

His Eminence Abdullah Aymaz

- **ENCOUNTER WITH GULEN**

In 1966 when we met Fethullah Gulen, he was teaching the traditional and classic Islamic sciences as an official Imam of the Department of Religious Affairs. During that time most scholars and imams were encouraging the community to build mosques and set up Qur'an courses. Conversely, we heard that Fethullah Gulen was suggesting the building of schools founded on modern sciences and morality.

- **UNIQUE IN APPROACH / A VISIONARY BEYOND HIS TIME**

During this time I was a student at the *Kestane Pazari* Qur'an Course where Gulen taught. His vision and dedication had attracted me to him. In order to support himself; he would give ten lessons a day and most of what he earned went to student scholarships. Although, he resided at the facilities, he would refrain from eating the food that was supplied to students. He purchased his own food with the little money that was left. Those days there were a handful of people who understood his vision. But the circle around him began to grow quickly. He believed that ignorance was the public enemy number one, so whilst he taught students religious and universal values, he also encouraged those around him to establish schools.

Finally, in 1976 an education facility titled Bozyaka Boarding Centre was established in Izmir. Bright students who did not have the necessary finances to obtain high education were supported by the local businessmen who listened to Gulen's advice. The students stayed at the boarding facility whilst they continued their education at state schools. However, Gulen's dream was to establish private schools in which students were given the opportunity to equip themselves with modern sciences whilst they were also raised with morals, ethics and love for the entire humanity. As people began to understand the vastness of his vision they came with passion to support his cause.

- **A NEW BEGINNING IN KONYA**

Before long, Gulen suggested that those close to him go abroad, hence I was also asked to go to Konya, one of the most conservative provinces in Turkey. It was 1982 when I packed my bags and went to Konya. There, I began to explain Gulen's vision, the importance of setting up schools and providing scholarship to underprivileged children. The social structure of this city was quite conservative. We needed the support of recognized individuals to help explain the significance of modern education to the locals.

There was a Senior Sergeant of the local police in Konya. He was a sincere person whom I had befriended. He believed in the aims of Gulen's ideas. In an organized meeting set up by myself, the sergeant spoke to those who had come "O people of Konya, you are a traditional community. It is a well known fact that in your community, Mosques and Quran courses are established prior to all other necessities. Perhaps, God will reward and forgive the sins of your community for the next 200 years for the contributions you have made to build mosques and Islamic institutions. However, from this day on, let us work in a new field that needs urgent attention. Let us assist this gentleman (referring to me) to build modern schools and provide scholarships for your children who attend state schools and for the children of the needy.

It took quite a time to explain the importance of this matter and people to understand. It was difficult to win over the hearts of people who had followed a certain tradition for many years. But through the personal sacrifices of many teachers motivated by Gulen's ideals of serving God through serving the community and through financial sacrifices made by regular individuals whose wages that were well below state norms, we had succeeded. Teachers had a unique place in Gulen's heart. He suggested to all those who were close to him to become teachers. Many people who took his advice sacrificed a comfortable life to go back through the education system and become teachers.

It was a time when many people began to support Gulen's ideals. The working class, the small business owners, teachers and others gave a significant amount of their earnings to establish foundations that eventually succeeded in establishing private schools. It was during the 1982s when the movement began to establish schools all over Turkey.

Currently there are hundreds of colleges in all provinces, townships and regional areas of Turkey. In addition to these, there are thousands of other educational institutions including pre-schools, tutorial centers, study and homework centers and youth hostels and dormitories and student accommodation centers.

- **CARRYING THE VISION OF GULEN TO THE INTERNATIONAL PLATFORM**

One of the main goals of Fethullah Gulen is to achieve universal peace. He taught his followers that education, love, mutual respect and philanthropy was the only way to establish peace and harmony amongst human beings. One of the key factors in minimizing conflicts was respecting fellow human beings for what they were. This could only be done through information, interaction and mutual understanding. Therefore, education was the first step to understanding.

Following the success achieved in Turkey, it was time to take this concept to other regions of the world. The language of these schools would be that of the heart- love and compassion, teaching through example with special references to

common human morals and values and accepting people for what they are. Such an original education system was imperative because of the three major problems that the modern world faced, and the situation was worse in the Muslim world – these significant problems were ignorance, poverty and disunity. These were important issues because they were the main cause of most of world's conflicts and wars. In order to achieve peace all of the issues had to be addressed. Ignorance would be solved through education, poverty would be solved through philanthropy and disunity would be solved through love and respect for humanity.

- **ISLES OF PEACE**

Gulen's vision of education was the first step and it was so successful that it began to bring people of all faiths together throughout the globe. The international efforts to establish the educational model achieved in Turkey commenced with the collapse of the former Soviet Union. In the 1990s many colleges and educational facilities were set up in the Central Asian states and then spread to more than hundred nations globally. Currently, these schools serve people of all races, irrespective of color, creed or faith. It is in these colleges students of all races, cultures and faiths are taught universal values and ethics along with modern sciences.

Gulen's vision of universal peace through education began to yield fruits when schools were established in certain conflict zones of the world. For example; Schools in Bosnia brought together Catholics and Muslims; schools in Russia were predominantly Christian; schools in the Philippines – where Muslims and Christians were engaged in an ongoing conflict – had students from both sides of the conflict; schools in India brought together Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims and schools in Iraq brought together Christians and Muslims

During this time, issues affecting unity in Turkey were also tackled. The polarities that existed in Turkey were:

Turkish- Kurdish,
Sunni -Alevi,
Religious-Secular,
Left-Right,
Muslim-Non-Muslim

The polarities between different groups had to be removed. Turkey needed some form of information service through which people understood each other and respected their views.

- **MEDIA, INTELLECTUALS AND ACADEMICS**

Those days, most of the media in Turkey was controlled by people who constantly pumped provocations, disunity and hatred through the screen and through their

columns. It was about this time Gulen encouraged those around him to establish news facilities. Once again dedicated people who supported the movement rolled their sleeves and made enormous financial sacrifices to establish the Sizinti Magazine, Zaman Newspaper, STV television channel, Fountain Magazine and many other journals. However, this was not enough because there were a lot of journalists, intellectuals and writers who remained at the opposite points of polarity. With this in mind the Journalists and Writers Foundation (GYV) was formed and for the first time Gulen's name appeared in an organization in an honorary capacity. We visited all the newspapers of the various socio-political spectrums. Our message was "No to polarity, conflicts and enmity...."

It was a result of the GYV that thinkers and writers from different ideologies and perspectives came together for the first time around the same table.

Gulen also encouraged writers and journalists with varying views to write for other journals and newspapers. He started Ramadan Iftars Dinners that brought together people from the opposite sides of the socio-political spectrum and people who had completely different world views.

In a 99% Muslim country, he met with leaders from the minority religious communities. Amongst them there were communities of Assyrians, Armenians, Greek Orthodox and Jews. With this initiative Gulen paved the way for breaking the taboos and stereotypes in regards to mixing and meeting with Non-Muslims. He was the first Imam, amongst Muslim leaders to meet with the Orthodox Patriarch of Turkey and the Chief Rabbi of Turkey on regular basis.

At the time there were many other obstacles on his path. Initially, his efforts to promote modern educational colleges received stern criticism from various religious, secular and nationalist groups. However, in time most of them realized the significance of his vision and began to support him.

These developments led to an increase in constructive activities and relationships in the Balkans and beyond. One example involves a Turkish National of the Greek ethnicity, who worked for the Patriarch. He was approached by a man during the national military service in Turkey. This man said as a result of the then current political climate in Cyprus "If it weren't for Gulen's ideas and teachings I just might have beat you up". This story was relayed to Gulen via the Patriarch who also thanked him for his great services he provided not only for the Turkish nation but the people of all faiths and cultures.

Another example was conveyed to me by Yusuf Sag, an Assyrian Orthodox priest who was reprimanded by a Muslim who saw him reading the Holy Quran and said "Why are you reading my Holy book?". He went on to say how much the attitudes had changed as a result of the positive dialogue activities taking place in Turkey.

At the time, various geo-political problems such as conflicts in Cyprus, Armenia and Palestine affected racial sensitivities. But Gulen's words and actions inspired the majority of the public. As a result people from all facets of society came together and began talks on commonalities.

Gulen is so sensitive towards the protection of human life that not only he felt great sorrow during the Gulf War when many innocent Muslims lost their lives but he also felt deep sorrow when he heard that missiles were fired by Saddam upon innocent Israeli children. He always stood on the side of those who were innocent, irrespective of race or religion and he always implored his congregation to do the same.

He was quoted in the world media on September 12, 2001 (the day after the 9-11 terror attacks in the United States) stating that "A Muslim could not be a terrorist and a terrorist could not be a Muslim" His comments were also published by the New York Times.

Of course there were others Muslims who advocated dialogue, but Gulen, through his own role model and his insistence through relating everything to the Quran, Sunnah and the lives of the Sahabe (companions of Prophet Muhammad) gave a firm reliance on true Islamic sources and theology.

As a result of the strong relationships formed with the members of other faiths, new opportunities began to present themselves. For example, following the meeting between Fethullah Gulen and the head Rabbi of Israel in 1998, Kerim Balci (Zaman newspaper Israel representative) was contacted in July 1999 by the Rabbi. He asked him to relay three issues to Gulen.

1. He wanted Gulen to join him as his guest of honor when Pope John Paul II had plans to visit Israel in the year 2000.
2. He said that, if the movement wished to set up a school in Israel, he would do his best to help.
3. He also asked if he could assist in a matter where 13 Jewish Iranians were being tortured in Iran.

On another occasion, the UK Ambassador to Turkey spoke to Gulen asking him if he could convey a message to Muslims regarding an incident where two British citizens were being held captive by a group in Chechnya. Immediately, Gulen organized an interview on Chechen TV and sent out a message to all Muslims of that nation, explaining that such behaviors were against the teachings of Islam. Before long, the British citizens who had been kidnapped were released.

Besides education, dialogue and media, other activities included on Gulen's agenda were charities, Aid organizations, health and welfare services. Each year,

aid organizations and foundations established by the movement organize various campaigns to help people in the war-torn regions, disaster struck regions and poverty stricken regions of the world.

- **WHERE TO WITH DIALOGUE**

It should be realized that all divinely revealed faiths' spiritual ancestry goes all the way back to Adam hence we are bonded by this relationship and many other commonalities that bring us together.

Gulen reminds us often about what the Prophetic Tradition suggests in regards to human relations;

“The most blessed of all people is the one who benefits other people....”

Muslims are not engaging in dialogue activities simply because it was requested by Gulen; we are doing it because the holy Qur'an prescribes it. Gulen only emphasis on its importance and reminds us of its worth to humanity and that it is a behavior which pleases the Creator.