

Reading the World In Fethullah Gulen's Educational Philosophy

Magdy Said

Thoroughly reading of the words enables the person to reflect on the world, this quote was said by the educational Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire as a title for his first message, to those who are courage enough to lead the education and teaching career⁸⁷. This quote represents a summary of his educational philosophy and in the construction of his sober critical thinking through what he called the emancipational education in contrast to the banking education, which enables the people of intellect to reflect on this world by reflecting the words. It is the same quote that we can use referring to the philosophy of Fethullah Gulen, one of the most Islamic Turkish contemporary thinkers who is considered to be one of the greatest students of the Islamic revival Imam Bediuzzaman [Said Nursi], we can also add this quote: "reflecting on the words enables us to reflect on life and the world" to refer to his philosophy and the practices of his movement in its educational side, this paper is presenting how Gulen had formed his philosophy and educational practices.

1- Reflecting the World according to Fethullah Gulen

To avoid diving in deep seas of Fethullah Gulen's writings, I investigated his critical reflection of the world through his view of human needs and the problems of the world to what is relevant to his view of the role of education to solve these problems.

1-1: Human Needs:

In his article titled "Education from Cradle to Grave", we can see the point of view of Fethullah Gulen to human needs in a detailed way. These needs should be satisfied, in Gulen's perspective, through education, the view that we can put in points in his own words:

- At birth of the human is born "needy and impotent"

⁸⁷ Paulo Freire, teachers are the founders of the culture, messages to those who are courage enough to lead the teaching career, translated by Hamid `Ammar and others, Cairo, Egyptian Lebanese house, 2004, p.61.

- And during his life he seeks for perfection & understanding, the process which is called: Education.
- Which "is a perfecting process through which we earn, in the spiritual, intellectual and physical dimensions of their beings"⁸⁸,
- As "Our duty in life is to acquire perfection and purity in our thinking, conception, and belief. By fulfilling our duty of servanthood to the Creator, Nourisher, and Protector, and by penetrating the mystery of creation through our potentials and faculties, we seek to attain the rank of true humanity and become worth of blissful eternal life in another, exalted world.
- And that: "Our humanity is directly proportional to our emotions purity. Although those who are full of bad feelings and whose souls are influenced by egoism look like human beings, whether they really are human is doubtful."⁸⁹.
- Each of us is uniquely endowed with free will and the consequent obligation to discipline our powers (which are reason, anger and lust). This struggle for discipline determines our humanity.
- And that: We are not only composed of body and mind. Each of us has a spirit that needs satisfaction. Without this, we cannot find true happiness and perfection. Spiritual satisfaction is possible only through knowledge of God and Belief in Him⁹⁰.
- There are two extremes related to each moral virtue: deficiency or excess. (..) So a person's perfection, the ultimate purpose of our existence, lies in maintaining a condition of balance and moderation between the two extremes relating to every virtue.⁹¹

1-2: Community Needs:

In the same article and under a subtitle of: The Real Meaning and Value of Education he has stated that:

⁸⁸ - M.F.Gulen: Essays, Perspectives, Opinions. NJ, Fountain, The Light Inc.,2002, pp 57

⁸⁹ - Ibid p 58

⁹⁰ - Ibid p 59

⁹¹ - Ibid p 60

- Improving a community is possible by elevating the coming generations to the rank of humanity, not by obliterating the bad ones. Unless the seeds of religion, traditional values, and historical consciousness germinate throughout the country, new bad elements will inevitably grow up in the place of every bad element that has been eradicated.

- A nation's future depends on its youth. Any people who want to secure their future should apply as much energy to raising their children as they devote to other issues. A nation that fails its youth, that abandons them to foreign cultural influences, jeopardizes their identity and is subject to cultural and political weakness.

- The reasons of vices observed in today's generation, as well as the incompetence of some administrators and other nation-wide troubles, lie in the prevailing conditions and ruling elite of 25 years ago. Likewise, those who are charged with educating today's young people will be responsible for the vices and virtues that will appear in another 25 years.⁹²

1-3: World Problems:

In his article titled "Educational Services Spreading all over the World", with a subtitle: Why Education?, Gulen speaks about the world crisis in the shadow of western thought & civilization, the speech which we will try to crystallize and brief it in those points:

- In the beginning he talks about the historical factors which accompanied the western Renaissance era, which was characterized by the feverish desire to satisfy the progressing material needs of western societies, and the scientific studies which were faced with opposition of Church and Church-appointed monarchs, the conditions which put the Europeans in a state of conflict between science & religion and a split off between religion and science, so many people were broken with religion. This development eventually led to materialism and communism.

- Humanity was faced with the most striking elements of western history: global exploitation, unending conflict based on interest, two world wars, and the division of the world into blocs.

⁹² - Ibid p p 61-62

- The West held the world under its economic and military control for several centuries. In most centuries, the religion-science conflict has occupied many intellectual circles.

- Enlightenment movements beginning in the eighteenth century considered human beings as minds only. Following that, positivist and materialist movements considered them as material or corporeal entities only. As a result, spiritual crises have followed one after another. It is no exaggeration to say that these crises and the absence of spiritual satisfaction were the major factors behind the conflict of interests that enveloped the last two centuries and reached its apex in the two world wars.⁹³

Claims are made today that religion is divisive and opens the way to killing others. However, it is undeniable that religion, especially Islam, has not led to the last several centuries of merciless exploitation, especially the twentieth century's wars and revolutions that killed hundreds of millions of people and left behind even more widows, orphans and wounded. Scientific materialism, a view of life and the world that has severed itself from religion and a clash of interests caused such exploitation.⁹⁴

2: Change Strategic Map of Fethullah Gulen

Before I present the views of Fethullah Gulen in fulfilling the needs and solving the human problems through education, I would like to present the importance of the education change strategy for him, through my readings and reflection in the writings of Fethullah Gulen and what has been written about him, I tried to investigate the change strategy in the movement. It is doubtless that the thought and practices of the movement aimed at making a change in the construction of the human being and the lived reality or there would not be logical reason to words and deeds if every thing in reality goes smoothly, according to the views of the movement and its spiritual leader Fethullah Gulen.

It is useful before I start presenting my conception of this strategy to demonstrate that the modern western culture is based on two basic things: the first one is the typical intensive production; the second is the marketing concept. The over power of this culture resulted in two things: the first is patterning, which reflects the style of production lines. The second is: merchandizing, which means turning every thing into a commodity that is bought and sold. Patterning and merchandizing affected every thing even humans who became a pattern commodity, or so they want him to be, he is

⁹³ - Ibid pp 76-78

⁹⁴ - Ibid p 81

considered in this culture no more than a buckler in a huge production machine or a machine in a huge factory. The growth of the national and international oppression power that depends on arming itself turned the human into a helpless creature in controlling the production to lead another direction to produce another product. However, Allah bestowed upon humans a mind and a free will so he must not submit to this culture and should awake and change the path of the production process, which what Gulen and his movement are trying to do:

2-1: Title of the Strategy:

We can say that this strategy is like a buckler against the machine strategy or the machine strategy against the factory strategy, strategy of the oppressed against the strategy of the cruel dominants whether on the national or the international level.

2-2: Features of the Strategy:

- Investing the thing in hand the way it is.
- Focusing on the long run outcomes other than the outcomes of the near future.
- Alternatively, changing the final product and keeping the form of production process.
- Using the style of accordance cure instead of the style of penetration cure that might arises confrontations and result in halting the effort of saving the human kind.

2-3: Purposes of the Strategy:

- Forming a final product (human) armed with three things: faith, morals and knowledge (science) i.e. to change the formation of the mind and soul of the human being.
- Forming a more human like globalization.
- Forming a less corrupted and more people serving systems without confronting with them.

2-4: Means of the Strategy:

- Faith and morals are formed through presenting the model according to the proverb that says: deeds speak louder than words, the other way is by forming the environment and the surrounding atmosphere that should be filled with faith and morals.
- Knowledge and science are formed through facilitating the ways to acquire them and motivate acquiring them by providing the required tools in its modern forms, asserting that the goals should benefit humans.

2-5: Outcomes of the Strategy:

- Arming the human with the aforementioned tools enables him to read and reflect the world and the existence, reflecting the world comes through realizing the distributions of world power to self and the other, reflecting on the existence comes from realizing the spiritual and metaphysical role in changing the current circumstances and reforming the world then activating this role.
- Arming the human with such tools enables him to realize the laws that rule the people, the universe, life and human beings.

2-6: Position of Education in the Strategy

Education is one of the most important human activities which participate in forming human beings (the final product), examining and observing the writings of Fethullah Gulen and his movement we find that it participated a great deal in this issue because the main focus of his movement are in the fields of: Education and Media, Spirituality and Dialog.

The first two fields occupies a big place in the movement in addition to their participation in forming the family (they are the first and the most important incubator in forming the human) and forming the general environment through creating an awareness and general conduct.

The third is Gulen's focus on rekindling the spiritual dimension of the Islamic faith which adds strongly to the dimensions of forming human beings, while the fourth is both intra- (within Turkish society) and inter-faith dialog which Gulen pioneered in Turkey starting 1994 and henceforth spread to the international community which adds to the efforts of re-shaping the environment in the direction of tolerance and love .

3- Features of the Educational Philosophy of Fethullah Gulen

There are five well-known questions that the educational process is revolving around:

- Why do we learn? Or purpose of learning.
- What we learn? Or the content of education.
- Who is learning?
- Who educates? It is concerned about the teacher and the educational institutions that are responsible for the learning process (school or collage).

- How to educate? It is concerned about the way we learn and educate⁹⁵.

In the following lines, I will try to analyze the educational philosophy of Fethullah Gulen through discussing these five points.

3-1: Why do we learn? Or purpose of learning:

The answer of the question about purpose of learning lies in satisfying the human & community needs and solving the problems of the world, which we have pointed to them during our talking about Fethullah Gulen point of view regarding those points, which he affirm in other words:

- Our essential duty, as a creation that has come to this passing guesthouse with a pure nature, is to reach stability and clarity in thought, imagination and belief so that we can acquire a "second nature" and qualify to continue our life in "the next, much more elevated realms". In addition we by performing our duties as servants, we must activate our hearts, spirits, and all our innate faculties. By embracing our inner and outer worlds, where innumerable mysteries and puzzles reside, we must comprehend the secret of existence and thus rise to the rank of true humanity.⁹⁶

- He clarifies the purpose of education in another paragraph: Given the great importance of learning and teaching, we must determine what is to be learned and taught, and when and how to do so. Although knowledge is a value in itself, the purpose of learning is to make knowledge a guide in life and illuminate the road to human betterment. Thus, any knowledge not appropriated for the self is a burden to the learner, and a science that does not direct one toward sublime goals is a deception.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Around these questions see: Sulayman Naseem, forming the modern Egyptian education, the role of the political, social and intellectual powers 1923-1952, Cairo, public Egyptian administration for the book, series of Misr An-Nahda 1984, p.191

⁹⁶ - Op. Cit., pp 79-80

⁹⁷ - Ibid. p 63

- He adds to that in another piece, while he was talking to those who devoted their lives to teach people in that educational institutions belonging to the movement all around the world⁹⁸.

"Who knows, maybe in the near future, thanks to these volunteers who devote themselves to letting others live, the mind and soul will embrace each other once again, conscience and logic will become complementary depths of each other, physics and metaphysics will stop fighting and withdraw to their own realms, and everything will find the opportunity to express the beauty in its own nature through its own language, the intricacy of legislative rules and the principles of creation will be rediscovered, people will regret having fought each other over nothing, an atmosphere of peace that was not previously established in the marketplaces, in the schools and homes will be established, and breezes of happiness will blow, chastity will not be violated, honesty will not be oppressed, hearts will always breathe respect and esteem, no one will envy others, their property or their reputation, the powerful will treat the weak justly, the weak and the poor will have the chance to live humanely, nobody will be arrested on the strength of mere suspicions, no dwelling or workplace will be attacked, nobody's blood will be shed and the weak will not cry, everybody will adore God and love humanity, It is only then that this world, which is the hallway to Paradise, will become an Eden that is fascinating to live in.

3-2: What we learn? Or the content of education

In their teaching program Fethullah Gulen's institutions affirm two essential educational contents:

- Science
- Religion, namely faith & morals, in its living meaning, and in its human general valuable content.

And because the contradiction between science & religion was a field of intellectual debate according to the Western historical experience which we have pointed to before, because of that Gulen has put his arguments in this debatable issue, clarifying that the contradiction is an illusion, pointing to that:

⁹⁸ - Ibid. p 63

- Consider: A book is the material manifestation via words of its "spiritual" existence in the writer's mind. There is no conflict between these two ways of expressing the same truth and contents in two different "worlds".

- Similarly, there can be no conflict among the Qur'an the Divine Scripture (coming from God's Attribute of Speech), the universe (coming from His Attribute of Power and Will), and the sciences that examine them. The universe is a mighty Qur'an deriving from God's Attributes of Power and will. In other words, if the term is proper, the universe is a large, created Qur'an. In return, being an expression of the universe's laws in a different form, the Qur'an is a universe that has been codified and put on paper. In its true meaning, religion does not oppose or limit science and scientific work.

- Religion guides sciences, determines their real goal, and puts moral and universal human values before them as guidance. If this truth had been understood in the West, and if this relationship between religion and knowledge had been discovered, things would have been different. Science would not have brought more destruction than benefit, and it would not have opened the way for producing bombs and other lethal weapons.⁹⁹

- Gulen also borrowed his teacher Bediuzzaman [Said Nursi] words: There is no understanding of education that sees the illumination of the mind in science and knowledge, and the light of the heart in faith and virtue. This understanding, which makes the student soar in the skies of humanity with these two wings and seek God's approval through service to others, has many things to offer. It rescues science from materialism, from being a factor that is as harmful as it is beneficial from both material and spiritual perspectives, and from lethal weapons.¹⁰⁰

Gulen adds to these two essential contents a third important one, when he advises educating trades and crafts:

"A community's survival depends on idealism and good morals, as well as on reaching the necessary level in scientific and technological progress. For this reason, trades and crafts should be taught

⁹⁹ - Op. Cit. pp 80-81

¹⁰⁰ - Ibid. p 82

beginning at least in the elementary level. A good school is not a building where only theoretical information is given, but an institution or a laboratory where students are prepared for life."¹⁰¹

3-3: Who is learning?

Educational institutions belonging to Fethullah Gulen are spreading all over Turkey and many other countries of the world, offering their services to their student whether Muslims or non-Muslims, as stated by Bekim Agai¹⁰²:

Motivated by his ideas, Gulen's followers became active in the educational field. In the 1980s and 90s more than 150 private schools as well as 150 dersanes offering additional courses were established (Agai 2004, 13ff). By now, the movement has established over 250 educational institutions outside of Turkey in nearly all parts of the world, they are concentrated in the post-communist Balkan countries as well as the former Soviet Union.

Gulen has expressed that: Whatever happens, despite those who blows out the candles, these men have long illuminated the hearts that are thirsty for light wherever they go, they warn the pure natures of what lies behind things and events, and they announce the universal human values to unspoiled souls.¹⁰³

3-4: Who educates?

Fethullah Gulen has concentrated in his writings on the role of the teacher & the school and their essential criteria, from these writings we have chosen those quotations:

- A school may be considered as a laboratory in which an elixir is offered which can prevent or heal the ills of life, and teachers are the masters by whose skills and wisdom the elixir is prepared and administrated.

¹⁰¹ - Ibid. p 75

¹⁰² - Bekim Agai: Discursive and Organizational Strategies of the Gulen Movement, a paper presented in: Islam in the Contemporary World: The Fethullah Gulen Movement in Thought and Practice, November 12-13, 2005, Rice University, Houston, TX, p 71

¹⁰³ - M. Fethullah Gulen: Toward A Global Civilization Of Love & Tolerance, New Jersey, The Light Inc., Second Impression, 2004, p 213

- The school is a place of learning, where everything related to this life and the next can be learnt. It can shed light on vital ideas and events and enable its students to understand their natural and human environment.
- In essence, the school is a kind of place of worship whose "holy men" are teachers.
- Good schools worthy of the name are pavilions of angels, which develop feelings of virtue in their pupils and lead them to achieve nobility of mind and spirit.
- The real teacher is one who sows the pure seed and preserves it. It is his duty to be occupied with what is good and wholesome, and to lead and guide the child in his or her life and in the face of all events.
- As it is in the school that life, flowing outside in so many different directions, acquires a stable character and identity (..) the flowing of life in undirected ways is channeled into unity by means of the school.
- School is thought to be relevant only in a particular phase of life. However, it is much more than that. It is essentially the theatre in which all the scattered things of the universe are displayed together. It provides its pupils with the possibilities of continuous reading and speaks even when it is silent.¹⁰⁴
- The best sort of knowledge to be acquired in the school must be such that enables pupils to connect happenings in the outer world to their inner experiences. The teacher must be a guide who can give insight into what is experienced. No doubt, the best guide (and one that continuously repeats its lessons) is life itself. Nevertheless, those who do not know how to take a lesson directly from life needs some intermediates. These intermediates are the teachers- it is they who provide the link between life and the self, and interpret the manifestations of life's happenings.¹⁰⁵
- Education is different from teaching. Most people can teach, but only a very few can educate.

¹⁰⁴ - M. Fethullah Gulen: Towards The Lost Paradise, Izmir, Kaynak, Second Edition, 1998, pp 98- 99

¹⁰⁵ - Ibid pp 99-100

- Patience is of great importance in education. Education people is the most sacred, but also the most difficult task in life. In addition to setting a good personal example, teachers should be patient enough to obtain the desired result. They should know their students well, and address their intellects, and their hearts, spirits, and feelings. The best way to educate people is to show a special concern for every individual, not forgetting that each individual is a different "world".¹⁰⁶

Gulen also borrows from the light of prophethood the example of the educator, and adds to criteria of the real educator those points:¹⁰⁷

- First: Give due importance to all aspects of a person's mind, spirit, and self, and to raise each to its proper perfection.

- Second: An education system is judged by its universality, comprehensiveness, and quality of its students.

- Third: An education system is judged by its ability to change its students.

In fact, the practical experience has showed the success of the schools & teachers of Fethullah Gulen as stated to by many researchers; one of them is Ruth Woodhall who pointed to the factors of success of these schools:

- In fact the schools in Turkey and elsewhere invariably follow the national curriculum, even in countries where private schools may be exempt from such a requirement. In addition to being unusually well equipped for teaching of science, as mentioned above, they tend to have very good English language departments and small classes. These three criteria are seen as key to the ultimate educational and professional success of the pupils and are vital factors in the marketing of the schools to the growing educational middle class in Turkey, Central Asia and other non-English speaking countries.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ - M. F. Gulen: Essays, Perspectives, Opinions, p 75

¹⁰⁷ - M. Fethullah Gulen: An Analysis of the Prophet's Life- The Messenger of God Muhammad, New Jersey, The Light Inc., Revised Edition in one volume, Second Impression, 2005, pp 188-189

¹⁰⁸ - Ruth Woodhall: An Examination of Fetullah Gulen's Philosophy of Education and the Educational Activities of his Movement, In: Islam in the Contemporary World: The Fethullah Gulen Movement in Thought and Practice, November 12-13, 2005, Rice University, Houston, TX, p 85

- At a managerial level the constant in-service training of teachers and support staff is seen as vital to establishing and maintaining high standards and schools often join together, in greater or smaller numbers, depending on the need and the circumstances, to provide weekend and holiday skills training for teaching staff.

- In the same periods, when teachers are meeting for training, school managers also meet, exchange views and experiences, and discuss good practice and innovations.¹⁰⁹

Ruth also adds to these factors another point from Ozgala's words:

- The first unique aspect (of the schools) is the fostering of a competitive spirit. Yearly reports are prepared and distributed that compare the performance of students in Gulen's high schools with those in other schools- and the former often score very well in the entrance examinations to universities. This outstanding performance is even more noticeable in the schools in Central Asia than in Turkey. The competitive spirit also is encouraged by training and sending students to different academic "Olympic" contests for high-school students all around the world, often they return with medals.¹¹⁰

3-5: How to Educate?

The question, which faces us here regarding the educational experience of Fethullah Gulen, concentrating specially on education faith & morals in addition to science is: How they can address these issues in extremely secular countries preventing education of religion in their non-religious schools?

The answer to this hard question we can find it in Gulen's own words¹¹¹:

- We rightfully say, "Tongues and words have nothing to say in the presence of actions. When manners speak, is there a need for speech?"

The answer is in the "Good Example" teachers present to their pupils, Gulen has borrowed this way from the "Example" of the Messenger, who was an educator by actions and manners too:

¹⁰⁹ - Ibid pp 85-86

¹¹⁰ - Ibid p 86

¹¹¹ M. Fethullah Gulen: Toward A Global Civilization Of Love & Tolerance, p 213

God's Messenger represented and expressed what he wanted to teach through his actions, and then translated his actions into words (..) As a result, whatever he preached was accepted immediately in his house and by his followers, for his words penetrated all their hearts.¹¹²

Gulen also pointed to another aspect of the way of education by refusing the way of ear & memory, and by stimulating the way of mind & spirit, saying:

"Information rightly acquired at school and fully internalized by the self, is a means by which the individual rises beyond the clouds of this gross world of matter and reaches to the borders of eternity. Information not fully internalized by the self is no more than a burden loaded upon the pupil's back. It is a burden of responsibility on its owner, and a devil, which confuses the mind. That kind of information that has been memorized but not fully digested does not provide light to the mind and elevation to the spirit, but remains simply a nuisance to the self."¹¹³

This way reminds us with another reformer whose life was also the education, and who was exposed in his life to those two ways of education, and he has chosen the second one namely "the way of mind and spirit". He is Imam Muhammad Abdo¹¹⁴, whose ideas about reforming life through education resemble that of Fethullah Gulen.

Conclusion

Fethullah Gulen shifts through his educational philosophy from reflecting the world reflecting the whole universe, life and humans. He derived this philosophy from the words of Allah in the noble Qur'an when Allah addresses man to reflect upon the verses and the signs in the horizon to enable the humans learn the laws of life and existence. He depended in his philosophy on a deep and profound reading, an understanding and critical reading, to the writings of both Islamists and westerners, using these readings he was able to define the needs of human, society and the problems of the world, which its solution the human should be reformed altogether, mind, body and soul. He depended on his philosophy in answering the five pivotal questions forming the educational process by teaching the students the art of reading life, reflecting on the world and existence to illuminate for the rest of the

¹¹² - Op. Cit, p 187

¹¹³ - M. Fethullah Gulen: Towards The Lost Paradise, p 99

¹¹⁴ - About education in Muhammad Abdo's life read:

Abbas Mahmud el Akkad, Muhmmmad Abdo, Cairo, Ministry of Education, 1963, pp 103-120

humanity a light that brings hope to the souls of a new generation, a generation of mind and soul, a generation who knows its creator as it knows the world and the universe around it.

The educational philosophy and experiment of Gulen widens the horizons to many comparative studies, to start with is the study of the Islamic schools in Egypt that are established by national efforts and supported by Islamic and national powers to resist occupation and illiteracy in the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century and compare this experiment with the one of Gulen's considering the resemblance and the differences exposed by the differences in time and place.

We can find resemblance in the trial of either those "old" or the "new" Egyptian Islamic schools to mix between the best of both traditional "religious" education & the modern "western" education, which means to mix between the study of science & religion on the basis of re-forming the human being. On the other hand we can find differences in the "level" of teaching science, and in the "way" of addressing religion, the fact that makes it important nowadays to benefit from the experience of Gulen's schools special "mix".