly separated from their congregations.**

Over the past several years, I have spoken with **many imams and religious educators** who had served their communities for decades without any record of violence, political activity, or disciplinary misconduct. Their common experience was strikingly similar: they were dismissed overnight, barred from serving as religious leaders, and publicly stigmatized—not for what they had done, but for what they were believed to represent.

Many of these individuals lost not only their jobs, but also their **vocational identity**, their **community ties**, and their **social standing**. In some cases, members of their former congregations became afraid even to greet them in public. These stories are not exceptions; they reflect a **broader and systematic pattern** of religious exclusion.

This represents a fundamental violation of religious freedom. What was punished was not an act of violence or incitement, but **reading, believing, and thinking within a specific religious tradition**. The result has been widespread fear, self-censorship, and the effective exclusion of an entire religious-intellectual legacy from the public sphere.

2. Institutionalized Hate Speech and Public Demonization

Legal measures were accompanied by an aggressive **public discourse of demonization**. Hizmet members were repeatedly described in official statements and pro-government media as “traitors,” “terrorists,” “internal enemies,” or even as a “virus.”

This language did not merely express political opposition; it produced **moral exclusion**. By framing Hizmet followers as enemies of religion and the nation, this rhetoric legitimized discrimination and normalized social hostility. Many individuals experienced ostracism in their neighborhoods, workplaces, and even within extended families.

When such language is endorsed by state officials, it ceases to be opinion—it becomes a **social signal**, shaping behavior and justifying abuse.

3. Collective Purge from Professional and Social Life

One of the most visible consequences of this approach has been the **mass exclusion of Hizmet-affiliated individuals from professional and social life**. Tens of thousands of teachers, academics, judges, doctors, and civil servants were dismissed through emergency decrees—without individualized evidence or effective legal remedy.

Beyond public employment, informal blacklisting practices made it nearly impossible for many to find work in the private sector. Passport cancellations prevented international mobility, effectively trapping families inside the country. In many cases, spouses and children suffered consequences despite having no alleged involvement.

This amounts to what many observers have described as a form of **civil death**—a punishment extending far beyond the individual to entire families and communities.

4. Politicization of Mosques and Friday Sermons

Perhaps one of the most troubling aspects of this period has been the use of **mosques and Friday sermons** as instruments of political polarization. Mosques, which should serve as inclusive spaces of spiritual reflection, were increasingly drawn into ideological messaging.

Academic research—including the study shared with this panel—documents how sermons emphasized themes of obedience, loyalty, and internal threat, while using concepts such as “fitna,” “betrayal,” or “deviation” in ways that implicitly targeted the Hizmet Movement.

When religious language is employed to stigmatize a particular group, faith itself becomes a tool of division. This undermines both the spiritual integrity of religious institutions and the social trust necessary for coexistence.

5. Religious Freedom Violations in Prisons

Discrimination against Hizmet followers has been particularly severe in detention settings. Many prisoners have been denied basic religious rights, including access to religious books, participation in communal prayers, and spiritual counseling.

In some tragic cases, this discrimination has had fatal consequences. The deaths of **Halime Gülsu** and **Gökhan Açikkollu** highlight how denial of medical care, combined with discriminatory treatment, can lead to irreversible loss of life. These cases underscore that religious discrimination is not an abstract concept—it has **human costs**.

6. Erosion of the Rule of Law

Underlying all these developments is a serious erosion of the rule of law. In Hizmet-related cases, **association replaced action**, intention replaced evidence, and collective identity replaced individual responsibility.

The European Court of Human Rights has issued multiple judgments finding violations of fundamental rights in cases linked to these prosecutions, including breaches of the right to liberty, fair trial, and legal certainty.

This is not merely a legal problem—it is a moral one. A system that punishes belief, affiliation, or thought cannot claim legitimacy.

Conclusion: Why This Matters Beyond One Movement

The case of the Hizmet Movement is not only about one community. It demonstrates how fragile religious freedom becomes when the state defines acceptable belief and criminalizes dissenting religious interpretations.

Defending religious freedom in this context does not mean defending a particular movement. It means defending **human dignity, pluralism, and social peace**. A society that allows one religious tradition to be excluded today may find others excluded tomorrow.

Religious freedom is not a privilege granted by the state; it is a fundamental right. Protecting it is not optional—it is essential for any society that seeks justice, coexistence, and lasting peace.

Thank you.