



THE VISION OF EDUCATION WITHIN PLURALISTIC SOCIETIES IN THE THOUGHT OF FETHULLAH GÜLEN: THE CONTRIBUTION OF NON-DENOMINATIONAL EDUCATION TOWARDS INTER-RELIGIOUS AND COMMUNAL UNDERSTANDING, PEACE AND IDENTITY. A STUDY OF CONTRASTS IN THE UK, TURKEY AND THE USA

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Abstract

'But in the provinces, where Islam is strong, there would be trouble ... The Syrian army is as fanatical as the hordes of the Mahdi. The Senussi have taken a hand in the game. The Persian Moslems are threatening trouble. There is a dry wind blowing through the East and the parched grasses wait the spark. And the wind is blowing towards the Indian border...' 'It looks as if Islam had a bigger hand in the thing that we thought', I said 'I fancy religion is the only thing to knit up such a scattered empire'.

In his novel, *Greenmantle*, published in 1916, John Buchan speculated on the possibility of a mass-mobilisation of Islamic sentiment directed against Britain, France and Russia, which would assist Germany and Austria to defeat the Allied forces. The generalisations of Islam made by the characters in *Greenmantle*, as cited above, reduce Muslims to an undifferentiated whole that strides across fundamental clefs in political, social and religious terrain. Dialogue between people of faiths and with those of no faith is a condition for communal global survival. This paper examines the contribution of Fethullah Gülen in his writings and their outworking in schools, their curricula and universities associated with his name towards global peace and understanding. It is based upon field work in the UK, Turkey, the USA, the Caucasus, and Africa.

1. Introduction

This paper examines the contribution of Fethullah Gülen in his writings and their outworking in schools, their curricula and universities associated with his name towards global peace and understanding. It is based upon field work in the UK, Turkey, the USA, the Caucasus, and Africa.

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Gülen is against the categorisation of Muslim and non-Muslim, East and West. Each must be a part of the future inclusive civilisation to achieve balance in the world and universal peace. This is a noteworthy vision drawing upon Qur’anic ideals, Western empirical science, and respect for the Semitic faiths in particular. Binding the strands of the movement in its polymorphic engagements with the contemporary world is an Anatolian Sufi influenced Islam redolent of Buchan’s character Richard Hannay and his words, ‘I fancy religion is the only thing to knit up such a scattered empire’

2. The Context: Europe

One of the most striking features of religious life in contemporary Europe is the evident mismatch between different measurements of religiousness. There exists, first of all, a set of indicators which measure firm commitments to the institutional life of a faith tradition and knowledge of the creedal statements of religion. For the majority of Europeans this still entails awareness of Christian professions of belief formed by Judaeo-Christian monotheism and the Decalogue, Greek and therefore Enlightenment Rationalism, and Roman organisation in the polity [O’Connell 1991].

Awareness of the first criterion shows a marked reduction in Europe as a whole, but most of all in the national states of northern Europe. Thus, countries such as Denmark and Sweden are regarded as profoundly secular. These indicators are, of course, closely related to each other in so far as institutional commitment [in the form of religious membership or regular practice of worship] both reflects and confirms religious belief in its orthodox forms. The believing Christian attends church to express his or her belief and to receive affirmation that this is the right and necessary thing to do. At the same time, repeated exposure to the institution and its teaching necessarily informs, not to say disciplines, belief and its expressions in propositional statements and thence into behaviour.

In the European Values Survey [1981 – 2004] respondents in Great Britain were questioned:

Do you belong to religious denomination?

BASE=1000 Weight [with split ups]	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative valid percent
Yes	823	82,3	82,3	83,4	83,4
No	164	16,4	98,7	16,6	100,0
Don´t know	13	1,3	100,0		
Total	1000	1000 (100%)		987 (100%)	



And: How often do you attend religious services?

BASE=1000 Weight [with split ups]	Total	Male	Female
More than once a week	5,8	6,1	5,5
Once a week	8,6	5,4	11,7
Once a month	4,5	4,3	4,7
Only on special holy days/Christmas/Easter days	7,7	6,9	8,4
Other specific holy days	2,9	2,0	3,8
Once a year	5,4	5,7	5,0
Less often	9,4	8,4	10,4
Never practically never	55,7	61,3	50,4
Total	988 (100%)	484 (100%)	504 (100)

And: Do you pray to God outside of religious services?

BASE=1000 Weight [with split ups]	Total	Male	Female
Every day	16,9	12,1	21,6
More than once a week	7,0	5,0	8,9
Once a week	5,0	5,3	4,7
At least once a month	4,7	5,3	4,2
Several times a year	6,2	4,5	7,8
Less often	12,0	12,9	11,1
Never	48,3	55,0	41,7
Total	932 (100%)	462 (100%)	470 (100%)



The disparity in “belonging”, “attending” and “personal spirituality” was significant. There was value evidently placed upon identification with a religious tradition but active participation in both public and personal ritual practice was placed on a low premium.

Two trajectories are running consequently and simultaneously in the religious life of northern Europe. The fact that they have occurred at the same time is partly a coincidence; each however encourages the other. On the one hand, the historic churches, despite their continuing presence are losing their capacity to form the religious thinking of large sections of the population especially amongst the young. At the same time, the range of choice widens all the time as new forms of religion come into Europe from outside, largely as the result of the movement of people. Populations that have arrived in Europe primarily for economic or political reasons bring with them different ways of being religious some of which are Christian and some not; conversely European people travel the world, experiencing amongst other things considerable religious diversity. In this sense a genuine religious marketplace is emerging in most parts of the continent.

The crucial question lies, however, not in the existence of the marketplace in itself but in the capacities of Europeans to make use of this phenomenon. Hence, in my view, the significance of an increasingly observable trend which is taking place both inside and outside the historic churches, from an understanding of religion as a form of responsibility to an increasing emphasis on utilization. What until moderately recently was simply imposed with all the negative connotations of this word, or inherited becomes instead a matter of personal choice. I go to a place of worship because I want to, maybe for a short period or maybe for longer; to fulfil a particular rather than a general need in my life. This is where I will continue my attachment so long as it provides what I want, but I have no obligation either to attend in the first place or to continue if I do not wish to do so. In essence there is a move towards “designer” or “preference religion” where “religion” becomes commodified.

A further ingredient in the religious life of northern Europe is the growing diversity in its faith traditions not least with the arrival of significant Muslim communities. A private Islam makes no sense; indeed it is almost an oxymoron. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Europe’s Muslim communities make increasing claims on public space in European societies to the discomfort, in many cases, of their host societies particularly those whose dominant mode of religious life has been to believe but not to belong [Davie 1994]. Islam, in other words, disturbs Christian nominalism (i.e. the increasingly privatized forms of inherited religion). It disturbs very much less those Christians who have chosen to belong to their churches. Indeed the latter are beginning to see in Islam a positive role model, despite the disquiet amongst those of them whose theology embodies exclusive forms of Christianity. The role model argument proceeds as follows: if small and newly arrived Muslim communities can make claims on public space in Europe, so too can Christians – in for example the complex moral debates of modern societies and in the competition for adequate institutional provision for all those in European societies who take religious practice and faith seriously. .

The latter point can be exemplified in any number of ways; it concerns amongst many other things the political sphere, educational provision and access to the media. The pressure to include a question about religion in the 2001 UK Census was a case in point. The Muslim community provoked the debate by wanting to be counted as Muslims (rather than in national or ethnic categories). But if Muslims made such a claim, why should not Christians, or at least certain kinds of Christians who wished precisely to stand up and be counted? Numbers, after all, can be used to support initiatives elsewhere in society, not least in terms of education and the media. The size of the community



becomes a bargaining point in the on-going negotiations between different societal groups and a national government.

It is an unfounded scheme therefore to predict the demise of either the European churches or of religious practice or of the latent support that is given to religious traditions and communities by significant sections in the population. Already innovative forms of religion have begun to emerge, both inside and outside the traditional churches and amongst the now settled faith expressions that have migrated to northern Europe since 1945. Such groups may be numerically small but they will, I suggest be capable of sustaining forms of religion that become one crucial variable among others in the competing claims of Europeans in their public as well as their private lives. This gradual and on-going metamorphosis is arguably incorrectly described by the term 'privatization'. With this mind, Casanova's analysis of public religion in the modern world can be applied as much in northern Europe as it can in the rest of the world [Casanova 1994. In essence Europe proffers an intriguing diversity of religious practice both wary of radical appearances of religious fervour and yet responsive to the ineffable. It is into this paradoxical shared discourse that such a movement as that engendered from the writings and teachings of Fethullah Gülen enters the wider European stage.

3. A Counter Movement

Originating in Turkey but becoming increasingly transnational, the movement represents novel approaches to the relationship between faith and reason, peaceful coexistence in liberal democracies with religious diversity, education and spirituality. [Aslandogan, 2007: vii]. Hendrick [2007: 12–3, 30-1] concludes that the Gülen Movement is “the Turkish-based, globally expansive ‘service movement’ [and] ...a civil/cosmopolitan mobilization” that “strives to present itself as exemplary in regard to ways in which Islamic morality and ethics might fuse with, rather than combat, the financial and political institutions of neo-liberal globalization”.

As Melucci [1999: 177] argues, such an understanding brings to the surface most notably the right to be different. In terms of political action, this requires opening up new channels of representation and granting access to so far excluded themes, projects and services. Rather than in contentious, political or direct action, the Gülen Movement has exerted itself in constructive efforts to form the public space and to consolidate and revitalize education, inter-religious dialogue and democratization. This is an expression of Qur'anic altruism as a counter movement.

Gülen's understanding of duty, to serve humanity especially in the field of education, “permits no expectation of material or political gain. Sincerity and purity of intention should never be harmed or contaminated” [Ünal and Williams, 2000: 22]. Woodhall [2005: 2, 14] maintains:

It must be remembered, however, that his philosophy of education is not utilitarian, nor a social and political activity which can be divorced from the rest of his philosophy or faith, but a firmly integrated and well-developed component of his world view. ...He indicates that the means must be as valid as the end, apparent or material success is not the only measure...

In the same vein, Tekalan [2005: 3, 7–8] describes the purpose of the movement: The basic purpose is to ensure respect for objective and universal human values, to never have ulterior motives to seek material interests nor to impose any ideology or to seize power through politics in any country.



This understanding of service is geared primarily to 'offering' in Turkey and abroad. Simply, this mobilization presents alternative models which state systems cannot replicate. Hence, it has attracted broad attention, in favour and against, within a short period of time [Ünal and Williams, 2000: 22). Melucci 1999: 359] argues that such action, such "offering", represents another breakdown in the rules of the game, for it is a symbolic challenge against the dominant cultural codes and the customary basis of strategic and instrumental logic in complex societies. He adds that the unilateral power of giving and thus generating and providing cultural models, constantly result in a movement's predominance in societies, as the autonomous and gratuitous production of cultural models are not governed by cost-benefit calculations.

The business, educational and interfaith organizations operating across the borders of economic, political and cultural spheres adopt a common rationality based on knowledge, skills and shared ethical values (*Fountain*, 2002: 5). This educational mobilization addresses time, space, personal relations, and individual selfhood, and the affective deep structure of individual behaviour. Therefore, the rationality of the Gülen Movement does not exhibit change, whether in Turkey or anywhere else

These successful trans-national and joint projects yield significant recognition, cooperation and acknowledgement from foreign entities and organizations [Stephenson, 2006: 30 –1; Aslandogan and Çetin, 2006: 45–8; Irvine, 2006: 55–74; Hendrick, 2006: 29, Ates, et al., 2005: 14]. Gülen especially encourages people to serve humanity through education, intercultural and interfaith activities and institutions, in order to lessen the gaps between peoples and to establish bridges for the common good and peace. These initiatives to cooperate with other faiths and cultures bring acknowledgement of the non-violent and peace-making vision of the Gülen Movement (Özdalga in Akman 2003; Weller, 2006: 86–8). Gülen (2004a: 259) stresses this frequently in his articles, now compiled as a book, *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*:

Now that we live in a global village, Gülen extends this idea to contend that the best way to serve humanity is to establish dialogue with other civilizations, to come together on some common ground, with mutual understanding and respect, and thus to work for peace, the cooperation of diverse peoples, and the prevention of the predicted clash of civilizations.

Taking the image of the global village, Gülen extends this idea to contend that the best way to serve humanity is to establish dialogue with other civilizations, to come together on some common ground, with mutual understanding and respect, and thus to work for peace, the cooperation of diverse peoples, and the prevention of the predicted clash of civilizations. He argues that education is the most effective vehicle, regardless of whether it is in Turkey or abroad, and whether or not people have systems working or failing, as every problem in human life ultimately depends on human beings themselves [Ünal and Williams 2000: 305–31; the site <http://en.fGülen.com/>, and Aslandogan and Çetin 2006: 31ff; Yildirim 2005: 120].

4. "And the wind is blowing"

Key facets of the Gülen Movement's culture accordingly include its Qur'anic ethic, the ideal of the *insan i-kamil*, flexibility, altruism, adaptability and reliability [Keles 2007]. These are invaluable resources in accommodating to new situations, whereas more rigid and exclusive cultures would have experienced greater difficulties in coping with true uncertainty. Simultaneously, destructuring has been accompanied by restructuring or the revival of collective energies through the experience,



credibility and heritage which the service-networks had already established and from which it has benefited because the collective actor of the Gülen Movement has not sunk into a total subjugation or a sort of collective psychosis at the cultural and group or service network levels. (Melucci, 1996: 375)

Also, a number of explanations can be given for the capacity of the Gülen Movement to respond to such a situation positively and peacefully, instead of retreating into passivity, as in Melucci's argument (1996: 376–7). The first is the reliability and legitimacy of the authority that Gülen and his readers already enjoyed. The second is the density and vigour of the formal and informal networks of belonging, and the entire heritage present in the Gülen Movement, and the ability to restructure, redirect, and reshape them in new situations. The third is the ability to listen to society at various levels.

The Gülen Movement's activities flourish most amidst political systems that are marked by confinement and authoritarian rule. Its adherents for example as teachers do not aim to maximize the advantages of the actor in political decisions. No matter how their worldview or services might empirically affect the political system, they do not threaten or infringe on the system of rules of a state nor extend to alter its institutional boundaries. The services given by the community are not a contest among adversaries for the distribution of control over the allocation of social production and the creation of imbalances of power among social positions. Thus, all the efforts of the Gülen Movement need to be analysed as *collective social altruism*, using analytical categories other than political ones. Özdalga [2000: 89–90; 2003: 61–2; Akman 2003] attempts to explain this use of Weber's notion of 'worldly asceticism'.

In social movement theory ends or goals are a central term which often synonymously includes and relates to plans, schemes, projects and strategies. Researchers vary in their conceptualizations and the diversity tempts them to choose or ignore one or a few elements relating to different or other variables (Lofland, 1996: 257, 259).

Rather than advancing political ambitions, his [Gülen's] objective is to foster an ethic that comes very close to what Max Weber described as 'worldly asceticism,' an activist pietism with a tendency toward the rationalization of social relationships. To intolerant reactions, which imply that he is after political gains or seeking a new political formation in the Turkish or any context Gülen responds:

I have absolutely no political aspirations and expectations. I have never been involved in any political effort or activity. ...But I see myself as a genuine member of this nation, as one of the threads in the lace of this culture. So as long as I live, if I have an opinion about an issue related to it, I won't hesitate to express it.' [Ünal and Williams, 2000: 177]

The Gülen model of active non-political engagement with a host society contrasts with northern European experiences where denominational or faith sector education is ineluctably involved with the political process and lobbying. As indicated by the EVS evidence [EVS 2006] there is considerable disparity between belief and practice of religious values in European societies and most certainly in the UK context. As I have already indicated it is oxymoronic to suggest that in Muslim observance there is a divide between public ethic, social construction and observance, and personal devotion. Consequently, the debate surrounding the provision of faith sector schools in the UK has consistently embraced a public and political colour. Education Acts from 1870, to 1944, to 1988 and subsequent legislation have secured the place of Christian and Jewish denominational education. Since 1997 and 2001 the UK government has reinforced this commitment to its provision of faith based educational



environments for Muslim, Sikh and other faith groups present in British society [Open Society 2005, 124-125].

The atmosphere of the deliberations and policies is one characterised by conflict, contentiousness, protectionism and misunderstanding. Esposito [1995] examines media coverage that portrays the relationship between European / Western societies and Islam as one of antipathy. Press reporting focuses upon particular global events ranging from the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the current antagonistic relationship between Iran and the USA, to the also contemporary combative activities in Iraq and Afghanistan. This ideological collision is in addition present in education [Halstead 1993] both in the UK, France, Germany and the Netherlands with debate ensuing over the nature of state funding, religious observance and education, and the wearing of the hijab by girls. From finance to the curriculum, from religious symbolism to wearing of a head scarf, the discussion concerns the management and encouragement of religious pluralism, integration, diversity, unity and equality of opportunity in education

The UK Islamic Human Rights Commission conducted research in 2004 on British Muslims' expectations examining educational provision. Of 1125 respondents 47.5% stated that they would prefer to send their children to a Muslim school rather than a state school; 40% responded that religious values were of the utmost concern for them in nurturing their children; 38.5% would opt for the best school available; and only 8.5% would choose a mainstream state funded secular school [Ameli & Merali 2004].

It is not simply the weak educational achievements of Muslim children in state schools that result in such a low preference response for such schools but also the apprehension that Qur'anic ethics and values are challenged in such environments. There is no division between personal piety, religious observance, morality and citizenship in Islam. It is an oxymoronic perception. Modood comments that "...the real; division of opinion is not between a conservative element in the Church of England versus the rest of the country, but between those who think religion has a place in secular public culture and those who think not." [Modood 1994, 71]. In a similar mode Newbigin asserts "...in our present situation in Britain, where Christians and Muslims share a common position as minority faiths in a society dominated by the naturalistic ideology, we share a common duty to challenge this ideology" [Newbigin et al 1998]. It may be added that it is a common duty to challenge not only secularist ideologies but also the nominalism as evidenced in the European Values Surveys in religious adherence, understanding, practice and understanding of beliefs.

Faith sector / denominational schools create "Christian", "Jewish", "Muslim" or whatever faith "educational spaces" which are valued and sought after by parents. These are "spaces" where respect for particular faiths are respected, cultivated and accepted as integral for framing contemporary UK society. It is only by creating such "spaces" that the faith communities become normalised, visible, incorporated and established in wider society.

5. Conclusion

Fethullah Gülen simultaneously embraces and represents several aspects of both traditional and also innovative Islamic thought and practice. This combination of characteristics, abilities and qualifications, some of which have hitherto seemed mutually exclusive, marks him out from other scholars and reformers and has provided him with a transformative edge [Keles 2007].



The Gülen synthesis is significant. It seeks to empower and enable people through education and dialogue, which challenge cultural perceptions and religious dogmas [Keles 2007]. It seeks to mobilise the individual and society towards achieving and becoming *insan-i kamil* which can only progress in a free, fair and just society [Keles 2007]. Since Gülen's goals and teachings are justified in traditional Islamic sources, they should have no problem of legitimacy or authenticity. Just as Gülen's and the movements' efforts have helped strengthen the influence of Muslim thought and active social engagement from the periphery increasingly to the centre in Turkey, my contention is that this is being replicated both in the wider Muslim world and in non-Muslim societies [Keles 2007]. The pace of this influence naturally depends on the movement's wider presence.

It can be said that the Gülen Movement is most successful in the sight of communities globally when it mobilises inactive, dormant, but innovative energies present in societies. It absorbs conflicting pressures and eases tension within fragmented communities. It has transformed the potential for coercion to induce changes in political systems into efforts to produce beneficial services. Also, it has never shown any inclination whatsoever towards violence, despite provocations and ill-treatment. [Aslandogan and Çetin, 2006: 43-4, 51-4].

The Gülen Movement has involved diverse people within a comparatively brief period of time over a large geographical area to achieve educational and other projects. It appears to have established the exact ratio, or the ideal balance, between risks and advantages, so that millions of people take part in *servicing*. By recognizing the outcomes of its actions and securing positive recognition from others, the participants in the movement compare and perceive its consistency and continuity over time and across borders. The movement has formed a large number of organisations operating across borders in economic, political and cultural spheres. It circulates and diffuses ideas, information, new patterns of action and cultures. In this way, it is able to transfer latency into visibility through collective action and services, which are then institutionalised. Through associational and relational service networks and through the media the participants in the movement harmoniously integrate and liaise between its many layers formally and informally when needed (Özdalga, 2005: 443). 76

Karaman and Aras (2000: 56) argue,

“Gülen represents the continuation of a long Sufi tradition of seeking to address the spiritual needs of the people, to educate the masses, and to provide some stability in times of turmoil. And, like many previous Sufi figures (including the towering thirteenth-century figure, Jalal ad-Din Rumi), he is wrongly accused of seeking political power”.

The movement inspired and guided by Fethullah Gülen is offering Muslims a way to live out Islamic values amidst the complex demands of modern societies and to engage in ongoing dialogue and cooperation with people of other religions” [Michel, 2005 91]. As Thomas Michel also acknowledges, Gülen [2004a: 250] deserves the last word:

The peace of this (global) village lies in respecting all these differences, in considering these differences to be part of our nature, and in ensuring that people appreciate these differences. Otherwise, it is unavoidable that the world will devour itself in a web of conflicts, disputes, fights, and the bloodiest of wars, thus preparing the way for its own end.

This is a new wind that is blowing.....for “religion is the only thing to knit up such a scattered empire” of humanity.