

Main characteristics of the Gülen movement and the importance of education in globalising world

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While the cry for democratic values, human rights and intercultural dialogue is frequently heard, the global threat of war, terrorism, the increased gap between poor and rich, famine, malnutrition, global warming and pollution, and many other social and cultural problems, pose a real challenge for present citizens of the globe. To tackle these challenges is the prime concern of today's intellectuals and politicians. Despite the existence of some pessimists, there are a number of initiatives working for the common good and expending great effort to eradicate these problems. The Gülen movement is one of the most influential initiatives which should be taken into consideration in this context. The question of how the formal and informal educational activities of the movement contribute to the solution of local and global problems is the second concern of this paper. Finally, as an extension of the movement's global educational activities, the paper deals with Gülen's approach to cultural and religious diversity and their relationship in modern societies.

Introduction

The Gülen movement is one of the most influential initiatives which should be taken into consideration in this context. Fethullah Gülen is a Turkish Muslim scholar whose ideas have inspired and influenced many Turkish intellectuals, educators, students, businessmen, politicians and journalists inside and outside Turkey to establish schools, and educational and intercultural centres in more than 120 countries. After summarising some important features of globalisation briefly, this paper provides a general description of the movement, and its main characteristic in the formation of an ideal person who is capable of internalising the qualities of self discipline, dialogue and the notion of service for humanity (*khidmah*). The question of how the formal and informal educational activities of the movement contribute to the solution of local and global problems is the second concern of this chapter. Finally, as an extension of the movement's global educational activities, the chapter deals with Gülen's approach to cultural and religious diversity and their relationship in modern societies.

Globalisation

Globalisation is multidimensional therefore it is not easy to define. This undefined character of globalisation is strongly related to the economic, political, social, cultural and ethical values of the globe. For some, the process of globalisation is a real nightmare which causes various problems.

They consider it a great threat to local traditions and cultures by weakening the conventional borders or internal cohesion of communities to create super economic and social structures (Steger, 2003).

For others, globalisation is a unique way to go forward. It is enough to examine only at the development in information and mass media technologies to realise how people are involved in this inevitable process. Between these two radical understandings of globalisation, there are various discourses which pronounce more cautious approaches. When we take a Muslim's discourse of globalisation into account, it will be seen that it is not very different from the modern discussion of globalisation. There are extreme sceptics who consider it a major threat to Islam and a conspiracy against Muslims all over the world. Especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the vast tragedy of September 11th 2001, criticism of and attacks on Islam everywhere lead many Muslims to mistrust the global discourse of globalisation.

Living in a world which is in constant and rapid change, it is easy to imagine that there will be many other approaches to globalisation with which to contend. The Gülen movement, in this respect, is unique in its approach to globalisation. It is open to change but also respects its own traditional values and identities. In other words, the Gülen movement does not display an antiglobalist reflection (it is not reactionary), but it has produced a counterglobalisation (proactivist) view which bears its own seal.

Main characteristics of the movement and the importance of education

As many researchers have pointed out, the movement originated in Turkey where the cultural and religious (together with mystical) richness of the uncolonised Ottoman state have still been preserved (Gülen, 2004). Although religion and culture play significant roles in the Gülen movement, it is neither a fundamentalist reaction to the West and modernity or a complete acceptance of it. It is open to recognise the contribution of others, indeed it is extremely positive about the use of mass communication technology in human service, and very conscious of how globalisation removes the borders among nations and brings people together. The question of how Muslims can be involved in and contribute to this process lies in their understanding of humanity and of serving humanity in a global way.

For Gülen, the value of our ancient earth originates from its noble inhabitants, namely humankind. To serve this honourable resident is our most honourable earthly duty (Gülen, 2004). The question of why the human being is very important, according to Gülen, lies in his full trust in and dependence on God. Because we love God, we should love and respect His best creation. If a person loves God, they feel a deep inclination towards His every creature (Gülen, 1998). This love is not a static proclamation or an abstract notion; it is in fact a transcendental immersion which come directly from Gülen's understanding of Islam. He believes that love is the strongest and most powerful weapon in the universe (Unal, 1998). The dream of this universal love can only be realised by the 'person of ideals.'

Gülen sees the realisation of the person of ideals as the ultimate aim of human existence. He calls them a 'golden generation' and sees their activities on a global level as a sign of hope for the salvation of all humanity.

The key term in the realisation of the golden generation as a whole is education. Gülen has spent more than forty years encouraging and inspiring the people around him to invest materially and spiritually in education. For Gülen, education is a sublime duty that manifests the Divine name Rabb (Pedagogue, Upbringer, Sustainer) (Gülen, 2002). This is a very important notion which connects human beings with God. Real life, says Gülen, is only possible by knowledge. Whoever neglects teaching and learning could be considered dead. For Gülen, the reason we are created is to learn, communicate and teach (Gülen, 2004).

Gülen is insistent on education for several reasons. Not only does it train individuals, but it is also the most vital factor for positive social change. In addition, he sees education as the most effective tongue for relations with others. Education is the aim of the aims. Therefore no one can be unconcerned with or uninterested in the education of their children. In his own words, the people who are educating their young today are actually investing in the next 25 years (Gülen, 2004). Nonetheless, despite the existence of a wide range of schools everywhere, Gülen, expresses many times his dissatisfaction with the existing system of schooling. There are numerous state and private schools, but they fail to take all of the needs of children into consideration. Gülen frequently repeats that people who are responsible for the education of youth in the modern period have not developed a holistic approach to education. This failure results in the creation of a young generation with no ideals, as if they were animated corpses (Gülen, 2004). The pressure of globalisation in this process cannot be denied. Educational institutions have come under pressure to focus more on meeting the demands of the economy, rather than more sublime aims, and education merely for employment blinds many people to raising spiritually and bodily healthy children. In conclusion, value-free, job-oriented education in global competition meets children's physical needs but it never meets their spiritual or ethical potential.

This is the gist of Gülen's educational philosophy. For Gülen, training the body of children is easy, but very few train the minds and hearts of the pupils at the same time (Gülen,2004). For him the distinction made between the mind and heart of students in modern school systems is a calamity for all. Today, according to Gülen, this mistake is still being repeated. Despite the production of many great scientists from contemporary schooling systems, modern men and women across the globe fail to establish real happiness. In fact, this one-sided education increases the crises in societies and produces only youth with no ideals. Thus, there is a great need for new and fresh approaches to current education systems (Gülen, 2004) It is also urgent to redefine the frame of knowledge. Gülen thinks that in the modern period, knowledge is limited to empty theories and unabsorbed pieces of learning which arouse suspicion in minds and darkness in hearts, is a heap of garbage around which desperate and confused souls flounder (Gülen, 2004). Nonetheless, he sees Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's approach as a sole prescription for this dilemma. The purpose of education is to make knowledge a guide in oneself and in others. To achieve such an aim is to see education as the illumination of the mind in science and knowledge and the light of the heart in faith and virtue.

He also finds Qur'anic references to this concept (Gülen, 1995). He wisely interprets the Qur'anic term *al-sirat al-mustaqim* (straight path, Qu'ran, 1.5) as a middle way to use in a wide variety of social and ethical issues. This middle way can be described as an extreme emphasis on avoidance of excesses and deficiencies while finding a balance between materialism and spiritualism, rationalism and mysticism, worldliness and asceticism, heart and mind, tradition and modernity (Kuru, 2003). This middle way opens the doors of education for many hesitant, conservative parents who face great difficulties in allowing their children to receive a modern education at the risk of losing their faith, or keeping their faith but suffering from losing their chance to achieve a high standard of education in modern secular schools.

To fulfil such an important goal, Gülen, in contrast with many Muslims, has put education with a special emphasis on ethics at the centre of his own movement. Education is the most effective way to compete with others on a global scale. His educational model does not exclude anyone from participation. In fact, its universally accessible nature empowers many marginalised groups to continue their education in this model. This is one way to bring an equal and just educational system to everyone, rather than the unequal and unjust nature of global education, and therefore to improve the conditions of the poor. Bearing in mind the existence of schools in nearly every part of the world and in various environments and different social conditions, as described above, their main focus is on the development of ethical understanding of global issues rather than teaching religion.

It is also important to note that Gülen makes a clear distinction between the educator and the teacher, stating that educators are very limited in our modern world (Gülen, 1996). Despite their openness to new developments and the contribution of others, educators in the Gülen movement also share a common pedagogic vision, similar curriculum and human and material resources (Michel, 2003) based on networks of advanced information and communication infrastructure. This collective consciousness is a unique attempt to respond to and confront the challenging nature of globalisation.

They are very patient in reaching their goal and prefer to use a logical way to persuade students rather than forcing or imposing on them. The aim is not to use the students for their own purposes but to train them for the benefit of humanity. The adoption of this self mission is of prime importance in this educational project, therefore teachers consider every individual as a different world and try to find a way to their hearts (Gülen, 2004). In this process, the notion of *tamthil* (representation; *temsil* in Turkish) comes to the fore. *Tamthil* means to teach values through example. Gülen believes that this is the most effective way to prepare students for the future. Proper action is more influential than words. In this way, he believes, both the teacher and student internalise the core values of education. Put another way, they not only teach but also show how to use knowledge. Such a high achievement in the quality of education, and the exemplary moral character of teachers and its impact on the student's behaviour, make this school more attractive in the modern period.

Once again, in Gülen's project this interaction is not one or two-sided (teacher-student) but is multidimensional, and includes family, school environment and the mass media. Gülen argues that the desired result can only be achieved by the cooperation of these different sides. Otherwise, the

existence of opposing tendencies among these vital institutions will subject the students to contradictory influences that will distract them and dissipate their energy. In particular, mass media should contribute to the education of the younger generation by following the education policy approved by the community (Gülen, 2004) . This is the dream of Gülen therefore, as a leader of a giant movement. He guides his followers to establish various institutions to satisfy this global need.

Towards Global Peace and Tolerance

As well as education, another important activity initiated by Gülen in the cause of global peace is his unlimited emphasis on the notion of tolerance, dialogue and intercultural and interfaith relations. As Enes Ergene (2005) has pointed out, dialogue activities are an extension of Gülen's global educational struggle, and they also serve the education of humanity. Although he has been severely criticised by some people, he bravely argues that dialogue is primarily concerned with religion and is thus a religious duty (Ergene, 2005). Gülen constantly insists on the religious nature of the meetings, because the basic Islamic sources advise Muslims to engage in dialogue with representatives of other faiths.

Thus for Gülen, one of the prime functions of education is to foster intercultural understanding. Failure to take into account the diverse nature of society in education feeds the homogeneous and monocultural dominance in many host cultures. Denial or disregard of the diversity which already exists in society leads to misrepresentation of others. This partisanship is the root of every turmoil and social conflict. In a world becoming more and more globalised, one has to know who will be one's future next door neighbour. Furthermore, like neighbours, nations also need each other in a global scale. One of the most important factors here is to eliminate causes that separate people, such as discrimination based on colour, race, belief and ethnicity. Education, Gülen says, can uproot these evils (Williams, 2000).

Having held firmly to this belief, the Gülen movement works very hard to promote tolerance both inside and outside Turkey. For Gülen, dialogue and tolerance mean accepting every person, irrespective of their status, and learning to live together. In this regard, education is considered an island of unity. Tolerance and dialogue need to be taught in schools. Teaching differences and giving an accurate picture of the unfamiliar other give opportunities to move on. Gülen thinks that this is a key for the improvement of relationships among the world's nations. Religiously speaking, in the understanding of Gülen, what is good for all is also good in Islam (and other religions). Education is the way to transmit these universal values.

In the Gülen movement schools, education for tolerance is being practised energetically, and it is fair to say that diversity is part of their existent schooling system. In many countries students from different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds study in the same peaceful atmosphere of these schools. For example, in Bosnia, Croatian and Serbian students –even though their numbers are small- study peacefully alongside Bosnian students, in spite of the brutal war. This is a powerful indication that the Gülen movement's schools have succeeded in establishing a non-sectarian

atmosphere in their educational system without neglecting to respect cultural and religious differences.

In addition to schools, the last ten years have seen a great explosion in the establishment of cultural and inter-faith centres to promote dialogue and tolerance. Bridge-builders of Gülen movements have felt the need for general training in intercultural activities and have gone beyond schools to meet this need. These centres play a complementary role to school education and have had a great impact on the internal cohesion of societies. In addition, these centres also contribute to the integration of minorities in different countries without losing their own identities and cultures.

Today, despite many good works of self sacrificing people all over the world, there are still many who control by force, and there is intolerance among different intra and international groups. After 9/11, Islam and Muslims in particular have been greatly affected by this global disinformation. The war against terror is being transformed into a war against Muslims, and most Muslims are being seen as terrorists or most terrorists are being seen as Muslims. The efforts of some mass media and the mistakes of some individuals further diminish the image of Muslims and Islam around the globe. What we are facing today is a really clash of ignorance rather than the clash of civilisation. Gülen sincerely believes that if one wants to win the hearts of suppressed people, and wants to solve the conflict, the most secure shelter is education and dialogue. Unfortunately, violence nourishes violence. This is an experimentally proven fact. It is easy to destroy but it is very difficult to rebuild.

Today our multicultural societies' cohesion depends on this mutual understanding, engaging proactively in co-operation between communities and respecting each other. According to Gülen, this is a religious duty and we are responsible for the preparation of our future world in this regard. In its hundreds of schools and many intercultural centres the Gülen movement tries to establish a common language for better understanding.

Conclusion

As summarised briefly above, the middle way is the main characteristic of the Gülen movement. The movement is aware of global issues and problems and believes sincerely that these problems can be solved only by global cooperation. Here, it tries to develop a sense of culture based on Turkish Islam and Anatolian Sufism to preserve their own identity, but at the same time they are ready and open to new changes. At this juncture, education, moral development, spirituality and tolerance-dialogue play a significant role. A lack of any of these concepts may lead a very civilized movement to power or tyranny. Unfortunately, many authoritarian programs could not bring peace and material-spiritual developments to the world. Systems which recognise no ethical values and depend solely on power have nothing to contribute to the global progress of all humanity. Continuing wars at the beginning of the third millennium have shown that it is impossible to control people by killing or suppressing them. Thus what is needed is the development of a global movement which covers or surrounds a person's every dimension. To do so, there is no instant solution. Gülen and his followers have chosen education and intercultural gatherings in the formation of a new man and woman (ideal human/*al-insan al-kamil*). This is not a rigid educational movement. Laying prime stress on

representation (*tamthil*), teachers in the movement expend great effort in showing students how to internalise values of morality and tolerance. Because lack of faith and ethical values are the cause and root of every conflict and problem in the world, the Gülen movement's *raison d'être* is to establish an environment where the student's heart and mind are simultaneously satisfied. So the movement tries to domesticate excessive positivism with emphasis on the inner and spiritual dimensions of Islam. This is not an exclusivist approach, although it takes its power from the Islamic faith. As regards globalisation, their motto 'Because we love the Creator we love all His creatures' (Ergene, 2005, 17) is the starting point. So the number of sister schools and dialogue centres in more than 120 countries, together with various interactions, are the best way to serve the citizens of the globe.

They are practising globalisation vividly and contributing to contemporising and modernising Muslims without losing their faith in any way, and without any hidden political or ideological agenda. Because human beings are potentially respectful creature and they are able to achieve, the Gülen movement is very optimistic for the future of the globe. As long as we preserve a civil, just and free atmosphere to pave the way for the education of advantaged and disadvantaged people, there is no barrier to transforming the world into paradise. The movement has potentially global and universal values that can build bridges between East and West.