

Purposes of Education in the Light of Fethullah Gülen's Teachings

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Introduction

The significance of any prominent thinker's ideas is determined not only by their intellectual content, their orientation to fundamental sources and convincing quality of argument, but primarily by the role those ideas play at the moment when a society is undergoing a crisis or confronting problems which need to be solved in order to secure its future. Outstanding thinkers can only be described as great if their views affect not only the consciousness and behavior of some limited groups or even nations, but also if they influence the entire situation in the world in general. Among such thinkers Fethullah Gülen occupies an honorary stage. Such estimation is based mainly on his teachings about mental, spiritual, and cultural development of the modern World. Education is one of the leading subjects among these teachings.

Many researches have already been published concerning Fethullah Gülen thoughts on education as well as on his educational philosophy. That is why in this paper we briefly touch only some aspects of this topic. The main attention will be given to Gülen's analysis of reasons of increasing role of education, its basic fundamentals, the purposes of education, and finally the place Islam could play in education today.

Increasing role of education

Fethullah Gülen explains the main reasons of his special attention to education. First of all they go to the genuine nature of human being. He points out that every person is a creature made up of feelings that cannot be satisfied by the mind, and a creature of spirit; that is through the spirit than we acquire our essential human identity. Each individual is a combination of all of these factors. When a person around whom all systems and efforts revolve is considered and evaluated as a creature with all these aspects and when all needs are fulfilled then this person is able to attain true happiness. At this point, true human progress and evolution in relation to our essential being is possible only through education (Gülen 2004:194).

At the same time the thinker argues that another reason is the spread of ignorance in the modern World distinguishing three great enemies which are ignorance, poverty, and an internal schism. As ignorance is the most serious problem, it must be opposed with education, which always has been the most important way of serving our country (Gülen 2004:198).

One more reason for increasing role of education is ethical and cultural features of our World. In this respect Fethullah Gülen asking “Why education” answers that in recent centuries spiritual crises have followed one after another. It is no exaggeration to say that these crises and the absence of spiritual satisfaction were the major factors behind the conflict of interests which enveloped the last two centuries and that reached its apex in the two world wars (Gülen 2004:194). Along with this factor the thinker underlines that now we are witnessing loss of moral and spiritual values in general (Gülen 1999).

Finally Fethullah Gülen pays special attention to the contradictory relationships between science and religion as a reason for increasing role of education in the modern World. He analyses in very deep manner the conflict between science and religion which arose firstly in the West some centuries ago and embraced recently the Muslim World. Gülen underlines that science is not private property of any one people in the world. It is the common heritage of all mankind. But when the West had borrowed a lot of scientific achievements from the East it forgot their genuine source which is religion. Now when the East in its turn is importing scientific knowledge from the West it also neglects its religious roots (Gülen 1997).

Basic fundamentals of education

On the basis of the above mentioned reasons for a special role played by education Fethullah Gülen explains its fundamental pillars. For example, he argues that education must be based on recognition of pluralism of cultures, civilizations, and faiths. Along with this Gülen stresses the necessity of keeping one’s identity. He explains that due to rapid developments in transportation and communication, the world has become a global village. Nations have become like next-door neighbors. However, we must remember that in the world like this, national existence can be ensured only by protecting the specific characteristics of each nation. In a unified mosaic of nations and countries, those who cannot protect their unique characteristics, “patterns”, or “designs” will disappear. As with all other nations, our essential characteristics are religion and language, history and the motherland (Gülen 2004:197-198). This diversity and not unlimited unification is a real basis for serving humanity.

Another foundation of education is combination of adherence to historical traditions and patterns with openness to the modern world facing the process of globalization as well as combination of modernization with individual development.

Among the pillars of education a leading place is occupied by growing students up by teaching them in the light of fundamental human values and not giving them correct but formal knowledge. That is why Fethullah Gülen pays special attention to overcoming the above mentioned conflict between religion and science. Concerning this point he observes that a proper education includes religion. If a thing is a fundamental principle of religion, it should be taught in education (Eldridge: 535). Religion guides sciences, determines their real goal, and puts moral and universal human values before science as guides. If this truth had been understood in the West, and if this relationship between

religion and knowledge had been discovered, things would have been very different (Gülen 2004:196).

Such approach means the comprehensive character of education because religion is only part of ones education which must include all important sides of human life. So every requirement of life should be met in schools. Making correct decisions is dependent on possessing a sound mind and being capable of sound thought. Science and knowledge illuminate and develop the mind. For this reason a mind deprived of science and knowledge cannot make the right decisions (Eldridge: 535).

The most important basic fundamental of education is its orientation towards combination of sciences, first of all natural ones, with human values, ethics, and spirituality. Touching this issue Fethulla Gülen explains that education curricula should emphasize science and technology, as much, or more than, they incorporate faith teaching. He also advocates the transmission of spiritual, moral and behavioural values, of tolerance, openness, and the like. Through the internalized spiritual transformation of individuals will come a wider social transformation (Park: 51).

Fethullah Gülen stresses in his discourses that schools concentrating on non-religious subjects could serve religious needs. But if the thinker considers a science useful instrument in the hands of humanity, at the same time he thinks that it alone cannot constitute a guide for society. In his opinion science is not a positive value in itself. In order to really contribute to the welfare of society it has to be possessed and used by morally-guided individuals. The scope of Fethullah Gülen's educational project is exactly this: to form individuals with a strong inner ethics which can guide society toward the correct use of scientific discoveries (Vicini: 435).

Finally it is necessary to mention one more pillar of education which is of special importance for Fethullah Gülen. We mean avoidance of politicization. The thinker is convinced that politics is not the upper value in our World. On the contrary, for him spiritual and moral development of individual is much more important for humanity today.

Purposes of education

Within these basic fundamentals of education and taking into account the role it should play Fethullah Gülen discusses the main goals of educational process. First of all he sees the individual human being at the centre of every major problem of humanity as well as its solution. Lasting solutions of social problems such as lack of education, poverty and division can not be achieved without paying enough attention to the individual human. For this reason, the underlying dynamics of Gülen's approach are education, mutual understanding, respect, opportunity, and hope (Aslandogan and Cinar: 332). So, the main purpose of education consists of character building (Mohamed: 556).

In the light of this approach Fethullah Gülen sees education as the most influential agent of inculcating a sense of responsible citizenship, cooperation and dialogue among individuals, groups and nations (Kucukcan: 196). It is education that can fulfill the final goal – to develop individual who feels himself free, aiming to combat tyranny and to fight for justice, human rights, and tolerance. At

the same time education is the most effective way to overcome international terror (Aslandogan and Cinar: 333).

But growing up individual is only starting point for achieving global task. Fethullah Gülen argues that the final purpose of education is development of society as well as serving humanity. "Now that we live in a global village, education is the best way to serve humanity and to establish a dialogue with other civilizations" (Gülen 2004: 198).

The importance Gülen attributes to such a kind of education is intimately connected to the final scope of the movement called by his name. That is to reform society. Indeed according to him, education will permit to shape a new generation of people which will be able to use scientific knowledge according to ethics and to lead society along the right path. Armed with the tools of science and religion, this generation shall be able to solve dilemmas of present and future society. Therefore committing to both education to other people and activism in society, these people will shape other individuals' inner ethics and will definitively transform society into a paradise (Vicini: 435). That is why education according to Fethullah Gülen, is a key tool in the development of society (Eldridge: 535).

At the same time this final purpose of education is closely connected with dialogue and relationships between different cultures and faiths. In this respect Fethullah Gülen explains that students are not the only beneficiaries of educational institutions. Increasingly transnational in their outlook, civil society organizations focusing on education serve as a bridge between the peoples of the countries where they are and thereby can contribute to the world peace. In many cases, the educational institutions have started a large synergy and led to the formation of new trade and civic links among communities and nations (Wright: 332-333).

Islam and education: Gülen's approach

The fact that education serves intercultural and interfaith dialogue explains the great significance of religion in general and Islam in particular in Fethullah Gülen's view on education. He stresses that religion reconciles opposites that seem to be mutually exclusive: religion-science, this world-the next world, nature-Divine Books, the material-the spiritual, and spirit-body (Gülen 2000).

Fethullah Gülen believes that this role Islam can play may be more successfully than any religion. Than is for Islam is the middle way. While it does not reject or condemn the modern scientific approach, neither does it deify it (Gülen 1999). That is why science should not be studied independently of the Quran (Bakar:). And on the contrary the Quran could be studied without any contradiction with science (Gülen 1997).

But such approach needs rethinking Islam in the light of the modern World conditions. First of all it means to overcome understanding everything connected with Islam as political phenomena. Unfortunately, till now Islam is seen mainly as political ideology rather than a religion (Gülen 2000).

For Fethullah Gülen the most important reason for such politicization lies in the fact that it is not understood properly.

In a number of his publications Fethullah Gülen analyses in a short but very deep manner the present situation in the Muslim world. He agrees that during a long period of time the Muslim societies have been witnessing a multidimensional political, social and cultural crisis. On one hand, this crisis embraces the Islamic thought and education at the moment. But on the other hand, it is itself caused by the decline of Islamic ideas and knowledge. That is why Fethullah Gülen's teachings must be estimated by their impact upon the development of the modern Islamic theory and by their contribution into overcoming the crisis of the Muslim world.

The thinker points out a few main reasons of the present weakness of the modern Muslim countries. In his view, the three ones deserve to be mentioned before others:

- Prolonged and continuing political backwardness which manifests itself first of all in the absence of genuine democratic institutions and processes coupled with domination of the authoritarian regimes;
- Spiritual and moral crisis which consists in particular in the growing influence of imported - western standards of life;
- Unsatisfactory knowledge of Islam.

When touching leading roots of backwardness of the Muslim world the thinker underlines some key problems of Islamic societies linked directly with the perspectives of their political reformation. He especially stresses that Islamic societies entered the twentieth century as a world of the oppressed, the wronged, and the colonized. After their liberation and creation of independent states political authorities worked for the well-being of the dynasties of which they are members, rather than working for the prosperity of their countries and trying to establish the unity of public and the power, and thus these administrations have been degraded to the position of mere oppressors and are deserving of loathing in the eyes of the public (Gülen 2004:239-240).

Values like democracy, basic human rights, the spread of knowledge and education across society, economic prosperity, equality in production, the institutionalization of consumption and income in a way that prevents class formation, the supremacy of law and justice, values which today are general accepted throughout the world, have never been fully realized in Islamic societies (Gülen 2004:240).

Maybe more important than all of the above, the fact that religion, and the religious values, spirituality and ethics that are connected to religion have been eroded away throughout the world constitutes the most important source of major social problems that threaten humanity today. The Muslim world is going through a spiritual crisis as all the essential supporting pillars of humanity have collapsed and have been destroyed (Gülen 2004:241).

Fethullah Gülen formulates the most important and bitter conclusion: today, in his opinion, an Islamic world does not really exist. There are places where Muslims live. Islam has become a way of living, a culture. It is not being followed as a faith. There are Muslims who have restructured Islam in accordance with their thoughts. It doesn't mean radical, extremist Muslims, but ordinary Muslims

who live Islam as it suits them. The prerequisite for Islam is that one should “really” believe, and live accordingly. Muslims must assume the responsibilities inherent in Islam. It cannot be said that any such societies with this concept and philosophy exist within Islamic geography. There are no administrators having this vision. The Islamic world is pretty ignorant, despite a measured enlightenment that is coming into being nowadays.

Today, there is an Islam of the individual. There are some Muslims in different places of the world. One by one, all have been separated from one another. It’s difficult to see anyone who is a perfect Muslim. If Muslims are not able to come into contact with one another and constitute a union, to work together to solve common problems, to interpret the universe, to understand it well, to consider the universe carefully according to the Quran, to interpret the future well, to generate projects for the future, to determine their place in the future, then we can’t talk about an Islamic world. Since there is no Islamic world, every one acts individually. It could even be said that there are some Muslims with their own personal truths. It cannot be claimed that there is an Islamic understanding which has been agreed upon, approved by qualified scholars, reliably based upon the Qur’an, and repeatedly tested. It could be said that a Muslim culture is dominant, rather than Islamic culture. As a result we must realize that no Islamic country, when considered from viewpoint of administrative, legal, and economic matters, exists. Today Islam is not understood properly. At best we can say that Islam is not known at all (Gülen 2004:184).

Conclusion

To sum up we have enough arguments to say that Fethullah Gülen promotes “educational Islamism” as opposed to “political Islamism” (Park: 5). Those who want to reform the world must first reform themselves. In order to bring others to the path of travelling to a better world, they must purify their inner worlds of hatred, rancour, and jealousy, and adorn their outer worlds with all kinds of virtues. Those who are far removed from self-control and self-discipline, who have failed to refine their feelings, may seem attractive and insightful at first. However, they will not be able to inspire others in any permanent way, and the sentiments they arose will soon disappear. Goodness, beauty, truthfulness, and being virtuous are the essence of the world and humanity. Whatever happens, the world will one day find this essence. No one can prevent this (Gülen 2000). This service is our right; conveying it to others is our responsibility (Gülen 2004: 201).

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