

How Do Gülen's Educational efforts contribute to Global Peace

by Dr. Zeki Saritoprak on 19 October 2010. Posted in Gülen Conference in Indonesia

Our world has become a global village, where people are more interconnected than ever. Technological progress continues at an amazing speed. The emergence of human beings' awareness of their place in the universe increases human sharing in one another's happiness and sorrow; this consciousness is unique to our time and carries risks as well as benefits. No nation or ethnicity in the world can claim complete isolation, even the most primitive of societies. As a result of increased interaction and access to faster channels of communication, human beings have greater need than ever for the maturity of mind and spirit to coexist peacefully. In contrast to the high speed of technological development, the building of human relationships appears to be slower than ever. Where greater communication should foster real relationships between members of the human family, today's world instead faces conditions in which two-thirds of the world's population suffers from interpersonal violence and war.

Considering the violence in today's world, and the proliferation of weapons capable of rendering the human species extinct several times over, it is urgent that both Muslims and non-Muslims follow the instructions of the Qur'anic verse for human relationships: "Peace or reconciliation is better" (4:128). This principle of peace can be achieved only through education. Through education the ideal principles of Islam to make our world a cradle of brotherhood can be fulfilled.

Two main principles upon which Islamic civilization is founded are mutual cooperation and the loving interrelatedness of creation. The first principle is the one that scholars of peace-building call collaborative actions and solidarity. According to this principle, the planet depends on the mutual cooperation of all creatures helping one another: rain helps grass to grow; grass helps animals to grow; and animals help human beings to grow. This provides an example for human beings. That is to say, "All human beings have a common origin in God, who created them all equal. Therefore, they should assist one another and not neglect one another's needs."^[1] This principle finds its root in the Qur'anic verse, "[...] Help one another in what is good and pious, not in what is wicked and sinful" (5:2). The second principle requires that all members of creation are considered brothers and sisters. This principle requires all human beings to reject anything that does damage to this essential relationship; therefore, in Islam all forms of chauvinism (including racism and nationalism) are unacceptable. Therefore, communal solidarity is one of the goals that Islam put forward as a principle. Examples of this can be found in the practice of the Prophet. After his migration to Medina, the Prophet instituted a charter, known as the Charter of Medina, which stated the equality of the members of the community. In this charter, the People of the Book (specifically here, the Jews) were

considered as a part of the Muslim *ummah*. Today, Gülen Movement by providing education for both Muslims and non muslims contribute to establishment of such a worldwide brotherhood.

Through education people can understand the importance of diversity and coexistence. Recognition of human dignity, understanding of common origins of human beings, the consideration of differences as a positive, the acknowledgment of other religions, awareness that judgment belongs to God alone (which occurs on the Day of Judgment), and finally doing what is beautiful are all directly related to the establishment of sound educational system that responds to all kind the need of human beings.

The Islamic view of human society is based on the principles of harmony, knowledge, justice and peace: wars and violent actions, while part of the history of every major world religion, have no place in the essence of Islam.

Despite this ideal goal, the Qur'an acknowledges the reality of human nature and the possible conflicts that may arise between peoples. However, it constantly encourages believers to incline towards harmony and brotherhood. As Gülen says, "be handless against those who attack you, be tongueless against those who insult you." . .

Since God has put no limitations on the devastating capacity for human anger, educating people and building peace is one of the most difficult tasks for human beings. It requires steadfastness, resolve and patience, which are considered prized values of Islam and essential elements for peace-building strategies. "Control of emotions and listening to the way of rational thinking are considered essentials to peace-building."^[2] It is a long process, and may take generations in order to build a worldwide peace. The Qur'an encourages peace-builders in this struggle by reminding them of the eternal rewards they will receive. Even if they are not fully successful, still they will be rewarded for their works, and therefore they should not lose hope while working for peace; even the angels in paradise will greet such peacemakers with joy. "Peace be with you," they will say, "because of your patience in the life of the world" (13:24).

The prophet himself educated his companions. He had a famous school known as Suffa. Those who were attending this school were known as The People of Suffa, or Ashabu al-Suffa^[3].

There is well known statement "if you think education is too expensive, think of the price of ignorance."

The focus of this paper will be on the efforts of Fethullah Gülen (b. 1941-), as one of the most influential personalities of our time. As elaborating on Gülen's biography is beyond the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that Gülen's passionate pursuit of education began at a young age, in a time when anarchy and chaos were dominating Turkish society. In the 1970s, college students, teachers, and even some professors were highly influenced by Marxism. Marxist and nationalist groups were in armed conflict with one another. More than 10,000 people in Turkey were killed in two decades during these clashes. Even families were not immune to this violence and tragedy; members of the same family could be found fighting on opposite sides. Gülen made all efforts to extinguish the fire of

conflict amidst this chaos and dedicated himself to the education of people. Instructed his people open schools. This was something that unheard from a Muslims scholar like Gülen. He was different than his peers. An influential Islamic scholars promotes education, rather than the establishment of mosques.

In a recent statement Gülen describes the essence of his movement as the following,

“To show the bright face of Islam which is stained by the actions of terrorism by suicide bombers, to live Islam rightly as was done in the time of the Prophet, and to prepare an environment in which the idea of divine acceptance grows in hearts of people; in short, to live and express Islam in its real form. Today, the world of humanity is slipping towards a negative direction with these horrific weapons. If human beings get into conflict this world will be an unlivable place. Therefore we need to create islands of peace in order to prevent these highly possible future conflicts. We need to make our efforts in this direction so we can create peace, reconciliation, and sharing. Therefore this movement can be called the movement of understanding and dialogue.” (Gülen mentions this in response to a question on March 14, 2010). Gülen believes that this can be achieved through educational institutions.

“Today the job is upon our shoulders. We have to make a space in our hearts for thousands of chairs, for people to come and sit on them. We have to have a space for everyone in our heart. [...] Let the entire world hear that our heart is open to those that love us and to those that attack us. It is open to everyone because we believe that every human being is created by God in the most beautiful form. Today there is an utmost need for this understanding.” Gülen refers to the Prophet who allowed Christians to perform their own prayers in the Mosque. (Gülen in response to a question August 9, 2009). Therefore, according to Gülen every human being deserves a quality education and they should receive it.

Gülen’s efforts were mainly educational. It can be argued that he did not directly stop the armed conflict; however, his efforts through education equipped young people with values that prevented them from engaging in conflicts

It is not an exaggeration to assert that the educational endeavors of Gülen have, and will continue to have, a global impact on the well being of various communities. There is no doubt that Gülen’s greatest efforts and contributions are related to these two fields. Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, in the beginning of the twentieth century, stated that “there are three major enemies of Muslims: ignorance, poverty, and internal division.”^[4] If we take a closer look at our modern world, we can easily understand the importance of education, particularly for Muslims, who constitute 22% of the world’s population. Population growth is faster among Muslims than any other population, while literacy rates remain significantly low.^[5] Gülen considers lack of education to be a disease requiring a cure; he wants to cure the disease.

Today in Turkey, Central Asia and many other parts of the world, the educational institutions that were established by admirers of Gülen have continued to contribute greatly to the education of people of different religions and ethnicities. In fact, his Golden Generation has already contributed,

through educational endeavors, to the building of peace in many areas of conflict, including the Balkans, northern Iraq, Northern Ireland, and the Philippines.

Fr. Thomas Michel, in his article on Gülen, speaks of a school established by the admirers of Gülen on the Philippine island of Mindanao, which he visited. Michel visited an area of the island where kidnapping, guerrilla warfare, and armed conflict was constant between Moro separatists and the Philippine state. Michel states, "The school [which is named the Philippine-Turkish School of Tolerance] offers Muslim and Christian Filipino children an excellent education and a more positive way of living and relating to each other."^[6] Michel found, in this school, students from all backgrounds, and described it as a "heaven of peace" in this area of conflict.^[7]

Another example comes from my own experience, when I visited Skopje, Macedonia in the summer of 2004. I had a chance to visit a school established by some Turkish businessmen who were supporters of the Gülen movement. I was told that when civil war was going on in the region, members of different ethnicities were sending their children to this school. Their parents were fighting, but the children were living peacefully under the roof of the same school.

Based on this efforts, Gülen is hopeful about future. He says:

Who knows? Maybe in the near future some selfless people, who sacrifice themselves to make others live, will unite hearts and minds through their efforts. The conscience and logic will become two different, deeply rooted dimensions of their lives that will complete each other. Physics and metaphysics will abandon the fight between themselves: in order to give the opportunity for the beauty of everything to express itself in its own language, each will return to its own field. These selfless people will discover the interconnectedness of the divine command and the laws of nature. People will repent for their previous meaningless fights with one another. An atmosphere of serenity will be built and be felt in homes and in schools. No dignity will be stepped on. The hearts will be full of respect to the extent that no one will trespass on the properties or the dignities of others. The powerful will act justly so that the weak and the poor will have a chance to live humanely. No one will be arrested just because of an assumption. No one's house or business will be attacked. No innocent's blood will be shed. No oppressed person will cry out. Everyone will love human beings as a duty towards God. It is exactly this time when the world, which is a corridor to Paradise, will become a paradise-like place that will always be enjoyed.^[8]

He strongly advocates selflessness and living for others as the most essential qualities of the builders of peace. He calls them "sacrificed souls" (*adanmış ruhlar*). Selflessness has enormous potential in buildings of sustainable peace. Selflessness helps those who dedicate themselves to peace better understand the situation and sufferings of victims. By living for others, Gülen believes an ideal individual should always prefer the advantages of others over his/her own. This is the major reason why thousands of educators leave their homes and go around the world to teach and educate young generations. This is in fact a description of the believers in early Islam, namely the companions of the Prophet as the Qur'an speaks of them. The verse says: "They prefer others over themselves even if they are in need" (59:9). This is why he constantly asserts the need for faithful and selfless individuals to dedicate themselves to the establishment of peace. Educational

institutions should serve to bring up such individuals from the realm of imagination to the realm of realization. It can be argued that all of Gülen's educational efforts work towards this goal.

Again his great hope is exemplified in the following statement:

Once upon a time, despite intercontinental obstacles, through the teaching of the Qur'an, a permanent love, respect, and dialogue was achieved. These days, I have full faith that through the efforts of these holy people a new atmosphere, new understandings and dialogue will be achieved. Even now, through the immigrants who carry this idea around the world, the rivers of love have started to flow. Now they are heard in every corner of the planet. The breezes of tranquility and happiness have started to be felt. And in every corner of the world, they are creating islands of peace for stability and harmony.[9]

According to Gülen, his ideal Golden Generation will always think of positive steps to strive for education. His Golden Generation will not be distracted by historical mistakes. He would say, despite some negative historical experiences like the Crusades and colonization, "We are resolved not to remember those events and not to give an opportunity for the rebirth of animosity. We strongly encourage the constraint of historical mistakes within the limits of the history books so as not to resurrect the feelings of animosity among people." [10]

Describing his ideal generation further, Gülen says: "everyone in their capacity is like an apostle of revivalism carrying in their hands the flowers of friendship, on their lips the songs of brotherhood. Their tongue, which takes its essence from the eloquence of the Qur'an, is stronger than any sword. Their words are afterlife-oriented. These words shatter darkness without harming anyone." [11]

In Gülen's ideal world "there is no bullying, no greed, no quarrelling, no distrust, no lies, no oppression, and no deception. On the contrary, there is chivalry, tenderness, the efforts of revival, the love for life, kindness and dialogue, respect for truth, trust, acknowledgement of kindness and generosity, the spirit of righteousness, justice, and the following of the straight path." [12]

Gülen insists that people should "light candles" in their communities in order to enlighten society: it is the duty of the ideal generation to enlighten people rather than sulk in darkness.

Gülen suggests that his admirers should invest first in human beings. Any investment in human beings takes years, so people must be patient in their expectation of results. His own experience indicates some of the difficulties that educators face.

Gülen is confident about his approach and its compatibility with the core teachings of Islam. Gülen has never lost hope and has always believed that the efforts for education will eventually bear fruit. When all doors were closed against him, the media and the secular elite pronounced him *persona non grata* to the extent that his life was under threat. [13] Despite the hardships that Gülen faced during the process of accusations, spiritual persecution and exile, he never sought revenge. "We are going to be respectful for our character," he says. "We will not harm those who persecuted us. We will not seek an eye for an eye. We will never curse them. We will not break hearts and, in the manner of Yunus [the famous 14th century Turkish poet], we will invite everyone to love [...]. As a

believer, I promise that I will never shun any person and I will not prosecute those who transgressed against me.”[14]

According to Gülen, once one is equipped with love and compassion, there will be no difference between “you,” “we” and “others.” Gülen believes that for building peace, love is essential. Furthermore, today “we need love and compassion more than water and air.”[15] Gülen describes those who love others and live for others as heroes. He says, “Happy are those who make love their guide in their journey. How unfortunate are those who do not perceive the love that is grounded in their spirit and who spend an entire life blind and deaf.”[16]

The concept of compassion in the teachings of Gülen is one of the most important principles in Gülen’s understanding of education. In the tradition in which Gülen was brought up, his understanding is that no matter how small, every creature praises God in its own tongue, and therefore deserves its proper respect and compassion. Gülen says:

Compassion is the beginning of being; without it everything is chaos. Everything has come into existence through compassion and by compassion it continues to exist in harmony [...] Everything speaks of compassion and promises compassion. Because of this, the universe can be considered a symphony of compassion. All kinds of voices proclaim compassion so that it is impossible not to be aware of it, and impossible not to feel the wide mercy encircling everything. How unfortunate are the souls who don’t perceive this [...] Human beings have a responsibility to show compassion to all living beings, as a requirement of being human. The more one displays compassion, the more exalted one becomes, while the more one resorts to wrongdoing, oppression and cruelty, the more one is disgraced and humiliated, becoming a shame to humanity.[17]

Gülen reflects the Qur’anic teaching of compassion in this statement, which is iterated by Akbar Ahmed as an important component of peace building:

The committed search for global solutions to common global problems confronting human society, and the quest for a just, compassionate, and peaceful order, will be the challenge human civilization faces in the twenty-first century. To meet the challenge is to fulfill God’s vision to embrace all humanity. Doing so is to know God’s compassion.[18]

In other words, the tremendous ignorance requires great efforts that must go far beyond the capacity of some dedicated individual.

Footnote

[1] Abu-Nimer, Mohammed. *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice*. Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2003. p 73.

[2] Ibid. p 65

[3] For this see Zeki Saritoprak, Suffe Ashabi, (Istanbul, 1985).

- [4] Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Divan-i Harb-i Orfi*, in *Risale-i Nur*, (Istanbul: Nesil, 1996) p.1921.
- [5] Akbar Ahmed, "Islam and the West: Clash or Dialogue of Civilizations?" in *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace*. By Roger Boase. England: Ashgate Publishing, 2005. p 103-118.
- [6] Thomas Michel. "Fethullah Gülen as Educator." in *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement*. Ed. M Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003). pp 69-84.
- [7] Ibid.
- [8] M. Fethullah Gülen, *Örnekleri Kendinden Bir Hareket (A Movement Whose Samples are from Within Itself)* (Cag ve Nesil Serisi, N.8), (Izmir: Nil Yayinlari, 2006), p110
- [9] *Ibid.*, p111 My emphasis.
- [10] Fethullah Gülen, *Isigin Gorundugu Ufuk (Cag Ve Nesil Serisi-7) (Izmir: Nil Yayinlari, 2006), pp158.*
- [11] Fethullah Gülen, *Ornekleri Kendinden bir Hareket*, p112.
- [12] Fethullah Gülen, *Yeseren Dusunceler (Cag ve Nesil 6) (Izmir: Nil Yayinlari, 2006)*, p 88-92.
- [13] For the details of Gülen's feelings, see *ibid* pp75-82.
- [14] Fethullah Gülen, *Isigin Gorundugu Ufuk (Cag ve Nesil Serisi-7) (Izmir: Nil Yayinlari, 2006)*, p217.
- [15] Fethulla Gülen, *Ornekleri Kendinden bir Hareket*, p. 184.
- [16] Fethulla Gülen, *Yitirilmis Cennete Dogru (Cag ve Nesil Serisi-3) (Izmir: Nil Yayinlari, 1997)*, p. 98.
- [17] M. Fethullah Gülen, *Towards the Lost Paradise*, (London: Trustar, 1996), 40-2; see also M. Fethullah Gülen, *Fatiha Uzerine Mulahazalar*(Considerations on the Chapter Fatiha), (Izmir: Nil Yayinlari, 1997), 90-95.
- [18] Ahmad Akbar. *Islam Under Siege: Living Dangerously in a Post-Honor World*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2003. pp 171-172