

The Gülen schools: A perfect compromise or compromising perfectly?

By Anne Solberg

1. Introduction

This paper will introduce the idea of the Gülen School. By idea I mean the ethos which underpins this particular school system and the way in which this ethos manifests itself in the actual delivery of education to young people in the western Balkans. Additionally this paper will place these schools along a theoretical continuum where the ends of the continuum represent a) traditional notions of teaching “from” “about” or simply “teaching religion” in a school setting and b) radical notions of where religion might belong within state-supported school systems. By state-supported systems I mean not only schools owned or run by the state, but also private schools that are legitimized by the state.

I will begin with a summary presentation of the characteristics of traditional understandings of teaching religion in schools. By teaching religion I mean all three ways in which this might be understood, i.e. teaching from religion, teaching about religion and simply teaching religion. By characteristics I mean the principles and practices that define the traditional and radical approaches

I will then go on to explore the characteristics of more radical notions of how religion might be dealt with within state supported education systems. Finally I will use the particular example of the Gülen schools as a way of highlighting characteristics of both ends of the continuum, ending with an attempt to locate the Gülen schools on this continuum.

The ultimate purpose of the paper is not to arrive at a series of recommendations for the inclusion of religion in schools or methodologies to integrate religion into state supported systems, but rather, to problematise the issue through a specific example, the Gülen schools.

2. Characteristics of Traditional Approaches

Traditional approaches can be categorised by four key separate approaches. Each approach is currently found in a wide number of jurisdictions. It is not within the scope of this paper to attempt to explain the origin of these approaches; instead I will characterise these approaches in broad terms.

The four key categories are

1. *Non-denominationalism*

School systems which do not include any form of structured religious education

2. *Single-denominationalism*

School systems which include the teaching of one particular religion using methods which protect, and operate from the ethos of, that religion

3. *Multi-denominationalism*

School systems which include the teachings of many religions. However, each

religion is taught separately, with students electing for classes in their (usually own) religion. The teaching methods protect, and operate from the ethos of, that particular religion.

4. *Inter-denominationalism*

School systems which include the teachings of all religions to all students regardless of the particular religion of any one or group of students. The teaching methods are based on respect and understanding for each religion.

These four categories are not perfect “systems” and should not be thought of as such; instead they should be seen as four normative approaches

3. Characteristics of Radical Educational Approaches to Religion in State Supported Systems

In an effort to illustrate an amalgam of radical approaches I have developed the following matrix.

This matrix does not represent any one particular radical model of the relationship between education systems and religion, but rather represents the key elements common to a number of approaches which more and more characterise the western European states’ response to the dilemma of how to approach the issue of religious education.

Underpinning this dilemma is the paradox of the rights of individuals (personal liberty) versus the rights enshrined in social and political statutes (equality). The question can be rephrased as: How can education as a key institution of the state value the religious diversity of its citizens, while at the same time protect the democratic principles upon which the state is founded? This highlights the philosophical question of whether personal liberty can ever be fully reconciled with equality. In practice this question is manifest in the debate between four distinct groups: those who support multi-denominational, inter- denominational, single-denominational and non- denominational education.

The matrix offers a possible compromise that could be acceptable to all four groups.

It conceives of an education system that offers all the usual subjects, History, Science, Geography, Languages etc and presents these as parallel disciplines. In this way the system is very similar to traditional ways of organising subject-based learning. The difference here is that Religion is not included as a parallel subject but is instead included horizontally (i. e. in a cross-curricular way).

The yellow circles denote points of relevant interaction. These points represent the areas of religious thinking relevant to the parallel subjects. In designing these points, curriculum development systems would need to understand the place that religion has in developing our thinking in a number of subject areas. Obviously, this is no small task and requires an inter-disciplinary approach to curriculum development. Such curriculum development has itself to be informed by a series of values which include respecting the role of religion while at the same time allowing students to develop a critical analysis of that role.

How critical that analysis is, will depend upon the society in which the curriculum is developed.

Although this could satisfy the non-denominationalists and possibly the inter-denominationalists, it leaves the single-denominationalists and the multi-denominationalists believing that religion has been removed from education systems, or that at the very least it has less value within the system than other defined disciplines.

In an effort to reach further compromise, the matrix proposes an inter-connecting value structure that connects the points of relevant interaction. This value system can be defined as the methodology through which religion is introduced into the curriculum. Whereas the “points of relevant interaction” simply define the information being imparted, the “connecting value system” defines the way in which this information is presented.

The way in which information is being presented and thought has been categorised into confessional, non-confessional and collaborative models. However, this matrix demands an expanded understanding of these existing concepts as well as a number of new additional ones. The specific experience of the Gülen schools, which will be expanded upon later, shows that there are other ways in which religion can be incorporated into state-legitimised education systems or institutions.

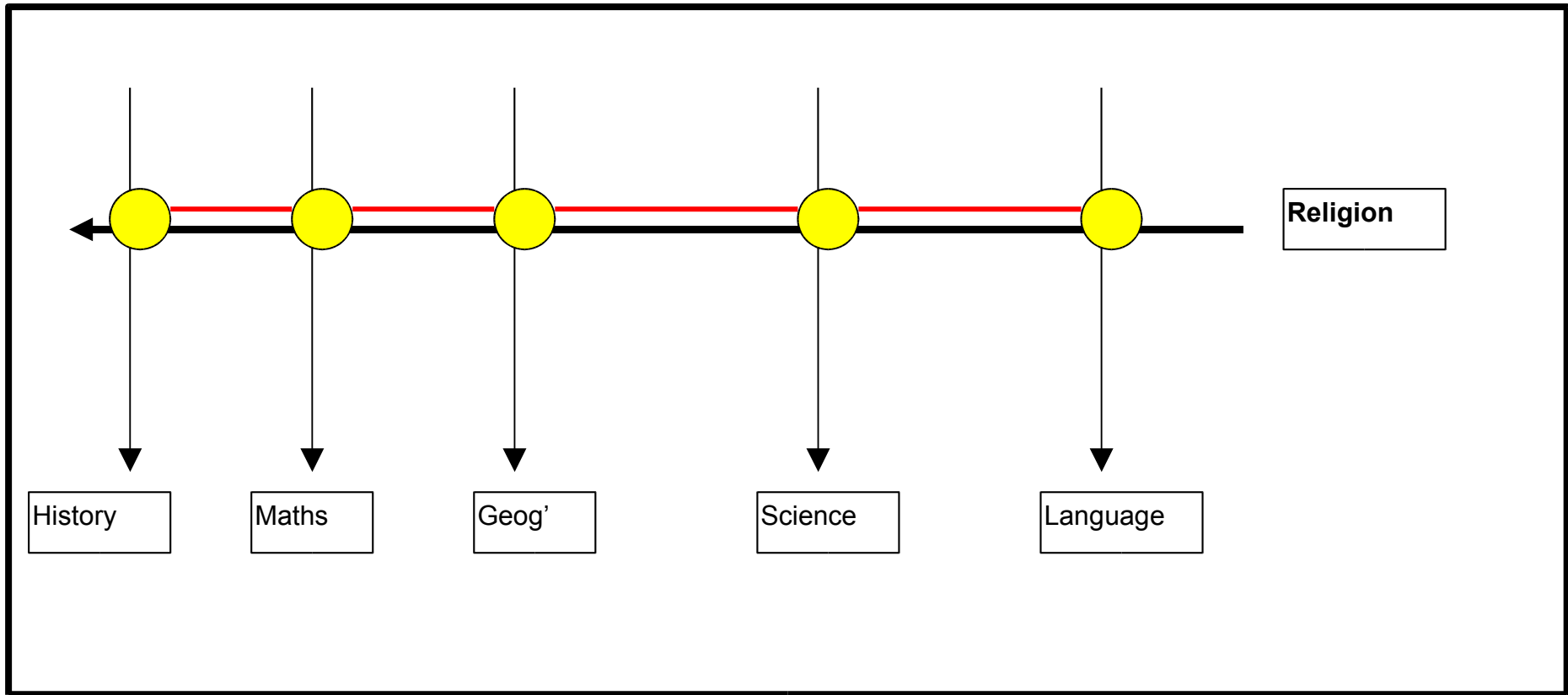
In some western democratic states this “connecting value system” is defined by what has become known as “the home/school community”. Simply put, this means that the state facilitates collaboration between the main stakeholders in education, i.e. parents, teachers and community representatives, to define the way in which the state-prescribed information is delivered. This ensures that the state plays an equal but not superior role in defining the place of religion in education.

The state also recognises that such a system may not satisfy the needs of single-denominationalists and therefore grants them the right to self-organise but may withhold the financial support for such an endeavour.

No state can devise policies that will completely satisfy all four groups. It can devise policies and implementation mechanisms that respect the personal liberty of individuals, but only in so far as such personal liberty does not undermine the equality tradition of that state and increasingly of multi-state or post-state value systems

The example of the Gülen schools is used here to illustrate how one particular kind of school system places itself within this debate. By highlighting particular characteristics of the Gülen school we can begin to understand how the debate manifests itself in practice, and how a particular approach tries to accommodate the complexity of the debate.

The Personal Liberty /Equality Matrix in Religion and Education



Points of relevant interaction



Connecting Value System

4. The Gülen Schools – an Introduction

4.1 The Gülen movement

I use the term “the Gülen schools” to denote schools that have been established by the Gülen movement and are inspired by Fetullah Gülen and his Islamic ethos of education. These schools are not owned by Fetullah Gülen himself, but by private companies and institutions that sympathise with him and his thinking. The Gülen community is not a tightly controlled hierarchical organisation, but rather a loose network of schools, study centers, foundations, companies, media organisations, hospitals etc., some of which are closely affiliated with Gülen himself, and others who merely regard him as a source of inspiration. There are between 250 - 300 Gülen-inspired schools in nearly all parts of the world, the majority of them in Turkey, the former Soviet republics of central Asia, and the Balkans.

A lengthy analysis of Fetullah Gülen and the movement associated with him, is beyond the scope of this paper. I will however, attempt a short introduction for those not familiar with him. Fetullah Gülen is a retired Turkish Muslim preacher currently living in the United States. His thinking is heavily influenced by Said Nursi, a popular Turkish Islamic reformist scholar of this century, who attempted to prove the compatibility between Islam and modern science and technology. The Nur community has grown to be one of the most powerful text-based Islamic movements in Turkey. The Gülen community is sometimes characterised as a neo-Nur community, as there are some significant differences between it and the other Nur groups.

Fetullah Gülen, the charismatic spiritual leader of the Gülen movement, is one of the most heavily debated public figures in Turkey. Due to his popularity and his close connections with leading Turkish politicians and statesmen, many Atatürkist and left-leaning journalists, authors, and representatives of military and the judiciary, accuse him of having a secret agenda of trying to undermine the secular system in Turkey, by encouraging his followers to aim for central positions within institutions such as the military and the police. Others see him as someone who is putting “Turkey on the map” by promoting Turkey and Turkish abroad, and a champion of religious dialogue and inter-cultural tolerance.

4.2 Key elements of Fetullah Gülen's thinking:

Fetullah Gülen sees the economic and moral decline in the Muslim world as a result of spiritual and intellectual decline, and aims to renew the Muslim tradition.

The main strategy for achieving this aim, is education. For Gülen, serving Allah means “raising ‘perfect youth’ who combine spirituality with intellectual training, reason with revelation, and mind with heart”.¹

Characteristic of the Gülen movement in comparison with other Islamic social movements, is its emphasis on Turkish nationalism, the free market and modern education.

His thinking and strategy has changed considerably over the last 40 years. In his early writing, the discourse of Islamic revival and Turkish nationalism is

¹ Yavuz 2003, p. 20.

more evident. From the 1990s onwards, however, he has turned to a more global discourse, emphasising inter-religious dialogue and tolerance.

The Gülen movement is sometimes referred to as a missionary movement, but I think it may be more useful to think of them as a faith-inspired education movement.

4.3 The Gülen schools

The Gülen schools are perceived to be elite schools. They are fee-paying private schools, the students are selected on the basis of academic performance, and the students in the schools tend to score high in terms of academic achievement. The schools generally follow the curriculum of the host country, combined with some elements from the Turkish curriculum and the curriculum in other countries. A majority of the subjects are taught through English, and on secondary level, education is also given through Turkish. In order to bring the students' English to the necessary standard, the school week is generally longer than in the state schools.

My current analysis of these schools is based on secondary sources and primary sources. In April 2005 I conducted a two-hour interview with Fatih Gürsoy, the general manager of Bosna-Sema Educational Institutions, which owns and runs the Gülen schools in Bosnia-Herzegovina. I also visited several Gülen-inspired schools in Bosnia, Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania, and conducted shorter interviews with school staff and managers.

4. 4 The Gülen schools in Bosnia

Bosna-Sema Educational Institutions owns and runs five educational institutions in Bosnia:

1. Sarajevo international primary school
2. Sarajevo college for boys (boarding school)
3. Sarajevo college for girls (boarding school)
4. Tuzla international primary school
5. Una Sana College in Bihać.

Another school is planned in Ilidža in Sarajevo, the institution has been given land by the city council of Ilidža, and the architectural plans are completed.

5. The Gülen Schools – A Perspective on Religion in Schools

With regard to the teaching of religion, the Gülen schools generally follow the policy and curriculum of the host country. In state schools in Sarajevo, one of the cantons in the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina,² religious education is optional. When religious education is opted for, it is taught following a confessional multi-denominational model of religious education. Muslim, Catholic and Orthodox children are taught separately about their respective religions. The Gülen schools in Bosnia also follow this model. At the time of speaking, the school only offers religious education in Islam, for those who wishes to attend. According to Gürsoy, they have not received any request for religious education in the Catholic or Orthodox faith. However, should some parents wish their children to receive Catholic or Orthodox

² The Federation, one of the two 'entities' that make up Bosnia-Herzegovina, is divided into ten cantons.

religious education, this would be catered for, he assures. The vast majority of the students are Muslim Bosniaks. In the international primary school in Sarajevo, there are about 250 students, of which about 8-10 are Croat and Serb students.

Traditionally, schools run by religious communities generally follow the confessional single denominational model. This is not the case with the Gülen schools. There is no significant difference in terms of how religion is taught as a subject in the private Gülen schools, and the state schools. So, how then, are they different?

Rather than teaching religion, the Gülen schools stress the transmitting of ethical and moral values (*ahlak*). The two key notions in the Gülen movement's understanding of Islam are morality and identity. Islam for Gülen is essentially about ethical values. The Gülen schools see themselves as working for Islam because they provide guidance and moral example to the students.

A key notion in all the Nur communities, is *hizmet*, meaning "service": the ideal of working hard and sacrificing one's own needs in order to serve other human beings and society, which ultimately means to serve Allah. Some scholars have drawn a parallel between the ethos of the Gülen community and the protestant "ethics of vocation."³ By teaching science and other subjects, and thereby fighting ignorance, they regard themselves as serving Islam.

Another key notion is *temsil*, meaning representation. Rather than preaching Islam, the teachers are expected to be good role models for the students, and personify the values of Islam through their good deeds and moral conduct.

As the discourse has developed over the years, partly as a result of global developments and the movement's own involvement in this world-wide education project, Islamic values have been reinterpreted as universal values. In my interview with the general manager of the schools in Bosnia, I asked him what he meant when referring to universal values. He mentioned loving one's mother and father, being respectful, and being honest. He also emphasised "family-oriented thinking". He regards these as universally acceptable values, and values that Muslims, Christians and Jews have in common. There are more common points that unite the various religions of the world, than what separates them, he argued, reiterating a point often made by Fetullah Gülen himself. What we should be fighting, he stressed, is not other religions, but irreligion and atheism.

6. Concluding Remarks – Locating the Gülen Schools on a theoretical traditional/ radical continuum

6.1 Religious education in the Gülen schools

In terms of teaching of religion as a subject, the Gülen schools can not be placed within any one of the traditional models I outlined above, because they generally follow the curriculum of the host country. Therefore, in some Gülen schools religion is taught according to the multi-denominationalist model, such as in Bosnia. In the Gülen schools in Albania, the schools follow the non-denominationalist model; religion is not taught as a separate subject at all. In Turkey, the schools follow the

³ Agai, Bekim. "Islamic Ethic of Education" in *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement*. p. 61.

single-denominationalist model, as do the state schools. In countries where the inter-denominationalist model is followed, I imagine that the Gülen schools in that country would also follow that model.

Rather than looking at whether and how religion is taught in the Gülen schools as an isolated subject, we may look at how religious ethos is incorporated into the education in other ways. Although religious education in the Gülen schools can not be categorised within any of the four traditional models that I have outlined, I will argue that the schools' ethos can be understood as an ethos of multi-denominationalism. Rather than advocating one religion in particular, the schools place value on faith in itself. Fetullah Gülen regards both morality and identity as founded in religion. The managers of the schools are inspired by Gülen's thinking, the students are therefore encouraged to hold on to their faith, of whatever denomination they may be.

Some parents may be suspicious that as these schools are run by a faith-based movement, they may have a missionary program where they actively try to convert their students to Islam. Such a fear is in my opinion unfounded. Rather than attempting to convert students to Islam, teachers and managers generally attempt to reinforce the religion of the student, whatever that religion may be. Gürsoy told me a story of a Catholic boy in the school whose father passed away, and of how he would tell this child: "Your father was a good Catholic, may you also be a good Catholic! Your father was a church-goer, may you not leave the church behind either!"

One can imagine that such an approach may satisfy multi-denominationalists, even in Gülen schools where religion is not taught at all as a separate subject. The schools' ethos protects all religions, without discriminating against any of them. The positive evaluation of religious identity and the encouragement of faith may also please the single-denominationalist, because single-denominationalists generally would like to see their own religion reinforced.

So what about the non-denominationalists and inter-denominationalists? I suspect that they may have some misgivings, and I will return to this in a minute.

6.2 The Gülen school and the radical approach

The equality/personal liberty matrix tries to accommodate supporters of all the four traditional models, although that is a hard task. The question also remains if that is something to be strived for, a question I will not attempt to answer here.

I have argued that education and teaching in the Gülen schools are motivated by what can be described as an Islamic ethics of education. Furthermore, although the schools may not offer conventional confessional teaching of religion, the schools are informed by a specific value system.

Can we then say that the Gülen schools are displaying one element of the radical model, namely the connecting value system? Perhaps, but within the radical model, the connecting value system is not envisaged as a prescribed absolute, but as a fluid element, negotiated in cooperation between school and parents. In the Gülen schools, however, these values are pre-existing and not negotiable.

In the radical model, the connecting value system was introduced as an element to satisfy the single-denominationalists and the multi-denominationalists, who may feel

that religion is given less value when introduced “horizontally”. The Gülen school system, however, may prove difficult to accept from a non-denominationalist point of view, and perhaps also from an inter-denominationalist point of view. Non- and inter-denominationalists generally favour non-confessional teaching of religion. Non-confessional inter-denominationalism tries to please everyone by treating all religions from a neutral point of view. In such a view, non-religion, agnosticism, and atheism, too, are regarded as one of many views that one should strive to respect and understand. Gülen and his followers who have founded the schools, however, take an active stand *against* irreligion and non-religious viewpoints such as materialism and positivism. As the manager Mr Gürsoy said “Let people be good Christians and go to church, just don’t let them unbelievers! Let people be good muslims and go to the mosque, just don’t let them be unbelievers!”

In the Gülen schools, it is not a case of different confessionals competing against each other. In the ethos of the Gülen schools, confessionalist multi-denominationalism is pitted against unbelief and irreligion.

Ultimately, the ability of this educational approach to appeal to non-, single-, inter-, and multi-denominationalists alike, stands and falls on the extent to which the universal values transmitted to the students, can actually be said to be just that: universal. The manager of the Gülen schools in Bosnia made the following point: “I have yet to receive a complaint from a parent because I taught their child to love their parents”. However, one can imagine how an overt conservative agenda of “family values”, where the family is invariably presented as the traditional model of mother, father and child, may potentially alienate an increasingly significant proportion of the population.

The Gülen movement emphasises the common values that different religions share, and I have no doubt that the Gülen schools’ commitment to religious tolerance is genuine. Such an approach can be seen as praiseworthy, especially in countries like Bosnia. However, from the perspective of equality, the strong emphasis on religion as the prime basis of morality and one of the prime elements of identity, may be problematic.

The educational approach to religion in the Gülen schools can be understood partly within the concept of multi-denominationalism, with elements of what has been referred to here as the radical approach, namely the connecting value system. However, whereas the connecting value system in the radical approach is thought of as a fluid system negotiated between stake holders, the value system in the Gülen schools is neither fluid nor negotiable. It is instead firmly grounded in a conservative Islamic ethics of family values, hard work, discipline, honesty and respect, for the benefit of the community, the nation, and humanity. For this value system to have a wider universal appeal, stronger integration of notions such as equality, personal freedom and human rights may be necessary.