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**“The Golden Generation: Integration of Muslim
Identity with the World through Education”**

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Turkey is a crucible in which Eastern and Western civilizations, secular ideas, and Islamic tradition merge. Using ideas born in the Turkish context, Fethullah Gülen and his followers have developed and put into practice an educational system that combines the strengths of both European and Islamic cultures, cultivating students of academic achievement in the sciences who possess deep ethical grounding. Founded in universal values of honesty, hard work, harmony and conscientious service, Gülen’s model appeals to people with a wide range of beliefs. Through Gülen’s teachings, this educational system stresses the compatibility of science with Islam and aims to bring up people equipped with the moral values and knowledge to use science for the benefit of mankind.

Education, according to Gülen, is an essential sphere to effect change. He laments what he sees as the lack of moral guidance in youth, and places the responsibility of such guidance upon the shoulders of the teacher. If education were consistent in imparting ethical values to students, Gülen argues, then individuals would work together to bring about peace and harmony, putting all their energy towards good works. Schools should not simply preach spiritual values, but instead, pair moral models with concrete training in the sciences so that students have the capacity to bring about positive change.

“It must be the foremost duty,” writes Gülen, “of those leaders upon whom the people have set their hopes to equip the coming generations with lofty ideals, leading them to the fountain of the ‘water of life’” (Gülen 1996c).

Two of the main values the Gülen movement would like to pass on to youth are tolerance and hard work. The schools, and teachers working in them, endeavor to exhibit these characteristics themselves. Gülen’s followers have established educational institutions all over the world. These institutions concentrate on teaching universal values, but do not specifically teach religion. Students with different religious convictions attend these schools; in some countries there may not be a single Muslim student. Students and graduates have proven to be well-prepared in the sciences and are also known for their high moral standards.

Gülen’s vision

The contemporary world often sees science and religion as incompatible. As Michel (2003) put it, “Secular educators saw religion as at best a useless expenditure of time and at worst an obstacle to progress.” Conversely, this perception of a dichotomy between religion and science resulted in some religious scholars leading to religion being viewed as “a political ideology rather than a religion in its true sense and function” (Gülen 1996a, 20). Gülen’s writings have pointed out time and again that science and religion are perfectly compatible, and in fact must be combined for science to have meaning.

Gülen proposes an educational system that combines technical and moral training. He sees the competition between secular and religious educational institutions as having

caused a crisis in Turkish society, since graduates of such restricted schools lacked an integrated perspective on the future (Michel 2003, 72). In the early twentieth century, the Turkish education system included *medreses* - institutions of religious training, *tarikats* - Sufi orders, and secular schools. *Medreses* did not offer an education appropriate for the contemporary world; Michel (2003) describes them as lacking “the flexibility, vision, and ability to break with the past [and] to enact change” (72). While *tarikats* had been traditionally concerned with developing spiritual values, Gülen perceives them as looking backwards. Secular schools, on the other hand, exhibit an inflexibility of ideas (Gülen 1996c, 11) and are designed to provide a value-free, job-oriented education that is too short-sighted to look to the future (Michel 2003, 74).

Gülen is especially concerned with what he sees as the lack of ethical values in the world. He perceives today’s people constitute “generations with no ideals” (Gülen 1996c, 51-52). The main value taught in today’s schools is that of material success. Current educational systems have taught people to search for new ways to dominate nature and other human beings (Gülen 2003). This has resulted in the worsening of the imbalances both between humanity and nature and among individual humans. Gülen’s teachings carry the assumption that some major global problems such as weapons of mass destruction and environmental pollution are created by scientists who do not take responsibility for the consequences of their work (Agai 2003, 59). To Gülen, harmony between humans and nature and an understanding between peoples will only be achieved when “the material and spiritual realms are reconciled” in the upbringing of young generations (Gülen 2000).

Gülen envisions a “Golden Generation,” that is well-educated in the sciences and well-rounded in moral training. The prototype of the Golden Generation is the teacher of the movement who works to bring on a “Golden Age” (Agai 2003, 57). The Golden Generation has the defining characteristics of faith and strong ethical values, which drive them to apply science for the benefit of humankind (Agai 2003, 57). In stark contrast to the typical Western view of political Islam, where Islamic activism is a reaction against modernism (Yavuz and Esposito 2003), in Gülen’s vision, the Golden Generation will participate in modernity and help to shape it (Agai 2003, 58).

Gülen’s ideal person is *zul-cenaheyn*, “one who possesses two wings,” exhibiting a “marriage of mind and heart” (Gülen 1996c, 12). Consolidation of different educational currents should result in a holistic system that trains individuals of “thought, action and inspiration” who are able to cope with the changing demands of the world (Gülen 1996c, 12). These individuals, then, would use their knowledge and training for the service of humankind.

Driving Values

Gülen’s vision is driven by Islamic values such as love, belief and hard work, which are also universally accepted values. A value of great importance to Gülen is that of hard work and action. Love for all humanity, paired with faith and strong beliefs, will guide a person from theory toward positive actions to carry and apply his beliefs and commitments into real life. It is when action stemming from universal ethical principles becomes the norm that the Golden Age will begin.

Gülen describes action as,

Embracing the whole of creation with full sincerity and resolve, aware of journeying to an eternal realm through the corridors in creation and equipped with a power from that infinite, eternal realm; it means expending all one's physical, intellectual and spiritual faculties in guiding the world to undertake the same journey (Gülen 1994).

To him, “action should be the most indispensable element or feature of our lives” (Gülen 1994). He further explains that activism should not be limited to any time or space, but should aim at larger goals. Thought is described as “action in one's inner world.” A combination of rational thought and ethical values should form activism, so that the nature of the world that is being created is understood (Gülen 1994).

This concept of action increases a Gülen student's drive to be involved in science. Gülen's educational model is designed partly to instill the ethic of hard work in its students, so that they will use their understanding of science to work for the improvement of the world.

Gülen emphasizes what Özdalga (2000) calls *activist pietism*. Instead of living in seclusion, he believes a pious person should use his life in the best way possible to accomplish things in the service of God and his creatures. In this view, worldly activities are seen as religious duty. Humans die, but their work lives on to serve humanity and God.

The term “worldly asceticism” was coined by Max Weber in a study of Calvinist capitalism, but is equally pertinent to Gülen's teachings. It refers to a perception of daily activity in one's calling as a form of worship. Activism is thus both inspired and controlled by piety (Özdalga, 2000). The work ethic Gülen advocates is congregational, where believers combine their efforts to do good works. While inner piety is essential, so

is externally oriented action. Gülen teaches that “the believer never rests in comfort but is always prepared to ask: ‘What else can I do?’” (Özdalga 2000).

To Gülen, the activist pietist, or the *aksiyon insani* (man of action) in his terminology, should possess four characteristics: 1. Criticizing and analyzing ideas: In particular, remembering the importance of self-criticism and self-control. 2. Keeping the image of death alive, since this image drives hard work to create lasting legacies. 3. Continually focusing on the works that stimulate you intellectually. 4. Maintaining close ties to people with whom you share the aspiration to do good deeds (Gülen 1997).

Unlike other religious teachers, Gülen promotes involvement in the world rather than isolated reflection. The ideal of the *aksiyon insani* can be partly credited with the success of students of Gülen schools, since it is this ideal, whether or not they are consciously aware of it, that pushes them to excel. The ideal of hard work is unquestionably universal, an example of the reason that Gülen’s educational model is so popular.

The educational model: Goals

Gülen is interested in developing “contemporary Muslims” who live by the ethical values of Islam and are well-rounded when it comes to science and present-day knowledge (Agai 2003, 51). In Gülen’s conception, the whole person is composed of the body, mind and spirit (Gülen n.d., 2). He believes in developing the spirituality of the students, including those from other religions. To him, the term *spirituality* has a sense broader than that of *religion*. It includes ethics, logic, psychological health and emotional openness (Michel 2003, 76). Gülen’s educational vision is one in which “genuinely

enlightened people” will be produced through a fusion of religious and scientific knowledge, morality and spirituality (Michel 2003, 76, Gülen 1996a).

Compassion and tolerance are key attributes that Gülen would like to see instilled by educators. Gülen urges his followers to “applaud the good for their goodness” and “return good for evil” (Gülen 1996a). Özdalga (2000) argues that problems in democracies are often intertwined with problems of integrating diverse components of the society and that Gülen’s teachings address these problems. Gülen tells his followers to be themselves, not through isolation, but by “following [their] way among other ways” (Gülen 1994).

Furthermore, Gülen stresses the importance of traditional and cultural values. Gülen’s model aims to teach young people to integrate themselves with their past to prepare them for the future (Michel 2003, 72-73, Gülen 1996a). Gülen sees Turkey’s past, for instance, as a long amassing of wisdom, much of which is still valid. At the same time, he has no interest in reconstructing the past, instead using the values that have developed to move forward (Michel 2003, 77).

At no time is the importance of science undermined. Gülen understands science as a way to comprehend the existence of God and to exalt His greatness.

Science means comprehending what things and events tell us, and what the Divine Laws prevailing over the universe reveal to us. It means striving to understand the purpose of the Creator. Man, who has been created in order that he shall rule over all things, needs to observe, read, discern and learn about what is around him. Then, he has to seek the way of exerting his influence over events and subjecting them to himself. At this point, by the decree of the Sublime Creator, everything will submit to man, who himself will submit to God (Gülen 1985).

Gülen writes that “the universe is a book written by God for us to study over and over again” (Gülen 1993). Thus, the curriculum of the movement’s schools has a special emphasis on the sciences. The students have outstanding performance in academic competitions in the natural sciences, information sciences and languages (Michel 2003, 70-71).

Gülen’s educational model combines scientific ideals with the moral ideals that come from religion. He is concerned with nurturing all aspects of young people’s characters, including an understanding and tolerance for other people, a comprehension of their obligation to the world and humanity, and the intellectual abilities to be able to fulfill that obligation. This vision may seem impractical, but one needs only to look at the Gülen schools around the world and the students who have attended to see that this goal is not unrealistic.

The educational model: The educator

Gülen differentiates between teachers, who simply pass on information and training, and educators (Gülen 1996a, 36). Educators communicate information, but also help students to build their characters and learn self-discipline and a sense of direction, as well as tolerance (Michel 2003, 75). Gülen describes the ineffectiveness of those teachers who are not educators as follows:

People unable to derive inspiration from the Divine Light coming from all around the universe are incapable of leading the people to the realization of true humanity ... They spend their time in relating the good deeds and accomplishments of others, which can neither arouse enthusiasm nor give uplifting thoughts to the minds nor empower the will of their listeners (Gülen 1996c).

The core Golden Generation would be made up of educators; thus, teacher training is essential to Gülen's vision. However, Gülen's movement does not have any type of formal institution to train these teachers other than the informal organization of Light Houses (Michel 2003). Mostly these teachers have come across Gülen's works independently and have taken it upon themselves to serve humanity through teaching (cf. Özdalga 2003).

In his book on the life of the Prophet Muhammad, Gülen describes the essentials of good education and sets the Prophet as the model of an ideal educator. He emphasizes the importance of addressing "all aspects of a person's mind, spirit, and self" (Gülen 1996b). Gülen points out that an educator is judged by the quality, comprehensiveness and universality of his teaching methodology (Gülen 1996b).

Gülen perceives part of the educator's role to be "filling science with wisdom so that it will be applied usefully to society" (Agai 2003, 58). Additionally, teachers can use their knowledge of science and their experience to help their students. For instance, one teacher in a Gülen school helps her students navigate the pitfalls of adolescence using her knowledge of psychology (Özdalga 2003, 105).

Gülen's followers believe that values are taught through example, not through lecturing. Gülen teaches that the human possession of free will entails an obligation to discipline it, and it is the struggle for discipline that determines humanity (Gülen n.d., 2). Educators in Gülen schools teach ethical values through example, rather than preaching them.

The teachers in Gülen's schools view knowledge as something to be developed both to strengthen their own faith and worship and to pass on to their students. One

teacher quotes Gülen as saying “Read a lot. If your glass gets filled up, you can always empty it.” She goes on to explain, “An empty glass does not contain anything to be given to others. But as you learn more and fill up your glass, you also will have something to give others. The teaching profession is exactly like that” (Özdalga 2003, 103).

During the time we spent with teachers from Gülen’s schools, we observed that most of them share certain characteristics in line with Gülen’s teachings. All of them are well-versed in Gülen’s teaching, especially when it comes to love for all humanity, piety, humility, self-criticism, and professional activism. All of them are committed to good works and devote time to their students after school and on weekends, although it is not required of them by the schools. They embody the ethics of hard work and tolerance.

One particular teacher working at a school in Georgia stated that although their salaries are barely enough to make a living, they organize yearly fundraisers among themselves to sponsor a few more poor students to study at their school. He went on telling us a story about one student whom they visited in his home during one of their regular house visits. They saw a family so poor that they decided not only to sponsor the student for school expenses, but also to help his family. He mentioned that this student graduated from their school successfully and is now working for an international company.

The educational model in practice: The schools

As mentioned above, action is an indispensable part of Gülen’s philosophy. To him, philosophical systems and theories do not have a real value unless they are applied to real life. Thus, in the early 1980’s he and his followers had begun a passionate

educational project of building educational institutions all over the world to bring the Golden Generation to life.

Gülen's educational programming began in Turkey, and in less than two decades, there were many schools and *dershanes*, or institutions offering supplementary courses, in Turkey. There were a larger number of dormitories (Özdalga, Agai 2003, 48). Gülen believes that building a school is more virtuous than building a mosque (Gülen 1998b, 17). Many people would expect that a movement, inspired by religious convictions, would focus on teaching religion at the expense of sciences in its schools. However, to Gülen, knowledge, whether religious or scientific, is an Islamic value by itself if it comes with ethical teaching (Gülen 1997c). Thus, teaching science from an Islamic perspective is perceived to serve humanity as well (Agai 2003, 62).

Islamic understanding of tolerance, to Gülen, allows differences in beliefs and cultures to continue to exist once universal values are recognized (Agai 2003, 65). Thus, the schools do not teach specifically about Islam; instead they communicate universal values of honesty, hard work, harmony and conscientious service (Michel 2003, 71).

The movement's schools follow the official curriculum of the host countries (Agai 2003, 51). In Turkey, they teach religion one hour a week; in other countries, they may not address it at all (Agai 2003, 51). It is usual for the language of instruction to be English in these schools, since English currently is the international language of science and research, thus providing students with the ability to follow the latest developments and research from international publications.

These institutions are like any other school in terms of curriculum and materials. Laboratory and computer equipment for science and language classes is up-to-date.

Yearly reports comparing these schools to other schools show that they compare very favorably, particularly in Central Asia (Özdalga 2000). The president of Kyrgyzstan gives the following example: “A successful *Sebat College* student won the first gold medal for Kyrgyzstan in the World Science Olympics. We never achieved such a success before. I believe, this student may be our first Nobel price winner in the future.”

Another example of such school is the Philippine-Turkish School of Tolerance in a city where half of the population is Christian and the other half is Muslim. The school provides more than a thousand students more positive ways to interact than the violent example set by military and paramilitary forces. The school lives up to its name, providing a bastion of tolerance in an otherwise religiously polarized area of the Philippines. Michel (2003) describes the school as having excellent relations with Christian institutions in the region (70).

Conclusion

There is no lack of brilliant ideas for the betterment of the world. Most of these ideas, however, are idealistic and break down when implemented in the real world. Gülen’s ideas and ideals have stood up to scrutiny in practice; his followers have translated his teachings into a viable educational model, with successful graduates to show for it. Scientific ideas are combined with moral ideals that come from religion in this educational model.

While the moral side of the student is developed through example, the intellectual side is explicitly developed in the classroom, resulting in informed, intelligent, and insightful young people. All aspects of one’s character need to be nurtured; that also

includes an understanding and tolerance for other people. Therefore, these educational institutions contribute to world peace by mutual understanding. It can be argued that graduates of these schools are good candidates to be strong supporters of world peace because of this vision of tolerance and understanding.

Gülen's school system also illustrates that Islam does not need to be marginalized in countries without a large Muslim population. It does not need to be kept separate from science. Instead, there is a place for Islam throughout the world, because of the universal appeal of the religion's ethics.

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