

# Spiritual Role Models in Fethullah Gülen's Educational Philosophy

Salih Yucel

**ABSTRACT:** Contemporary Turkish Islamic scholar, Fethullah Gülen, states that the world is in need of Islam and Islam is in need of representation or "tamsil". He believes that people's ears are full but their eyes are hungry for role models in all areas of life, including educational institutions. In his philosophy, representation comes before communication or "tabligh". When referring to "tamsil", Fethullah Gülen uses the term "Hasani ruh" or the spirit of Hasan, grandson of Prophet Muhammad SAW (peace be upon him). Hasan (radiallahu anh) symbolizes a loved leader who sacrifices for the peace, security, and good of people while striving to prevent conflict and bloodshed in the Muslim world. In Fethullah Gülen's works, "Hasani ruh" refers to being altruistic, trustworthy, peaceful, and devoted to the service of humanity. I will examine the concept of "Hasani ruh" and explore the altruism of teachers as seen in the time they devote and financial support they give to the educational institutions established by Fethullah Gülen's followers in the state of Victoria in Australia.

**KEY WORDS:** Fethullah Gülen's works, representation, "Hasani ruh", altruism of teachers, and Gülen-inspired school in Victoria.

## INTRODUCTION

In Fethullah Gülen's works, *Hasani ruh* is used literally and metaphorically. Hasan (radiallahu anh) is from *Ahl al-Bayt*, Family of Prophet Muhammad SAW (*Salallahu 'Alaihi Wassalam* or Peace be Upon Him). Literally, Fethullah Gülen refers to Hasan (r.a.) when exemplifying spirituality because Hasan is the embodiment of values needed today. One of the values is choosing "we" over "I". This is clearly seen in his choice of declining the highest political and spiritual position in Islam as caliph in order to prevent bloodshed (Yaqubi, 2:226 and Zahabi, 2:260 as cited by Adnan Demircan, 1995:94-106).

The Muslim community was politically divided into two groups, and if either leader had insisted upon leadership, it would have caused further

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conflict. Although he had the majority of the community on his side, Hasan (r.a.) did not want to endanger people's lives and risk the community's stability by accepting the popular support.<sup>1</sup> Choosing the greater communal benefit over all kinds of individual benefits is a very important rule in Fethullah Gülen's philosophy.

### **ON THE *HASANI RUH* OR THE SPIRIT OF HASAN**

Fethullah Gülen reads the life of the Prophet as comprising of 9 *tamsil* (representation) out of 10 (Ünal, 2001:217) and believes that the finest representatives of Islam were the Prophet, his companions and then his descendants (Gülen, 2007a:22-23) throughout the history. Metaphorically, those who have completely represented Islam carry *Hasani ruh* and even if they are not from the Prophet's lineage, they are considered to be part of his spiritual lineage (Gülen, 2007a:22-23). They carry the same characteristics of *Ahl al-Bayt*: they turn their backs on the world, serve their people, refrain from causing harm, and live to help all humans and other beings, and live as trustworthy, altruistic, and devoted believers (Gülen, 2007a:23) for whom spiritual progress is measured in terms of or determined by others' happiness in this world and the Hereafter (Gülen, 2004:235).

Seven major, and distinguishing characteristics, are associated with *Hasani ruh* carriers. Each characteristic reflects an aspect of *tamsil*. If a believer neglects a characteristic in both spirituality and action, then the truth that he or she represents will lose its value (Gülen, 2007b:151). Even if a believer speaks eloquently or uses the most beautiful words to express the truth, it will decay or be ineffective in time (Gülen, 2007c:156).

The first characteristic of those with *Hasani ruh* is that they seek to win people over, not politically, but spiritually. Displaying another trait common to the majority of *Ahl al-Bayt*, they refrain from politics and focus on enlightening minds and widening hearts. During the periods of instability in the Muslim world, they become indispensable, serving the Muslim community. Said Nursi refers to the Prophet's cousin Ali (r.a.), father of Hasan, as the "King of Sainthood". He was a blessed person, worthy of the highest position, not merely of political rule. He became a spiritual ruler whose status surpassed that of the political Caliphate a Universal Master whose spiritual rule will continue even until the end of the world (Nursi,

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<sup>1</sup>Hasan (r.a.) said, "I hate to be caliph by if it means people will be killed. I gave up the caliphhood so that the blood of the community of Muhammad (i.e. Muslims) does not spill". Even though Hasan took part in the Battle of Siffin, he did not engage in direct combat. For further information, see Abu Nuaym al-Isfahani, *Hilyetul Evliay va Tabakatu'l Asfiya*, 2, p.37; and Ibn Manzur VII, p.35 as cited in Adnan Demircan (1995:94-106).

1996b:75). This title can be extended to Ali's sons, Hasan and Hussein as well.

The second characteristic that *Hasani ruh* evokes is the desire to establish relationships based on trust and common ground. Those who represent Islam well can get along with everyone, including the Pharaohs of society, by accepting that even the most difficult person has a positive trait. This characteristic is needed because a Muslim should be beneficial to all people<sup>2</sup> with the exception of those who are unjustly aggressive in attacking others.

Fethullah Gülen sees a need to redefine the concept of "us" and "others" in the framework of serving others. "Us" refers to those who serve, while "others" refer to those who need to be served which includes all people, not just Muslims or those who have a physical need. Through this new definition, Fethullah Gülen shows the importance of a positive perception between Muslims and non-Muslims (Carroll, 2007:38). Fethullah Gülen often refers to one of his spiritual Masters' sayings that further support the need to serve others. For example, Muhammad Lutfi Efendi said, *"Everybody else is good but I am bad; everybody else is wheat but I am chaff, the inhabitants of the heavens will kiss him or her on the head"*. To that, Fethullah Gülen adds:

Seeing oneself as devoid of all virtues essentially originating in oneself, treating others humbly and respectfully, seeing oneself as the worst of humanity (unless being honored by a special Divine treatment), [...]. Do not boast of yourself in a way to see yourself as greater than others. As creatures are equal in being distant from being worshipped, so also are they equal in that they are all created (Gülen, 2011; and <http://en.fgulen.com/sufism-1/880-tawadu-humility.html>, 20/1/2011).

According to this line of thought, Fethullah Gülen views believers, especially those who teach, as having an obligation to serve humanity without expecting rewards, material or otherwise, because the world is an *"abode of service, not the place of pleasure, reward, and requital"* (cited by Nursi, 1996a:23). Spiritual representatives need to lead a life of "pietistic activism". This should be based on a "rejection of the world" but not "flight from this world" as is part of escapist mysticism (Özdalga, 2003:83-104). Fethullah Gülen takes this further when stating that the leaders of spiritual representatives should not even own a home and should lead a very simple life (Gülen, 2007d:163). A time will come when profit and self-interest will cause division among the community of believers. At that point, the

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<sup>2</sup>*"The best people are those most beneficial to [other] people"*, according to Prophet Muhammad SAW (*Salallahu Alaihi Wassalam* or Peace be Upon Him).

altruistic *Hasani ruh* carriers will decline worldly benefits, thus preventing conflict among believers (Gülen, 2007e:228), just as Hasan did.

The third characteristic of *Hasani ruh* is being trustworthy. Prophet Muhammad defines the believer as one who other believers do not fear will harm them.<sup>3</sup> Based on that principle, Fethullah Gülen concludes, “*Our greatest capital is our credibility (i.e. reputation). This must never be lost (i.e. misused)*” (personal communication with Fethullah Gülen, January 2006). In order to protect one’s reputation, a person must be trustworthy, must believe in the value of being trustworthy, and accept trustworthiness as a pillar for *tamsil* (Gülen, 2007f:318). In order to advance one’s credibility in the eyes of the entire community (Gülen, 2007g:318), a person must serve to benefit others. Fethullah Gülen holds that the ideal people burn like candles despite themselves, and they illuminate others (Gülen, 2007h:108).

The fourth characteristic calls upon spiritual representatives to focus on a person’s inner dimension, not only on appearance. Believers’ piety can be seen in their dealings with others (Gülen, 2007h:133) and in their concern with the well being of others rather than their own (Gülen, 2007h:122). A common fallacy in the Muslim world is to believe that change is manifested through appearance only, and that modernity means wearing a suit and tie, while piety means having a beard or wearing a turban (Gülen, 2007d:64; and Gülen, 2007h:241). Some Muslims take these appearances as a condition of piety. Having a beard is following in the tradition of Prophet Muhammad SAW, which is why some Muslims criticize Fethullah Gülen and his male followers for not having beards.

The fifth characteristic is being altruistic in all matters, whether it is physical, spiritual, financial or otherwise. Hasan (r.a.) twice gave his entire wealth to help the poor, and three times he gave half his wealth for the same purpose (Demircan, 1995), alongside giving up his right to be Caliph. To embody *tamsil*, a believer must be one who gives, not one who receives. Believers are those who give their time, money, knowledge, and sacrifice their pride, position, and daily needs (Gülen, 2007i:85-87). In addition to that, embodying *tamsil* is not about individual effort alone. It requires the development of problem-solving projects for the benefit of the community and even the natural world (Gülen, 2007j:153). The teachers understand that they have responsibilities not only to themselves, but also to the communities of which they are a part. This is one of the principles

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<sup>3</sup>The Prophet Muhammad SAW (*Salallahu ‘Alaihi Wassalam* or Peace be Upon Him) said, “*Who is the most excellent among the Muslims?*”. He said, “*One from whose tongue and hands the other Muslims are secure*”. It is based on *Hadith* by Bukhari and Muslim.

of the role-model teacher in Fethullah Gülen's educational philosophy. This philosophy emphasizes "*solidarity for service projects and collectively organized altruism*" (Cetin, 2009).

Fethullah Gülen's ideal level of altruism is exemplified by the mature person "*who can utter 'after you' even while exiting Hell and entering Paradise*" (Gülen, 2005:95). For Fethullah Gülen, there is no limit to helping others. For this to be possible, a believer must have sincere intentions, give without desiring a reward, and should serve all humanity, not only those of his or her own race or nation (Gülen, 2007h:118).

The altruism of the teachers evokes altruistic responses from the school community. This leads to a sense of belonging and responsibility to the school, and that will make the school more successful. Economist Albertini supports this idea when he says, "*The school will not have influence unless it is supported by the whole social milieu*" (cited by Ramadan, 2001:162). This sets up a cycle in which school community support increases the investment into the school, which leads to an increase in problem-solving projects. The profits from the funds invested are not shared, but invested back into educational institutions. For this reason, the altruistic teachers and even staff who are continuously serving are always in demand and rarely in a position to lose their position.

The sixth characteristic is having a gentle persuasion and refraining from inciting conflict. This characteristic is drawn from Said Nursi's works. Said Nursi states, "*For conquering the civilized is through persuasion, not through force as though they were savages who understand nothing*" (Nursi, 1996c:79). For successful *tamsil*, a believer is obliged to have a gentle manner, compassionate nature, soft heart, and consideration and kind words for others (Gülen, 2007g:40).

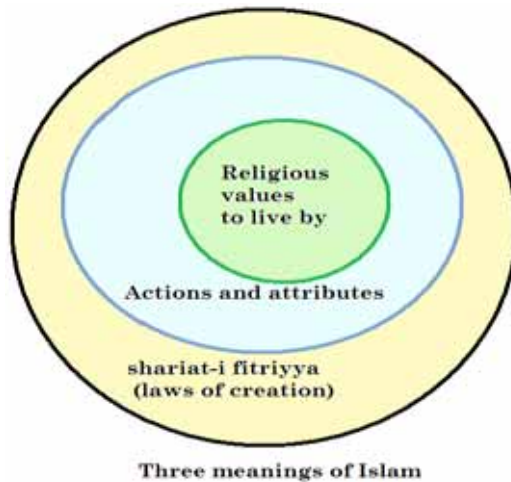
Finally, the seventh characteristic for a believer is to weave friendships with everyone on common ground, and work to increase the commonalities in a way that does not call for a compromise of religion or values (Gülen, 2007d:76). Instead of stirring meaningless controversy and engaging in acts or talks related to enmity, a believer must live according to his or her values, love his or her profession, and busy him- or herself (Gülen, 2007h:200) with building friendships and continuing service projects that promote amity. Moreover, a believer should not think that his or her way is the only way, but, according to Said Nursi, can say that "*My way is right and the best*" (Nursi, 1996b:22). Believers should also encourage or assist others who work for the good of humanity (Gülen, 2007b:68).

To better understand how to build common ground and not see one way as the only way, it is necessary to look at Fethullah Gülen's definition

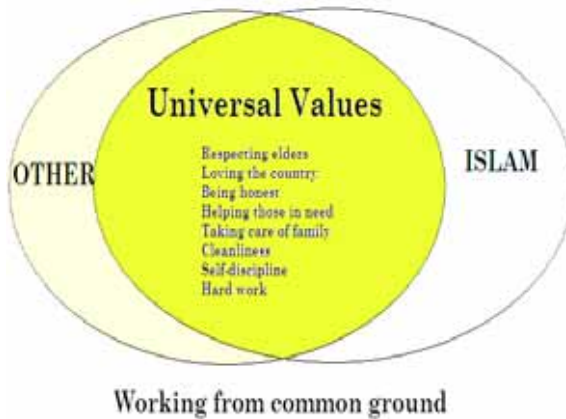
of Islam. He does not draw a single line between Muslim and non-Muslim, but views the word Islam as having three meanings, one within the other like three circles.

The core meaning defines Islam as the religion that stipulates how people should conduct their lives. The second meaning is that Islam refers to the actions and attributes of individuals independent of their religious persuasion. Fethullah Gülen gives the example of a non-Muslim who may possess the believer's attribute of honesty and a believer or Muslim with the non-believer's attribute of dishonesty. The third meaning that encompasses the meaning of Islam is the "laws of creation" (*shariat-i fitriyye*) according to which the universe conducts itself. These laws are similar to the rules of religion because both are ordained by God, but dissimilar because humans have free will to follow the religious laws, whereas the universe does not (Celik, Kirk & Alan, 2011).

Therefore, in drawing this distinction, Fethullah Gülen states being a *Mu'min* (one with faith) does not necessarily mean that one is a *Muslim* (one who follows Islam) and vice versa. In other words, a person may have faith and belief in God and as a result be a *Mu'min*, but may not conduct his or her life according to the rules of Islam and thereby fail to be a *Muslim*. The opposite is also possible according to Fethullah Gülen. A person may be a *Muslim* by attribute in the second concentric meaning of the word Islam but not have any belief in God. The following diagram illustrates the three concentric meanings of Islam with its relation to *Iman* (Celik, Kirk & Alan, 2011).



This universal approach accepts that every individual, group, community, race, or nation has positive attributes. Recognising this allows for the building of common ground and working together on projects regardless of the type of community. Moreover, it makes the establishment of educational institutions throughout the world possible. If this approach had not been a principle of Fethullah Gulen's educational philosophy, Fethullah Gülen-inspired schools could not have been established, even in the Muslim countries due to religious, political, economic, and social conditions. The following diagram illustrates common grounds with "others".



### **APPLICATION OF *HASANI RUH* BY TEACHERS IN VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA**

I will explore how *Hasani ruh* has been applied by 21 teachers, 15 male, and 6 female in a Fethullah Gülen-inspired school. To examine all seven characteristics of *Hasani ruh* in these teachers was not feasible given the time and length limits of this study, so I have examined the teachers' altruism by looking at their sacrifice of money and time.

Based on the figures I received, I determined that these teachers receive 30% less than the average Victorian teacher.<sup>4</sup> This is their own personal choice. From their salaries, these teachers donate from 2-14% for educational and community needs. The least given was \$1,100 and the most given was \$7,800. In 2010, these 21 teachers pledged \$75,950. There are also additional expenses on the teachers' part that aren't reimbursed, such as fuel and small gifts.

<sup>4</sup>A first year teacher receives a gross salary of \$52,000 in Victoria, Australia in 2009.

In terms of time, these 21 teachers worked a total of 373 unpaid overtime hours per week, including evenings and weekends. On average, each teacher spends 17.76 hours per week volunteering for the school and school community, with the least being 8 hours, and the most being 40 hours. These hours were spent in a variety of activities: tutoring, reading programs, parent visits, recreational activities, trips, and camps with students, teachers, parents, or community members, and even assisting with grounds keeping, construction, and renovations. Additional time and effort are allocated to in VCE<sup>5</sup> students as they prepare for university exams, and this is a key factor in the success achieved by graduating students.

During their two-week holidays between terms, these teachers volunteered a total of 1,174 hours, varying individually from two days to six days. On average, this is 55.9 hours per teacher during the two weeks. Normally, teachers are paid more for overtime work. If teachers were paid for their voluntary work, this would cost the school \$18,600 for evening and weekend work, and \$58,700 for two-week school holidays.

In times of great need, particularly natural disasters, teachers devote time to serving the community. Examples include the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami in 2005, Hurricane Katrina in the same year, earthquakes in Pakistan in 2005 and 2010, and the Black Saturday Victorian Bush Fires in 2009. There is also a yearly *Qurban* campaign<sup>6</sup> in which the Victorian Fethullah Gülen-inspired schools and school communities collected \$400,000 in 2010.

The numerous sacrifices made by these teachers do not relate only to time, money, and effort, but are wide-ranging as the following examples illustrate. A teacher who earned a Ph.D. fulfills the request to be a principal in a newly established school, and lives in a portable building attached to the school, receiving only a small grant to cover his basic needs because the school is financially strapped. Another teacher accepted half of the normal salary (which is already below the average state teacher's salary) for an entire year. There are weeks where several of these teachers worked 70-80 hours, half of which is voluntary work. Others have left their spouses and children behind for a period of time (due to visa problems) because immediate commencement at the school was essential. A teacher, who was demoted, did not complain about the loss of position.

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<sup>5</sup>VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) is the credential awarded to high school students who have completed Year 11 and 12 in Victoria, Australia.

<sup>6</sup>*Qurban* is a religious obligation. A financially able, Muslim must sacrifice or give enough money for the sacrifice of a sheep or cow. In Australia, the cost for an animal is \$100. The Australian Muslim community generally donates and sends to poor countries overseas.

Such sacrifices are possible because these teachers are trained in what is called “Culture of the Heart”, nurturing a compassionate heart, keeping the heart aware of the pain of others, and helping others without expectations. Teachers, in turn, work to develop that culture in their students so as to build a chain of people who want to help others because they too were helped. This help encompasses everything from having a mentor at all times to turn to for advice or with whom to engage in recreational activities, to receiving financial aid or academic help.

Another sacrifice made by these 21 teachers also involves more than time and money. These teachers are ready to teach in any other state or country in the world if there is a need. For example, one teacher relocated from Turkey to Turkmenistan, then Sydney, and then Melbourne. The majority of these teachers moved every three to four years to a different school, state, or country. This relocation produces many benefits. Spiritually, accepting appointments to other schools prevents a teacher from becoming attached to the world (i.e. buying a house), allowing him or her to focus solely on the duty of educating. Secondly, staying too long in one place can lead to a psychological fatigue or worn out, whereas moving refreshes the spirit. Thirdly, a teacher gains experience in different areas and makes use of this in the next school.

These efforts are clearly not wasted. Isik College Eastmeadows campus was established in 1997 with only 28 students, and currently has seven campuses with over 2,000 students. In 2004, the Victorian Government’s “On Track Survey Data” of 436 VCE-registered schools ranked Işık College as the school with the second highest number of graduates a remarkable 94% in Victoria going on to enroll in a university.<sup>7</sup> In 2005, the same campus was listed as the top school in the Northern suburbs, and was ranked second in Victoria with the entire class of 2005 going on to attend university. In 2006, news of the school’s first place ranking (university enrolments) appeared in Australian newspapers *The Age* and *The Herald*.

Eastmeadows girls campus was ranked first (100% university enrollment), while the Upfield boys campus ranked third (95% enrollment). In 2007, the entire graduating class of the girls’ campus went on to attend university and was ranked number one while the Upfield boys campus reported 98% university enrollment.<sup>8</sup> In 2008, Upfield boys campus ranked second, Dandenong campus third, and Eastmeadows girls campus fourth in

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<sup>7</sup>For detail information of success of Isik College, look at: <http://www.isikcollege.vic.edu.au/> [accessed in Victoria, Australia: 20 January 2011].

<sup>8</sup>Rankings appeared in newspapers of *The Age* and *The Herald* and on June 16, 2008.

the state of Victoria. The success of the academic and mentoring programs could be another research topic.

These teachers are motivated to serve the community through the work that they do. Said Nursi states, “*Almighty God placed the reward for work within it. He included the wage for work within the work itself*” (Nursi, 1996a:170). Teachers feel as though they are repaying a debt: they were once taken care of and mentored during their high school and university years, so they feel that they should continue the cycle of giving as a way of showing appreciation for what was given. Even though they are extremely busy with the school and community, they report that they feel satisfied, have good morale, experience happiness, and a sense of pleasing God.

## **CONCLUSION**

Fethullah Gülen preaches altruism as a component of piety. Without it, spiritual progress is delayed. The strong influence of Fethullah Gülen’s philosophy may be attributed to his active practice of these values. When he began working as an *imam* and teacher, he would donate half his salary to charity. He would account for the water he used at the mosque to perform his ablutions and pay for it, even though this service is available to worshippers at the mosque. When he was a principal of a Qur’anic studies boarding institution, he would either not have his meals there or he would pay for them, although he had the right to eat for free. He has donated 90% of the profit from his 60 books for scholarship (Yucel, 2010). The remainder is used to pay his rent. As a principle, Fethullah Gülen does not use anything belonging to the state, foundations (*waqif*), or public institutions without paying the cost. He lives an ascetic life, sleeping only a few hours every night, and devoting the rest of the night to prayer, worship, study, and writing his books, despite his three illnesses which are diabetes, heart problems, and high blood pressure. Fethullah Gülen refers to Said Nursi’s saying as a reflection of his life, “*In my 80 year life, I have not tasted anything of worldly pleasures*” (Nursi, 1993:629).

In Fethullah Gülen’s educational philosophy, the teachers are a collective personality in spiritual terms (*sahsi manavi*). They are connected to each other as partners in the service of the community, and are connected to the community through these spiritual threads. These connections need a gentle persuasion and a patient character, and the success of the relationships depends on the degree of altruism practised. In Fethullah Gülen’s holistic vision, *tamsil* comes before *tabligh* and education through *tamsil* and role-modelling comes before everything. Fethullah Gülen established a unique system of education that combines spirituality

and modernity, serving the outer and inner needs of humanity. Just as Al-Ghazzali injected spirituality into the dry body of Islamic theology (Macdonald, 1899:71-132) and reviewed religious science, Fethullah Gülen has injected spirituality, modernity and hope, altruism and asceticism into the dry body of faith based activism in the last half century and is a leading revivalist in our time.

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