

Fethullah Gulen: Establishing Turkish Charter Schools in America

By James Cha

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‘I worked at a Harmony School of Ingenuity for two years...and it was the worst two years of my life,’ confesses an Asian-American school teacher who taught for two years at a Turkish charter school in Houston, TX. Melody (not her real name) discovered soon after her employment that the charter school is drastically different from other public schools in the US. Her experience is shared by many other American teachers hired by 135 Turkish charter school administrators scattered across the US. To cite one example, her school did not have a human resource department, so when she discovered that there was gross salary difference based on gender (male teacher’s salary was \$40,000/year and female teacher’s salary was \$33,000/year), she had no legal place for redress of grievance. During her two years at Harmony, at the persistent encouragement of the administrators, she made a special trip to Turkey. The trip itself was heavily subsidized by the school, and while on that trip, she discovered that the network of Harmony schools in Houston was affiliated with a renowned Turkish leader named Fethullah Gulen.

Who Is Fethullah Gulen?

Fetullah Gulen is a Muslim cleric, educator and a businessman, born in Turkey in 1941. Gulen left Turkey and came to America in 1999 citing health reasons. At the time he was being investigated for plotting to overthrow the secular republic to replace it with an Islamic state (BBC News, June 21, 1999). He had been imprisoned for six months in 1971 under a similar charge. A few months after Gulen left Turkey, a video was aired on Turkish TV in which Gulen stated:

You must move in the arteries of the system, without anyone noticing your existence, until you reach all the power centres. . .You must wait until such time as you have gotten all the state power, until you have brought to your side all the power of the constitutional institutions in Turkey. . . .Until that time, any step taken would be too early - like breaking an egg without waiting the full 40 days for it to hatch. It would be like killing the chick inside. The work to be done is [in] confronting the world. Now, I have expressed my feelings and thoughts to you all - in confidence. . .trusting your loyalty and sensitivity to secrecy. I know that when you leave here -

[just] as you discard your empty juice boxes, you must discard the thoughts and feelings expressed here.

Gulen now resides in Poconos, Pennsylvania, under what some would describe as self-imposed exile. He fears retaliation from the Turkish government for his views and remarks against the country's leaders. According to one source, he is also a very wealthy businessman, worth over \$20 billion. (Berlinski, 2012)

Gulen believes strongly in promoting the ideals of Islam through interfaith dialogues and education, and prioritizes building schools over building mosques. He and his followers have built over 1000 Turkish 'Gulen' schools across the world, including 135 public charter schools in the US. These schools, which are headed by Turkish administrators but funded by US tax dollars, have been plagued with problems.

What Are the Problems with Gulen Schools?

The problems with Gulen schools run wide and deep. At the administrative level, there have been charges of ethnic and gender discrimination and financial impropriety including kick-backs and money laundering. At the teaching level many of the imported Turkish teachers have been found lacking in both English language proficiency and expertise or knowledge in the subject being taught. Mary Addi and her Turkish husband were former employees (teachers) at a Gulen school in Cleveland, Ohio. Her statements provide an insider's view of these problems.

My husband, Mustafa Emanet, and I were employed as teachers at a Gulen-inspired charter school in Cleveland. It was through our association and subsequent marriage that I quickly discovered the vast and varied illegal operations that are integrally part of the Gulen operation and being implemented under the guise of public education via their charter school network.

...my husband and I have been cooperating with federal authorities for the past four years regarding various illegal activities, like extortion through 'kickback' money (as my husband was forced to do), false immigration applications/H1-B visas (through fake employment searches and manufactured positions), and money-laundering activities (rent, kick-back money, tax and retirement funds). The investigation is not exclusive to Ohio and is instead being conducted on a national level.

...the most egregious of the acts committed by the Gulenists is the blatant discrimination against American educators and administrators. By supplanting American jobs with foreign H1-B visa holders, they are systematically (and have been for the past 12 years) putting their own, hand-selected male Gulenists in top administrative positions, including that of Business Manager. Further, if the board were to look closely at their

respective school boards throughout the 135 existing Gulen-inspired schools, it would find that the majority if not all of the board members are Gulenists, and again—the majority are Turkish males.

. . .despite the high percentage of unemployed American teachers and educators, the Gulenists continue to discriminate against American employees at an alarming rate—all the while using our tax dollars.

. . .make no mistake—the applicants are part of the Gulen movement as only Gulenists are permitted to run these schools. They are recruited from Turkey specifically to run the charter schools and sister organizations. They

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report to Gulen's men and do only as they are instructed. In Ohio, they were required to attend a mandatory meeting during Spring break in order to read about Gulen.

My husband, along with several teachers from the 'Gulen-inspired' schools personally drove to New York to have a private audience with

Fetullah Gulen. Last May, one of the Gulenists who accompanied my husband, Engin Blackstone, aka Engin Karatas, was asked by a Peoria news station if in fact he had met with Gulen and he denied it—despite the fact that my husband was an eye witness and accompanied him to visit Gulen in New York.

. . .according to my husband, in addition to garnering as much tax payer money as possible, the Gulen movement's other agenda is to spread Islam through subliminal indoctrinations. More specifically, the mission is to spread Islam by means of the Turkish events such as trips to Turkey, the Turkish Olympics, other cultural events, and teaching Turkish as a second language. Although the Gulenists are careful not to speak directly about their religious beliefs, it is their hope that by indoctrinating American students and parents with their culture and hospitality, that the students will likewise be more susceptible to religious conversion. (Addi, 2013)

A similar story emerges from the statements of a former employee at one of fifteen Harmony Schools of Ingenuity in Houston, TX:

I worked at a Harmony School for two years, and now teach in a Houston ISD school... it was the worst two years of my life....Whenever there was a negative article in the media about Harmony, we were asked to post comments that would spin it in a positive light (which I never did)....We had almost no materials, outdated books, no furniture other than desks (which frequently fell apart), and when we went to Turkey we also realized that when we looked at their classrooms, that we had the same desks as

they did... (Cha, 12/13/2012)

An article in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* tells of a similar story in that city:

Some parents say their children cannot understand their Turkish teachers because their English language skills are deficient. And staffers say the school's operations are shrouded in secrecy, and they risk losing their jobs if they ask too many questions. After *The Inquirer* reported about federal investigations last year, staffers reported that school officials had shredded documents. . .

. . .Rev. James W. Wright Sr., president of Truebright's parent teachers association, said he was embarrassed to learn a statement that school officials persuaded him to read at a recent SRC meeting erroneously claimed that 97 percent of the first senior class had graduated last June. In reality, only 33 of the 50 students who started in ninth grade stayed and received diplomas, according to a former administrator...

. . .not only are the FBI and the Departments of Labor and Education looking into allegations of kickbacks by Turkish teachers at the charters nationwide, according to knowledgeable sources, but at least nine American teachers and administrators at Truebright have filed complaints with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. All allege that they were being paid less than noncertified Turkish staffers.

. . .the Philadelphia School District's charter office has recommended to the School Reform Commission that it not renew Truebright's five-year operating charter on several grounds, including academic performance, lack of certified staff, and high turnover of administrators. . . ('Allegations raised over North Philadelphia charter school run by followers of Turkish imam.' *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 4/19/2012).

Gulen Schools in Central Asia

After the former Soviet Republics gained independence in 1991, Gulen supported the opening of Turkish high schools throughout the region. Known locally as Turkish lyciums, these Gulen schools attracted many bright, young students with the promise of advanced English education in various subjects. The Turkish administrators had agreed not to include any religious teachings in the classrooms. However, there were allegations that Islamic and pro-Turkish meetings were regularly part of student dormitory life. Students who attended retreats at nearby camps or even in Turkey were presented with Islamic teachings. According to one Samarkand Turkish lyceum graduate, the Turkish teachers made the following plea to the group of Uzbek and Tajik students on their graduation day: 'If Turkey ever goes to war with another country, you have to come to our aid!'

Uzbek authorities forced the Uzbek Turkish schools to close in 1999 following a series of bombings in Tashkent blamed on a former Uzbek opposition figure then living in Turkey. Several persons were arrested and convicted of membership in religious groups labelled extremist by the government. One such group is *Nur* ('light'), which has been banned by the Uzbek government. *Nur* was founded by the Kurdish Mullah Said Nursi and associated with Fethullah Gulen. In 2006 a Tashkent court found nine persons, all former students of a Turkish lyceum in Angren, guilty of membership in *Nur*, sentencing three persons to five years in prison and fining six others (US State Department, 2011).

How Should Christians in America Respond?

On one hand, we should be on guard and caution others about deceptive practices and hidden agendas. America is a nation established upon the principles of freedom for all. Turkish educators have the freedom to establish a private school for their community; however, a publically funded school that favours Turkish employees, an Islamic agenda, and the political initiatives of Fetullah Gulen should not be allowed.

At the same time, we should make the most of every opportunity to lovingly communicate the truth of the gospel—especially to those who might not have other occasions to hear. I had the opportunity to participate in several public-input sessions at Loudoun County Public School board meetings. I stated reasons for my opposition to the proposed Loudoun Math & IT Academy application. I thank God that the application was rejected by the school board earlier this year.

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During this period, I decided to meet with one of the applicants, a Turkish-immigrant IT engineer. He had completed his undergraduate studies in Turkey and received his PhD in IT at a state university in Florida. He would help establish the IT classes at the proposed Gulen charter school; however, he would not be one of its teachers. I told him that I had serious reservations about Turkish immigrant teachers/educators who were not familiar with the American education system and its philosophy of teaching.

During our lunch meeting, I shared my faith testimony and also asked him the following question: Do you know why Jesus was born of a virgin? (It was a few weeks before Christmas.) According to both the Quran (Q3:47; Q19:16-22) and the Bible (Luke 1:26-38), Jesus was born of a virgin. Why is this significant? And why is Jesus the only sinless prophet in the Quran (Q19:19)? Even

Muhammad had to be forgiven of his sins (Q47:19). The Turkish engineer could not give a reason, and I proceeded to give him the following explanation:

If Jesus had a human father and a human mother, His divinity would be impossible. Jesus had to be fully man and fully God in order to accomplish His work on earth. Furthermore, everyone born of the seed of man (Adam) is born with sin (Psalm 51:5). The Bible says that man can sin even from the mother's womb (Psalm 58:3). Every man has inherited guilt of sin from Adam (Romans 5:18,19), and if Jesus had a human father, He would also be born with the (inherited) sin of Adam. Jesus the Messiah was to be both the perfect priest (Hebrews 7:26) and the perfect sacrifice (Hebrews 9:14) for the sin of the world. He had to be born of a virgin, conceived by the Spirit of God, so that He could accomplish all this.

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The Turkish engineer was appreciative of this new understanding, and at the end of our lunch meeting, he was willing to receive a copy of the Jesus DVD (Campus Crusade version) and a copy of the English Bible. He said that he would start reading from the Book of Matthew (my recommendation).

My prayer is that this Turkish engineer would encounter Jesus through the Gospels (and even in his dreams) and follow the true Light of the world.

Jesus Christ has called each one of us to be His ambassadors to the world (2 Corinthians 5:20), including the Gulenist Muslims who may have come to America with a secret agenda. Let us take every opportunity to 1) pray for more labourers into God's harvest field (Matthew 9:38) and 2) share the truth and love of Jesus with those who are lost (Acts 1:8; Colossians 3:3).

To Find Out More About Gulen Schools:

In May 2012, CBS News' '60 Minutes' featured a documentary on Fetullah Gulen:

<http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=7408418n>

For a comprehensive list of Gulen Charter Schools in America:

<http://turkishinvitations.weebly.com/list-of-us-schools.html>

Loudoun County School Board's Decision on LMITA – Gulen school application (Feb 26, 2013):

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