

# The Thinking Behind the Gülen-Inspired Schools

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Today I want to discuss what, in my opinion, is one of the most interesting phenomena occurring today in the world of education. I am referring to those institutions usually referred to loosely as the “Gülen schools” or “schools of the Gülen movement.” These schools should not be thought of as a type of centralized school system, but rather as a loose collection of independent schools created and operated according to the pedagogical vision of the Turkish intellectual, Fethullah Gülen.

Even members of the movement do not know the actual number of schools. A recent estimate is that there are about 800 elementary schools, high schools, college preparatory institutions, student dormitories, and more than ten universities in almost 110 countries that are associated with this movement. These educational institutions were founded by a circle of students, colleagues and businessmen associated with Fethullah Gülen. The schools have been established by individual agreements between the countries in which they are located and the educational foundations erected for this purpose. Each school is independently run, but many of the schools rely on the services of Turkish companies to provide educational supplies and share human resources.

Fethullah Gülen, the man who inspired this educational movement, was born in eastern Turkey in 1938. After a traditional Islamic education, he taught religion and served as imam, first in his native region and then in the Mediterranean city of Izmir. There he got involved in the formation of youth and became convinced of the need for a new kind of education in Turkey. He felt that the existing educational alternatives were not offering youths a genuine opportunity for holistic growth and personality development. People could send their children to state schools where they might get scientific instruction but no character development or moral training. On the other hand, they could send their children to the traditional *madrasas*, where they received good training in religious subjects, but were not well prepared for living and working in modern situations. This was even more the case with those private schools run by Sufis, who offered the pupils sound spiritual instruction but were very weak on secular and scientific subjects.

## Crisis in Education

As a result of the polarization that took place in Turkish society after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Turkish Republic, parents of children were faced with a choice between the competing educational programs. These educational systems produced graduates who lacked an integrated perspective regarding the needs of society and who simply perpetuated existing ideological divisions. Gülen saw that there was a need for a new kind of school that could bring together the strongest elements of all these school systems. He states: “At a time when modern

schools concentrated on ideological dogmas, institutions of religious education (*madrasas*) broke with life, institutions of spiritual training (*takyas*) were immersed in pure metaphysics, and the army restricted itself to sheer force, this coordination was essentially not possible.”

## Integrating traditional wisdom with modern needs

The challenge that Gülen set for himself was to find a way in which these traditional pedagogical systems could move beyond regarding each other as rivals or enemies so that they could learn from one another. By integrating the insights and strengths found in the various educational currents, educators must seek, according to Gülen, to bring about a “marriage of mind and heart” if they hope to form individuals of “thought, action, and inspiration.”

Integrating the wisdom built up and handed down over the centuries with the scientific tools essential for the continued progress of the nation would provide students with both internal stability and direction for their actions. He states: “Until we help them through education, the young will be captives of their environment. They wander aimlessly, intensely moved by their passions, but far from knowledge and reason. They can become truly valiant young representatives of national thought and feeling, provided their education integrates them with their past, and prepares them intelligently for the future.”

Until the opening up of Turkey to religiously-based ideas and projects in the 1980s, under the leadership of Turgut Özal, Gülen’s vision could only be put into practice in the dormitories or “lighthouses” he set up for high school and university students. These “asramas” are very important for the development and continuation of the movement that formed around the ideas of Gülen. In the “lighthouse” asramas, the students not only pursue their educational goals in an atmosphere free from drugs, alcohol, tobacco and sexual promiscuity, but they also form a network of relationships (older brother – younger brother, older sister - younger sister) that support and sustain them throughout their lives.

## The first schools

The community’s first schools were already operating in Turkey in 1989 when the Soviet Union was disbanded. The collapse of the Soviet system left a vacuum that desperately needed to be filled. Russia and its former satellites needed an educational system that would be competitive in the modern world, but would also offer the kind of ethical and character formation that was often lacking in the communist pedagogy. Gülen’s disciples were among the first to open schools with Western-oriented curricula in the Russian Republic, throughout the Balkans, and in the newly independent nations of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Opening new schools in the far-flung regions of the former Soviet Union forced Gülen and his colleagues to adapt the pedagogic principles that they had originally fashioned to meet the educational demands of modern Turkey to more universal and diverse educational needs and

requirements. When, after the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, schools began to be opened at an extraordinary rate in the far-flung reaches of Southeast Asia, Africa, Western Europe, and North and South America, there was an urgent need for some universal principles of education that were nevertheless flexible enough to be adapted to local situations and national laws and standards.

## Respect for the past, an eye for the future

One of Gülen's principles that unite the effort of educators in various countries is his simultaneous respect for the past and eye toward the future. He states: "Integrate the [students] with their past, and prepare them intelligently for the future." In the Turkish context, this seemingly innocuous remark calls for a bold new direction in modern education. One of the features of the Republic of Turkey has been its concerted effort to *break* with the Ottoman past. In the years since the establishment of the Turkish Republic, many Muslims have criticized government programs for uncritically adopting both the best and worst of European civilization. They have seen secularization as not merely an unintended by-product of modernization, but rather as the conscious result of an anti-religious bias. The battle lines drawn up since the establishment of the Republic and reinforced by the mutually competitive systems of education have made the religious-secular debate one in which every scholar is expected to take a position.

One of the reasons why Gülen has been often attacked by both right and left, by secular and religious in Turkey is precisely because he has refused to take sides on an issue which he regards as a dead-end debate. He is proposing a future-oriented curriculum with which Turks can move beyond the ongoing debate. Gülen's solution is to affirm the intended goal of modernization enacted by the Turkish Republic, but to show that a truly effective process of modernization must include the development of the whole person. In educational terms, it must weave the major concerns of the existing streams of education into a new educational style that will respond to changing demands of today's world.

This is not an attempt to restore the past. Gülen denies that the education offered in the schools is an attempt to restore the Ottoman system or to reinstate the caliphate, and he affirms that the schools are oriented towards the future. However, despite the necessity of modernization, he holds, there are risks involved in any radical break with the past. Cut off from traditional values, young people are in danger of being educated with no values at all, beyond those of material success. Non-material values such as profundity of ideas, clarity of thought, depth of feeling, cultural appreciation, or interest in spirituality tend to be ignored in modern educational practice, which is too often aimed at mass-producing functionaries of a globalized market system.

## Value-oriented education

Students emerging from such institutions might be adequately prepared to find jobs, but they will not have the necessary interior formation to achieve true human freedom. Leaders in both economic and political fields often favor and promote job-oriented, "value-free" education because it enables those

with power to control more easily the “trained but not educated” working cadres. Thus, in Gülen’s view, not only is the establishment of justice hindered by the lack of well-rounded education, but also respect for human rights and an attitude of tolerance toward others. If people are properly educated to think for themselves and to espouse the positive values of social justice, human rights and tolerance, they will be better prepared to be agents of change to implement these beneficial goals.

The crisis in modern societies arises from decades of schooling having produced, in Gülen’s words, “generations with no ideals.” It is human ideals, aims, goals, and vision that are the source of movement, action, and creativity in society. Those whose education has been limited to the acquisition of marketable skills are unable to produce the dynamism needed to inspire and carry out societal change. The result is social atrophy, decadence, and narcissism. He states: “When [people] are left with no ideals or aims, they become reduced to the condition of animated corpses, showing no signs of distinctively human life... Just as an inactive organ becomes atrophied and a tool which is not in use becomes rusty, so also aimless generations will eventually waste away because they lack ideals and aims.”

The social crisis is intensified by the fact that, in Gülen’s judgment, the teachers and intelligentsia, who should be the guides and movers of society, have themselves become perpetrators of a restrictive and disintegrated approach to education. Rather than raising their voices in protest against the elimination of humane values from the educational system and campaigning for a pedagogy that integrates scientific preparation with non-material values, the educators themselves have too often, as Gülen says, “readily adapted to the new low standard.” He finds it difficult to understand how intellectuals could prefer the spiritually impoverished and technologically obsessed modern culture to a traditional cultural foundation that had grown in sophistication and subtlety down through the centuries.

It follows that if educational reform is to be accomplished, teacher training is a task that cannot be ignored. Gülen notes: “Education is different from teaching. Most human beings can be teachers, but the number of educators is severely limited.” The difference between the two lies in that both teachers and educators impart information and teach skills, but the educator is one who has the ability to assist the students’ personalities to emerge, who fosters thought and reflection, who builds character and enables the student to interiorize qualities of self-discipline, tolerance, and a sense of mission. He describes those who simply teach in order to receive a salary, with no interest in the character formation of the students as “the blind leading the blind.”

## Science versus religion?

The lack of coordination among mutually antagonistic educational systems gave rise to what Gülen calls “a bitter struggle that should never have taken place: science versus religion.” This false dichotomy resulted in a fragmentation in educational philosophies and methods. Modern secular educators saw religion as at best a useless expenditure of time and at worst an obstacle to progress. Among religious scholars, the debate led them to reject modernity as an anti-religious conspiracy and to view religion as a kind of social and political ideology. Gülen feels that through an educational

process in which religious scholars have a sound formation in the sciences and scientists are exposed to religious and spiritual values, that the “religion-science conflict will come to an end, or at least its absurdity will be acknowledged.”

For this to come about, he asserts that a new style of education is necessary, one “that will fuse religious and scientific knowledge together with morality and spirituality, to produce genuinely enlightened people with hearts illumined by religious sciences and spirituality, minds illuminated with positive sciences.” Having as a school’s educational goal the integration of the study of science with character development, social awareness, and an active spirituality might appear to critics to be a highly idealistic endeavor. The only adequate test of the feasibility of this philosophy is to examine how successful Mr. Gülen’s associates have been in establishing schools on these principles.

## Spiritual and traditional values

Gülen speaks of communicating *spirituality* and *spiritual values* through education. Some critics have read this as a code word for “religion,” but Gülen is using the term in a broader sense. For him, spirituality refers not only to specifically religious teachings, but also ethics, logic, psychological health, and affective openness. Key terms in his writings are *compassion* and *tolerance*. It is the task of education to instill such “non-quantifiable” qualities into the formation of students, over and above their training in the “exact” disciplines.

Another phrase often used by Gülen is what he terms the need for cultural and traditional values. His call for the introduction of cultural and traditional values in education has been interpreted by some as a rejection of the Turkish Republic and a return to Ottoman society. He has consequently been accused of being an *irticaci*, which might be translated as “reactionary” or even “fundamentalist,” an accusation he has always denied.

In proposing cultural and traditional values, he regards the past as a long, slow accumulation of wisdom that still has much to teach modern people. Because of this collected wisdom the past must not be discarded. On the other hand, any attempts to reconstruct present societies on the model of the past are doomed to failure. While rejecting efforts to break with the past, Gülen equally rejects efforts to return to pre-modern society.

The tendency among some modern educators to “break free of the shackles of the past” Gülen regards as a mixed blessing. Those elements of the heritage that were oppressive, stagnant, or had lost their original purpose and inspiration no doubt have to be superseded, but liberating and humanizing elements in the tradition must be reaffirmed if new generations are going to be able to build a better future. The challenge today, he states, is “to evaluate the present conditions and make good use of the experience of past generations.” His thinking is not limited by internal debates about political directions in Turkey, nor even the future of Islamic societies.

## Gülen’s religious commitment

His educational vision is shaped by his religious commitment; Gülen looks forward to a world renewed by the humane values enshrined in religious teaching. He sees this in terms of a religious renaissance. He states: "Along with advances in science and technology, the last centuries have witnessed around the world a break with traditional values and in the name of renewal attachment to different values and speculative fantasies. However, it is our hope that the next century will be an age of belief and moral values, an age that will witness a renaissance and revival for believers."

According to Gülen, education should be oriented toward forming reformers, that is, those who are fortified with a value system that takes into account both the physical and non-material aspects of humankind and can thereby conceive and bring about the needed changes in society. Well-rounded education must involve personal transformation in the student. Students must be encouraged to move out of restrictive, self-centered ways of thinking and to adopt attitudes of self-control and self-discipline that will enable them to make a lasting contribution to society. He states: "Those who want to reform the world must first reform themselves. In order to bring others to the path of traveling to a better world, they must purify their inner worlds of hatred, rancor, and jealousy, and adorn their outer world with all kinds of virtues."

The new style of education proposed by Gülen aims at responding to the root causes of the social crisis. As such, educational reform is a key to development and progress in nations. If national and private school systems are oriented solely towards the acquisition of material knowledge and mastery of technological skills, they cannot offer a way out of tensions and conflicts in society and offer a solution that can lay the basis of a better future. In calling for a type of education that seeks to develop both the material and spiritual needs of the students, Gülen sees educational reform as the key to positive societal change.

## Conclusion: some concrete examples

I will conclude with some personal experiences of the schools inspired by Gülen's thought. These schools are so diverse and there are many from which I could have chosen. The ones I will talk about I have visited personally and remain impressed by what I saw and learned. I'm sure there are many other Gülen-inspired schools with their own interesting stories to tell, but time will restrict us to three: 1) The Filipino-Turkish School of Tolerance in Zamboanga, Philippines, 2) Mehmet Akif College in Tirana, Albania, and 3) Paterson Charter School for Science and Technology, in Paterson, New Jersey, U.S.A.