

## GLOBAL PEACEFUL SOCIAL INNOVATION: THE CASE OF GULEN NETWORK

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### Abstract

*Gulen Network is a unique case of global social innovation based on spirituality in a number of respects. Followers of Gulen have engaged in hundreds of civil society projects and opened more than 500 schools around the globe. Owing to the principles of diversity, love and dialogue, Gulen enjoys voluntary participation of people from different backgrounds, ideologies, nations, classes, races and faiths throughout the world. Gulen Network proposes: a) a model of spiritual partnership and networking based on shared passion and idealism, b) a global agenda for interfaith and intercultural love, cooperation, and dialog, c) a multidimensional view of universal values and spirituality in the workplace, d) a unique case revealing insights for integrating management, religion and spirituality. The main objective of this paper is to understand this movement in detail, taking an internal perspective of the participants.*

### Keywords:

Spirituality; values; global; social innovation, peace, interfaith dialog, Turkish schools

*"I divide my life into two periods. Before and after I knew hizmet (the service). I met hizmet and this community in 1978, when I was 25 years old. I think of 1978 as my real birth year. So, I am 25 years old now (smiling). I felt so elevated, so purified, so excited, so awkward, so happy, like a baby when I met hizmet. It is impossible for me to be able tell you in words what I have experienced then. That was the beginning of life for me. The real life, the meaningful life, the golden life. I learned almost everything good in my life in hizmet and in this community. I discovered the value of peace, dialogue and tolerance in all spheres of life. I learned about brotherhood, sincerity, friendship, love and sharing - not only in this world but also in the other world. I discovered self-sacrifice, devotion and true idealism. I learned the value of being a piece of soil for roses to flourish. I learned the value of building a future civilization with passion, inspiration, hope and faith. I learned the value of crying and praying for the wellbeing of humanity. I've began to appreciate the value of enabling others to live well instead of living well. I learned the value of forgetting your home address while thinking about the problems of schools and families. I learned the value of hitting a tree while walking because you are reflecting deeply about your spirituality. I experienced the value of calling a friend at 3 am on the phone, sharing problems in service and crying together for half an hour on the phone.. My biggest aim in life is to continue contributing to this global civil initiative until I die. And I want to die among these friends. I would like to die in the middle of a process of an active duty and community work. I would decline any presidency, any ranks, any status, any material wealth, any reputation, any honor on this world. I just would prefer to die as a casual member of this community. I look forward to meeting my dear God by means of a peaceful death. If only I could help and reach more people, more students and more poor families."*

This excerpt is taken from the interview conducted with one of the volunteers of Gulen community. It illustrates a case of deep personal change and transformation in values, beliefs and spirituality. This interviewee is a business and an NGO leader who has devoted his life to founding schools in many countries. His friends say that he has donated almost all of his possessions and wealth to *hizmet*, including his companies, his car and even his house. He works for nearly 18 hours a day and sleeps very little, generally during his flights. It seems that he does not have a private life other than *hizmet* and he can spend very little time even with his family. He has been undertaking in a number of civil society initiatives around the globe and traveling around Africa, Asia, Europe and North America frequently. He says he loves visiting all his friends working relentlessly in schools and foundations in different parts of the world - from China to Tanzania. He is involved in fundraising, planning and coordinating activities of the Turkish schools founded in many countries. He is also known and welcomed as an honorary guest speaker whose talks evoke a lot of enthusiasm and inspire positive action among teachers, students and staff. His friends and colleagues have described him as a man who can truly integrate spirituality into his work and life. He frequently visits and exchanges views with

Fethullah Gulen, the honorary leader of all these initiatives. He says he himself is very much influenced by the encouragement and speeches of Mr. Gulen.

Mr. Gulen has become a role model for not just this person, but also for millions of people living in different countries. His teachings have inspired thousands of people work for global education, peace, and the spread of tolerance. Followers of Gulen have engaged in hundreds of civil society projects and opened more than 400 schools around the globe. These people do not have or share a religious mission and they are professionals or volunteers working in educational and non-profit organizations. However, they experience spirituality deeply, intensively and centrally in their lives and work. They share common humanistic values, ideals and passion. No one knows the size of Gulen's community of sympathizers and followers but most experts agree on five million. It draws much of its support from young urban men, with special appeal to teachers, academics, and other professionals. It has grown in part by sponsoring student dormitories, summer camps, colleges, universities, language schools, cultural facilities, interfaith dialog organizations and NGOs. What makes Gulen unique is that he has successfully persuaded and mobilized many young people around the world to establish educational and civil institutions and put into practice his discourse on global values/spirituality and realize his ideal of raising a "golden generation" and achieving global peace.

The most important sector of civil society projects Gulen undertakes is in education. Gulen schools, which are especially active in the Turkic world, Central Asia, Balkans, and Africa, continue to attract a lot of media attention in local regions and countries with respect to their success and performance in international science Olympiads. The teachers working in the schools mentioned within the framework of Gulen's understanding are seen exemplars wherever they are by their spirituality, sound characters, the level of morality in their behavior and the human values they carry, in addition to their professional proficiency.

Mr. Gulen explains his encouragement of Turkish entrepreneurs' opening schools as follows (Gulen, 2001): *"As for my relationship with the schools that have been opened, there is a lion in everyone's heart; a purpose hidden in one's nature since birth. When I was 12 or 13 years old and studying in Turkey, I had a book in one hand and a world map in the other. I would ask: "My God, how can we become a world interconnected with hope, love and science whose social problems have been considerably solved?"*

The second most important area in which Gulen community undertakes activities is Interfaith Dialogue. Mr. Gulen regularly visited and received leading international religious figures including Patriarchs, Rabbi and Pope John Paul II. Until Gulen started meeting with these leaders and representatives, it had been something very unusual for a Muslim to get into dialogue with a Christian or Jew.

*Gulen Network is a unique case of global social innovation based on spirituality in a number of respects. Owing to the principles of diversity, love and dialogue, Gulen enjoys voluntary participation of young people from different backgrounds, ideologies, nations, classes, races and faiths throughout the world. Gulen Network proposes a model of spiritual partnership and networking based on shared passion and idealism, and a multidimensional view of universal common values and spirituality.*

There is an increasing need for comprehensive and expanded theory in order to increase our understanding of values and spirituality in profit and nonprofit organizations. Research on spirituality in organizations can benefit significantly from perspectives outside the North American context. Although Gulen Network is potentially a very rich source of data on spirituality, values and organizations, there has been very little research done on organizations in Gulen Network.

*This study aims to explore the nature, forms and dimensions of peaceful values and spirituality in organizations operating in Gulen network which place a heavy emphasis on a set of universal values. It aims to explore the dimensions and forms of values and spirituality in this recent international movement exemplifying social innovation in the areas of education and international dialog.*

Some of the research questions that motivate this study are the following: How does the larger cultural context effect Gulen organizations? How can employees be provided a sense of hope, inspiration, purpose and meaning at work? How can we capture the complexity and multiplicity of values and spirituality at work? Are there global and universal values in organizations that can build bridges between East and West? The objective of this paper is to explore the dimensions and characteristics of values and spirituality in organizations in Gulen Network.

## **Methodology**

This study was based on a qualitative case studies of seven selected Gulen organizations (main unit of analysis: organization) including three schools, two businesses and two NGOs. The three high schools were Turkish secondary and high schools advocated by Gulen. All these schools were recognized publicly for their emphasis on spirituality and effectiveness on values/character education. One of these schools, which was in Istanbul, was among the most well-established and successful ones, with a large (more than 1,000 students) student population. One of the schools was in Middle Asia and the other was in Anatolia. One of the NGOs was a foundation involved in building interfaith and intercultural dialog and the other was an educational foundation supporting poor students and providing them

bursaries. Both of these foundations were in Istanbul. The business organizations were two small and medium sized firms operating in Anatolia both of which had about 50 employees.

A triangulation of various qualitative research methods was utilized. First, qualitative interviews were conducted with stakeholders in schools and foundations operating within Gulen Network. Seven interviews were conducted face to face in Turkish with individual participants in each school. They lasted from 35 minutes to 2.5 hours, and were tape-recorded and transcribed. Interview protocols were flexible, informal and broad, encouraging informants to talk freely and openly about what they perceived to be significant. The interviews were semi structured and allowed the interviewees to go deep into their stories, lives, experiences, values, philosophies, emotions and frustrations in detail.

Second, participatory observation and multi-sited ethnography were used. The researcher was involved in naturalistic inquiry to study real-world situations in each organization as they naturally unfold; nonmanipulative and no controlling. This made space for genuine and sensitive research to breathe and for questions and findings to emerge from the field. By immersion in the research setting, the researcher tried to come to an understanding of the values of the research participants from their perspective and of the context which shapes and flourishes these values. More than 20 hours were spent in each of these organizations in the role of a participant observer in order to gain the necessary depth of understanding of values and spirituality.

Third, to supplement all these field notes and information, a variety of documents, primary and secondary sources were also collected in each organization, to be used for documental analysis.

### **Data analysis**

The researcher reviewed all the materials mentioned above, using the method of constant comparison advocated by Glaser & Strauss (1967), and produced the following building blocks for a tentative theoretical framework: 1) A set of profiles that capture similarities and differences in respondents' descriptions of values of the organization, their experiences of spirituality and their individual values 2) A catalogue of the kinds of major organizational values, paradigms, metaphors, approaches 3) Categorization of multiple dimensions of values and spirituality.

A grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used in data analysis, with a focus on material specifically related to the values, spirituality, and cultural context. The interview transcripts were read to extract data on how these individuals thought about their organizations, their mission and

roles, their organizational values, and what their personal definitions or conceptions of values and spirituality were. Then these extracted data were reviewed, to look for patterns in conceptions of values, spirituality, virtues; meanings of an ideal organization and organizational member according to their own philosophies.

## **Results**

The data suggested that there were implicit theories in the minds of the participants regarding their values, spirituality, the dominant values in their organizational, the cultural context of their organizations, and various approaches and practices regarding spirituality and values at work. The following results are meant to be exploratory and they serve as initial taxonomies, recurring themes and patterns. The Analytical Memos surfaced themes and frameworks on spiritual leadership, cultural context of organizations as well as conceptions, forms and dimensions of different values in organizations.

### **On Spiritual Leadership: Fethullah Gulen**

Gulen was described by the participants as an extremely respectful, sensitive and modest person. He says "*estagfirullah* (I beg the pardon of God)" every other sentence. One of the participants reported that Mr. Gulen slept two hours a day, he ate very little and he read a lot. He had no worldly property or goods. He had never married. He had never participated in active politics throughout his life and always been careful to and aloof from political activities.

Fethullah Gulen is a unique example of spiritual leadership. First of all, He does not see himself as a leader. He rejects all labels and stereotypes imposed upon him. He sees himself as a simple man who tries to act in accordance with divine order. He is very strict to himself and sees himself as "zero". Secondly, he is acting as a living example of deep spirituality and piety. The participants interviewed described Gulen as a man of modesty, self-discipline, compassion, devotion, tolerance and dignity. The following excerpt, taken from the interview conducted with one of Gulen's closest circle of friends, illustrates Gulen's deep influence on his followers:

*"We all really have difficulty in catching up with his vision, his insights, his thinking, his depth and his open-mindedness. I cannot say I understand him completely. I think there are very few people in the*

*world who can completely grasp his way of thinking and feeling, if any, including his close friends and followers. Although he meets hundreds of people every day, I think Gulen is almost alone on this planet. It is as if he is living in another dimension. He seeks approval of God in his every action, every gesture, and every word. He acts as if there is a bird on his head, always so delicate. Every night, he spends several hours by constant praying and deep crying until dawn. He is intense love of God. He is in constant metaphysical tension and this causes interruptions in his speech as outbursts of crying. He feels responsibility for the whole world. A baby dying because of hunger in Africa or a Christian killed in Middle East is sufficient to make him upset. He could not recover for days after September 11. He stresses killing one person is equal to killing all humanity in Islam. I have seen him trying to rescue an ant for half an hour. He feels deep love, compassion and mercy to all creation. He constantly prays for global peace and love. He wishes to meet with his Lover, his Creator soon - by death. But we believe he still has things to do on this world. Honestly, I even pray that God may take from my life and add to his."*

Although teachers, employees and volunteers Gulen organizations are mostly Turkish Muslims, this composition seems to be changing quickly, especially since the movement is becoming internationalized and diverse. Religion and politics are not on the agenda of Gulen schools and NGOs, as teachers and employees asserted they "avoid any propaganda that may separate or alienate different people but instead focus on common bridges and universal values that can connect us all". Social contribution, dialogue, compassion and service to humanity with love are the common denominators for the participants. One of the most important rules in the community schools and organizations is never to impose a certain ideology or a particular religion on anybody. All the participants in this research were very clear in asserting that "universal ethical values are emphasized in these Turkish schools, instead of Islamic or nationalistic ones".

Participants used the term 'hizmet' to refer to the Gulen community and its educational, social, civil undertakings. *Hizmet* is a broad term encompassing a wide range of activities. At the most general level, it implies any volunteer service or work done for the community. The most frequent form of hizmet is teaching and educating the young. Hizmet is a commonly used word in Turkish and literally it means 'community work'. The word hizmet itself is an illustration of Turkish Muslim culture and is used to refer to the concept of service and contribution to people.

"Hizmet" is a relatively new phenomenon. It is a product of Anatolian Turkish Muslim context. The community activities largely began to take shape after 1980 in Turkey. These activities became widespread nationally and internationally after reaching the tipping point in 1990s. Gulen as a global civil society movement is largely in its infancy stages. Yet, Gulen seems to be a promising model of

social innovation not only for the Islamic world, but also for the Western world in the context of rapid globalization.

### **On Cultural Context: Anatolian Sufism based on Love, Dialog and Compassion**

Qualitative data analysis from the interviews and ethnographies revealed that organizations in Gulen Network have spiritual philosophies and deep values stemming from the paths of Sufism. The teachers, administrators of these schools consistently mentioned the tradition of Anatolian dervishes (*Sufis*) and Muslim saints who stress knowledge, love, dialogue and compassion. Rumi (Mawlana) deserves special attention here, because he was mentioned by more than half of all the participants. Participants talked about Rumi's philosophy based on universal love and peace; which shaped and influenced Anatolian intellectual and spiritual milieu (i.e. the context of these schools) for more than seven centuries. Rumi is regarded by teachers and students alike as the main role model, as a great symbol of tolerance and dialogue in Turkish Islamic history and in Anatolia. One teacher and one student recited the following poem by Rumi, to sum up their philosophies and values:

*"Come whatever you are, come  
Whether you are atheist, or worship fire,  
Whether you have broken your oath thousand times  
Our convent (Dergah) is not the convent of despair,  
Come whatever you are, come again"*

Sufism in general has a very humanistic approach to religion. Sufis, like other mystics, are trying to reach God or the ultimate Truth by following a certain path. In doing this, they disregard the dichotomy of the physical world and the divine, or better to say that they get rid of the veils separating them. This also means that as humans, they become God-like through this process which again involves human activity. God is internalized, making man not an outcast but an extension of God's reality and love. According to Sufism, the most important thing which is necessary for reaching the God is love. A plant, animal may be also loved; however, the only creature that is capable of loving with its body, conscious, thought, memory altogether is human being.

The following excerpt of Rumi was also seen in organizational publications, billboards, and value statements of two of the schools. This was the call of Rumi to all human beings without discrimination:

*"Come, come over, more over, how long this brigandage? As you are me and I am you. How long this discrimination of you and I? We are light of God! Why is this separation among us? Why does light escape from light? We are all from the same yeast. But under this bowed sky we see double. Come on, deny your Ego. Get united with everybody. So long as you remain in yourself, you are a particle. But if you get united with everybody, you are a mine, an ocean. Believe that all spirits are One! And all bodies are One! Just like almonds in quantity hundred thousands; but there is the same oil in all of them. There are many languages in the world, in meaning all are the same. If you break the cups, water will be unified and will flow together..."*

On the basis of Rumi's teachings and making a reference to him, the teachers and administrators said it would be impossible to believe that a perpetual peace in the world could be established strictly on scientific and rational means. According to them, global social innovation in areas of education, science, and culture could not be achieved completely without this "love".

Gulen himself also stresses that all the nations of the world should break the cups of their egos and be unified in love of God, in love of mankind, without discrimination of races, classes, faiths and nations, living all together with happiness and peace. In his words:

*"Be so tolerant that your heart becomes wide like the ocean. Become inspired with faith and love for others. Offer a hand to those in trouble, and be concerned about everyone. Applaud the good for their goodness, appreciate those who have believing hearts, and be kind to believers. Approach unbelievers so gently that their envy and hatred melt away. Like Jesus Christ, revive people with your breath. Judge your worth in the Creator's sight by how much space He occupies in your heart, and your worth in people's eyes by how you treat them. Do not neglect the Truth even for a moment. And yet, be 'a man or woman among other men or women'.*

*"Using Rumi's expression, an ideal person is like a compass with one foot well-established in the center of belief and passion and the other foot with people of many nations. If this apparently dualistic state can be caught by a person who believes in God, it's most desirable. So deep in his or her own inner world, so full of love... so much in touch with God; but at the same time an active member of society."*

TABLE 1: SUFI VALUE PARADIGMS IN GULEN ORGANIZATIONS		
	TRADITIONAL DOMINANT CONTEXT	ANATOLIAN SUFI CONTEXT
Focus on specific values of:	Freedom, individual rights, self-esteem, self-worth, material success, initiative	Service and contribution to society, belonging, respect, modesty, cooperation, devotion
Cultural dimensions	Individualism	Collectivism
	Low context	High context
	Low power distance	High power distance
Paradigm	Materialism	Spirituality
Dominant theme	Competition	Cooperation
Production of Knowledge	Analysis	Synthesis
Attitudes towards oneself	Self-confidence	Self-criticism
Relationships	Contractual, partial	Long-term, holistic
Self-representation	Impression Management	Authentic Behavior
View	Compartmentalization	Interconnectedness
Locus of behavior	Self-interest	Service to community
Atmosphere	Doubt and fear	Trust and support
Control	Power and influence on others	Control on oneself
Role of Ego	Self-esteem, strong ego	Transcending the ego
Self-actualization leads to	Pride and Arrogance	Humility and Humbleness
Leadership style closer to	Charismatic Leadership	Servant Leadership
Organizational life	Challenge and struggle	Altruism and mutual help
Nature of inspiration	Intellectual stimulation	Emotional arousal
Nature of motivation	Extrinsic	Intrinsic

## **Basic Principles of Anatolian Sufism**

- We are the avant-garde of love; we don't have time for hostility.
- Love all the creation because of the Creator.
- Tongueless to those who curse, handless to those who hit.
- Self-renewal is the only condition of continues existence.
- The greatest book to be read is human being.
- Be an advocate of others, but a judge to yourself.
- If there is no one left on Earth to build dialogue and love, go to other parts of the universe.
- Universe is within human, human is within the Universe.
- Science is the light illuminating roads towards the reality.
- Our way has been established on science, knowledge and love of human.
- Do not preach; instead act as a living model.
- Let us unite together, let us be huge, alive.
- Do not hurt even if you were offended.
- Whatever becomes heavy for your own personality, do not make it applied to anybody.
- Always bear in mind that even your enemy is a human.
- Everything created by God is placed orderly.

## **Conclusion**

At the Global Compact Leaders Summit on 24<sup>th</sup> of June, 2004, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan said:

*"Let us be true global citizens. Let us not rest until we have truly succeeded in bringing positive change into the lives of people, and laid the foundations for peaceful, well-functioning, sustainable societies throughout the world. Rarely has there been a moment in recent history when it has been so critical for all of us to protect our common space, building on what unites us. Again, I ask, if not us, then who?"...*

The development of peaceful values, virtues, spirituality, and peaceful skills in organizations is necessary to build a better and more humane world of peace, love, cooperation and dialog in the 21st century. Humanity and world civilizations today experience problems not only in economic, political or material domains; but also in ethical, moral, social, or spiritual realms: War, religious intolerance, conflict, violence, hunger, poverty, illiteracy, pollution, crime, theft, fraud, murder, corruption,

immortality, child abuse, human rights violation, oppression, inequality, injustice, nuclear weapons, global terror, Beslan attacks, London bombings, war in Iraq, conflict in the Middle East, September 11, Usame bin Laden..

*Our world is struggling with a myriad of complex social, economic, political, ethical problems. The world today needs peace more than at any time in history, and most of its problems arise from excessive worldliness, scientific materialism and the ruthless exploitation of nature. The call for values and spirituality is currently echoing in organizations throughout every land, as we are increasingly concerned about social problems, wars, religious intolerance, racism, violence, ignorance, poverty, conflict, pollution, crime, corruption, immorality, and global terror.*

The need for universal common values such as peace, dialog, cooperation, compassion is recurring themes in not only in educational and non-profit organizations but also for corporations and businesses. As we move into the 21st century, the search for ways to improve quality, meaning and sense of purpose in workplace is global. We need holistic, overarching and multidisciplinary paradigms to address and solve all these issues.

*A number of positive NGOs and peaceful institutions, together with a network of volunteers, social innovators and peaceful leaders can form "islands of peace" throughout the globe. This depends on deep and large-scale systems change, involving work with idealist people from all faiths, multi-national corporations, government agencies, and civil society organizations all over the world. Gulen Network provides a unique case in this regard. The case of Gulen schools and organizations suggest that a network of schools, NGOs and peaceful institutions led by volunteers, social innovators and peaceful leaders can form "islands of peace" throughout the globe.*

Gulen Network provides examples of organizations which try to nurture positive values such as love, compassion, dialogue, respect for others' rights, tolerance for diversity, and non-violent means in every aspect of work life. Regardless of the differences of race, faith and color, Gulen schools and organizations aim to serve as a bridge between the peoples of the countries where they are and thereby can contribute to the world peace. Further research on these organizations advocated by Gulen can reveal potentially rich data, cases and models on integrating values and spirituality with management and organizations. Research on Gulen organizations also offers new insights and rich perspectives for employees, managers and organizations interested in developing values and spirituality in the workplace.

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