

The boundaries of pragmatism in Muslim education: Comparing the Islamic pedagogies of Sayyid Qutb and Fethullah Gülen

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Abstract

Sayyid Qutb and Fethullah Gülen are two of the most important Muslim leaders and intellectuals of the twentieth century: the two are similar not only for their focus on the relationship between Islam and politics, but also for their lifelong commitments to education. For both Qutb and Gülen, schools were a means through which society itself could be made more just and, ultimately, more Islamic, and for both, their philosophy of education and broader political projects were at once pragmatic and implicitly (for Gülen) and explicitly for Qutb contrasted with American pragmatism. Their differing pedagogies are illustrative of their larger visions: for Qutb, Muslim education must be a “total world” in which Islam is protected from secular contagion, while for Gülen, Muslim education can move more slowly through largely secular means. For Gülen, Islam can work outside of and within a secular system; for Qutb, the system must be changed.

Keywords

Islam, education, politics, Sayyid Qutb, Fethullah Gülen

Introduction

What is the relationship between Islam, the state, and education? In this article, I compare the pedagogies of Sayyid Qutb and Fethullah Gülen, two of the most important Muslim

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intellectuals and leaders of the twentieth century, finding that the “moderate” Gülen and “extremist” Qutb have more in common than others might believe. Indeed, the primary difference between the two has less to do with their understanding of Islam than with their relationship with the secular and its role. That distinction becomes especially important when comparing the two men’s pedagogies, a task not yet completed, which is intriguing considering how deeply concerned both were about schooling. Qutb was a teacher and education administrator, and his famous time in the United States was spent studying education; similarly, while the Gülen movement is famous for many things, one of its centerpieces is schooling, an institution that Gülen has discussed extensively in his interviews and written work.

For both Qutb and Gülen, education had to be a separatist enterprise, creating counter-publics (Warner 2002) of moral piety and upright character. Yet for Gülen, these counter-publics did not need to be explicitly Muslim, provided they had Muslim leadership and Muslim “morals.” In contrast, for Qutb, schooling had to be much more explicitly Islamic: morality is not enough. Gülen was comfortable with Muslim practices that, he believed, would necessarily lead to Muslim beliefs. For Qutb, it is belief which comes before action, making a more dichotomous understanding of Islam and the world inevitable. More importantly, the role of state power takes on a different shape for these authors because of differing understandings of how a Muslim utopia could be brought about: both ultimately sought a *social* rather than a *political* revolution, though for Qutb, the political machinery of the state was a necessary means through which to enact those social changes. In contrast, Gülen’s writings show much more optimism about the possibility of a spiritual revolution enacting real social change, with or without the state. For both men, there is an explicit contrast with Western and secular education, terms which, for them, can become more or less interchangeable.

In discussions of their approaches to politics, both Gülen (Agai 2007; Yavuz 2013) and Qutb have been described as “pragmatic” (March 2010, 195). This distinction becomes interesting and important when one considered the thinkers’ potential relationship with philosophical pragmatism, itself important for schooling in both Egypt and Turkey. While it does not appear as though Gülen has explicitly engaged with pragmatism, it is nonetheless useful to show how the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey—especially his writing on education—can illustrate both the difference between Gülen and Qutb and their relative pragmatism.

This comparison is important for a variety of reasons. First, as the “madrasa problem” (Moosa 2015) becomes a greater concern for Western governments, and as “pluralizing authority in the Muslim world” makes it harder to adjudicate Islamic arguments (Mandaville 2007) it is useful to examine how two significant Muslim intellectuals have understood the problem of modern schooling. Second, even if Qutb was more contemporaneous with Gülen’s teacher, Said Nursi,¹ the comparison between Qutb and Gülen is an instructive one, especially because of Gülen’s contemporary relevance and Qutb’s status as the definitive Islamist intellectual. There has been a recent surge of interest in the intersection of Islam, the state, and the school, much of it concerned about how Muslim minorities are to be treated in state schools (Bowen 2007) or the relationship between Muslim schools and national interests (Moosa 2015). Yet there has been less work on how Muslim intellectuals themselves have articulated what schools should be, and how education should relate to religion and the state.

It is also important to note that there is insufficient space in this article to go into depth about the Gülen schools themselves nor recent political machinations of the Gülenist movement in Turkey, both of which have been extensively studied elsewhere. Neither is there sufficient space here for how the Muslim Brotherhood has been influenced by Qutb's work. This article is exclusively a comparison of the intellectual projects of these two thinkers, rather than an analysis of how those projects were or were not brought to fruition in either politics or contemporary schools.

This article will proceed in four sections. First, I will briefly describe the education writings of John Dewey, using his writings as a reference point for the "pragmatism" of Gülen and Qutb and broader debates about Muslim and Middle Eastern education regarding both pragmatism as a specific philosophical school and pragmatism as a more general political and pedagogical approach. I will then use this framing to review the separate political projects of Gülen and Qutb, followed by a comparison of their differing approaches to pedagogy. I will end with a conclusion that briefly touches on these separate intellectual projects' relationship to broader social and cultural milieus.

Pragmatism and "pragmatism" for Qutb, Gülen, and Middle-Eastern education

To be pragmatic does not necessarily mean that someone is attached to the philosophical school that bears its name. More commonly, to be a pragmatist means simply to be *practical*, to be more focused on the goal-at-hand rather than beholden to particular ways of doing things as ends in themselves. In his account of the early American pragmatists Louis Menand describes how its key early thinkers were influenced by the trauma of the American Civil War and the revolution of Darwin's theory of evolution to reconsider how ideas themselves are meant to work in the world. "They believed that ideas . . . are provisional responses to particular and unreproducible circumstances [so that] their survival depends not on their immutability but on their adaptability," Menand writes. "The belief that ideas should never become ideologies . . . was the essence of what they taught" (Menand 2001, xi–xii).

This commitment to ideas as provisional but not ideological does not *necessarily* create a tension with religion, but it does create a tension with a certain kind of religion, as John Dewey recognized throughout his career. Dewey was one of the central American pragmatists, and the most important for translating the insights of philosophical pragmatisms into an ongoing analysis of what happens in schools. In his writings on religion, Dewey insisted his problem was not with "faith" or even the *religious* per se, but rather with "the identification of the religious with the supernatural" ([1934] 1962, 2). By separating the *religious* as a "quality of experience" from the "unseen powers" of historical *religions*, Dewey suggests what he considers a way forward from what some might call the traditional world religions, including "the arbitrary will of Moslemism" ([1934] 1962, 4).

Dewey's suspicion of religion—and religion-like conservatism—extends into his frequent writing on schools. His writing on literature in schools is instructive: to read good books from the past is only helpful inasmuch as it helps students solve problems in the present. Great books are not ends in themselves; instead "their value lies in their use to increase the meaning of the things with which we have actively to do at the present time" (Dewey 2007, 63). **[AQ1]** Such pragmatism would seem to have no space for sacred texts as orienting centers for a religious life. Dewey makes this very argument in an essay titled

“Religion and Our Schools,” asking whether secular schools have an effect on “historic religions.” For him, these religions’ disappearances is not a problem to be lamented; instead, those committed to religion within schools must seek to rid their religious institutions of their “dogmatic and feudal stamp,” a characteristic Dewey (1940, 86) finds in any religion.

Yet the interaction of religion and education in Dewey’s work gets somewhat more complicated. In a text titled “My Pedagogic Creed,” he writes that “education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform” and is “the only sure method of social reconstruction.” Schools are *the* central sites of social reform for Dewey (1940, 3–17), and, as such, “the teacher always is the true prophet of God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of God,” with God here understood as something like Progress rather than any deity worshipped in this or that religion. And here one can see the optimism for which Dewey was often criticized, both in his reading of evolution and his understanding of history more broadly. Dewey sometimes seemed to assume that unmediated growth would always lead towards better and more democratic ends, sometimes using the metaphor of evolution in ways that biologists might consider too teleological. For Dewey, evolution seems to provide natural evidence that things get better if allowed to grow, yet an evolutionary biologist would usually respond that “better” is a matter of perspective and that there is no guarantee a certain adaptation of a certain species, useful at one moment in history, might not utterly doom that species later on. There is therefore a criticism of Dewey that his “democratic faith” hinged upon institutions he did not sufficiently recognize were contingent (Ryan 1997; though see Rogers 2008).

It should come as no surprise that that Dewey’s philosophy of education was resisted by those schools where “historic religions” remain important as ends in themselves rather than as tools to better serve our interactions with the present (Woods 2004). Yet Dewey’s connection with theories of modernization were linked in with American neo-colonial efforts at modernization in Iraq (Pursley 2015), meaning that Deweyan progressive (and *pragmatic*) education would become linked in particular ways with American hegemony and Western imperialism.

Much has been made of John Dewey’s 1924 visit to Turkey not long after the country’s “Islamic education system was replaced with a national system of free, universal, secular schools” (Büyükdüvenci 1994, 395). Many acknowledge that Dewey has a significant effect on Turkish education (Büyükdüvenci 1994), especially in the training of village teachers (Uygun 2008) and a social studies curriculum rooted in a secularist project (Keskin 2014; Tarman 2011), even if others consider Dewey’s warning about bureaucratic “red tape” still unheard (Turan 2000, 548). Dewey is less central to the story of education in Egypt, but he is nonetheless an important voice for education reformers (Starrett 1998, 96) and was an influence on some of the intellectual currents in which Sayyid Qutb played a part in the late 1940s (Sabaseviciute 2018, 89).

Indeed, Qutb was quite aware of Dewey, whose writings he most likely encountered as a scholar and administrator of schools in Egypt, and whom he almost certainly would have studied when he went to the United States to study education. Qutb used pragmatism as indicative of what is wrong with American education and with it, America more broadly:

the spread of this theory or this way of thinking is what has created the American educational methods and teaching curricula and systems . . . indeed, they have given American life this characteristic: they have directed it toward practical production and turned it away from an artistic or theoretical education to a large degree (Qutb 1996, 332).

This quote is from *Social Justice in Islam*, where Qutb most powerfully attacks pragmatism. As William Shepard indicates in his study of all five editions of the text, Qutb consistently distinguished “the Islamic method” from pragmatism, which, he argues, would reject “the idea of God . . . when it does not fulfill a visible function in material life. At that point it may be discarded because it does not operate an appliance or drive a machine!” Indeed, Qutb goes on, the materialism implicit within pragmatism would lead to a world in which “humanity has lost all its noble characteristics and men are at the same level as machines” (1996, 334). As such, pragmatism must be utterly rejected, and with it, the “the present-day Western way of thinking based upon a pragmatic ethics” which is not capable of being “patched” in with “our authentic thinking” (1996, 295). Qutb knows philosophical pragmatism, and while his rejections of it for being utterly materialist are perhaps unfair, his rejections of it for being *pragmatic* are not.

In contrast, I could find no reference in English to whether Gülen engaged John Dewey or pragmatism more broadly, even if Gülen’s broader approach is often referred to as pragmatic. Yet such “pragmatism” only goes so far: while it is true, as we will see below, that Gülen was more flexible than Qutb, it is also the case that, like Dewey, he held to a certain teleology maintained by forces he might not be willing to acknowledge.

What is education towards?

In this section, I will briefly outline some of the broader political goals of these two thinkers so as to provide a better context for their thoughts on education. It seems fair to argue that Qutb and Gülen would both eventually like a world entirely compatible with the shari’a (even if they might disagree about what such a world would look like). The big difference, then, is not where they’re trying to get, but how they’re trying to get there.

Their early biographies might provide something of an answer: Qutb grew up as indigent Egyptians sought to change their nation by using the state’s power to form a certain kind of citizen. While Qutb obviously disagrees with the secular direction such formation took, he never entirely disagreed with the methodology: for Qutb, the state is in the business of forming people, even if those people, once formed, will eventually be sufficiently self-policing and pious such that a robust state will no longer be necessary.

In contrast, Gülen was chastened by his experiences with the Turkish state and encouraged by his experiences of the United States to be more open to using democracy and civil society to make Turkey a more robustly Muslim nation. That is not to argue that Gülen’s experience of the United States suddenly changed him: it is instead to argue that the United States confirmed what was already brewing within Gülen’s philosophy: instead of the state making citizens into Muslims, Gülen would prefer that citizens make a Muslim society (Yavuz 2013, 50; see also Findley 2010). This focus on pluralism has led to criticisms from Islamists “that Gülen in his fervent ecumenism has made an alliance with the Vatican to sell out Turkey and Islam” (Yavuz 2013, 176). Yet, his pluralism actually manifests a dramatic optimism about the capacity of Islam to convince without coercion. It is also worth noting that the September 11 attacks occurred shortly after Gülen moved to the United States, and so his new focus on pluralism and defense of Islam as a religion of peace can also be understood as a response to an attack on American soil from within America (Sevindi 2008, 51–77). Both Qutb and Gülen ultimately envision a Muslim society in which there is very little space for radically different conceptions of the good life: the difference is that Gülen wants to get there through spiritual renewal, and Qutb wants to get there

through the state. Yet what is striking is how both ultimately understand their philosophies as *pragmatic*, even if they might have disagreed with each other about just how practical the other person actually was.

Qutb

Qutb insisted on total commitment to an Islamic worldview, which would brook no surrender to a secular separation of church and state or a European imposition of non-Muslim society. As such, his “insistence on divine sovereignty constitutes a rejection of and rebuttal to modern theories of sovereignty and the rationalist epistemology that justifies them” (Euben 1997, 34). Sovereignty is only from God, and illegitimate sovereigns need not be recognized. Political action is a necessary component of religious belief, and without political implementation in this world now, religion is meaningless (Haddad 1983). Like Al-Banna, Qutb was influenced by totalitarian ideologies; he developed a vision of Islam, which was “holistic,” all-embracing,” and rooted in national solidarity and state power (Soage 2009, 295–296). As a result, “Islam cannot fulfill its role except by taking concrete form in a society, rather, in a nation” ([1964] 1990, 9). While sometimes called an Islamofascist, Qutb was himself not convinced by fascism or Nazism, nor was he entirely the totalitarian his critics have made him out to be (Toth 2013, 3–6). As Euben (1999, 90) observes, Qutb was suspicious of rationalism and democracy; he supported a strong nation-state with robust solidarity and a clear sense of its enemies. These are commitments that make him similar to fascist intellectuals, not in a way that should dismiss his thought as fascist-and-therefore-easily-rejected but in a sense that shows him dealing with many of the same political problems faced by other early twentieth-century intellectuals.

That statism is not entire, however, and Qutb (1996, 114) is careful to distinguish it from personality cults and, for that matter, fascism. In all five versions of *Social Justice in Islam*, he makes clear that a ruler becomes a ruler “only by the absolute free choice of the Muslims,” even if the mechanism of that free choice is complicated given Qutb’s (1996, 294) ongoing denial that an “Islamic democracy” is possible. Yet it is important to recognize that Qutb recognizes each person as God’s vice-regent on Earth, even if the caliph “is God’s deputy or the head vice-regent only to the extent that he carries out divine law” (Toth 2013, 193). This leader has the ability to make any new rules necessary, but always with the understanding that the sovereignty is neither his nor “the people’s” but always God’s (Qutb 1996, 119). As such, Qutb’s vision of the Muslim state is less a kind of fascist statism than an eventual goal that rightly-guided individuals will make the coercive power of the state less and less necessary, except as an occasionally necessary tool to fix problem as they arise. Indeed, this is precisely why education is so central:

The restoration of Islamic life will not be accomplished merely by setting in place rulings, laws and systems based on the Islamic idea, for this is only one of the two pillars on which Islam always relies in ordering life. The second pillar is the creation of a mentality imbued with the Islamic idea so that the incentives for this life will issue forth from within the soul and encounter the environment provided by the rulings, systems, and laws . . . we must form the Islamic idea in the souls of individuals and groups alongside Islamic legislation that orders life. Education is the natural means for that idea. (Qutb 1996, 328)

What stands in the way are *jahili* societies, a word that used to refer to pre-Islamic Arabia but which Qutb used to refer to anyone in the modern era who, like these early polytheists, is similarly “ignorant of God.” In contrast to *jahiliyyah* is *hakimiyyah*, or ultimate sovereignty (Khatab 2002), which it is the duty of Muslims to serve (and to bring about).

Qutb refuses a dichotomy of material/spiritual, or even a differentiation of various aims between individuals or societies: all ought to be aimed towards God. While he insists on the importance of the individual conscience, he rejects the liberal conception of the human being as a fully autonomous agent. Qutb acknowledges that there is no compulsion in religion, yet in a society entirely dominated by Islam on every level “any concept of religious freedom is gutted of meaning” limiting actual religion freedom “to the realm of private conscience only” (Euben 1999, 82).

As Andrew March (2010, 197) argues, Qutb’s political vision is ultimately a deeply *practical* one in that his “writings are replete with proclamations that the Islamic moral code not only places demands on human behavior, but also restricts those demands to what humans can bear without great stress, given certain constants about their nature.” As such, while Qutb is clearly not a *pragmatist*, it is not necessarily false to claim that his philosophy is practical: indeed, as March and others argue, Qutb insists throughout his scholarship that Islam is the *via media* between materialism and spiritualism as well as between individualism and collectivism. None of these ideologies, Qutb claims, can quite hit the sweet spot of human anthropology in the way that only Islam can. Of course, despite his hatred of pragmatism, it is somewhat ironic that Dewey sought to demolish these same dichotomies with his own philosophy.

Gülen

As various scholars have acknowledged, Gülen’s discussions of politics can be quite vague (Hendrick 2013), and so it is not always easy to interpret Gülen’s optimism about the role of freedom and civil society in propagating Islam. And despite such optimism, Gülen’s theory of civil society might still create some problems for non-Muslims. As Yavuz (2013, 53–54) argues, “The difficulty with Gülen and his teachings is that he offers a comprehensive worldview based on Islam and expects everyone in society to think and act within that framework . . . The main problem of his thinking is that he does not recognize the possibility of a God-free morality or political system.” Especially because Gülen is uncomfortable with too much state coercion, the emphasis on spiritual rejuvenation becomes all the more central.

Like Qutb, Gülen argues that we have to get back to a Muslim society, which was once great but has declined (2009). Gülen suggests that the best way to fix this problem is primarily through individual piety, and he is quite defensive about being accused of having statist ambitions. He has cited Nursi in insisting that 95 percent—maybe even 97 percent—of Islam is the province of the individual rather than the state. However, that still leaves some remaining work for the state (Gülen and Gundem 2006b). As usual, Gülen is vague about what the state actually has to do. He makes clear that “the religion has certain commandments with a definite methodology” yet what these are is unclear. The privatism Gülen inherited from Nursi is therefore two-sided. On the one hand, he believes that Muslims will only make effective political actors when they have completed private work on their own individual selves; on the other, he is optimistic that democracy and civil society

will eventually work for Muslims, calling for “a democracy that has its references from Islam” (Gülen and Gündem 2006b).²

In this way, Gülen explicitly distinguishes himself from Qutb and other later followers of al-Banna in the Muslim Brotherhood, writing about them that “when the religion is made servant to politics, the religious feelings of people are manipulated; the religion has been approached disrespectfully and the movements have brought about no result” (Gülen 2006b). Even if Gülen is suspicious of religion and politics, his focus on Islam as the complete answer to everything can sound, at times, like the total world Qutb describes, warning that “those who do not act according to [Islam], and those who may partially neglect their duties, always clash with the gyrating spheres and grinding wheels of the universe, in addition to suffering from their own purposelessness and lack of supervision” (Gülen 2006d).

Gülen supports democracy yet it must be a *Muslim* democracy, as this is the only way for everyone in the society to find their true purpose. Such an Islamic democracy, he holds, would be inherently superior because it would introduce a spiritual sensibility to what is often far too materialistic of a political system (Gülen and Şimşek 2005, 452; see also 2006a). Indeed, part of the reason that Gülen (2006h) believes such democracy is possible is because “accepting all people as they are, regardless of who they are, does not mean putting believers and unbelievers on the same side of the scales.” Where this leaves unbelievers and non-Muslims theists is never entirely clear. Gülen’s insistence on “a virtuous society” that receives “God’s approval” makes it appear that everyone must be at least broadly sympathetic to Muslim ends.

He claims it is “social education”—how this is different from classroom education is not clear—that “encourages people to pursue lofty ideals and to strive for perfection, not just to run after their own desires” (2006a), and it seems that if everyone is properly educated, tensions about the nature of the good life will simply fade away. This focus on spiritual change depends upon Muslim saints. Gülen (2006e) argues that “a new nationwide resurrection is dependent on a few dozen heroes who will be the life in our bodies and the blood in our veins” (see also 2011, 2006g). Education is what holds the symbiotic relationship of state and religion together:

People need the protection and services of the State for suitable circumstances so that they can live their religion confidently and feel themselves at peace. The State, on the other hand, needs the invincible power of the religion to help individuals attain perfection, to put families and society in order, to guide the conscience and open the gates to the heart, thereby preventing many evils. (Gülen and Gündem 2006a)

The state needs religion, and religion needs education. However, as with Qutb, there is a practicality here, a sense that Islam is approachable and up-to-the-task, able to solve problems as they come. Also like Qutb, this is distinguished from a *philosophical pragmatism* that is suspicious of “historic religions,” though Gülen’s writing nonetheless shares a sense with Dewey’s that certain institutions will ensure a good outcome if they are simply allowed to happen.

Qutb’s pedagogy: Teaching against Jahliyah

Like Gülen, Qutb wanted teachers to transform students from the inside, producing within them “an inward (*wijdani*) idea of life” (Qutb, cited in Calvert 2010, 167); however, unlike

Gülen, Qutb did not believe that this inward view was sufficient. Qutb was much more suspicious of Western techniques of education and sought a much more robustly *Islamic* means of educating, even if he himself was the product of secular and semi-secular education techniques. This tension within his biography—wanting to reject the West yet also being grateful for the techniques and processes that the West had developed—is quite clear in his writings on education, which carefully distinguish between the science and technology which should be available to anyone and the specifically Islamic *purposes* towards which that technology should be used. As a result, as Qutb makes clear in the last edition of *Social Justice in Islam*, he does not mind a Muslim going to a non-Muslim or an impious Muslim to learn “pure chemistry, physics, astronomy, medicine, industry, agriculture, and administrative and clerical work, in conditions where a pious Muslim cannot be found to teach these things” (Qutb 1996, 304). Because these sciences are not related to the fundamental truths of the individual or the world, there is no danger that a Muslim will lose faith.

There are important implications here for schooling: like Gülen, Qutb is not opposed to learning Western developments and even, if necessary, learning them from a non-Muslim. The key is to learn them within an environment that does not encourage sinfulness or heresy.

Qutb repeatedly insists that Islam must be kept pure, and that it can brook no synthesis with anything else. This commitment has important implications for education, as Qutb describes in his last edition of *Social Justice in Islam*. This final edition marked more than the previous ones by a deeper level of despair about the capacity for Islam to survive outside of a truly Muslim society:

But Islam does not permit the Muslim to learn the fundamentals of his creed or the components of his conception, or his commentary on the Qur’an or the Hadith or the life of the Prophet, or his historical method, or the interpretation of his activity, or his social doctrine, or his system of government or his political method, or the inspirations of his artistic and literary expression from non-Islamic sources or from any sources other than a Muslim whose religion and piety are beyond suspicion. (Qutb 1996, 304–305)

With the exception of certain sciences and technology, Qutb ([1964] 1990, 111) insists that culture is not “the human heritage” but is instead either wrong or right: “there are two kinds of culture; the Islamic culture, which is based on the Islamic concept, and the *jahili* culture, which manifests itself in various modes of living which are nevertheless all based on one thing, and that is giving human thought the status of a god so that its truth or falsity is not to be judged according to God’s guidance.”

What must be avoided is the *jahiliyyah*, which Qutb ([1964] 1990, 138–139) saw most completely expressed in the United States—where the free mixing of sexes, capitalist monopoly and usury, and “individual freedom, devoid of human sympathy” turned humans into animals. Yet all is not lost: “the capacity exists in human nature to change completely from one way of life to another . . . and if the complete change were to be from one system of life to another which is higher, more perfect and purer than the former, this complete change is agreeable to human psychology” (Qutb, [1964] 1990, 136). So while the *jahiliyyah* has done great harm to society, the very nature of humanity makes correcting this harm easier than it might at first appear. The key is then to be sure that the educational experience is as pure as possible.

Qutb ([1964] 1990, 116) warns that Western science and ways of thinking have a long history of “enmity towards Islam.” If Muslims know as much and still “rely on western ways of thought, even in teaching the Islamic sciences, it will be an unforgiveable blindness.” He warns that even the seemingly neutral sciences must be taught warily, because, in the West, even these neutral technologies are used to support philosophical objections to God.

This is particularly the case for educational techniques. Qutb warns that Western educational techniques are influenced unduly by pragmatism, which, as described, he interprets as being overly-materialist and anti-theoretical. He warns that such a “philosophy of life” often comes uninvited with the use of “educational methods and teaching systems and curricula” (2006, 332). Qutb (2006, 332) wants to develop “independent Islamic thinking” and to do so he must “proceed with very great caution in borrowing the philosophy and the educational methods, teaching systems and curricula, literature, history and legislation that follows from it.” He warns that avoiding the West is harder than it looks: even Al-Azhar teaches Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushud, two Greek-influenced thinkers with “no connection whatsoever with the overall concept and philosophy of Islam” (2006, 332). Qutb argues that secondary students should not read any Western philosophy and college students should only do so after having been sufficiently prepared through studying “pure Islamic thought.” Similarly, teachers must be very careful about the history and literature they teach their students: Qutb (1996, 334–335) is not arguing for a total avoidance of Western literature and history, though he does insist that “we must guard against the study of Western philosophy before we create a strong, clear and profound pattern of thought in the minds of our children and youth which is based on the overall Islamic idea.” Similarly, he warns that importing pedagogy and philosophy of education leads “directly or indirectly, to the goals set by that philosophy” (335).

The point of Islam—and the point of education—is to change people. Yet such a change is not easy given the politics of the Islamic world. Steadfastness in belief is what is most important (Qutb, [1964] 1990, 145), and it is this difference—along with the role of the state—that might be the most important in distinguishing Qutb’s pedagogy from Gülen’s: for Gülen, the presence of Islam is enough to act on non-believers and move them towards the good; for Qutb, all must believe. Yet it is striking that, despite his careful avoidance of philosophical pragmatism, Qutb is actually somewhat *pragmatic* about all of this: sometimes Western techniques might be necessary, and sometimes people might need to use them. He worries about the importation of techniques, but he ultimately acknowledges they can be separated and made to work. His argument is ambiguous—possibly even contradictory—yet is generally pragmatic.

Gülen’s pedagogy: Teaching between fundamentalism and materialism

Gülen saw creating models of Islamic virtue as more important than content knowledge, which he believed could be developed elsewhere. The most important thing was to guard against materialism and Kemalist positivism. For Gülen (2006c), what is perhaps even more important than the school itself is the moral example provided by teachers: the school “offers an elixir that can prevent or heal the ills of life. Those who have the knowledge and wisdom to prepare and administer this elixir are the teachers . . . a school is a kind of place of worship; the ‘holy leaders’ are the teachers.” If schools are like places of worship, then the true function is not the leaders of the religion but what the religion is for: while Gülen rarely comes out and says education is about bringing people to God, he does make

clear, repeatedly, that it is about bringing people to morality and truth, of which, he otherwise insists, Islam is the only real and long-lasting source. The alternative is terrible:

Education is different from teaching. Most people can teach, but only a very few can educate. Communities composed of individuals devoid of sublime ideals, good manners, and human values are like rude individuals who have no loyalty in friendship or consistency in enmity. Those who trust such people are always disappointed, and those who depend upon them are sooner or later left without support. The best way of equipping oneself with such values is a sound religious education. (Gülen 2006c)

Gülen is careful to insist that such religion education must coexist with students' technological and scientific competence. Yet science education must not just be about science; it must be about the soul. Gülen criticizes humanist education for *only* being concerned with technical competence, a critique similar to Qutb's reading of American education as essentially soulless, pragmatic in the worst sense.

In contrast, Gülen (2007) uses the Prophet Muhammad as an example of the perfect educator, arguing that "the main duty and purpose of human life is to seek understanding. The effort of doing so, known as education, is a perfecting process through which we earn, in the spiritual, intellectual, and physical dimensions of our beings, the rank appointed for us as the perfect pattern of creation." All the problems in society, he therefore claims, can be blamed not only on turning from Islam, but turning away from the specific processes of Islamic education that the Prophet established. Gülen continually insists that the most important figure in this process is the teacher, who affects the future through their forming of children and the current world through the power of (educated) children to affect their families and those around them (2013a). In an ethnographic study of Gülen schools, Aslan (2009, 383) found that teachers saw their "teaching as worship."

However, in many of the Gülen schools, teachers are not allowed to mention Islam, which means that the religious instruction must be one of composure and morals rather than explicit instruction. He therefore insists that teachers provide "guidance to students with the language of their posture and with the depth of their representation of values by personal example" (2013a). Similarly, Aslan's (2009, 393–394) work in the Gülen community in Turkey found that "the community's perspective on activism... is not based on inviting others directly to practice Islam, but rather is based on inviting others to the community's social activities... through *temsil*, i.e. the representation/performance of Islam through their everyday practices, Islamic morality is demonstrated." This focus on bodily comportment is a necessary means of achieving true humanity, which is "directly proportional to the purity of our emotions" (Gülen 2006c).

Such education of the spirit does not actually need to be explicitly Muslim: in fact, it is just this optimism about the relationship between knowledge and Islam that both differentiates Gülen from Qutb and explains his movement's relative success in a secular state. As Agai (2002, 41) puts it, "depending on the perspective of the observer, this phenomenon can be called the universalization of Islamic principles or the Islamization of secular institutions." In either case, it is an insistence that Islam and the secular world (what Qutb would call *jahiliyyah*) can coexist.

Because, for Gülen (2006c), the "struggle for discipline determines our humanity," he is able to argue that a school without explicit reference to Islam is still able to produce authentic education. This confidence in the power of Islam is in direct contrast with Qutb, and

again indicates a radical difference between how they envisioned the relationship between Islam and the state: for Qutb, Islam must be explicit and enforced; for Gülen, Islam will work on its own, even if it is not mentioned, provided there are powerful Muslims of good character. Gülen's insistence on *hizmet* (service to humans, the country, and the world) serves a double-function: it is both a powerful legitimation of his movement through an appeal to a common Turkish value and a pedagogical technique in which teaching good character and working in a spirit of service are sufficient to make the world more Muslim, even without necessarily mentioning Islam (Bilici 2006).

Yet such a belief does not negate the need for powerful friends. This move into politics is what separates Gülen from Nursi and also makes him more similar to Qutb. Despite all of his praise for teachers, Gülen acknowledges that other professions are necessary, including businesspeople (Hendrick 2013). Gülen reconciles his relationship with prominent business people in Turkey and the asceticism he himself practices and encourages in others by insisting that a community that will achieve a better world needs many different kinds of people and resources (2013c; see also 2006b). Yet Gülen is not arguing—as was Qutb—for an Islamist state. He is instead arguing that powerful people within a state work to make the state that already exists more Islamic.

There is, again, a pragmatism here about the capacity for well-intended Muslim “saints” to inspire non-Muslims by their example. One could easily ask how simply behaving well as Muslims is all that different from behaving well as atheists or as Protestants, but this discounts the way Gülen frames the nature of reality itself: atheists and Protestants are not like Muslims in that, in the end, they do not have full access to the truth. Gülen would not argue that these non-Muslims' worldviews are completely flawed, though they are incomplete. His insistence that Muslims can bring others to the truth without once mentioning Islam is a testament to his faith in spiritual renewal and in the class of “saints” that will instigate it. Yet it could also be read, similar to Dewey's potential naivete about evolution and the progress of history, as a misplaced hope that Islam simply works, a hope perhaps cynically, perhaps naively, rooted in Gülen's own connection to wealthy and powerful actors in Turkish politics and the Turkish economy (Yavuz 2016). There is therefore a potential class angle here that makes Gülen's theory of Islam, even if ostensibly more “liberal,” simultaneously less democratic than Qutb's. Of course, Qutb would never acknowledge his theory as democratic-as-such, but his politics situates all people as fundamentally equal before God, beholden to God through the person of a leader. In contrast, Gülen's politics hinges on powerful actors and influencers in the state and the society: saints perhaps, but saints with more power than most. Yet what is most striking here is the degree to which, in both cases, there is a practical awareness of the need for Islam to accommodate itself to the reality of human experience, as well as an awareness of the role of education in preparing people for the requirement of Islam and the good society it can unfurl. Where they differ is in what such practicality might entail.

Conclusion

Much has been written about how to make sure young Muslims are educated in the ways of Islam and the wider world. And while two key Muslim thinkers—Sayyid Qutb and Fethullah Gülen—have often been analyzed for how they relate Islam to politics, less has been written about them in comparison, especially comparing their reflections on education.

Both wanted to make a Muslim society, but they came at this through opposite directions. For Qutb, a Muslim society must be enacted through the state, which would legally mandate social changes that would thereby cause spiritual reform, eventually making a state unnecessary. For Gülen, a spiritual transformation could change society, which would work with the state to keep those social changes in effect. Their discussion of education reflected these differences, with Gülen confident that Islam could work without even being mentioned and Qutb insistent that Muslims must be in fully Islamic communities as protection from secular contagion.

In different ways, both men rejected the secular pragmatism of John Dewey (Gülen implicitly and Qutb explicitly). Yet in some ways they shared a more general practicality, albeit in different ways, and reflected at different levels of optimism. Future research could further engage these overlaps and intersections. Other scholars could further examine the relationship between pedagogy and politics, not so much in how teaching itself is political, which is well documented, but rather how pedagogical philosophies come out of concrete political situations. Menand argues that American pragmatism's contribution to pedagogy came out of the trauma of the American civil war, and it is not unreasonable to argue that Qutb and Gülen's own very different kinds of pragmatic approaches to education emerged from different experiences of how Egypt and Turkey reacted to secular colonial powers. Dewey insists that new actions come from learning from failed habits, and both Qutb and Gülen saw many such failed habits in their world. It is no surprise then that, like Dewey, they sought to correct those habits in a broadly institutional way: by focusing on schools.

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Notes

1. Perhaps the most important distinction between the two men was Gülen's intellectual and spiritual debt to Said Nursi (1878–1960), both for the importance of the man's thinking and spirituality and for the rule the Nur movement played in setting the ground for the Gülen movement to follow. Gülen became a prominent Nurcu (follower of Said Nursi) early on, and while the two men differ in how they view the political role of Islam, they share a focus on piety and an optimism that science and logic could never contradict true Islam. Unlike Nursi, who was chastened by early political misadventures to advocate something like pious quietism, Gülen was much more insistent that Muslims ought to act in the public sphere to advance their interests.
2. Nearly all quotes from Gülen in this article come from websites that lack page numbers.

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