

# Peaceful Muslim–Non-Muslim Co-existence in a Secular Context

by Farhod Alimuhamedov on 23 November 2007. Posted in Peaceful Coexistence

## Abstract

This paper is about the conditions of inter-ethnic, inter-religious and inter-class relations in Gülen schools and looks into their operation in non-Turkish and non-Muslim settings. It aims to examine the relations among young people coming from different groups. The initial and main steps of the integration processes among different ethnic and religious entities are well observed at school - we hypothesize that it is much easier to transfer knowledge and values to young people with the same or closely similar identities. The field of research is in Russia because Russian society offers an interesting context for the observation of inter-ethnic and interreligious relations. There we observe the strong ethnic identity arising after the collapse of the Soviet Union with concomitant rise in social rivalry among different groups. The students at Gülen schools are initially selected on academic merit, and the results then obtained by the schools make their reputation. That reputation increases the attractiveness of the schools and the best young people from different ethnic groups try to get places in them. However, the major focus of my research is to check the level of social integration rather than of academic success and to observe how Muslim-based schools can transmit values in non-Muslim context. The example of these schools could be useful for ethnically changing societies like the French one. French society should be reassured by the 'republican school' model, and should question the academic and social effectiveness of its methods and approaches rather than the ethnic or religious beliefs of the young French students who attend such schools.

## 1. Introduction

The reason of my interest in Gülen schools lies on my educational background. I studied at the Uzbek Turkish school in Tashkent which was opened in 1992 just after the first anniversary of the independence of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (1st September 1991). I spent 4 years at that school instead of 3 (we have to study at preparatory class first) in order to get the secondary level permitting to apply to the university. Nevertheless, I do not regret much about it, even if at that time one extra year seemed to be very important.

During these 4 years I had not learnt anything about Fethullah Gülen. Even after graduating the school I never questioned about him. The first information about Gülen I found was in Russian analytical paper named "Compass" in 1999 (in the same year all schools were closed in Uzbekistan) which described him as the leader of the "Nurcular" movement, Islamic oriented powerful stream with a strong financial and political support coming mainly from private funds in Turkey. Although that 10-page-article could not change my opinion about my 4-year-experience at school, it created a sort of suspicion towards the schools because that paper was and remained the only information about Fethullah Gülen and "his" schools for a long time.

## 2. Gülen and "His Schools"

I was informed lately that Gülen possesses no school by his own. He is not a businessman and he did not inherit enough to open hundreds of schools. The difference is clear between Gülen and other famous philanthropist like Soros, Ford or Gates who finance directly schools and education programmes by their own. He was a preacher in Edirne (Turkey) where he received the degree and later in Izmir city from 1966 to 1981 years. The functions of imam being not limited to preaching, but especially educating and writing (he has written about 60 books) he describes himself as an educator<sup>[1]</sup>. Modern education was not included at his early stages of activities, since at that time he played an important role in educating religion of Islam in Turkey. Therefore the name "Hocaefendi", which comes for the role of religious is often used to replace his name. The sector of contemporary (modern) education is one of the domains of his group activities behind the others. That field was actively taken into consideration after 1980<sup>[2]</sup> by the opening of private schools and became by the time the most discussed and publicly known sphere of activities. The schools which are associated with his name follow his line and vision of modern education which is based on both "mind and heart"<sup>[3]</sup>. He thinks that modern education is job oriented and lacks the spirituality whereas madrasas<sup>[4]</sup> (Qur'anic schools of Ottoman Empire) did not follow modern evaluation. However, he finds that Turkish secularism eliminates the religion from the public sphere and encourages the development of violent religious movements. Therefore he proposes the schools both compatible with and critical of modernity and Muslim traditions. Gülen does not see modernity and Islam as opposing entities, but in contrary suggest the participation of Islam in modern [Secular State](#). Even if his points of view are taken from Turkish experience, he tries not to establish one model to all schools over the world.

There are some 250 Gülen schools in Turkey and even more abroad. They are located in different countries, but mainly in developing ones. In the countries closer to Turkey they are densely implanted. For example, they exist in different forms in the majority of the post communist countries bordering and closely located to Turkey. In some countries like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan there are even universities which are linked to the Gülen movement. The schools, however, cover a large geographical area starting from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Northern America and even in Europe.

Gülen's role is not so much a planning one, but rather visionary one, since in new regions locally operating groups are better acquainted with needs and realities on the ground<sup>[5]</sup>. Therefore the forms of the schools are multiple. There are schools recognized as "lyceums" or "gymnasium" which are attached to the local schools. They share the building and interfere for the elder pupil. There are also Language and Computer centres that are in developing countries where the need for the subject is vital, but also in developed countries where difficulties to open the schools (mainly Europe) exist. Beside Gülen "has" several International Schools which is open to local pupil and for the children of diplomatic corpus residing at that country. However the main form is so called "Turkish" schools which undergo through intergovernmental agreements.

These schools obtained certain recognition in many countries. Famous political leaders, even presidents have claimed about them in public. For example, recently Afghan president Karzai

demanded Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Gul in their meeting to multiply the numbers of Afghan Turkish schools<sup>[6]</sup>. The director of Crimean-Turkish School in Ukraine Mehmet Sevketoglu has received a medallion for his work by country president Youshenko. The students of Turkish school Horizon Japan International School) were received by Prime Minister Koizumi Junishiro, whereas the mother of Georgian president Saakashvili, Dr. Giuli Alasania Saakashvili works at one of the Turkish schools.<sup>[7]</sup>

### **3. The Missions of "Missionary Schools"**

The success of Gülen schools is achieved almost everywhere they open. However, the question rises about the main aim of these schools from Turkish side, as well as from hosting country side. Several schools have been closed in Russia, and all schools in Uzbekistan. It is difficult to make parallel between these accidents, but in both cases the problems come from political and not from educational drive. In order to avoid all suspicion the schools keep a very strong control over the look of their students. The common characteristics of students are being well-bred, well-dressed and not having an ostentatious look. Traditional clothes are banned; students are obliged to have the uniform. The uniform is composed of jacket, trousers for young men and skirt for girls. In spite of "modern" image, the presence of these schools abroad was discussed in Turkey for several times as they were considered to be the drive for pro Islamic, missionary education. Gülen stated the purposes of these schools as follows: "Our schools are missionary like other missionary schools of Europeans and Americans. Our purpose is to carry out missionary activities to prepare the suitable conditions for creating Turkish lobby and to train bureaucrats".<sup>[8]</sup>

In fact, making parallel between missionary schools and Gülen schools is somehow interesting. The presence of Christian missionary schools in Muslim countries is a fact, why it would be difficult to accept the vice versa? From other hand, it remains very difficult to understand the notion of "islamization" of Muslim societies. Central Asian societies have been Muslim societies for the centuries; even Turkey itself is composed of more than 90% of the population of Muslims. How it is possible "islamize" already Muslims? There is, undoubtedly rising ethnic and religious identity formation which is replacing more and more left/right or communist/capitalist identities. Therefore there is a need for schools giving religious education after the "revival" of the religion in post communist countries. There is a need for sharing the history of Turkic nations those were in the same geopolitical area before being annexed by Russia. Schools are by their composition and acts may be considered as the promoters of the modern and needed education. They offer in fact, what lacks to that society in academic and moral terms. Michel says that given the lack of integration between scientific knowledge and spiritual values, Gülen and his companions introduced a new style of education which reconciles the two.

I think, by his comparison Gülen does not want to oppose his schools to missionary schools. On contrary, he takes them partly for example which has a role to play in contemporary political and social conflicting situation among the religions. Islam is considered as an "enemy" for some especially after that theory was officially promoted by Huntington. Therefore he favours inter religious dialogue in order to avoid the clash, whether than discussing sticky points among the religions. Gülen advocates acceptance and dialogue with the non-Muslim community. To advocate

this notion of tolerance, Gülen met important Christian and Jewish religious leaders including the Pope, Chief Rabbi of Israel and the Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church to promote inter-religious dialogue. If his role was to "islamize" or "re-islamize" he would better limit to Muslim societies, if his role was the revival of Panturkism he would better fix only on Central Asian countries. Therefore he favours opening the schools in non Muslim countries like Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Brazil, Mexico, etc. which establishes another image of Muslims as educators and not as the "bombers" in a very crucial period called "post September 11th". That lets non Muslims and non Turks get known abroad by the best image as he told above.

If there are similarities in the methods of education between Gülen schools and missionary schools, in the purpose they remain different. In fact, there is a "cliché" of missionary schools applied to Gülen schools. In methodology Gülen schools accent on family-like study which strengthen ties among the students. The schools are prevailing general level, in spite of individual which make an almost equal level of all the students. They have a strong discipline, strict control and very good information over each pupil. The parents are permanently enrolled in education processes and pupil stay at the dormitory during the week. By the functioning they may resemble to Christian "missionary" schools acting nowadays.

The purpose of "missionary" Gülen School is far from converting to Islam. In fact, it is impossible to convert somebody to Islam (we see the use of the terms to other context again) as according to Islam everybody is a Muslim by the birth. The parents make Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists from them, that means if somebody decides to be Muslim, he would have "come back" to Islam. From that, we can say that, being different from Christianity where the "conversion" is the purpose, in missionary schools, it would be incorrect from religious point of view to suppose Gülen schools "convert" pupil to Islam. Briefly, we can't use terms "islamization" or "conversion" as the purpose of these schools. Another divergence is based on the notion of Land. The missionary schools come from so called "Christian Land" to another "non Christian Land" that is located in between "10/40" window (which points on territorial aspect). In contrary, Gülen points on society and schools act within the society and not on territorial basis. They knowledge should serve for the people and for the necessity of the nation, therefore one can find several schools in one small territory, and no school in large territories in spite of religious or ethnic proximity. The purpose of the missionary schools is to use the pupil in Christian drive once they obtain important leadership career, whereas Gülen School believes that the pupil would work for the sake of his/her society and be the good person whilst having an important role in the government. Gülen considers that the majority should obtain the knowledge and thinks that danger comes when only minority possess it. Therefore "his" schools do not have a "target group" and open to everybody, whereas Christian missionary schools are active among the vulnerable groups like orphans, minorities, etc.

The purpose, aim is more important than the method, because it effects to a long term result, whereas, the method effects to a short term result. Hereby, I would like to look through the activities of Gülen schools in Russian Federation.

#### **4. Case study: Schools in contemporary Russia**

The secondary education remains one of the high priorities of Russian education system. The country achieved almost 100 per cent of alphabetisation even before 1990s. Therefore, basic and general level of education was high in the country.

At the beginning of the 1990s many specialists spoke about the decline in educational sphere in almost all countries of former Soviet Union. It was linked to the decline of the salaries of all employees depending from the state budget. In fact, it would be true talking about the "transformation of the education" in general, with new priorities and new approaches. New education sector would shape a new face of the Russian society. In terms of society, Russia was no more cosmopolitan, but extremely nationalistic in its internal policy at the first stages of its independence. In terms of economy, country accepted market economy to state regulation which affected to all budget sectors. In terms of politics, the leaders established power based on multi class society, rather than on workers or agricultures as it was in Soviet time. The division into the classes was very quick after a long single class society. In sum, the country transformed its system from egalitarian to market oriented education even in primary levels and increasing in higher steps. Initially, authorities could not provide necessary basis to accomplish such education therefore they were open to accept foreign specialist who proposed their study systems.

Gülen schools entered Russia as to other ex communist countries from a very beginning of the independence as an actor partly linked to Turkey and less to Turkish education system. In fact, they were aware of that, Turkish education system did not achieve much success until the recent years. The country is still placed among the highest among OECD countries having attained only primary education level (64,2%). The part of those who continue in tertiary and advanced research programmes is lower than in Russian Federation (9,1% to 20,8%). Only in this year (2007) the best Turkish universities entered among 500 leading universities list. In terms of yearly expenditure for each student in secondary level both Russian Federation and Turkey have the same expenses. Briefly, Turkey itself cannot represent a better model of secondary or higher level education and lesser "export" it to other countries. Therefore, schools had to prove much in Russia.

In fact, Gülen's schools represent elitist schools even in Turkey. The students are selected under the selective basis. They compose the best students and increase eventually better reputation of the school. As mentioned above, the schools have a relatively short experience even in Turkey. The possibility of acting abroad represents a double challenge for them. The results would have affected not only to Turkey's representation abroad, but also strengthening role of the schools inside the Turkey. Their ambassadorial role functioned with the best, young specialists who went to exercise teacher's functions abroad, with a small experience in pedagogy, in general.

Russia has given a green light to promote "lyceums" or "gymnasiums" or other types of schools that distinguished by better level from other "ordinary" schools. The interest for learning foreign languages, especially English and Computer Sciences became important points of attractiveness. The country aimed to have not only national, but more and more internationally oriented youth accepting the importance of English which have a lesser use in Soviet political zone.

The change from equal level to stratified level of secondary education is very important in the Russian system where the entrance to higher education is done through the examinations. The competition on the secondary education based in two areas. If the first is national and partly international Olympiads, the second and most important is university entrance results.

Gülen schools have a different methodology in teaching at secondary level. They should adapt to each national education system which varies from one another even at post communist countries. In general, they try to keep the control over the teaching of natural sciences in English and leave social sciences teaching to local teachers. School programme is based on obligatory study (between 35-38 academic hours) and working hours (about 10-12 hours) controlled by educators in the evening time.

## **5. Academic results**

These schools have spoken of them very quickly in Russia. Of course, their importance was not as strong as in Central Asia where they possessed unequal reputation based on domination in all sorts of competitions. However, with the small number of establishment, the schools achieved academic success in different fields, even though the education programme was not the same with the general secondary programme. For example, in 2007, Ms Katya Bikova, pupil of International Moscow Lyceum 56, obtained the second place in Russian national Ecology Olympiad. M Vasili Raska who studies at the same school obtained the first place with his project on the bio indicators. In sum, 8 pupil from that school participated successfully in 29th Lomonosov Olympiad organized by Moscow State University. The list of success is long and it is permanent each year. For example, only Tatar Turkish Girls School obtained 52 winning places within 10 years, which makes that each year they obtain more than 5 winning places in Olympiads.

University entrance statistics of Schools are also high. More than 90% of pupil enter the university from the first tentative, the data that is extremely high in comparison to national level.

## **6. Human Relationship**

The force of the schools resides not only in academic, but especially humanistic aspects. In fact, it is still difficult for Russian families to release the education of their children to foreigners. Especially, when this foreigners come from developing country which was considered for the centuries as an enemy. The image of Turkey as the centre of education remains unwilling because for the Russians it represented during Soviet Union Islam and Pan Turkism vis-à-vis the conquered Central Asia.

Surprisingly, the relations between teachers and students remain in the very good basis. Although, the age scale which is admitted to schools remains the most difficult (12-17), and the fact that the difference of age is considered to be low between educators and students (5-15) the authority of the teacher is very strong. The respect of the teacher is gained very quickly, in spite of cultural, religious differences. The assimilation with the local people, studying the local languages and traditions let the young teachers get rapidly the respect and trust of the parents and authorities. Even though the fact the cadres are very young (between 20 and 30) and composed of majority from the male (in Russia school teachers are composed of mainly women).

M Kuznetsov<sup>[9]</sup> says that the teachers are selected ones in Turkey. He notes that the relations between teachers and parents are in excellent stage which is the result of active relationships of teachers with parents. Things go even much farther by the example of the marriages of teachers with local women. For example, M Mustafa Boder (teacher of Turkish at Tuva Turkish College) married the daughter of president of Tuva M Serigo-ool Oorjak - Anyeta<sup>[10]</sup>.

Teacher selection for Gülen schools is not based only in academic criteria. Yet, before being teacher, young people try to understand the teachings of Gülen and the aim of educating. Gülen writes that "those who want to reform the world should reform themselves before"<sup>[11]</sup> Therefore, teachers are firstly well educated and thereafter competent ones. That puts into the first plan the character of the school staff which is neglected actually in contemporary education system, based only on competences<sup>[12]</sup>. The schools offer not only academic success, but also transfer good moral education. The schools give a parallel education and apprehension which is not offered by any other school in the region<sup>[13]</sup>. Ali Bayramoglu notes that, schools do not rely on religious (Islam) teaching, but to make moral education for the youth.<sup>[14]</sup>

In his article "Changing values: Russian youth in transition", Mikhail F.Chernys, speaks about the rapid changing of post-soviet Russian youth. He indicates that so called rise of consumption needs among the younger people. They start to drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes, etc. much younger than previous generation<sup>[15]</sup>. He notes that, a sharp change within the several years create a great antagonism between two generations living together. Many parents in Russia noted that the choice of sending their children to Turkish schools was linked to the moral education. Some parents openly say that they prefer these school for their English and non smoking education. Hulusi Turgut<sup>[16]</sup> notes that, many pupils stopped drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes after commencing studying.

Another aspect of the schools lay under the resolving multi ethnic or multicultural problems within the society. Gülen schools are attractive by having several ethnic groups. Kuznetsov noted that Moscow school has pupil from 12 different origins. In Tatarstan Muslim and non Muslim pupil continue studying together. In spite of rising ethnic view all over the Russia, the schools keep attracting diverse ethnic groups. The schools have almost the same prestige in the big cities or in the smaller ones and even in the central cities like Moscow or Saint Petersburg though the ethnic portrait is completely different. These cities are the centres of competing educational institutions; therefore it remains very difficult to get known. It is notably that ethnic Russians from these cities choose Gülen schools in spite of the large choice of different international schools.

## **7. Conclusion: The Movement in Europe**

Gülen schools exist also in developed countries like Japan, England, USA, etc. The role of these schools is determinant in putting into practice a new system of teaching as they make prior the teacher's education.

Gülen movement in Europe has other priorities actually. They concerned with moral education and academic support to local citizens of Turkish origin. Turkish Diaspora is one of the biggest in Europe,

therefore they have much activities to do. I suppose that the movement is aiming to multiply the number of schools in Europe because there is an increasing need for them.

The need is coming from the gap left by the society in the formation of the individuals. The role of human upbringing has much changed and therefore the institutions which play role in it have different power actually. The society is getting lesser role in human upbringing. Its role is reduced by non recognition as an institution like school, university or kindergarten. Therefore its share is partly taken by primary and secondary schools which make an important role in human development in European context. Parents leave all the responsibility to school which should play today the double role. If the task of the modern school is centred on knowledge transmission, the educating aspects are becoming more and more important. The schools are facing this problem in many European countries and this is clearly seen especially in immigrant families who are coming from the different context where society is still have a word to say in human upbringing.

For example, the French education system is very known by being republican, egalitarian. The state controls majority of primary, secondary schools and higher education institutions. The "égalité" is written in French constitution which is guaranteed in France by the equal conditions of education. But French sociologist Bourdieu has already shown that "egalitarian machine" was not working well throughout the years. The sector of education is the main factor of social stratification in the country. Recent studies show that primary and especially secondary education results very much from one part of the city to another. The so called "creation of ghetto schools" within the "ghetto districts" resulted in a very low degree of the pupil studying there. The school is reflecting social problems which are based on class, ethnic and religious tensions.

Actually, many critics come towards the school and education institutions in general as they are giving no chance to change the social status. Besides, the school is becoming the area of the conflict based on religious or ethic means. These conflicts show the different perceptions of the role of the school by diverse groups and the incapacity of the "republican school" to satisfy the needs of the new generation.

In actual French education system, there is an increasing need for education oriented schools. Parents leaving their children to the sake of society do not easily perceive its absence. Children have "individually" organized study programmes which are based under the stronger parental academic control. When it comes to immigrants or parents with low degree studies who can't transmit necessary knowledge and control, it becomes clear that children are going towards fiasco. Therefore, parents are surprised to see their kids having not being necessarily educated, nor academically fit in spite of studying for several years at school.

It is no more surprising when we find some Muslim parents sending their children to Catholic schools in the search of the better education and qualification. The purpose is to avoid the risks and giving their children good moral education. However, Catholic schools are also known well for their academic success that means parents prefer them not for being religious but effective. One can go to Christian University of Paris to search for Christianity, but he/she find that the majority of the



students are there not for Christianity, but the quality of higher education. Parents trust these schools, whereas the trust to "republican school" is diminishing especially in certain districts.

Today's France is a multicultural, multi ethnic and multi religious society. Although major political drive tries to keep ancient identity vision, they are aware of the need of reforms in very transforming society. The best reforms go through the education, as it is better and easier to educate the younger than the older one. France and Russia resemble much in their vision of society, central governance and actually more and more multi ethnic society. The experience of Gülen schools in Russia may be tempting for French educators in search of rapid reforms in nowadays.

[1] Thomas Michel, S.J. «Islamic Modernities: Fethullah Gülen and Contemporary Islam», p.1

[2] Agai, B «Discursive and Organizational Strategies of Gülen Movement» p.3

[3] Thomas Michel, S.J. «Islamic Modernities: Fethullah Gülen and Contemporary Islam», p.6

[4] In fact, the word «madrasa» which is the same as «medersa», «madrasah», «medrese» literally means "a place where learning/teaching is done". However, by the time this word lost its original meaning and stands for ancient schools which existed before establishing republican regime in Turkey. Therefore, people refer directly to Qur'anic school once they use the word «madrasa».

[5] Hermansen.M, «Understanding of Community within the Gülen Movement», p.9

[6] Zaman, 28-02-2007

[7] Zaman, 22-09-2006

[8] Cennet Engin Demir, Ayse Balci, Fusun Akkok «The rôle of Turkish schools in the educational system and social transformations of Central Asian countries: the case of Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan», Central Asian Survey (2000), 19 (1), p.151

[9] Hurriyet 19.01.1998

[10] Zaman (08/01/2007)

[11] Fethullah Gülen «The Necessity of Interfaith dialogue : A Muslim Approach», p.30

[12] Nelson, C «Fethullah Gülen, A Vision of Transcendent Education», p. 4

[13] Ali Unal «Fethullah Gülen : Bir Portre Denemesi», p. 272

[14] ibid

[15] Values and Post-Soviet Youth. The Problems of Transition, p. 166

[16] Sabah, 22.01.1998

**Farhod Alimuhamedov**

Currently in the fourth year of studies for his PhD in political sciences at Dauphine University of Paris, France. After studying in the faculty of International Relations of the University of World Economy and Diplomacy in Tashkent, he obtained in 2001 a scholarship to do graduate studies in geopolitics and international relations at the Institute of Political Studies of Toulouse, France, where he was invited to continue his studies in following years.