

REVIVING THE *SUFFA* TRADITION

Rifat Atay

Abstract

In Islamic history, one of the most intriguing questions has been the termination of the *Suffa* School immediately following the Prophet's demise. As is well known, the *Suffa* Companions were comprised of mostly single young men who did not have anywhere else to go to. They were provided with shelter and food in the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. Their sole occupation was to spend all their time with the Prophet, learning and studying. They became so well versed in Islam that most of them were sent as teachers and/or governors to new provinces.

The paper claims that today Gülen is seeking to revive the *Suffa* tradition in two ways. First, by resembling the first *Suffa* Companions himself. The four guiding principles traced in the lives of the *Suffa* Companions (single, simple, humble and pious) can be found in the daily life of Gülen. Thus, this paper suggests that Gülen is often mistaken as a Sufi when in fact he can be considered a member of the *Suffa*. Secondly, Gülen has been consistently providing personal tutelage over the last two decades to hundreds of theology graduate students. Students gain admission to Gülen's informal school by passing a rigorous exam in Islamic sciences and Arabic. Thereafter awaits them extensive study and an ascetic lifestyle. Students can remain as long as they wish, some for even as long as ten years. Gülen has been known to have had up to 40 students at times, although given his ill-health this number has dropped to 15 in recent years. In their lifestyle, daily programme and efforts post 'graduation' these students resemble the first *Suffa* Companions.

“Human beings to whichever world they are tuned in are deaf to the other one.”¹

Introduction

Civilization is a continuous process in which institutions do interact with each other. Like other educational initiatives, the Gülen movement probably has its roots at the very beginning of Islamic educational history and the rarely studied first Islamic educational institution, the *Suffa* School. This paper will attempt to show these direct or indirect roots and connections.

It is maintained by Muslims that when societies start deteriorating, especially in moral standards, God sends messengers to them to put them right. The messengers come sometime with a special revelation and mission and sometime with the mission only by following the message revealed to the previous prophet. When the seventh century Arabia was in total decay, the former was the case with them, too. The Prophet Muhammad was sent primarily to them, then to all humanity, with a special revelation and mission to restore the society to the godly rules expected of them. After ten years of struggle and partial success in Mecca, the Muslim community was ordered by Allah to migrate to Medina to start anew and afresh- in fact, this move, technically termed *Hijra*, was later rightly considered to be as a new era in Islamic history and taken to be the beginning of Islamic lunar calendar by the second caliph ‘Umar b. al-Khattab. Muslims gradually left in small groups up to the point when only a few remained at Mecca. Then, the Prophet himself was ordered to departure to Medina with his closest companion, friend and an ally of the Muslims, Abu Bakr, the first caliph to succeed Muhammad.

When the Prophet reached at Medina after a long, arduous journey, the first thing he decided to do in the new Muslim settlement was to build a mosque both as a place of worship and a centre for all formal and informal gatherings. The masjid was later to be called the al-Masjid al-Nabawi, the Mosque of the Prophet, the second holiest/sacred place in Islam after the Holy Ka’ba. The Prophet himself not only designed this original mosque but also physically worked in building it alongside his companions. The mosque was divided into three separate parts: (i) in the northern direction situated a large section for praying opposite to which was placed (ii) the *Suffa* or *Sofa* in the southern direction and (iii) at the eastern direction, took place the rooms for the wives of the Prophet.²

The Suffa School³ and Ahl al-Suffa (The Suffa Companions)

The Arabic word *suffa* literally means *shed*, *bench* or *banquette*; it was even adapted by some other languages such as Turkish and English as *sofa* or *divan*. In Islamic literature, it came to mean “a long, covered portico or vestibule,”⁴ initially, forming part of the newly built mosque at Medina, then in later periods transformed into the antechamber of any mosque in Islamic

1 Özel, I, *Erbain: Kırk Yılın Şiirleri (Forty: The Poetry of Forty Years)*, Istanbul, Şule Yay., 2005, 100.

2 Hamidullah, M, *İslam Peygamberi (The Prophet of Islam)*, trans., Tuğ, S, İstanbul, İrfan Yayıncılık, 1990, v. II, 768; Baktir, M, *İslam’da İlk Eğitim Müessesesi: Ashab-ı Suffa (The First Educational Establishment in Islam: The Companions of Suffa)*, İstanbul, Timaş, 1990, 20.

3 Throughout the paper, I shall mostly shorten the phrases as the Suffa for reasons of i) convenience and also ii) prevent confusion that it was like a modern day school of our times.

4 Watt, W M, “Ahl al-Suffa”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, New Edition*, Leiden, E J Brill, 1960, v. I, 266.

architecture. Although some orientalists assume that both the *Suffa* and *Ahl al-Suffa*⁵ were probably ungrounded legends,⁶ some Muslim scholars fittingly consider the *Suffa* as the first archetypal Islamic university, even providing an accommodation facility.⁷ As will be much clearer in the following pages, it is probably a serious gaffe to suppose such a common, well-known, societal event as legend for it appears not only in historical sources but also in the Qur'anic commentaries (*tafsirs*) and the authentic *hadith* collections.⁸ For the time being, it suffices to remark that the *Suffa* was the first Islamic educational institution consisted of a mosque as its classroom, the *Suffa* as dormitory, the *Suffa* Companions as students and above all, the Prophet as the teacher and mentor.

The companions who used to live in the *Suffa* were called *Ahl al-Suffa* or the *Suffa* Companions. Although, in the original plan of the mosque, the *Suffa* section at the mosque was allocated in the southern direction, when the direction of praying (*qibla*) was changed from Jerusalem to Mecca, the mosque had to be rearranged in order to accommodate the new situation. With this new decree, the praying section and the *Suffa* had to be replaced asymmetrically, which meant that the *Ahl al-Suffa* had to be removed to the northern side of the mosque whereas the praying area had gone to the Southern direction towards Mecca.

After their migration, *hijra*, to Medina, the majority of the companions took up either trade or agriculture. Some others, however, made an otherworldly choice by deciding to devote their lives by remaining right next to the feet of the Prophet Muhammad. They were comprised of mostly single young men who did not have anywhere else to go to or relatives and acquaintances to safeguard them.⁹ With one exception about 'Abdullah b. Mas'ud who, according to Ibn Sa'd, was given special permission to live in the *Suffa* with his family,¹⁰ whoever has got married left the *Suffa*. Nevertheless, newcomers kept flowing since there are reports putting their numbers as high as 400¹¹ or even 700 at some points.¹² The *Suffa* Companions took shelter under the *Suffa* where, from time to time, they were also catered for either by the Prophet Muhammad himself or some wealthy companions,¹³ such as Sa'd b. Ubade.¹⁴ Often, the Prophet used to take some of the *Suffa* Companions as guests to His rooms and strongly recommended His companions to invite as many of them as possible to their houses at meal-times.¹⁵ Hence, the *Suffa* Companions were nicknamed as the *guests of Muslims*.¹⁶

One should not get the wrong idea that the *Suffa* Companions were a burden on the Muslim community as far as their day-to-day living is concerned. It has been reported that they themselves had also struggled to earn their living by collecting wood from the jungle and selling it

5 The common Turkish expression is *Ashab-ı Suffa*

6 Watt, "Ahl al-Suffa", 266.

7 Hamidullah, *İslam Peygamberi*, v. II, 768-769.

8 See e.g.: Baktir, *Ashab-ı Suffa*, 30-47 (footnotes n.: 41-74).

9 Another exception to the general character of the *Suffa* Companions was the son of the second caliph Umar, 'Abdullah, better known as Ibn 'Umar, who was so keen on learning the religion and wisdom from the Prophet that he chose to stay at the *Suffa* rather than the far away family home (Sahih Muslim, "Fadhail al-Sahaba," 140).

10 Yilmaz, H K, "Tasavvufi Açıdan Ashab-ı Suffa" (The *Suffa* Companions from the Mystical Aspect), *Tasavvuf İlmî ve Akademik Araştırma Dergisi*, v. 3, n. 7, 15 (Ibn Sa'd, *Tabakat*, v. III, 152).

11 Hamidullah, *İslam Peygamberi*, v. II, 769.

12 Yilmaz, "Tasavvufi Açıdan Ashab-ı Suffa", 13.

13 Baktir, *Ashab-ı Suffa*, 26 (Ibn Sa'd, *Tabakat*, v. I, 255).

14 Hamidullah, *İslam Peygamberi*, v. II, 769.

15 Bukhari, "Manakib," 25.

16 Tirmidhi, "Sifat al-Qiyama," 36.

off or by carrying water for other people.¹⁷ The Prophet was very careful about making sure that the *Suffa* Companions were fed and clothed properly for Allah ordered Him and Muslims in the Qur'an to do so in several verses. Here is one verse in the *Sura al-Baqara*, the second chapter of the Holy Qur'an:

(Alms are) for the poor who are straitened for the cause of Allah, who cannot travel in the land (for trade). The unthinking man accounteth them wealthy because of their restraint. Thou shalt know them by their mark: They do not beg of men with importunity. And whatsoever good thing ye spend, lo! Allah knoweth it.¹⁸

In this respect, the general rule followed by the Prophet was that if something was brought to Him, He used to ask whether it was charity or gift. If it was charity, He used to send it directly to the *Suffa* Companions; if it was gift, he used to accept it for Himself but spare a share for the *Suffa* Companions. Like all the previous prophets did, Muhammad, too, always refused charity but accepted gift.¹⁹ Even then, most of the time, the *Suffa* Companions had neither enough food nor proper clothing²⁰ to the extent that they had to survive without food for two days in succession. As a result, some of them used to fell down in the middle of congregational prayers due to weakness. The Bedouins who witnessed this thought they were mad but they were not mad; they were only hungry.²¹ The Prophet, however, had always a great concern for the *Suffa* Companions, sometimes even at the price of refusing his beloved daughter Fatima's wishes. Once she asked a maidservant to be employed at her house by complaining that her hands were bruised because of corn grinding. The Prophet rejected her wish outright with this statement:

O my daughter. I can give you nothing before I satisfy the needs of the people of the *Suffa*. However, let me teach you something that is better for you than having a servant. When you go to bed, say: 'Glory be to God (*Subhan Allah*), All praise be to God (*Alhamdu li'llah*), God is the Greatest (*Allah Akbar*),' 33 times each.²² This is better for your next life.²³

Although the *Suffa* Companions had a difficult life vis-à-vis the material world, their educational and spiritual development was extremely fruitful. Since they neither had a family to feed for nor any other worldly worries to look after, such as camel flocks or beautiful date gardens, their sole business was either to sit next to the knee of the Prophet to gather the treasures he was distributing day by day or keep themselves busy with praying or spiritual cleansing. Certainly, in Islam, learning and teaching are considered both duties and worship. Thus, contrary to the common misperception, the emphasis put on education and learning is far greater than even on *jihad*, the holy struggle. This verse in *Sura al-Tawba* is reported to have been revealed about the *Suffa* Companions:

And the believers should not all go out to fight. Of every troop of them, a party only should go forth, that they (who are left behind) may gain sound knowledge in religion, and that they may

17 Muslim, "Imara," 147.

18 Qur'an 2/273; for other verses related to the *Suffa* Companions, see also: 2/267-268, 6/52-54, 9/122 and 18/28.

19 Muslim, "Zakat," 175.

20 Bukhari, "Salat," 58.

21 Tirmidhi, "Zuhd," 39.

22 In Turkish Islamic practice, these three are usually repeated five times a day after each daily prayer regardless of performing either in congregation or alone.

23 Bukhari, "Fada'il al-Sahaba," 9.

warn their folk when they return to them, so that they may beware.²⁴

In addition to the Prophet, the *Suffa* had other teachers assigned especially for them by the Prophet Himself. ‘Abdullah b. Sai’d b. al-As and Ubade b. Samit were teaching them reading and writing while ‘Abdullah b. Mes’ud, Ubay b. Ka’b, Muaz b. Jabal, Salim b. Mua’z and Abu al-Darda were giving Qur’anic studies and religious knowledge. As they grew well informed in Islam, most of them were either assigned for special duties or sent as teachers and/or governors as the new religion reached to the surrounding regions. Bilal al-Habashi and ‘Abdullah b. Umm al-Maktum, for instance, were responsible for calling *al-azan*, the prayer time,²⁵ while Mua’z b. Jabal was sent to Yemen as teacher and governor.²⁶ Besides other well-known examples, Abu Hurayra can probably be considered the most famous graduate of this school as far as the *hadith* collection is concerned. When some people complained that, as a Yemeni, he was narrating too many *hadiths* some of which might not be sound, he retorted that while they were busy with their businesses or crops, he always remained with the Prophet to memorize the divine wisdom He was delivering.²⁷

Besides improving their intellectual capabilities, the *Suffa* students were educated spiritually and morally as well. They passed most of their nights in worship and prayer for their philosophy of life was to eat less and sleep less. Because of their total renouncing attitude towards the world, classical Islamic scholars like al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyya established close connections between them and the *Sufis*,²⁸ and sought to originate many of the *Sufi* principles in their lives, such as living in *tekkes* next to the mosques, asceticism, piety and seclusion. Especially Ibn Taymiyya, who severely opposes to most of the *sufi* practices, is highly appreciative of the *Suffa* Companions.²⁹ Nonetheless, one should not assume that the *Suffa* Companions had an ascetic, secluded life in their own corner, like some of the *Sufis* who are sometime criticised for leading a monastic life totally devoid of social contact. As we have already noted, the *Suffa* Companions were being educated for special missions such as teaching, administrative duties and official representation. Hence, when the circumstances required, they were sent away to accomplish these duties. Probably, this is the reason why the *Suffa* School ceased to exist after the passing away of the Prophet.

As to moral and behavioural education and training, the Prophet, as their prime mentor, used to warn them when they committed a wrong deed and encouraged them when He saw their good behaviours. I shall end this section with a significant anecdote related to teacher training aspect of the *Suffa* School. Ubade b. Samit, as indicated earlier, was a *Qur’an* and writing teacher at the *Suffa*. One of the students gave him an arch as a present but he was unsure about accepting or refusing it. The Messenger of God disapproved of it and warned: “If you would like a ring of fire to be hung on your neck, take it.”³⁰ I consider that this moral code has the utmost importance since, in terms of piety and asceticism; it forms one of the basics of the Gülen educational initiative.

In short, I believe that the *Suffa* Companions had some essential characteristics apparent in their day-to-day lives that can be labelled as the *Suffa* spirit. They are *asceticism, piety,*

24 Qur’an 9/122.

25 Muslim, “Siyam,” 38.

26 Abu Dawud, “Aqdhiya,” 1.

27 Bukhari, “I’tisam,” 22; cf.: Tirmidhi, “Manaqib,” 46.

28 Watt, “Ahl al-Suffa,” 266.

29 Yilmaz, “Tasavvufi Açidan Ashab-ı Suffa”, 17-27.

30 Abu Dawud, “Buyu’”, 36.

humility and dedication to good deeds (al-‘amal al-salih). Particularly the latter, *al-‘amal al-salih*, is a general term that covers a wide range of affairs such as *tamsil*, *tabligh*, *al-amr bil-ma’ruf wa al-nahy an al-munkar* (commanding good and preventing bad) and serving people in general. What is more, the *Suffa* School created an organisational climate, primarily for the companions staying there and for others in general, that supported to develop and activate these qualities not only in their close environs but also in other places where they went to.

Can Gülen himself and his theology graduate students be related to the members of the *Suffa* School in sharing the *Suffa* spirit in any way? Let us try to discuss this question in the following section.

The Need for Change

With the fall of the so-called “sick man of Europe”, the Ottoman State, at the beginning of the 20th century, the last super power came out of the Islamic civilization had also come to an end. This situation presented a grim picture and a possible destiny for Islamic world due to the fact that many people in the Islamic world used to see the Ottomans as their saviour and protector. When this guarantor had ceased to exist, the main picture of the Islamic world looked rather bleak in real disarray and deterioration. Islamic thinkers and scholars were all looking for a way out of this dismal state. In this regard, having studied three different scholars from three different continents, Namik Kemal of Turkey, Muhammad Abduh of Egypt, Sayyid Ahmad Khan of India, Fazlur Rahman drew our attention to the similarity in their conclusions despite the fact that they “hardly met each other.” They seem to have agreed on four important pronouncements for the Islamic world in order to stand up on its feet and become a leader in the world stage again:

(1) that the flowering of science and scientific spirit from the ninth to the thirteenth century among Muslims resulted from the fulfilment of the insistent Qur’anic requirement that man study the universe-the handiwork of God, which has been created for his benefit; (2) that in the later medieval centuries the spirit of inquiry had severely declined in the Muslim world and hence Muslim society had stagnated and deteriorated; (3) that the West had cultivated scientific studies that it had borrowed largely from Muslims and hence had prospered, even colonizing the Muslim countries themselves; and (4) that therefore Muslims, in learning science from afresh from the developed West, would be both recovering their past and refilling the neglected commandments of the Qur’an.³¹

It is a well-known fact that the Turkish response to the problems of the Islamic world was not limited to Namik Kemal’s. The line opened by N Kemal and others was furthered by Said Nursi and other like-minded scholars. Nursi was a scholar and activist strongly suggesting to preserve and revive the religious essentials like faith, fate and the objectives of Allah.³² It is usually assumed that the Nursi thought fathered several renewalist movements in Turkey and the Gülen Movement is one of them.³³ However, Gülen himself denies the assertion that

31 Rahman, F, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1982, 50-51.

32 Michel, T, “Four Frontrunners In Peace: People Who Have Devoted Their Lives To Peace”, Academic Resources on the Gülen Movement CD, www.GülenConference.org.uk, 2007, 66 (Michel, T, *Bedüzzaman’a Göre Müslümanlık-Hıristiyanlık Münasebetleri* (Said Nursi’s Views on Muslim-Christian Understanding) trans. Taşkın, C, İstanbul, Etkileşim Yay., 2006, 54).

33 See, Bilici, M, “Context, Identity and Representational Politics of Fethullah Gülen Movement in Turkey,” Academic Resources on the Gülen Movement CD, www.GülenConference.org.uk, 2007, 66

“he is a follower of Nursi in any sectarian sense”³⁴ and would like to put a distance between Nursi and himself, in a way, to establish the movement’s own identity. He wholeheartedly acknowledges the spiritual inspiration and indirect contributions of the Nursi intellectual heritage both to himself and the movement but stresses the fact that his primary goal has always been to become a good believer and to live as God commands Muslims to live rather than following this or that scholar.³⁵ To clarify the identity of the movement more evidently, some of Gülen’s articles have been put together as a book under the title *A Movement Originating Its Own Models*, highlighting the article that carries the same name.³⁶ Despite the boldness of the title, the original article follows a softy softy approach and does not directly deals with the identity problem of the movement. It rather focuses on praising how much of a momentous job the volunteer of the movement are accomplishing both at home and abroad. Certainly, in between the lines, the article also asserts that the movement is unique in many areas and this is one of them and a very important one. Addressing the issue more directly has been left to another author close to the movement, Enes Ergene. Having conducted a thorough study of the movement, Ergene concludes bravely that the movement has produced “all its tradition, visionary, organizational, expansive and missionary objectives, societal and moral values, educational and preparatory institutions on its own. In reaching this level, it was supported by neither political and ideological, nor socio-cultural and Islamic any legacy that existed before itself.”³⁷ Certainly, Ergene is not aiming at cutting bonds with the Islamic heritage. His main intention is to put a barrier between the Gülen Movement and the Nursi Group against the claims of an organic linkage existing between the two. According to Ergene, the movement receives its momentum and success solely from the charismatic personality, scientific and scholarly spirit, strong rhetoric and social activity of Gülen and also from the strong social and spiritual effect of the masses that support his cause. The role of Nursi in the movement is neither is organic and nor direct but remains within the spiritual and psychological sphere by means of the Nursi collection.³⁸

The Gülen Movement came to the forefront when it started to gain momentum during the 1980s and became more publicised and got even stronger during the 1990s throughout Turkey. The movement’s key philosophy or operating principles can be summed up as “remaining awake to your image of death and to your existential broods; doing good deeds (*hizmet*); and practicing humility, sacrifice, and self-criticism.”³⁹ The traces of the *Suffa* spirit are visible in these principles, such as *humility*, *asceticism* and *dedication to good deeds (al-‘amal al-salih)*. In fact, Gülen’s worldview is based on a harmonious mixture of activism (establishing charities in many spehres of life and economic enterprises) and pietism.⁴⁰ He declares that “our three greatest enemies are ignorance, poverty, and an internal schism.” Out of three, the most serious problem is ignorance and the solution lies in education, which has always been “the most important way of serving” one’s country in particular and humanity in general. It is also a good way of creating “dialogue with other civilizations,” which has become a must

34 Michel, T, “Fethullah Gülen as Educator,” in *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, ed., Yavuz, M H and J L Esposito, Syracuse, NY, Syracuse University Press, 2003, 81.

35 Michel, “Fethullah Gülen as Educator,” 81.

36 Gülen, M F, *Örneklere Kendinden Bir Hareket (A Movement Originating Its Own Models)*, Istanbul, Nil Yay., 2004, 110-115.

37 Ergene, E, *Geleneğin Modern Çağa Tanıklığı (Tradition Bears Witness to the Modern Age)*, Istanbul, Yeni Akademi Yay., 2005, 106-107.

38 Ergene, *Geleneğin Modern Çağa Tanıklığı*, 107.

39 Özdalga, “Following in the Footsteps of Fethullah Gülen,” 85.

40 Özdalga, “Following in the Footsteps of Fethullah Gülen,” 85

in the Gülen thought for more than a decade now. Gülen believes that the most crucial thing to remember in education is that it is “a humane service” through which we can learn and be perfected.⁴¹

Gülen’s understanding of education more or less covers the four points Rahman summed up above from the three different Muslim scholars. Gülen presupposes that education rests upon three basic premises. The first one is **(i)** to learn and lead “a commendable way of life” which is a “sublime duty” as “the manifestation of the Divine Name *Rabb* (Educator and Sustainer).” The second and the third rely on this as the results of the first since when one fulfils the first, one is **(ii)** “able to attain the rank of true humanity” and to **(iii)** “become a beneficial element” for one’s society,⁴² that is, dedication to good deeds. Hence, according to Gülen, as Michel accurately put it, education should “give a strong scientific grounding, together with character formation in non-material values, which includes cultural, ethical, religious and spiritual training.”⁴³ Gülen, too, is a firm believer in the importance of “the sciences and its centrality to a wholistic educational program which blends faith and science”⁴⁴ together. Gülen takes the Qur’anic decree of *contemplating* on “the creation of the heavens and Earth”⁴⁵

As an invitation to discover the Divine mysteries in the book of the universe and through every new discovery that deepens and unfolds the true believer, to live a life full of spiritual pleasure along a way of light extending from belief to knowledge of God and therefrom to love of God; and then to progress to the Hereafter and God’s pleasure and approval – this is the way to become a perfect, universal human being. Studying God’s creation is thus a natural consequence of an individual’s faith in and love for Him, leading to deeper knowledge of matters of the mind and the spirit and ultimately to ‘annihilation in and subsistence with God.’⁴⁶

It is obvious that Gülen concurs with the three scholars in their claim that studying nature is God’s commandment and a requirement of faith, though Gülen’s reading has a strong flavour of *Sufism*.⁴⁷ More significantly, as Yılmaz appropriately observes, another revolutionary transforming contribution of Gülen in the Muslim educational discourse is to take “it from its traditional form as practiced in the *madrasah* and *Qur’anic* literacy courses to the modern high school and university format.”⁴⁸ In other words, Gülen has chosen to take up the bold step of carrying out his educational initiative outside of the religious sphere, even if he were to be criticized at times by the pious Muslims for not putting enough effort in creating and preserving the religious educational institutions, such as Imam Hatip High Schools in Turkey. It can be suggested that this Gülenian transformation of education from traditional forms into “the modern high school and university format” can also be a model to other Islamic countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan, etc.

41 Gülen, M F, *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, New Jersey, The Light Inc., 2004, 198.

42 Gülen, *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, 205.

43 Michel, “Four Frontrunners In Peace: People Who Have Devoted Their Lives To Peace” 70 (in Turkish 62).

44 Afsaruddin, A, “The Philosophy of Islamic Education: Classical Views and M. Fethullah Gülen’s Perspectives” *Academic Resources on the Gülen Movement CD*, www.GülenConference.org.uk, 2007, 19.

45 Qur’an 3/190.

46 Afsaruddin, “The Philosophy of Islamic Education”, 19.

47 For a detailed analysis of Gülen’s educational philosophy, see: Aslandoğan, Y A and M Çetin, “The Educational Philosophy of Gülen in Thought and Practice” in *Muslim Citizens of the Globalized World*, 31-54, *Academic Resources on the Gülen Movement CD*, www.GülenConference.org.uk, 2007.

48 Yılmaz, I, “Muslim Laws, Politics and Society in Modern Nation States: Dynamic Legal Pluralisms in England, Turkey and Pakistan” 177 in *Academic Resources on the Gülen Movement CD*, www.GülenConference.org.uk, 2007.

Gülen's personal life resembles to that of the *Suffa* Companions in many aspects. The four guiding principles traced in the lives of the *Suffa* Companions and put forward previously can also be found in the daily life of Gülen. He leads a single, simple (poverty), humble and pious life dedicated to God in all aspects.⁴⁹ Considering the fact that he has not received a formal *Sufi* training, that is, does not belong to a *tarikat*, one can even claim that he might be closer to the line of the *Suffa* Companions than many *Sufis*.⁵⁰ In short, he does what he preaches.

The primary concern of the *Suffa* School was to teach religious sciences to young Muslims in order to make them good Muslims for their society. Similarly, Gülen also runs an informal school whenever his ill-health permits. For more than the two last decades, Gülen regularly teaches *kalam* (theology), *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis), *usul-u hadith* (science of hadith) and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) to theology graduate students.

In every 3-4 years, a group of volunteer and eager 15-20 theology faculty graduates from all over Turkey are selected with the help of informal examination by former students of Gülen. It is known that to be selected many theology faculty students start studying extra while they are still at the University level. After selection, these prospective students of Gülen are introduced to him and they start studying under his tutelage.

Every year Gülen teaches different *kalam*, *tafsir*, *hadith* and *fiqh* books. The students study next day's lesson wherever they reside either their homes, dormitories or in some cases, as guests where Gülen resides. Needless to say, they all share his ascetic lifestyle as well. Every day, after the morning prayer, they study together with Gülen. They read and discuss a variety of texts from classical to modern. Gülen also interprets these texts in tune with the *Zeitgeist* while they are studying. In some cases, inspired by these texts he shares his ideas with his students. Students ask him questions regularly too. After studying with Gülen for 3-4 years, these students both emulate their teacher, become truly ascetic similar to him and also become more knowledgeable having studied many major Islamic sciences texts. It is obvious that Gülen also refreshes his knowledge while teaching and also re-reads texts in the light of the current developments, his experiences and so on.

After their informal graduation, these students go on to become academics, writers, journalists, editors, imams and preachers. In almost every sphere of life, they continue teaching and more importantly presenting (*tamsil* instead of *tabligh*)⁵¹ Gülenian understanding of Islam.

Their teaching climate then encircles in successive waves colleagues, friends, families, cities, countries and civilizations. The important clue here is Gülen's understanding of *servanthood* and *service*. By establishing a link between the two concepts, he encourages his followers

49 For more on his life, see: Sarıtoprak, Z., "Fethullah Gülen: A Sufi in His Own Way," in *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, 156-169; Ünal, A., *Bir Portre Denemesi: M Fethullah Gülen (An Essay in Portrait: M Fethullah Gülen)*, İstanbul, Nil Yay., 2002; Erdoğan, L., *Fethullah Gülen Hocaefendi: "Küçük Dünyam" (Fethullah Gülen Hocaefendi: My Small World)*, İstanbul, AD Yay., 1995.

50 For Gülen's understanding of Sufism, see: Gülen, *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, chap. 4, esp. pp. 164-168; Sarıtoprak, Z., "Fethullah Gülen: A Sufi in His Own Way," in *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, 156-169; Michel, T., "Sufism and Modernity in the Thought of Fethullah Gülen," *The Muslim World*, v. 95, n. 3, July 2005, 341-358 and Gökçek, M., "Fethullah Gülen and Sufism: A Historical Perspective" in *Muslim Citizens of the Globalized World*, 165-175, Academic Resources on the Gülen Movement CD, www.GülenConference.org.uk, 2007.

51 See for instance: Özdalga, "Following in the Footsteps of Fethullah Gülen," 85-114; Agai, "The Gülen Movement's Islamic Ethic of Education," 48-68; Michel, "Fethullah Gülen as Educator," 69-84; Yılmaz, I., "İjtihad and Tajdid by Conduct: The Gülen Movement" in *Turkish Islam and the Secular State*, 208-237.

to serve God by serving, respectively, “families, relatives, and neighbors,” and then their “country and nation, with finally humanity and creation being the object” of focus.⁵² In other words, they struggle to revive the Suffa spirit.

The Suffa Climate

We need to focus on Gülen’s students to have a better understanding of their relationship with the Suffa Companions vis-à-vis the revival of the Suffa spirit. The first thing that should be pointed out in this regard is the perception of work (*hizmet*) as a holy duty,⁵³ which is similar to what we have noted above as *dedication to good deeds* in the case of the Suffa Companions. It should be noted that the Gülenian ethics of vocation consists of total dedication. Agai, by borrowing the Weberian language, terms this state as the “inner-worldly asceticism” and describes the person “who performs *hizmet*” is someone “who sees his or her occupation as given from God.”⁵⁴ Almost all of Gülen’s students are visible in the public sphere—especially the volunteers of the movement see them as beacons— and they are observed as having this sense of duty and set it as the guiding principle of their life. They create a Suffa climate around them.

Gülen utilizes the religious language well in shaping up the hearts and minds of his students, surely not to turn them into religious zealots but into social workers who strive for the betterment of humanity in general. He describes them as *dervishes*,⁵⁵ angels, philosophers, ascetics, holy mentors⁵⁶ and the altruistic Companions of the Islamic Golden Age (*Asr-ı Saadet*).⁵⁷

Considering the number of the volunteers and the widespread activities of the movement, it can be inferred that Gülen has conveyed his message quite successfully to his sympathisers and followers.

There are numerous accounts exemplifying how the mind setting of the volunteers operates but I will only cite a few instances to illustrate the point. A group of Turkish businessmen were visiting Azerbaijan during the time of which one of them asked casually to a young volunteer when he would be returning to Turkey. The volunteer replied promptly that they did not come to return to the homeland but came to die in that country.⁵⁸ It is worth remembering here that Gülen frequently remarks that the number of the Companions who took part in the Prophet’s Farewell Pilgrimage (*al-Hajj al-Wada’*) was about a hundred thousand but the books mention only about ten thousand because many of them had migrated to other countries to convey the message where they met their destiny. Such was Abu Ayoub al-Ansari’s case, who is believed to have come to Istanbul in an army to conquer it and buried there when he passed away as a result of his wounds. The neighbourhood where his tomb is located was named after him, Eyüp, in Turkish spelling, which is a famous site for visitors.

52 Gülen, *Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance*, 201.

53 Agai, “The Gülen Movement’s Islamic Ethic of Education,” 58-61.

54 Agai, “The Gülen Movement’s Islamic Ethic of Education,” 60-61.

55 Ünal, I, *Fethullah Gülen’le Amerika’da Bir Ay (A Month in America with Fethullah Gülen)*, Istanbul, Işık Yay., 2001, 14.

56 Tuncer, F, “Gülen’in Eğitim Anlayışı ve Zihni Oluşum Temelleri” (Gülen’s Educational Understanding and Bases of His Intellectual Formation) in *Bariş Köprüleri: Dünyaya Açılan Türk Okulları*, 262.

57 Gülen, M F, *Örnekleri Kendinden Bir Hareket*, 90, 114, 120; see also Özdalga, “Following in the Footsteps of Fethullah Gülen: Three Women Teachers Tell Their Stories,” 85-114, which will be dealt with shortly in detail in the following paragraphs.

58 Tekalan, “Sevgi ve Fedakarlık Abideleri: Türk Öğretmenleri”, 236-255.

A young female biology teacher, interviewed for a recent research, has solid resolutions about the importance of teaching and of the science in particular and its relation to good deeds. She comments that teaching is “the profession ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad himself; it means learning and conveying knowledge; the knowledge at hand is science oriented and thus has a sacred dimension; and it involves conveying sacred knowledge to others, which means doing good deeds.”⁵⁹ As regards to science, she believes that “for a Muslim, studying or learning science is equivalent to worship. The same is true of teaching science.”⁶⁰ She further elaborates what exactly science means by saying that “sciences such as physics, biology, chemistry, and mathematics—that is, the positive sciences. To teach these subjects is equivalent to worship. And that is also the reason we have to teach these courses very carefully: because science is essential.”⁶¹ Özdalga, who conducted the research, infers that such an approach to the teaching profession is “based on a combination of intellectual considerations (learning and teaching) and religious considerations (the ethics of giving),” which she takes to mean “the project of becoming an active believer.”⁶²

The project of becoming an active believer forms one of the founding principles of the Gülen-inspired initiatives in creating learning climates. It has several dimensions, such as pursuing non-formal education, performing *temsil* rather than *tebliğ* and bringing together colleagues, friends, families, businessmen, sponsors and the locals in building up a world of peace, love and tolerance through the individuals who achieved bridging the gap between their hearts and minds.

In order to attain character formation by “cultural, ethical, religious and spiritual training,” as Michel rightly observes, the movement engages in “non-formal education through television and radio channels, newspapers and magazines, cultural and professional foundations.”⁶³ Non-formal education, on the one hand, fortifies the Suffa climate while, on the other, eases up the *temsil* (representation) responsibility.

The most important duty of a volunteer –like Gülen’s students- in the Gülen movement in society is to become a good example of *temsil* rather than *tebliğ* (proselytism). Gülen compares the two concepts and robustly advises his followers to stick to *temsil* instead of *tebliğ*. He analyses the life of the Prophet and of the Companions and the Apostles in terms of *temsil* and *tebliğ*. He reads the life of the Prophet as comprising of 9 *temsil* out of 10.⁶⁴ He comments that the Apostles and the Companions who conveyed religion to foreign countries did not speak the language of those countries but spoke the universal language of *temsil*: demonstrating in person by living what they were preaching.⁶⁵ His frequently repeated motto is this: “There can be no room for language, explanation next to showing by living (*hal*)! Once *temsil* speaks, there can be no need for *tebliğ*!”⁶⁶ In Gülen’s understanding, “*tebliğ* creates a gap between the man who knows and the other who does not know a complex of superiority and inferiority between the preacher and those he is preaching to, and complicates the mission of Muslims.”⁶⁷ *Temsil*, on the other hand, is “the best way of preaching,” and a preacher

59 Özdalga, “Following in the Footsteps of Fethullah Gülen,” 102-103.

60 Özdalga, “Following in the Footsteps of Fethullah Gülen,” 102.

61 Özdalga, “Following in the Footsteps of Fethullah Gülen,” 102.

62 Özdalga, “Following in the Footsteps of Fethullah Gülen,” 103.

63 Michel, T, “Four Frontrunners in Peace,” 70.

64 Ünal, Fethullah Gülen’le Amerika’da Bir Ay, 217.

65 Ünal, Fethullah Gülen’le Amerika’da Bir Ay, 206-207.

66 Ünal, Fethullah Gülen’le Amerika’da Bir Ay, 113.

67 Balci, B, “Fethullah Gülen’s Missionary Schools in Central Asia and their Role in the Spreading of Turkism and

practicing it will “live an Islamic way of life at all times wherever he is, but will never utter the word ‘Islam’ or other ‘dangerous words’. As “*temsil* missionaries,” volunteers ought to “set a good example, embodying their ideals in their way of life rather than preaching about them.”⁶⁸ In Afsaruddin’s words, “exemplary, loving conduct towards others is the best witness one can provide for one’s moral integrity and fidelity to God.”⁶⁹ Therefore, *temsil* is a must for all the volunteers of the Gülen movement.

Nonetheless, working in secular environments does not always permit one to project one’s religious affiliations. The Gülenian response to such a problem is to be a faithful Muslim while even imparting secular knowledge⁷⁰ because knowledge itself becomes an Islamic value when it is imparted by individuals with Islamic values and who can present an example of employing knowledge in the right and beneficial way.⁷¹ Again, one cannot but stress how huge and important a role the volunteers have in creating the right environment and attitude that support the development of tolerance, love and morality.

As an indicator of the high moral standards I mentioned earlier about the *Suffa* teacher who was advised not to accept a gift from his student, I will refer to another anecdote from the movement. A young entrepreneur, settled in Turkmenistan to support the educational institutions operating there, was returning from a business meeting late at night. When he stopped at the red light, he heard a harsh knocking at his car and opened the window. A lady outside asked him to take her wherever he wanted to. He responded in a rather friendly way that he did not come there to seduce women, which surprised the woman a lot. She asked him who he was. He said he was a Turk who came from Turkey and advised her not to stay there at that time of night. He offered a lift to her house and gave her his card. Later, he introduced her to his wife and they become very close family friends.⁷²

Last but not the least, to illustrate the depth and the breadth of the change that the Gülen-inspired initiatives contribute to love, peace and tolerance, I shall finish with an observation by a Turkish columnist writing in a liberal Turkish newspaper, *Bugün* (Today) Daily. In an article entitled “The Whole World Met in One Scene”,⁷³ Mehmet Harputlu starts by lamenting on the process of Englishizing of the Turkish language. He states that it is very common to hear the Turkish youth using English phrases like “What’s up, O.K., Of course, Bye, etc.” in their daily conversations. Harputlu observes that the emotional patriotic nationalistic reaction to this inculturation process is to take up the Turkish flag and run to the demonstration arenas. Whereas the Gülenian response, he maintains, is to bring together different youths from 102 countries and organise a multilingual, multicultural event. The author quotes the ex-speaker of the Turkish Great National Assembly, Bülent Arınç, in his saying that “those writing books and preparing scenarios after scenarios on the fight and clash of civilizations must come and see this love.” Harputlu adds that despite their differences in religion, language, colour, the young people who hugged each other in one act demonstrated to the whole world what peace and love are all about. He concludes by remarking that what can be more proud than hearing a Vietnamese student saying “Greetings to my second homeland.”

Islam”, *Religion, State & Society*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2003, 162-163.

68 Balci, B, “Fethullah Gülen’s Missionary Schools,” 163.

69 Afsaruddin, “The Philosophy of Islamic Education”, 20.

70 Afsaruddin, “The Philosophy of Islamic Education”, 20.

71 Agai, “The Gülen Movement’s Islamic Ethic of Education,” 62.

72 Tekalan, “Sevgi ve Fedakarlık Abideleri: Türk Öğretmenleri”, 256.

73 Harputlu, M, “Bütün Dünya Tek Bir Sahnede Buluştu” (The Whole World Met in One Scene), *Bugün Gazetesi*, 6th June 2007, 14.

An outsider, like me, might think that the Gülen Movement is mostly comprised of young, eager, Turkish volunteers with limited capabilities that will probably cool down and eventually die away after the earthly life of Gülen himself. Because of the fact that I am not a trained sociologist to answer properly such a question, I will only repose on it in passing. It is rather difficult to count the movement as an only Turkic-supported activity, since there can be and seem to be several ways of extending it beyond the Turkish frontiers. The first and common one is marriage conducted by volunteers, businessmen and the like in the host countries.⁷⁴ The second reason is the support available from the local administration and public in general. The third one is the local graduates themselves who can come back as volunteers either as teachers or governors or businessmen, who can in turn also inspire the public around them. And finally and most significantly, the emphasis put on high moral standards and interfaith and intercultural dialogue by the movement forces it to expand beyond the limits of the Turkish population.⁷⁵ These and other possible connections mean that the Movement will most likely keep on broadening its developments both vertically and horizontally by building up institutions that serve to love, tolerance, humanity and friendship.

Conclusion

Many of the thinkers in Islamic world have been and still are of the same opinion that the way-out for the Islamic world from its misery can only be possible through a smooth transition from the Middle-Ages mentality to the modern times we live in. This, however, is an easier to be said than done job. Therefore, I believe that Gülen's successes are very significant at this juncture for he revived the old *Suffa* Tradition and Spirit to provide solutions to the problems of the Muslim world in particular and of humanity in general. By utilising the characteristics of the *Suffa* Companions, he created a movement of volunteers devoting their lives to turn the people around them into respectful good citizens and to transform the society in which they live into a more humane society. Instead of preaching about good and bad (*tebliğ*), these volunteers set good examples (*temsil*) for their fellow travellers, colleagues, friends, companions, families and even acquaintances. Thus, it can be claimed that Gülen's innovative renewal model can be a good example applicable, at least, in the other Muslim countries due to the fact they share the same heritage and the same problems, too.

It can also be inferred that, like the *Suffa* Tradition, the Gülen Movement is also an asceticism-based voluntary organization. The possible effects of both are that they do extend in a wave-like manner and show a snowball type development. In other words, they started out with a small number of men from a certain nationality in a rather small part of the world but gradually multiplied not only quantitatively with the inclusion of other nationalities but also spatially by spreading to other geographical locations. Although the *Suffa* Companions and the volunteers in the Gülen Movement share certain qualities like *humility*, *asceticism*, *piety* and *dedication to good deeds*, they differ slightly in their aims. While the companions were almost purely religious missionaries, the volunteers are rather workers striving for a humanitarian cause that aims to serve for the benefit of humanity in total.

It seems to me that the volunteers who work passionately and tirelessly day and night with a consciousness of worship constitute one of the most, if not the most, important triangle of the successes of the Gülenian initiatives. They may or may not be, but I think many are, aware of their resemblance to the *Suffa* Companions in their *dedication*, *sacrifice* and *piety* in

74 Tekalan, "Sevgi ve Fedakarlık Abideleri: Türk Öğretmenleri", 245, 252.

75 Yilmaz, "İjtihad and Tajdid by Conduct," 236.

performing their duties. I hope this paper has provided enough evidence of this similarity. In this sense, the volunteers of the Gülen movement are the modern day *Suffa* Companions serving to spread peace, love and toleration in this very divided world. If the accomplishments of the Gülen movement regarding to the transition of the Muslim world are to be continued in the places where they are and/or spread to other unknown neglected parts of the world, one should always bear in mind this model of dedicated volunteers who actively engage in this world without losing their primary target of serving God by serving humanity as a whole. Hence, the better the volunteers are, the closer the Muslim world will be to recover from the current dismal situation and be integrated with the modern world with its positive contributions to the betterment of humanity.