

Practitioners, Faith Based Organizations and Global Development Work¹
A Discussion with Ali Yurtsever, Rumi Forum, November 23, 2007

What path has brought you to your current job, and how has it involved you in working with faith-based organizations and international development?

The Gulen Movement began in Izmir, in 1966. When I was in primary school, Fethullah Gulen, the Movement's founder, was a preacher in the town where I lived, Edremit. My father was a close friend of Gulen; they were the same age, and saw each other often. I was in primary school and went to Friday prayers where I heard him preach; Gulen was at my house often, so I came to know him well. When a hostel (dormitory) was started in Izmir, I was one of the early students who lived there and I continued in this arrangement through middle and high school. I attended state schools but we lived in the hostels and went to school each day in buses. At the dormitories, we prayed together and learned values, through a religious and moral education.

I moved to Istanbul for university, and again lived in a Gulen dormitory – they were called then (and now) light houses. They play a critical role, as the smallest unit (5-6 people) and the place where core values are transmitted, through prayer, reading together, and talking. There was no politics in the dormitories: we had no television and no newspapers. We focused on our schooling and on moral values.

When I finished university, I became a teacher in a Gulen high school in Izmir (my dormitory had grown into a high school). I had studied science and mathematics and became a teacher of physics and computer science. I worked at the same time for my masters and PhD degrees and when I finished, began to teach at the university in Istanbul. Fatih university in Istanbul is one of seven Gulen universities in the world (the others are in Central Asia).

Through my education and associations with friends I was thus part of the Gulen Movement from an early age. As a student, it gave me values; as a teacher, my job was to give, to transmit values.

In 2003 I received an offer to be a visiting professor at the Florida International University. I spent time there, returned to Turkey, and then received an offer to come to the mathematics department at Georgetown University. I came in 2004. Then the position of President of the Rumi Forum was vacant as my predecessor moved to John Carroll University and I took on that role.

Can you tell me more about the significance of the values education that you have stressed?

The values we are focusing on and conveying are generally universal values, thus religious values, but modified by Fethullah Gulen. Thus we focus on key and universal values, like not lying, not committing adultery, being helpful to others. But we also stress particularly openness, the importance of dialogue, and the central importance of peace. Our values are welcoming to others. Ours is a different understanding of Islamic values, in some sense a more spiritual understanding.

¹ This conversation between Ali Yurtsever and Katherine Marshall (Berkley Center) took place in Washington DC as part of the preparatory work for a December 17 conference at Georgetown University's Doha Campus. The conference is part of a joint Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs and Luce Foundation project on religion and international relations.

In Gulen schools we often teach values that are inspired by religion (with Islam as its foundation), without explicitly linking them to the religion. We try not to show an Islamic face as some might be offended by it or feel excluded. There is no goal of conversion or proselytizing. We do not see ourselves as in any way fighting for our religion.

Can you give me a better idea of how the Gulen Movement is organized and its broad mission?

The movement is very decentralized and very much built on local action and initiative. Fethullah Gulen does not like hierarchy. Gulen is very much at the center and we are connected both by our friendships and by Internet. The movement also has its media which we all follow. We are very much guided by the same principles. There is no central office or bureaucracy.

A central aspect of the movement is the weekly circles and prayers. Members get together every week and also attend to community business. For younger members dormitories/hostels give a more intensive experience but for more mature members the weekly gatherings are most important.

In Africa, for example, business men from Turkey who are part of the Movement go to a country and start a business. They then start a school and find a teacher, who usually comes from Turkey. The core group may also open an interfaith center, or Gulen may advise them to start a cultural center. Within the community in that country, there is no formal hierarchy though it is natural that one will preside and one will learn. Those who are more educated and responsible tend to lead the others. Almost all the people involved are volunteers. Mutual respect is an important ingredient.

The pattern in Washington DC is similar. There are several Gulen institutions, which are quite autonomous though we are linked to one another. There are businessmen from Turkey who support the work here and are part of the community, and then there are several centers, including the Rumi Forum and a cultural center in McLean.

What is the role of Fethullah Gulen in the Movement?

Gulen stopped preaching in 1980, and he now lives quietly in Pennsylvania. We seek his ideas when new developments occur and he gives us guidance. We operate generally through our knowledge of his teachings and values, but on occasion there are new currents where his ideas are needed. When there is an incident in Algeria, for example, we try to get his ideas. When the former USSR fell apart, he urged us to get involved in the new Central Asian Republics, where people had suffered so grievously under Communist rule for so many decades. He always advises us to respond in a peaceful way. He is a true visionary and his advice reflects his vision and understanding. His leadership is very present.

How large is the Movement and how do you count its members?

No-one knows the Movement's size. One way to guess is to look at circulation of the Gulen newspapers. The leading publication has a circulation of 750,000 daily, so if three people read each newspaper that gives some indication.

The Gulen schools and universities are also an indicator. There are now about 300 private Gulen schools in Turkey and about 500 other educational institutions. There are about 600 Gulen schools outside of Turkey.

The movement is active today in about 100 countries, with members there. We are working in many African countries and there are about 50 schools there.

It is Fethullah Gulen who advises on the paths for the movement's expansion. He urged first that the Movement expand to Central Asia. The focus now is very much on Africa, where we work in several countries, including Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa. There is a community in Ethiopia. Our aim is to open schools everywhere.

There are some places where we have not been able to operate: Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Iran are countries that have not allowed Gulen schools to open. In Afghanistan the Taliban shut down our schools but they have now reopened. Some movements tend to be against them as they seek to protect their understanding of Islam.

How do the Gulen Schools work?

The schools are private schools and parents pay fees. Thus not all people who would like to attend are able to do so. Business people support part of the costs. The schools are autonomous and respect local standards and curriculum requirements. Generally the financing is local – fees and support from businessmen, but there might be some financing from private businessmen in Turkey to a school elsewhere.

Though Gulen schools are private, we manage the schools according to the rules of local governments so the curriculum is prepared according to the provisions set out by local authorities. But the Gulen Schools take great care in hiring very qualified administrators and teachers so that they become good examples for the students. Also in after school activities they emphasize more universal moral values and teach about dialogue between the adherents of different faiths and cultures, theoretically and practically..

There are approximately 15 Gulen schools in the US. Many of the teachers are from Turkey but for subjects like history and geography local teachers are hired.

Can you give me a better idea of why there is so much focus on education?

Education is the most important thing in the world. And it is not just education in schools, but education from birth on. Excellence in education is a central value for the movement.

Education is also important to counter the negative influences of the media and the general culture. Much of what is transmitted is bad. The idea is that through education, teaching people core values, we can make a peaceful people, people with character and ideas. People can be modified through education.

We see the Gulen schools as islands of peace. The values we teach will spread peace through the societies where they work. We are also active where there is conflict, as in Bosnia, Northern Iraq and Afghanistan. Gulen schools bring together children from different groups so that they can learn together. Families are also involved. Thus the schools form bridges across warring communities.

Can you explain more about how the financing works?

The financing takes the form of foundations created by individuals and businesses. They are waqfs and are governed by the government principles that govern waqfs. They are registered as such in Turkey. In practice they take many forms. There may be several different waqfs in a single Turkish city.

I reiterate that all financing for schools and other works are locally raised. The businessmen in an area support the schools and the institutions of that local area. Fethullah Gulen is sensitive about not accepting funds and financial aid from other countries, in order that the movement maintains its independence.

How are they linked to Mosques?

In Turkey, all mosques are governed by the state and all imams are sent and directed by the government. The aim of the secular government is to limit the powers of the Gemaats and Tariqahs over the mosques; that is the reason why the government hires imams. Despite all the efforts from Ataturk on, however, the tariqahs did not die, and especially in Istanbul they are very important. The Gulen movement represents now the largest group of people in Turkey who can be considered as a civil society.

Do you see any parallels between the Gulen approach and management of schools and the Jesuit approach?

I do not really know the Jesuit schools well enough to comment but if excellence and values are core themes there may well be some parallels. Our philosophy focuses on citizenship and we are convinced that good citizens will make the world more peaceful.

How do you measure performance and success of Gulen schools? As a mathematician this must interest you.

The Movement has very few statistical measures and techniques. This comes partly from our history and concerns about security, so we tend not to count. Gulen himself says he does not know how many Gulen schools there are. I do not know how many Gulen members there are in any place in the US. But we can measure by the numbers of schools that are running. And when I go to a place I meet people and get a sense of the size of the community. There are no common measures of school performance that we use other than the regular governmental measures.

What are the relationships between boys and girls, men and women, within the Gulen Movement?

All schools in Turkey are mixed by law and the Gulen schools are also. The dormitories are separate for boys and girls. In circles, men and women meet separately.

I understand there is some discussion within and outside the Gulen movement about this issue. Can you give me a clearer idea about how the Movement sees the issue?

The Gulen community gives great importance to strong families. For this reason members tend to behave conservatively on gender issues and try to refrain from intimate relations among males and females before marriage

As you look at the Berkley Luce FBO project and December consultation, what are the issues you would most like to see addressed?

The stated objective for the consultation is to “*focus on how emerging institutions in the Muslim world, especially those with explicit faith links, are approaching issues of social and economic development*”. I would hope that the meeting can focus on ways in which faith groups influence the community so that bad and wrong things are corrected and there is a more positive direction for the development of the community overall. More specifically, concerns to address include the morals of children, drug problems, divorce problems, early pregnancy problems, children without parents and raised without the affection of a family, corruption in business, corruption and degradation of the environment. Atrocities by some groups against others, intolerant views of others, violence, etc. What roles can faith groups play to bring solutions to these issues?

How is the Gulen movement involved in health care? Environmental issues?

The Gulen movement tries to be everywhere where human beings are. Thus the movement has several hospitals and their number is increasing day by day. In those hospitals, people pay for their expenses but are well treated; for those who are needy and poor, there are some funds to help. Also the Movement has a large assistance company “Kimse yok mu?” (Isn’t there any body?) that helps the needy and disabled worldwide. At present, for example they are working in Bangladesh to help people suffered from the devastating floods.

Gulen himself emphasizes that the environment is given to the all living beings by God to support and sustain safe and secure lives for all living things. So we have no right to corrupt the environment so that the others suffer and are threatened by the resulting disorder. Everything is created by God and we are responsible to protect the environment and the rights of all others

What kinds of questions might this suggest for discussion and research?

What kinds of training should faith communities offer to their members in areas like health and environmental issues?

What are the faith principles to follow for a member to protect the environment and health?

Is the environment considered at the center of the faith?

How does the Gulen movement work with other Muslim and secular organizations?

The Gulen movement cooperates with other organizations when it is necessary. Mr Gulen believes, especially, in the necessity for interfaith dialogue, so as to remove the bigotries and prejudices between groups and prevent clashes between and among them. But in general there is no ongoing program to further partnership at either a general level or specifically with other Muslim organizations. Since Islam is so central a focus in many countries and at the point where many eyes are on the lookout for problems, the Gulen movement is very sensitive about cooperation with other Islamic movements. They try to refrain from being misunderstood and also to convey an incorrect or distorted picture to people outside.

What do you see as perspectives from where you sit in the United States?

From where I sit, as part of the Gulen Movement, if we speak about the Muslim faith in general, unfortunately the picture is not entirely hopeful for the near future. As Said Nursi stated: the main problems of Muslim communities can be counted as (i) ignorance, (ii) poverty, (iii)

disunity, and (iv) laziness; these issues remain unsolved. These challenges can also be seen as affording an opportunity for response and action, and this can counter the beliefs of those who see a “clash of civilizations”. At this point, intellectual Muslim groups and individuals have a burden on their shoulders in trying to resolve these problems with short and long term plans and to educate their communities as quickly as possible. Otherwise people with evil intentions and inclined to violence will find more space to accomplish their objectives.

And concluding thoughts?

I appreciate this project. I hope it can be an eye and heart opener for all parties and also a very useful tool to wake up the communities or trigger some innovations to solve the ongoing problems throughout the world.