

# **An Absent Influence? The Fetullah Gulen Movements in Turkish Islam and their potential influence upon European Islam and global education**

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## **1. Introduction**

My way into this area of research, which has taken me in the past three years to the US to visit schools related to Fetullah Gulen and to Turkey to visit more institutions linked to this movement, comes about by an inductive method.

1.1 Becoming co-supervisor for a PhD candidate, who is a Turkish national then resident here in the UK.

1.2 Encountering other Turkish nationals who are observant Muslims.

1.3 And then field work experiences in the US and in several provinces of Turkey

From this meeting with, to me a fresh manifestation of contemporary Islam I began to explore deductively and to read into the writings of Fetullah Gulen himself and the other key ideologue in this expression Said Nursi [1873-1960]. With these axes I was examining a considerable global network of schools and universities, as yet unrepresented physically in the UK and thus an 'absent influence', and considering Gulen's ideas on education, faith and the development of a contemporary Islam.

Precision however, is essential here because Gulen and 'brothers' in this 'movement', which is not a defined organization in the sense of being a *tariqa*, or a pressure group, or a hierarchy but nonetheless bears signs of being a 'social movement', have indistinct links with the 300+ schools and institutions that currently exist and function from Turkey, to the Russian Republics, to Kenya, Uganda, and onto the Philippines and elsewhere.

In Gulen's own terms he is an 'educator' with members of his movement calling him 'Hocaefendi', a title of respect given to religious teachers in Turkey. This is the term with which my respondents all used when referring to Gulen and his work. He also makes it clear that he has no schools of his own and plays down the notion of his leading a 'movement'.

'I am tired of saying that I don't have any schools'

Webb: n.d 106.

Nonetheless, since Gulen began to attract a circle of students, colleagues and business men [who are key to this 'movement'] at Izmir in the 1960's some 300 schools, primary, high schools, English language schools, and universities have been founded and sponsored by Turkish business entrepreneurs in fifty countries [Gulen 1998b, ii]. Whilst each institution is independently run, they are reliant upon Turkish origin finance for resources and staffing with Turkish teachers. There is also a shared vision, curriculum, as well as the common human and material resources.

## **2. Encountering Gulen Schools.**

My encounters within these Gulen schools had begun in the USA – where are both primary/elementary and high schools. There are such developments in St Petersburg and Moscow. Outside Turkey these schools are attended by children and students from all or no faiths.

Within Turkey itself I was able to visit and meet both staff and students in a dozen schools, and then the Fatih University just outside Istanbul.

In the UK we have life-by-league-table. If this is not quite the case in Turkey then these schools achieve success in various academic Olympiads in the natural sciences, ICT, and languages. Students and primary age children quickly entered English language mode when I conversed with them.

These schools do not however, have an overt Muslim ethos. Within Turkey there is the required and normal niche in the entrance hall with the bust of Ataturk and an extract from an address to young people. There are glass cases filled with trophies and prizes gained in competitions.

2.1 the emphasis is upon transmitting not so much confessional beliefs as Qur'anic values of honesty, endeavour, harmony and service. There is an amity and universalism about the project.

2.2 there are other aspects of Gulen's work – television, journalism, publishing and support for poor students, some of which is politically controversial.

### 3. The Development of the Gulen Movement.

Three different stages in the evolution of the movement can be identified.

#### 3.1 Community Building: 1970-1983

From his base in Izmir, the Kestanepazri Qur'an School, Gulen began to establish a group of students, who were spiritually alert and intellectually motivated. Classes, personal contacts and summer camps effectively gave students supplementary education in maths and the sciences, alongside religious education.

This was combined with Gulen's charisma, and focussing on the Sunnah of the Prophet and the Ottoman period, which in Gulen's estimation was a 'great epoch' in Turkey because so many sought to live in accord with the Qur'an.

As you will be aware Turkey went through in this period a time of political polarisation of ideologies with left wing movements emerging. Gulen's movement adopted an anti-communist rhetoric and began to create informal networks of adherents [*deshanes*] and 'lighthouses' [*isi kevlere*] to draw students in particular together and to fashion social capital.

These 'lighthouses' have for example transferred easily into the USA whereby Turkish students and those who have graduated from postgraduate study in US universities form private-public living spaces. Participants eat, pray, and live together and offer to newcomers from Turkey or Central Asia a familiar and secure environment within which to settle.

These community houses [and I saw and stayed within them in Houston, Austin, and College Station in Texas] are places for discussion, modelling Islamic values, watching soccer from home, and attracting people into or back into the practice of their faith.

Gulen envisages private or personal piety being transformed into action in the public sphere viz. educational contexts, the media and in commerce.

...we need...private shelters for the youth against disbelief and corruptive influences of the system. These shelters are the lighthouses. And I hope they help each and every young person to create their personality by living together and enlightening their environment with Islamic ideals.

Yavuz 2003. 32.

Gulen defines these 'lighthouses' as:

...places where the people's deficiencies that may have been caused by their human deficiencies are healed. They are sacred places where p

lands and projects are produced, the continuation of the metaphysical tension is provided, and courageous and faithful persons are being raised. Said Nursi himself said that "the men who acquire the true faith can challenge the universe."

It is undoubtedly clear today the conquest of the world can be realized...by penetrating into people's hearts with the Qur'an in one hand and reason in the other.....

Gulen 1997. 12

These households have a significant formative power spiritually, morally, educationally, and in aspirations.

Their spiritual, academic and moral character stand them in good stead in the competitive world of Turkey and in the wider world. Personal conduct guides their public conduct.

The young saint *sakirt*

Spirituality/Communal Life - Political Conservatism/Nationalism - the

Movement's Goals

3.2 'The Education Movement' 1983-1997.

Changes in Turkey's political atmosphere post 1980 allowed Gulen [with Prime minister Turgut Ozal] and his movement to become 'public' and to enter the spheres of education, media and culture.

So a definable 'social movement' was fashioned, with outlets to form public opinion: *Zaman* [daily paper] and *Samanyolu TV*.

Personal networks also remain important as they are in Turkish society.

Moral emphases: Social responsibility; Gender segregation; moralisation of public domain.

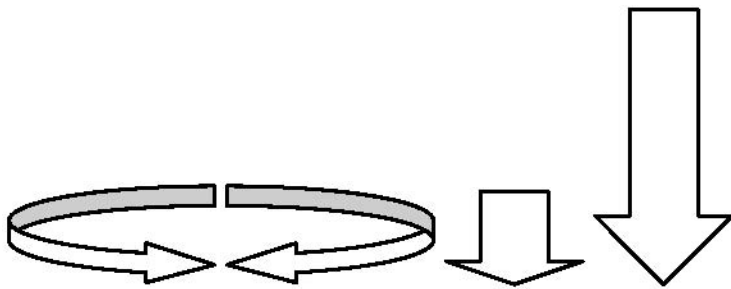
This is supported financially by these networks of businessmen, financiers, educationalists, journalists in a market economy. This is a model of religion and work ethic combining to create a new Islamic society. In some ways this is the

ideal of the Turkish Kemalist Republican ideal: people who are Muslim by religion [personal] and European in thought and action [public].

1983: Private initiative enters Turkey's education sphere and in 1986 the Ozal government withdrew an arrest warrant against Gulen [issued after the 1980 military coup].

If the movement was a tool in Ozal's policies against radical Islamic groups then Gulen took the opportunity to respond as this coincided with his own goals.

Free Market economy and Enterprise



Supports education

Creates Muslim/Turkish moral atmosphere

2004: 300+ schools across the developing world with 7 x universities [Liberal Arts Colleges] in Turkey. Stress on Natural Sciences and English, which is the principal means of education.

Links to conservative and pious businessmen and their networks 'supporters' who are encouraged to visit their sponsored schools and combine this with business openings.

An initial critique here is that whilst these schools achieve exemplary standards academically and create well balanced and purposeful young people, they are still conformist and have not as yet focussed upon creating critical thinkers.

3.2.1 Equally, I suspect that the Islam professed by the movement and its adherents is [whilst wholly orthodox in observance] is the Islam of Anatolia and wider Turkey not strictly [Qur'anic' but Sufi and legendary, following Nursi's use of parable and legend to propagate itself.

3.2.2 Until 1990 Soviet atheism was in competition with Islam in Central Asia so Muslim teachers have had to show that religion and natural science are compatible.

3.2.3 Gulen's schools therefore advocate a softer, Sufi orientated Islam open to contemporary knowledge rather than a stricter Saudi model. This also allows for a Turkic nationalism to enter the discourse and schools.

Thus, an intellectual, conservative generation of opinion formers, wealth creators, and academics are being fashioned.

3.2.4 Gulen also reached out in an Inter-Religious Dialogue trajectory by meeting Pope John Paul II and the Patriarch of Constantinople – Bartholomeus.

In reaction the secular elite found itself confronted by an Islamically influenced elite with a global profile. In essence the Gulen movement was Islamising what had hitherto been the preserve of the Kemalist power bloc. This new movement which had its own social contract and increasing social capital could not be incorporated within the establishment.

3.3 Persecution and Liberalisation 1997 –

29 February 1997 'soft military coup' Arguably, Gulen has sought to offer a liberal alternative to radical Islamism, which is a source of anxiety to the secular establishment. He has sought legitimacy with the state, and has criticised other movements. But:

21 June 1999 military sponsored attacks on Gulen in press; questions over inter-religious dialogue; and suspicions of Gulen penetrating state institutions.

Post 1997 Turkish people, as they may be encouraged to think of themselves as Turkish and 'one people' have also moved to identify their cultural diversity. Social diversity leads to liberalised thought and global perspectives. So, now in exile effectively in the USA, Gulen is less politically centred and more community, society and market focussed..

And But I want to focus on the educational vision as inspired by faith.

#### **4. The Educational Vision.**

4.1 Dysfunctional education: in his writings Gulen sees several divisions in Turkey's society and educational system:

'At a time when modern schools concentrated on ideological dogmas, institutions of religious education [*medreses*] broke with life, institutions of spiritual training [*tekkes*] were immersed in sheer metaphysics, and the army restricted itself to sheer force, this coordination was essentially not possible.'

Gulen 1996d. 11.

In the Turkish context therefore:

Secular schools maintained their secular ideology as inherited from the Kemalist modernization of the state.

Religious Schools, such as there were, could not break with the traditional models of curriculum and learning.

Sufi schools were equally out of touch with modernity.

The Military, which in Turkish society with conscription has been an educational force for the less literate had absorbed itself in an inflexible pattern.

This setting as Gulen describes it may appear far from the UK experience. It resonates to some extent with recent emphases upon “Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural” education and the stress on Citizenship which we are puzzling over in faculties of Education at the moment. His goal is to create men and women of:

‘...thought, action, and inspiration..’

Gulen 1996d. 12.

At this point Gulen’s Islamic perspective comes to the forefront. He writes of the need to:

‘..integrate [students] with their past and prepare them intelligently for the future.....’

Gulen 1996a. 59.

Modern Turkey under the Kemalist ideal sought from 1923 to breakaway from the Ottoman past – religiously, linguistically, in law, social customs, and dress. From 1923 there has therefore been a tension between modernisation [with a secularisation implicit theme] and the overtly religious for whom the secularist agenda is too explicit.

Tacitly, Turkish people may perceive religion as a personal/private matter and the military take a position of defending the secular constitution against overt Islamist interventions but both see Gulen as criticising their respective ideologies.

In Gulen’s writings therefore, modernisation is affirmed but it has to have a relation with the past and it must be concerned with the development of the whole person i.e the spiritual person. For him, the schools are not about a reviving of an Ottoman Islamic past but entering the future.

Education is also concerned with recognition of the human rights of others – education enables understanding and the espousal of such rights and mutual tolerance. Where education is limited to marketable skills the results in Gulen's view are social atrophy, and narcissism.

'Just as an inactive organ becomes atrophied, and a tool which is not in use becomes rusty, so aimless generations will eventually waste away because they lack ideals and aims.'

Gulen 1996d. 51.

The past represents in its classical form where traditional culture fostered intellectual sophistication and subtlety; modernity represents sterility.

#### 4.2 Teachers and Educators.

For Gulen anyone can be a teacher; but few are educators. Both impart information and skills but the educator addresses the emergence of the student's personality as a whole:

Thus 2 x education systems existed side by side, which gave rise to conflicts such as science and religion, which for Gulen was an absurd division.

Consequently, the ideal is for an education, which is academic with character development, where there is achievement and spirituality. 'Spirituality' does not in Gulen's lexicon mean religion per se. Rather it covers ethics, openness, tolerance, acceptance of plurality.

#### 4.3 The Model.

Critics accuse Gulen of being reactionary, seeking to re-establish a pre 1923 status quo. He asserts though that his model for these ideals is the Prophet

'The Prophet, PbuH, defined a true Muslim as one who harms no-one with his or her words and actions, and who is the most trustworthy representative of universal peace.'

Gulen 1999a. 20.

Hence, these ideals can be spread globally- they may be inspired from the Sunnah and the Qur'an but they are also universal .

2 x human sources for this are Mevlana Jalal ud-Din Rumi:

'One of my feet is in the centre and the other is in the seventy-two realms [the nations] like a compass'



Gulen 2004. 199

And Said Bediuzzaman,

'Victory with civilized persons is won through persuasion.'

Ibid.

Teachers and educators therefore need to be spiritually literate, 'with sight' if they are to form while people out of their students. The blind cannot lead the blind.

## **5. Critique.**

5.1 Although there are some 100 such schools established in Turkey itself they are criticized as channels for extreme Islamist ideas and a threat to the secular order of modern Turkey.

Schools established outside Turkey are said by critics to be a 'green belt' around the state in Russia, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and in the Balkan.

5.2 Whilst there is no formal Religious Education [i.e. in Islam] in these schools there is provision during 'out of school' hours and through informal relations between staff and students. The critique is made therefore of implicit religious formation against the secular nature of at least Turkish state education..

The schools do receive summary and unpredicted inspections.

But when you visit the high schools you are treated to displays of students meeting with the Turkish President when they have achieved 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> out of the university entrance examinations for the whole of the country.

The schools established and sponsored by Turkish businessmen range from Brazil, to Denmark and Kyrgyzstan with the same ideals if different cultures.

The ethos of the schools is one of freedom to think, to be challenged to think independently, and where unveiling of events and meanings occurs.

'In essence, the school is a kind of place of worship whose "holy persons" are teachers'

Gulen 1999b. 98.

## **6. The Islamic motivation.**

The majority of Gulen's writings focus upon Islamic and Qur'anic themes designed not as academic texts but addressed to educated Muslim audiences.

These are his 'supporters' from when he began this public presentation in Izmir in 1958.

### 6.1 The Anatolian tradition of Islam.

He carries forward the ideals of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi [1873-1960], and from before him the tradition of Mevlana Rumi.

Said Nursi and the Anatolian expression of Islam has always been under suspicion in modern Turkey. Nursi was imprisoned for his religious work and Gulen has been termed as a 'Nurcu'.

Certainly, Nursi did wish to transform Turkish society along Islamic lines and Gulen is accused of seeking to:

6.1.1 change Turkish society by introducing religious i.e Islamic discourse into the educational curricula.

6.1.2 establish schools, universities, language schools as well as business enterprises to change the patterns of Turkish society.

Gulen's prospectus is less upon the ritual and creedal aspects of Islam than upon the ethical and moral formation of the individual after the sunnah of the Prophet..

This can be seen as Islamic universalism in that the religion offers a universal; model of an ethical life, which no-one can disagree with. The central figure is the Prophet as evidenced in the 2 x volume studies of the Prophet in which Gulen deals with the way the Prophet related to those around him: wives, companions and enemies. His moral qualities are all stressed: piety, sincerity, generosity, faithfulness et al.

This leads to a pure Islamic statement. Islam is a,

'...way leading a person to perfection or enabling one to reacquire one's primordial angelic state....'

Gulen 1996c. 122-123.

### 6.2 Sufism / *Tawassuf*.

Inevitably, we may ask is this movement a *tariqa* in all but name? I think it is as a non-tariqa tariqa. Because it is from classical Sufism with its concern to purify the human soul, mind and purposes that we have a psychological and overtly religious spirituality within which to frame these educational ideals and purposes. Al-Ghazzali, Al-Rabbani and Said Nursi are all cited as exemplars of scholarship and spirituality

## 7. Conclusion.

In many ways these ideals may differ little from other 'faith sector' educational aims and objectives.

7.1 In quantifiable terms the schools achieve well – in OfSTED code this means 'outstanding': academic and sporting Olympics; entrance levels in to universities; over subscribed – 100 places will attract 2000 applicants. These are academically elitist.

7.2 Qualitatively we can but observe the qualities of graduates of these schools. The criteria used by Gulen include:

7.2.1 'a marriage of mind and heart'

7.2.2 'thought, action and inspiration.'

7.2.3 'profundity of ideas, clarity of thought, depth of feeling, cultural appreciation, and spiritual values.'

'An Absent Influence' = ?

There are two particular trajectories in Gulen's writings and ideas as they emerge in his movement, or followers.

7.3 Internal to Turkey: with the development of the modern state with media, and e-source spaces the opportunities for public debate and discourse multiply. These spaces allow individuals and communities to share and express their vision of new religious and social solidarities. The model of the Gulen movement does encourage this process and especially in educational contexts.

Said Nursi's concern was not to save a state but to advance and equip Muslims to address modernist scepticism. In the Kemalist programme was to replace religion with positivist thought.

This neo-Nurcu Movement seeks though education, market economy and enterprise, moral stability, and the open media to offer spaces for internal debate and the advocacy of an Islam attuned to the contemporary world.

7.4 External: The locus of change in Turkey presents Europe and a wider worlds with a model of how :if the Kemalist/secular bloc inhibits the integration of Muslims into national political, social and economic life then Turkey will not be a genuinely pluralist democratic society. Yet the educational emphasis of the movement offers to a greater Europe a model of an integrated educational system embodying spirituality, re-imagined tradition, enterprise and virtue.

5.5 Yet the more this movement seeks to control sources of power and to change the nation as much as the world in a religio-social manner the more it is engaged in everyday life and is transformed by forces it seeks to harness.

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