Fethullah Gülen's Missionary Schools

The Nurcu movement founded by Said Nursi (1873–1960) is probably one of the most important religious organizations in Turkey. After Nursi’s death in 1960, the Nurcu brotherhood fragmented into several sub-communities with different interpretations of religion, different goals and different positions on political issues. However, all these groups have in common the aims of spreading Islam in the region, which has become a real project of the community shows that the movement will only be possible should the governments in the area change their attitude towards religion, in particular Islam. The effects of the current crisis in Afghanistan will most likely not lead to liberalization in the Central Asian republics. In fact, it is highly doubtful that activities of foreign religious movements will be tolerated at any point in the near future.

Fethullah Gülen was born in Erzurum in eastern Turkey in 1931. He decided to pursue a life dedicated to Islam after an encounter with his family’s religious itinerant, which is designated as the Fethullahci movement, although its members are not known to use this term. Basically, Fethullah Gülen’s ideas serve to achieve three intellectual goals: the Islamization of the Turkish nationalist ideology, the tertullisation of Islam, and the Islamization of modern and contemporary. Therefore, he wishes to revive the link between the state, religion and society.

Development of an educational network

No one knows exactly the size of Gülen’s enormous community of followers and sympathizers, but most agree on an average estimate of 3 million members. The movement obtains much of its support from young urban men, especially doctors, academics and other professionals. The movement has grown in part by sponsoring student dormitories, summer camps, colleges, universities, classrooms and communication media. Without the intentions for Central Asia. They were always given the same answer: ‘We are here to help the sister republics of Turkey.’ Therefore, the creation of ‘cultural bridges’ between Turkey and Central Asia.

Detailed research on the activities and the effects of the community shows that the Nurcu movement in Central Asia is a real missionary movement. Its mission is to re-establish Islam in the region, which has been concentrated for the last 70 years by an atheist power persecuting Islam. To that objective, the Nurcu employ methods similar to those of Western missionaries. They have developed an elitist method of recruitment; they wish to change society through education, and they perceive education as a global supervision of pupils in and out of school. Also, the missionary movement entreats excellent relations with the Turkish community in order to ‘convert’ them.

Despite similarities, the Nurcu missionary movement has its distinctive characteristics. Schools, in spite of allegiances in the Turkish media – especially in the Kemalist media, are not a direct instrument of proselytism. Because it is too dangerous for the existence of the community itself in Central Asia, Nurcu missionaries never openly or directly proselytize. Their hocaefendi, or ‘respected lord’, Gülen advocates two main ways of spreading Islam: teaching and teaching the first, and very classical, hocaefendi is to profess and teach openly the ‘good’ mission. But since now a day, the Nurcu are ready to invest in this long-term goal: the future elites are expected to speak English and Turkish, and the favorable chances in passing the universities’ entrance exams, Nurcu schools have a very good reputation among the local populations. The crisis of the national educational systems partly explains the high performance of the Nurcu schools.

The schools’ raison d’être

Turkish media have very often interviewed Fethullah Gülen and his followers in Turkey. They have always been given the same answer: ‘We are here to help the sister republics of Turkey.’ Therefore, the creation of ‘cultural bridges’ between Turkey and Central Asia.

The effects of the current crisis in Afghanistan are most 95% of the Fethullahci in Central Asia are hostile to the movement. If in Turkey the state (especially the army) is sometimes very critical of the movement for its ‘reactionary’ ideas, Turkish ambassadors have developed and entertain good relations with the Nurcu in Central Asia. And by reciprocity the Nurcu benefit from Turkish official support, for without it private organizations face great difficulties in terms of functioning in Central Asia. Considering the benefit the Nurcu schools in Central Asia bring to Turkish, Turkish ambassadors always support and encourage cooperation agreements between the local state and Nurcu educational enterprises.

One should, however, realize that the development of the Nurcu movement in Central Asia is still in its infancy. The community is active in Central Asia since 1991, but it is still primarily a Turkish effort, with Turkish teachers and Turkish enterprises and supporters. Though they work at it in a patient manner, the Nurcu still lack strong local roots among the populations and local elites. Moreover, Islamic movements are not welcome in Central Asia by the governments, and that explains why the movement never officially or openly shows its authentic religious identity and why usually the local communities have no clue as to the schools’ true nature and purpose. It is known that in town there is a ‘Turkish school’ but will never mention any ‘Fethullahci’ school, as this term has no signification for them.