

University of Alberta

Constructing an Islamic Ethics of Non-Violence:

The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Religious Studies

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Spring 2012
Edmonton, Alberta

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This thesis is dedicated to my wife Zeyneb.

Thank you for your unconditional support and patience throughout this project.

I love you.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the late Muslim theologian Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's ethics of non-violence. It argues that the non-violent ethics of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi based on the Qur'an might aid in finding solutions to the global problem of religion and violence, particularly as it is experienced in the Muslim World. The research seeks to accomplish three objectives. First, this study aims to contribute to the increasing number of works in the area of Islamic ethics which are still minimal compared to the literature dealing with Islamic law. The second scope of this project therefore focuses on the examination of the ethics of non-violence as presented in Said Nursi's writings. Though Nursi never applied violence and constantly encouraged his followers to avoid it, he is still not known as an Islamic figure who promoted non-violence. The third objective is to demonstrate the ambiguity within the Qur'an when it comes to defining a clear stance on violence. This will be evident through the juxtaposition of Said Nursi with Sayyid Qutb.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my former supervisor Dr. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' who passed away only recently before I defended my thesis. He has been very supportive by his countless reviews, suggestions and feedbacks. I am grateful to Dr. Earle Waugh who continued to advise on this work.

My special gratitude goes to Dr. Francis Landy and Dr. Willi Braun for their support throughout this research. They constantly encouraged me to move further in my studies. My professors including Dr. John Kitchen, Dr. Andrew Gow and Dr. Sylvia Brown, all of whom have been helpful from the beginning with their wisdom, guidance, and knowledge. Janey Kennedy, the department's graduate programs coordinator, was the one who kept me on the track from the beginning. Thank you Janey.

Without my parents Besra and Mehmet Zeki I could not have concluded this journey successfully.

I am grateful to Dr. Faris Kaya, Director of the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture, for giving me the opportunity to use the Nursi Studies archives of the foundation.

Finally, I would like to thank the ECMC Chair of Islamic Studies at the University of Alberta for generously funding this project.

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CHAPTER ONE -INTRODUCTION

This thesis intends to examine the late Muslim theologian Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's (henceforth Nursi) ethics of non-violence. It will argue that the non-violent ethics of Nursi based on the Qur'an might aid in finding solutions to the global problem of religion and violence, particularly as it is experienced in the Muslim World. Nursi's Qur'anic notion of non-violence has had a significantly positive impact on Turkish Society, thus proving its practical relevance and efficiency. The following structure will be applied in the treatment of Nursi's ethics of non-violence.

The research seeks to accomplish three objectives. First, this study aims to contribute to the increasing number of works in the area of Islamic ethics which are still minimal compared to the literature dealing with Islamic law. As in the Jewish tradition, Islamic religious ethics imperceptibly merges with religious law.¹ In practice most ethical systems combine both reasoning and authority to come to their conclusions about correct action. In the Islamic case, the relationship between revelation and reason becomes evident due to the fact that the Qur'an does not provide guidance for every conceivable detail. This points to the need for the development of a moral consciousness and human responsibility in making ethical decisions. The present work exemplifies that there is a fair amount of overlap between the ethical prescriptions of Islamic law and many commonly acknowledged ethical injunctions from other religious traditions when it comes to condemnation of violence.

¹ See for a more detailed discussion A. Kevin Reinhart, "Islamic Law as Islamic Ethics" in *The Journal of Religious Ethics* Vol.11 No.2:1983, 186-203 and Carl W. Ernst, *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 108-162.

Within the general framework of Islamic ethics, the particular aspect of Qur'anic ethics of non-violence is something that Western audiences are not familiar with. The second scope of this project therefore focuses on the examination of the ethics of non-violence as presented in Nursi's writings. While Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Confucian, even perhaps Baha'i teachings are often cited or promoted in the media and education circles in the context of non-violence, one seldom notices a coverage of the teachings of Islam on this discourse. Currently there is a good deal of literature promoting Islam as the religion of peace and that it is not affiliated with violence; yet the implications are rather weak. One can hardly find mentioned a Muslim equivalent of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Thomas Merton, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a book written on non-violence. There are few such exemplary figures and certainly Abdul Ghaffar Khan can be mentioned as one of them.² Though Nursi never advocated violence and constantly encouraged his followers to avoid it, he is still not known as an Islamic figure who promoted non-violence. As Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' rightly highlights "even though academic research and interest to Bediuzzaman Said Nursi has accelerated in the last few years, it is still very fresh and does not enjoy the same research and analyses as other modernist Muslim intellectuals and their works, such as Jamal al-Din Al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Sayyid Qutb."³ Farid Syed Alatas elaborates on this problem to which Abu-Rabi' draws major attention. He states that Nursi is never included in a course examining philosophers or theologians. For Alatas, this is not only the case in the

² Badshah Khan (1890-1988) is Gandhi's contemporary. He has taken an essentially nonviolent view of Islam. His interpretation of *jihad* is known as nonviolent. Gandhi himself refers to Badshah Khan: "I was struck by their transparent sincerity, frankness, and outmost simplicity. He was consumed by a deep religious fervor. I found him to be universalist." For more details see, Jean Akhtar Cerrina, *Islam's Peaceful Warrior: Abdul Ghaffar Khan* (USA: Xlibris Corporation, 2003).

³ Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' (ed.), *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), ix.

Western world but also in the Muslim World, which practices a certain kind of ethnocentrism: “Nursi’s thought had not been developed in the course of the last several decades by theorists to make his work as theology or social theology more accessible,” Alatas explains.⁴ As a result, he continues, “Nursi is mentioned but not methodologically or theoretically encountered and reconstructed as a social theologian or any other type of systematic thinker.”⁵ For Alatas, the main reason for this is “the continuing Eurocentrism via the themes of the subject-object dichotomy and the dominance of European concepts and categories.”⁶ Therefore, non-Western thinkers like Nursi remain marginal. This project aims to fill this particular gap by introducing the English-speaking world to the aspect of non-violence in Nursi’s writings.

The third objective is to demonstrate the ambiguity within the Qur’an when it comes to a definition of a clear stance on violence. This will be evident through the juxtaposition of Said Nursi with Sayyid Qutb. Both approach Scripture as devout and sincere Muslim intellectuals and leaders, yet both come to different conclusions and solutions with regard to the predicament of the Muslim world. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith has argued, “scripture is a human activity” and as such any interpretation remains dependent on the approach and human experience of the reader, even when two readers share to a large extent the same historical context as is seen in the life of Qutb and Nursi.⁷ Human beings are complex and this complexity and diversity is reflected in the

⁴ Syed Farid Alatas, “An Agenda for Nursi Studies: Towards the Construction of a Social Theology” in *Asian Journal of Social Science* No: 38(4) 2010, 528.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 18.

interpretation of the Qur'an as this work seeks to show in the particular issue of non-violence.

1 The Public Face of Islam – Violent and Radical

The reasons for undertaking such a study are obvious. The issue of violence and religion has always been a matter of constant discussion and intense debate. For the most part, Islam has become the center of controversies today due to some extremist elements in the Islamic world and manipulations by the Western media. Specifically, after the events of September 11th, the Western world has associated Islam more than any other religion with violence. The linkage between terrorism and Muslims has grown over the last two decades, giving rise to the irrational fear of Islam known as Islamophobia. Ever since the end of the Cold War, Islam has become the phantom of evil in many people's eyes.⁸ As Christine Mason rightly remarks, "Islam is associated with terrorism, jihad, martyrdom and the repression of women, honor killings, female circumcision and so forth... Post September 11th, the linkage has become something of a global obsession, as the fear of communism is swiftly replaced with the fear of Islamic terrorism."⁹

With regard to violence, extremists abuse certain verses in the Qur'an in order to justify their illegitimate acts. They developed an understanding of the Qur'an which calls for the *jihad* of even killing civilians. By means of a selective approach to the Qur'anic text, they utilize the irreligious repertoire in order to mobilize and recruit people. Such an abuse of Scripture must be therefore countered with a holistic and timely interpretation of

⁸ More details see Edward Said, *Covering Islam* (New York: Pantheon, 1981) and John Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁹ Christine Mason, "Terrorism, Gender and Nonviolent Islam: The Case of Eritrea" in Sentil Ram and Ralph Summy (eds.), *Nonviolence: An Alternative for Defeating Global Terror(ism)* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2008), 107 and 110.

the Qur'an for the modern world. With respect to that, it is crucial to provide a concept of *jihad* which takes the present pluralistic landscape into consideration. The effort to provide a different understanding of *jihad* most prominently took place within the intellectual endeavors of Muslim scholars to reconcile Islam with the challenges of modernity.

2 Jihad – Revisited

In order to trace back the continuous effort of Muslim scholars to revisit the idea of *jihad* one needs to begin from the early 18th century. From then on, modern Muslim scholars have been aware of the need for a contemporary interpretation of Islam which would make Islam relevant and responsive in the context of modern society. The objective was that adherents of Islam could live, participate, and contribute actively to the modern world while being faithful to their religion. Its ultimate intention was to accommodate Muslim societies with an “indigenous ideology of development, one that was not copied from the West and could become the basis of a rational, modern society.”¹⁰ The endeavor to modernize Islamic society took place not only in the area of religion but also literature, economy, and education.

As John Esposito highlights, “the goal of modernists was two-fold. First, they sought to re-awaken the Islamic community and restore its strength through a modern reformation of Islam. Second, they wanted to overthrow European imperialism in the Muslim world and regain autonomy and independence.”¹¹

¹⁰ Mustafa Koylu, *Islam and Its Quest for Peace: Jihad, Justice and Education* (Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2003), 25.

¹¹ John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 50.

As stated above, within the context of their social criticism of the Islamic World, modernists also attempted to provide a new understanding of *jihad*. They lived at a time when the term *jihad* was intensely and continuously utilized in Western journalism and polemical analyses to describe annihilation, violent seizure, and various other brutalities attributed to Muslim extremists during the 19th century confrontations with Western sovereignties in the Balkans, Greece, Armenia, Anatolia, Damascus and Lebanon.¹² Their views of *jihad* can be broadly categorized in three ways. The first notion is represented by modernists such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839-1897), Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Rida (1865-1935). Their standpoint was more apologetic and they began to interpret *jihad* as merely a defensive war or self-defense. Abu'l Ala al-Mawdudi (1903-79) and Sayyed Qutb (1903-66) held onto the second notion maintaining that the *jihadist* aim is “to bring about an end to the domination of man over man and man-made law. *Jihad*, in trying to realize these objectives, is a permanent revolutionary struggle for the sake of whole mankind.”¹³ The third type of *jihad* can be basically characterized as the Sufi approach which sees the inner struggle as the greater jihad.¹⁴ Certainly, all three definitions were grounded by their respective representatives on the primary Islamic sources of Qur'an and Sunna, the practice of the Prophet Muhammad.

¹² S. Abdullah Schleifer, “Jihad: Modernist Apologists, Modern Apologetics,” *The Islamic Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1984), 26-27.

¹³ Rudolph Peters, *Islam and Colonialism: The Doctrine of Jihad in the Modern History* (Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 1984), 130.

¹⁴ This categorization was made by Mustafa Koylu. For more details see his *Islam and Its Quest for Peace: Jihad, Justice and Education* (Washington: RVP, 2003), 25-70.

2.1 Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and Non-Violence

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1876-1960) is another Muslim intellectual who wrote a great deal on the notion of *jihad*. One may situate Nursi among the first group with al-Afghani and Abduh. Yet, unlike his contemporaries al-Afghani and Abduh, Nursi does not have an apologetic interpretation of *jihad*, but rather develops a new ethics of non-violence through his understanding of *jihad*. In order to examine Nursi's understanding of non-violence. We will examine his work using the following structure.

3 Structure

This project consists of five chapters including the introductory chapter (Chapter One). Chapter two presents the social and political atmosphere in which Said Nursi grew up and the various stages of his life. The analysis will focus on how Turkey's transition from the Ottoman Empire to a new secular Turkey influenced Nursi's personality and shaped his thought. Chapter three will bring Nursi into conversation with French philosopher Rene Girard's Mimetic Scapegoating Mechanism theory. This is followed by a close analysis of Nursi's ethics of non-violence along with an examination of the global threats he defines. Chapter four will compare Sayyid Qutb and Said Nursi in terms of their respective methods of transforming their particular societies. Beginning with a brief comparison of their biographies, the chapter will sketch out the problems that their respective societies faced and will juxtapose their developed methods in order to overcome these challenges.

The final part of this project, chapter five, will discuss whether Nursi and his view of non-violence had or is still having any practical impact on Turkish society.

Additionally, his Nur Community and its relationship with and influence on Turkish politics will be examined.

The findings of this study shall be summarized in the conclusion.

4 Literature Review

This section reviews available English literature in the field of Nursi Studies, including translations of Nursi's publications and related works which are partially available in more than thirty languages.

Hamid Algar was the first academic to introduce Nursi and his magnum opus, the *Risale-i Nur*, to the English speaking world. In 1979, he translated one of Nursi's treatises, *The Supreme Sign* which deals with the existence of God. It was published by the Risale-i Nur Institute of America, founded by followers of Nursi in the United States. In 1980, Algar also translated Nursi's *The Resurrection and the Hereafter* which was published by the same publishing house. Later, Algar wrote an article on Nursi discussing his works in the context of the *tajdid* tradition.¹⁵

Algar's translation was followed by Sukran Vahide's. Beginning in the 1990s, Vahide translated most of Nursi's works into English. This gave Western intellectuals an opportunity of a close reading of Nursi's texts. Parallel to the translations, the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture founded in 1979, organized symposiums and workshops not only in Turkey but also abroad to disseminate Nursi's ideas.

¹⁵ Hamid Algar, "The Centennial Renewer: Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and the Tradition of Tajdid," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3, September 2001.

The crucial point in Nursi Studies was Serif Mardin's publication *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* in 1989.¹⁶ This was the first scholarly analysis marking the beginning of Nursi Studies in the academic world. Mardin's work refers to a special point in the history of Nursi Studies. While the number of Nursi's followers in Turkey was rapidly increasing and his thought was becoming more influential even after his death, attention to Nursi's intellectual work from the academy was rather weak. This was particularly the case within the Turkish academy which was occupied by the secular elite. Both Nursi's followers and secularist Turks reacted in different ways to Mardin's work. For some of Nursi's followers Mardin's book would unfold Nursi's message and so it was very much welcomed, while others said that Mardin wrote from a very secular point of view. In one of his articles, Metin Karabasoglu, a prominent author on Nursi in Turkey, argued that Mardin did not understand the essence of the *Risale-i Nur* and its author.¹⁷

Mardin's book did draw a great deal of attention from people opposing Nursi who accused Mardin of being a traitor to the country. For them, Mardin exaggerated Nursi's work. As a consequence, Mardin's membership of The Turkish Academy of Sciences (TUBA) was denied by TUBA's committee in 2010. In a later interview, Dr. Yucel Kanpolat, the director of TUBA, would claim that the reason for Mardin's membership denial was that he was not sufficiently critical of Nursi. According to Kanpolat, Mardin painted an entirely positive picture of Nursi, thus contradicting principles of scholarly

¹⁶ Serif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

¹⁷ Metin Karabasoglu, "Serif Mardin Olayi", <http://www.karakalem.net/?article=852>, (accessed on December 21, 2010).

research.¹⁸ In his research, Mardin argued that contrary to received understanding, the Nur Community should be seen as a means of modernization within the Turkish Republic.¹⁹ Mardin's views of Nursi remain controversial both among Nursi's followers and his opponents. However, the second chapter of this project will rely to some extent on Mardin's book, for these are the sections examining the social, religious, and cultural circumstances of Nursi's time.

Anatolia Junction by Fred A. Reed is another study of Nursi.²⁰ Reed is a Canadian journalist who was introduced to the Nur Community in 1990s. At the first glance it is difficult to identify the subject of Reed's book either as Nursi or Turkey. It consists of Reed's observations of his visit to Turkey. He visited most of the places in which Nursi lived and presents his observations. In addition, he had conversations with the members of the Nur Community. *Anatolia Junction* is a good record of the Nur Community from an outsider perspective as the book attempts to portray Nursi through the eyes of his followers.

Reed's book was followed by new scholarly works on Nursi. Here, it is essential to mention Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi'. Indeed, he was a pioneer in Nursi Studies, predominantly after the late 1990s. It is important to note that Abu-Rabi' has been, to date, the only Turkish speaking non-Turkish Nursi scholar to become an expert in Nursi Studies. He not only authored a number of books on Nursi, but also introduced Nursi and his thought to the academy, especially in the United States. One issue of *The Muslim*

¹⁸ Sefa Kaplan, "Said Nursi'yi fazla parlatti", <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/14390258.asp>, (accessed on December 21, 2010).

¹⁹ Mardin, 25.

²⁰ Fred A. Reed, *Anatolia Junction* (Burnaby: Talonbooks, 1999).

World was dedicated to Nursi Studies when Abu-Rabi' himself was the senior editor of the journal.²¹

Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi is Abu-Rabi's first book on Nursi consisting of 19 articles written by a wide range of scholars including Dale F. Eickelman, Barbara Freyer Stowasser, and Oliver Leaman. The articles discuss various aspects of Nursi's life and thought such as Sukran Vahide's essay on Nursi's understanding of *jihad* which is related to the present subject. According to Vahide, Nursi's new interpretation of *jihad* brought victory to him and his followers.²²

Abu-Rabi' is also the editor of *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*,²³ authored by Sukran Vahide. It is so far the most comprehensive intellectual biography of Nursi. Vahide uses primary sources to portray Nursi in as much detail and as genuinely as possible. Again, one of the sections of her book is dedicated to Nursi's concept of *jihad*. She argues that Nursi and his followers used peaceful means to serve belief and the Qur'an. This method is called *müsbet hareket* (positive action) by Nursi, a "patient and silent struggle to save and strengthen belief in God."²⁴ It also requires struggling through written words and non-involvement in politics. This was unique, as in many Islamic countries revolution had been brought by violent means in which many innocent people lost their lives.²⁵ Though Vahide sheds light on Nursi's understanding of non-violence, she does not examine it in the context of ethics.

²¹ For more details see *The Muslim World* Vol. LXXXIX Nos.: 3-4 (1999).

²² Sukran Vahide, "Said Nursi's Interpretation of Jihad" in *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', ed. (Albany, State University of New York Press, 2003), 112.

²³ Sukran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 322.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 310.

Indeed, Vahide's analysis of Nursi's understanding of *jihad* can not be regarded as comprehensive.

Two additional works *Spiritual Dimensions of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Risale-i Nur* and *Theodicy and Justice in Modern Islamic Thought: The Case of Said Nursi* were also edited by Abu-Rabi'. Both anthologies include a broad range of essays on Nursi's spiritual dimensions and his view of resurrection and justice. In some of the articles Nursi's ideas are analyzed in a comparative context such as his relation to Western theologians and philosophers like Thomas Merton, Immanuel Kant, Dante Alighieri, and Jürgen Moltmann.

Another scholar worth mentioning in the field of Nursi Studies is Hakan Yavuz, presently at the University of Utah. Besides his publication of a number of articles, Yavuz authored the work *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*.²⁶ Yavuz's book is not specifically on Nursi, but includes two chapters on the Nur Community which he analyzes from a sociological perspective. He uses the term "print-based Islamic discourse" to identify the Nur Community.

Ian Markham is a Christian theologian who has written a great deal on Nursi studies. So far, Markham has published three books on Nursi. His first book *Globalization, Ethics and Islam: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* is co-edited with Dr. Ibrahim Ozdemir. This is the first book that discusses Nursi's work in the context of ethics. The book contains three chapters: Non-Violence and Peace, Ethics and Dialogue, and Globalization. Unfortunately, the book does not sufficiently address the issue of non-violence and peace from Nursi's point of view. The section on non-violence and peace contains three articles. One of them deals with the life of Nursi written by Sukran Vahide

²⁶ Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

and the other one is on the subject of renewal and reformation in the mid-twentieth century. The last essay is by Thomas Michel, S.J. entitled “The Ethics of Pardon and Peace: A Dialogue of Ideas between the Thought of Pope John Paul II and the *Risale-i Nur*.”

Nursi’s ideas of non-violence have also been discussed in a number of articles, primarily by Thomas Michel and Zeki Saritoprak in the context of Interfaith Dialogue.²⁷ The second chapter of Markham’s book discusses the foundations of Nursi’s ethics.

Since this research will deal with the subject of Nursi’s epistemological framework, Markham’s article will be taken into consideration. Markham’s second study on Nursi is *Engaging with Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: A Model of Interfaith Dialogue* published in 2009.²⁸ This is an important monograph on Nursi. In his book, Markham advocates a new model of religious pluralism while utilizing the spiritual sources of the Islamic faith to make his argument. The whole work is thus already a dialogue in action between a Christian theologian and Nursi. Markham spent about eight years of deep theological engagement with Bediuzzaman, whom he regards as a mirror reflecting the challenges of every person of faith in the West. He states, “Nursi faced an aggressive secularism, as do Western Christians; Nursi wanted to affirm the achievements of science and democracy, as do we; Nursi felt it important to challenge unbelief, as do we.”²⁹ An Episcopalian priest and also Dean and President of Virginia Theological Seminary, Markham argues that “the assumptions of the modern interfaith dialogue industry are

²⁷ Thomas Michel, S.J., combined these articles in his book *Said Nursi’s Views on Muslim-Christian Understanding*. It was published by Soz Basim Yayin, an Istanbul based publication owned by Nursi’s followers. Dr. Zeki Saritoprak, the Nursi Chair in Islamic Studies at John Carroll University, published a number of articles in the *Islam and Muslim-Christian Relation*. For more details see *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2000, Vol. 19, No. 1, 25–37, January 2008.

²⁸ Ian S. Markham, *Engaging with Bediuzzaman Said Nursi A Model of Interfaith Dialogue*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

deeply misguided.”³⁰ To his mind, Said Nursi is “the future of interfaith dialogue” and he discusses the religious basis of his ethics extensively in the first part to lay a foundation for a “New Decalogue.”³¹ Markham’s book is also a critique of the kind of pluralism that denies the uniqueness of faith traditions. To his mind, such an approach disturbs “committed believers in the major world faiths” and expects adherents of every faith group to turn into liberals by negotiating their fundamental beliefs.³² The second part of the book attempts to formulate a “New Decalogue” of dialogue. Markham’s most recent book on Nursi is *An Introduction to Said Nursi: Life, Thought, and Writings*, co-authored with Suendam Birinci Pirim.³³ One limitation of Markham’s works is that he could not access all the literature of Nursi due to the fact that a great deal of Nursi’s writings is still not accessible in English.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 131.

³² Ibid., 155.

³³ Ian Markham and Suendam Birinci Pirim, *An Introduction to Said Nursi: Life, Thought, and Writings* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

CHAPTER TWO

Nursi and the Socio-Historical Conditions of His Time

1 The Old Said

This chapter intends to present the social and political atmosphere in which Said Nursi grew up and the various stages of his life. It shall argue that the social circumstances of the time encouraged Nursi to find new applications for classic Islamic principles. The following, therefore, shall briefly discuss the life of Nursi while taking the context of the time into consideration.

Nursi was born in 1876 in Nurs, a village in the province of Bitlis in the Eastern part of the Ottoman Empire.³⁴ This was also the first year of the First Constitutional Era. In this period, the leading figures aimed to protect the Empire from collapsing by imposing regulations. The First Constitution (I. Mesrutiyet) intended to establish freedom of belief and equality of all citizens before the law. The 19th century was an era in which the Ottomans were rapidly declining relative to the West. The Caliphate, representing the political authority and unity of the Muslim *Ummah*, had become the focal target of foreign forces. The end of the Ottoman State, referred to as ‘the sick man of Europe’, was approaching. It was not only the Ottoman Empire that was suffering but the whole Muslim *Ummah*, as this was the century of defeat and humiliation for the Muslim world. The European powers had already demonstrated their military and commercial superiority.

³⁴ There is no agreement on the date of Nursi’s birth. In most of the sources the date given for his birth is either 1876 or 1877.

As Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' rightly highlights, there were several intellectual reactions in the nineteenth-century to the "question of modernity and the threat it posed to the integrity of the Ottoman state."³⁵ The first one was a nationalist response aimed to unite all of the Turks under one umbrella. This school was represented by Turkish nationalists whose concerns were not focused on the empire or religion. They intended to unite all the Turks in order to have one language, one ethnicity, and a shared tradition under the Empire. The most prominent among them were Ziya Gokalp, Yusuf Akcura, Ahmed Agayev (later Agaoglu), and Halim Sabit.³⁶ Publications such as *Milli Tetebbular*, *Halk'a Doğru ve Türk Yurdu* of the time reflect their mindset. The nationalists initiated a new understanding of Turkish civilization and history and emphasized pre-Islamic Turkish history. Turkish history would no longer begin with their conversion to Islam. They focused very much on a "purification" of the Turkish language to eliminate the influence of Arabic and Persian vocabulary. In order to create a national literature, the nationalists even attempted to remove Arabic and Persian elements in Turkish literary works. The intention was to focus on pre-Islamic Turkish literature and French literature.

The second reaction aimed to preserve the Ottoman Empire "without giving any central role to Islam in either society or politics."³⁷ The representatives of this response are called the Westernists. For them, the only way to save the empire was through a process of westernization. This was, in their eyes, a journey to make "a radical moral and mental transformation" in order to "develop a new morality based upon the Western

³⁵ Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', ed., *Spiritual Dimensions of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Risale-i Nur* (New York: SUNY Press, 2008), vii.

³⁶ Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (New York: Routledge Press, 1968), 345.

³⁷ 'Abu-Rabi', (2008), vii.

system of values.”³⁸ Among the prominent figures of this school were Tevfik Fikret and Abdullah Cevdet. Fikret’s well-known poem ‘The Old History’ (Tarih-i Kadim) reflects the mentality of this school:

... Says³⁹ this is the history of the human being,
and starts to narrate tales to us,
makes up cradle songs and puts us to sleep.
From our ancestor’s dark life,
which includes many gaps,
shows the previous times,
and says this is the only truth, and the best example.
You see that there is no difference between the past days and future days.
What you call history is like a person
who has six thousand years old wrinkles in the forehead
similarly, doubts.
His head moves between past and imagination,
His feet moves to a meaningless future,
Like a very skinny person,
He barely remains standing.⁴⁰

For Tevfik, Islamic history is a tale. He likens the Ottoman State and Islam to a very old person who has many wrinkles on their forehead. For him there is no hope for the future with an adherence to the past. It is not only the history and the tradition that Fikret questions, but also the tenets of the faith. In his renowned poem ‘the Creed of Haluk’ (Haluk’un Amentusu), he states:

I listened to the scholars of religion praising you as:
“Unique and far from all shortcomings,
The Ever Living One, The Self-Existing One,
The All Powerful, The Supreme One,
The Sustainer, The Reliever,
The Subduer, The Knower of All

³⁸ Berkes (1968), 338.

³⁹ In this poem, Fikret addresses the Islamists who are advocates of Islamic principles and the tradition.

⁴⁰ As part of ‘The Old History’ (Tarih-i Kadim), these lines were translated by Salih Sayilgan. For the whole poem in Turkish see Esad Sezai Sumbulluk, *Tarih-i Kadim/Tevfik Fikret – Siiri Serhi* (Istanbul: Aydinlik Basimevi, 1947).

The Manifest One, The Hidden One,
The Hearer of All, The Seer of All

...

The most prominent attribute of Yours is the One 'who has no partners'.
Look into this quagmire
and see how many partners you have.
We are both Satan and jinn; there is neither Satan nor angel
The world will turn into heaven with human beings.⁴¹

Here Fikret presents the attributes of God and questions them. He argues that they contradict reality. If God does not have any partner, why are we all facing various problems and evils? For him, these problems imply that God could not control everything in the universe. He also denies the existence of Satan, jinn and heaven. According to their own behaviors, Fikret states, people become devil-like or jinn and turn the world into either heaven or hell. This was also a new language in literature.

Abdullah Cevdet (1869-1932) expounded Fikret's ideas to a wider audience. He was well aware of the fact that the source of the troubles in the Empire and later on in modern Turkey was not the ruler per se. What had to be changed was the society itself. The masses had to be enlightened; otherwise the whole process of the revolution would fail.⁴² In order to accomplish his goals, Cevdet began to publish a review called *Ictihad* while in exile in Geneva. For him, remedies of the Empire were obvious and simple: "to push, pull, if necessary lash the people into moving, working, earning, seeing, and thinking like the infidels of the West."⁴³ Civilization meant, for Cevdet, European culture.⁴⁴ In his writings, he initiated an open campaign against Islamic culture. He first

⁴¹ Kaplan, Mehmet, *Sir Tahlilleri I: Tanzimat`tan Cumhuriyet`e* (Istanbul: Dergah Yayinlari, 1968), 158. The translation was made by Salih Sayilgan.

⁴² Berkes, 339.

⁴³ Ibid., 341.

⁴⁴ Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 267.

started with translations into Turkish of some Orientalists who wrote about Islam. Among them was Reinhart Dozy's controversial work entitled *De Voornaamste Godsdiensten: Het Islamisme*. The translation of Reinhart Dozy's study was a critical point in Ottoman history, since it was the first time that a book explicitly hostile to Islam and its Prophet had been published in Turkish and widely distributed.⁴⁵ In the introduction of the translation of Dozy's book Cevdet focused very much on articulating the arguments of the work rather than the translation per se:

We verified that there was no comparable history [History of Islam] in the three major Islamic languages Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. The reason of this deficiency should be sought in the absolutism of the rulers of Islam... We respond to the inevitable question of: (The author is from the Netherlands, a non-Muslim, thus a stranger to the religion [of Islam]. So is it possible to trust his discourse?) in the following manner: One cannot become a Muslim by [adopting a Muslim] name, by fasting, and by performing *namaz*... Learned, erudite Doctor Dozy, who had spent his entire life with research and study, and who strived to enlighten the minds of *ibadullah* and tried to be beneficial to people, is one hundred times more Muslim than vagabond Hamids whose creation and desires are nefarious... Every learned and virtuous person is a Muslim. Any ignorant or immoral person is not a Muslim even if he comes from the lineage of the prophet.⁴⁶

Cevdet has, herein, a new understanding of being Muslim and justifies Dozy's Orientalist writings which are against the orthodox understanding of Islam. Cevdet had made, later on, other attempts to transform Turkish society. He would not hesitate to attack the basic tenets of Islam. For instance, the April 1927 edition of the monthly magazine *Resimli Ay Mecmuasi* carried an interview with a number of well-known figures including Abdullah Cevdet. In the interview, Cevdet is replying to a questionnaire entitled: "Do you believe in the hereafter?" In his response, Cevdet openly denies the belief in the hereafter and

⁴⁵ M. Sukru Hanioglu, "Garbcilar: Their Attitudes toward Religion and Their Impact on the Official Ideology of the Turkish Republic" in *Studia Islamica* (1997), no. 86, 138.

⁴⁶ Abdullah Cevdet, 'Ifade-i Mutercim', in *Tarih-i Islamiyet*, 5 in Hanioglu, "Garbcilar: Their Attitudes toward Religion and Their Impact on the Official Ideology of the Turkish Republic" in *Studia Islamica* (1997), no. 86, 138.

states that belief in God was only for simpletons and “irremediably illogical.”⁴⁷ Cevdet also argued that Islam is violent and it is the religion of blood and war.⁴⁸ In one of the issues of his review *Ictihad*, hence, Cevdet proposed Baha’ism as new the religion to replace Islam in Turkish society.⁴⁹ Over time the ideology of these Westernists would greatly influence the Kemalist ideology of the new modern Turkey.

The third response to save the Empire, called the Islamist, was to some extent a reaction to the Westernist school. The Islamists aimed to modernize the Empire while “preserving the status of Islam in that society.”⁵⁰ Their ideology is called Ottomanism and was initially advanced by the Tanzimatists⁵¹. They held the view that under the sultan’s sovereignty all ethnic groups and religious communities were citizens of the Ottoman State with equal political rights.⁵² For a while, this position was supported by the Young Ottomans and aimed to unite all nations of the Empire under a powerful central government, regardless of their ethnic and religious differences. Ottomanism found initial support among prominent figures like Mustafa Sabri, Mehmet Akif, Said Halim Paşa, Esref Edip, Selahaddin Asim, İskilipli Mehmet Atıf, Babanzade A. Naim, A. Hamdi Akseki, and Ismail Hakki. They sought solutions for the problems of the Empire and published them in magazines such as *Sırat-ı Müstakim*, *Sebil-ür Reşat*, *Mekâtîp*, *Medâris*, *İslâm*, and *Beyan al-Hak*. They supported the constitutional regime. For instance, in the first issue of *Beyan al-Hak* in September 1908, the Islamists did refer to

⁴⁷ Necmettin Sahiner, *Hasir Risalesi Nasil Yazildi?* (Istanbul: Zafer Yayinlari, 1997), 31-2.

⁴⁸ Ahmet Ishak Demir, *Cumhuriyet Aydınlarının İslam’a Bakışı* (Istanbul: Ensar Nesriyat, 2004), 253.

⁴⁹ *Ictihad*, 1 Mart 1922, Sayı: 144.

⁵⁰ Abu-Rabi’ (2008), vii.

⁵¹ Tanzimatists were the intellectuals who believed that the problems that the Empire faces could be solved through reforms in institutions related to education, economy, military during the Tanzimat Period (1839-1876).

⁵² Sukran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (New York: SUNY Press, 2005), 58.

the declaration of the Second Constitution (II. Mesrutiyet) by stating the following, “today, thanks to be God, no obstacle to our progress and development remains.”⁵³ The Islamists used all their efforts to fight against the belief that Islam was an obstacle to progress. When the Westernists raised their voices to attack Islam regarding some controversial issues, the Islamists were quick in opposing them. Mustafa Sabri, a leading figure of the Islamists wrote, in *Beyan al-Hak*, a series of articles entitled “The Controversial Questions of the Religion of Islam.” In his articles, he addressed contentious issues such as polygamy, divorce, and the permissibility of being photographed.⁵⁴ Mehmet Akif, another prominent figure among the Islamists, promoted the ideology of the school through his poems. Combating a disillusioned westernization and nationalism was the major objective of his poems:

HOW WAS YOUR MIND OCCUPIED WITH THE SENTIMENT OF
DIVISION?

While Islam should have tightly united you
I do not understand and cannot understand,

How was your mind occupied with the sentiment of division?
Did Satan put the idea of nationalism in your mind?

It was Islam holding under one religion,
Many nations which were totally different from each other

Nationalism is like an earthquake that destroys from the bottom.
If you do not understand this, it is a great disappointment...

This nation does not remain standing by emphasizing Albanian and Arab,

⁵³ *Beyan al-Hak*, Sayi: 1 Yil: 1908 in Berkes (1998), 340.

⁵⁴ Berkes, (1998), 340.

The latest policy is Turkish nationalism which will not work either ...

God created you all as a family,
Remove all the elements that cause division among you ...⁵⁵

Here, Akif clearly highlights that what can hold all the nations under the empire is Islam.

For him, there is no nationalism in Islam at all. In another poem, Akif criticizes those who see Islam as an obstacle to progress:

Particularly during the declaration of this damned war,
Spit on the faces of those who suggest the absurdity of
“The only way to think like the Westerners is
To leave God out of life.” as faith to the people!⁵⁶

As it is evident, Akif attacks those who argue that the solution to save the Empire is in blindly following the West and giving up the religion of Islam.

Said Nursi was another prominent figure who did support Islamic values. Like other members of the school, Nursi believed that there is an immediate need for change to save the Empire, however this should be based on the principles of the religion of Islam. Nursi completed his education at various traditional schools (*medrese*) in the Eastern part of the Empire and contemplated its problems by analyzing the Eastern Provinces.

Living mainly in the Eastern province of the Ottoman Empire, one might question how Nursi became aware of the problems in the Ottoman lands and the Muslim World in general. There are several answers to this. First, Nursi did not stay in one place during his formative years. Until his first visit to Istanbul in 1907, Nursi visited many places in Eastern Anatolia and studied in different Islamic schools (*medrese*). Secondly, during his

⁵⁵ Mehmet Akif Ersoy, *Safahat*, Ed. Ertugrul Duzdag (Ankara: Kultur Bakanligi Yayinlari, 1987), 163-64. The translation was made by Salih Sayilgan.

⁵⁶ Ersoy, *Safahat*, Ed. Ertugrul Duzdag (Istanbul: Iz Yayincilik, 1991), 186. The translation was made by Salih Sayilgan.

time in Mardin, a city in the southeast of Turkey, Nursi's encounter with two disciples of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and a member of the Sanusi Order might have influenced his political awareness. Colin Turner highlights this occasion as follows:

In Mardin, Molla Said was first 'awakened politically' when he became aware of the wider issues facing the Muslim world through meetings with certain travelers who were passing through the town. The first of these was a follower of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, one of the prominent architects of the pre-modern reformist tradition; the second was a member of the Sanusi Order, which had provided a religious framework for the formation of a modern nation state in North Africa.⁵⁷

Thirdly, while in Van, Nursi stayed at the residence of the governor Tahir Pasa in Van for a long period. Tahir Pasa supported Nursi until his death in 1913. This period is exceptionally significant in Nursi's life. Tahir Pasa was an esteemed bureaucrat of Sultan Abdulhamid II and a well-known supporter of education. He had a wide-ranging library and followed developments in modern science and technology with great interest. Tahir Pasa's residence was a preferred meeting place for government officials, teachers, and other intellectuals in order to discuss various questions of interest.⁵⁸

While staying at the governor's residence Nursi took advantage of reading the newspapers and journals delivered to the governor's office and benefitting from Tahir Pasa's library. Through these readings Nursi was able to gain an insight into the broader problems challenging the Ottoman society and the wider Muslim world. According to Turner, it was probably at this stage that Nursi understands a new interpretation of Islamic theology is essential: "Nursi realized for the first time that traditional Muslim theology alone was unable to answer the doubts concerning Islam that had been raised as

⁵⁷ Colin Turner and Hasan Horkuc, *Makers of Islamic Civilization: Said Nursi* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 10. See also Vahide (2005), 22-23.

⁵⁸ Vahide (2005), 27.

a result of the growth of materialism, and that a study of modern science was necessary.”⁵⁹ At the residence Nursi studied a whole range of books written on social and natural sciences, including history, geography, mathematics, geology, physics, chemistry, astronomy, and philosophy.⁶⁰

Becoming increasingly aware of the problems that affected the Muslim World, Nursi began to find solutions. He first started with promoting educational reforms. Founding his own *medrese* during his years in Van, Nursi formulated new ideas in order to advocate reforms in education. He aimed to combine the religious sciences with modern sciences. For him, this combination would corroborate and strengthen the truths of religion. Nursi practiced this new method when he was teaching his own students.⁶¹ Later on, he took his new method of education further and wanted to establish a university that would embody his ideas in Eastern Anatolia. He named the university the *Medresetu’z-Zehra* after the Al-Azhar University in Cairo, as it was to be its sister university in the center of the western Islamic world.⁶² Nursi’s hope was that the new project would be a significant means of combating the widespread ignorance and backwardness of the region and also finding solutions for its social and political problems. According to Vahide, Nursi’s time with the government officials in Van alarmed him at the extent of Westernization and secularization, and the doubts about Islam among the Ottoman elites. Some of these officials came to the conclusion that Islam was responsible for the backwardness of the Ottoman State. Nursi knew that an urgent reform in education was necessary and “the updating of the Islamic sciences in the

⁵⁹ Turner and Horkuc, 11.

⁶⁰ Vahide (2005), 36. See also Turner and Horkuc, 11.

⁶¹ Ibid., 29.

⁶² Ibid.

light of modern advances in knowledge” was a requisite.⁶³ This thought occupied Nursi’s mind until the beginning of World War I.

With his project in mind, Nursi left Van for Istanbul in 1907 in order to accomplish his dreams of reforming the educational system.⁶⁴ A reference letter written by Tahir Pasa helped Nursi to meet the Sultan. However, Nursi did not receive support for his project on this occasion, but he befriended some Young Turks who were the leading figures of the reformation movement in the Empire.⁶⁵ The Young Turks discovered Nursi’s vision and were aware of his influence on society. Later on, Nursi became involved in their activities. Three days after the Young Turk’s military coup against Sultan Abdulhamid II in 1908, Nursi delivered a speech entitled “Address to Freedom” in Istanbul, repeating it later in Salonica’s Freedom Square. The speech was organized by the Young Turks’ Committee of Union and Progress:

“O Freedom! ... I convey these glad tidings to you, that if you make the Shari’ah, which is life itself, the source of life, and if you grow in that paradise, this oppressed nation will progress a thousand times further than in former times. If, that is, it takes you as its guide in all matters and does not besmirch you through harboring personal enmity and thoughts of revenge ... Freedom has exhumed us from the grave of desolation and despotism, and summoned us to the paradise of unity and love of nation.

The doors of a suffering-free paradise of progress and civilization have been opened to us... The constitution, which is in accordance with the Shari’ah, is

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ There are different views regarding Nursi’s intention in traveling to Istanbul. According to Vahide, Nursi’s objective was to gain official support for his idea of an Islamic University, the Medresetu’z-Zehra in eastern Anatolia (Vahide (2005), 33), while Serif Mardin suggests that Nursi aimed to present some reform proposals to the Sultan (Mardin (1989), 79).

⁶⁵ It is not very clear when and how Nursi met the members of Young Turks. According to Mardin, Nursi met Yahya Nuzhet Pasa, one of the advisors of the Sultan in Erzincan. Nuzhet Pasa introduced Nursi to Sultan Abdulhamid’s Imperial Kuscubasi Mustafa Bey through a recommendation letter. The son of Mustafa Bey, Esref Sencer Kuscubasi became one of the leading figures of the Young Turks. It is probably that Nursi became acquainted with the Young Turks through Mustafa Bey. For more details see Mardin (1989), 78-9.

the introduction to the sovereignty of the nation and invites us to enter like the treasury-guard of paradise. O my oppressed compatriots! Let us go and enter! ”⁶⁶

As is evident, Nursi argues that taking the side of constitutionalism is a religious obligation. He goes further and indicates that as long as it is consistent with the principles of Islam, it would be “the means of upholding the might of Islam and exalting the word of God.”⁶⁷ According to Nursi, material progress was a significant means to uphold the word of God (*ila-yi kelimetullah*) and constitutionalism was one way to achieve this progress. At this stage, Nursi became very involved in political and social life. In the next two years (1908-1910), taking the advantage of new freedom of thought and expression, Nursi delivered speeches, addressed gatherings and published numerous articles in the newspapers and journals of the day. He was the leading member of several societies including the *Talebe-i Ulum Cemiyeti* (Society for Students of the Sciences) and the *Ittihad-i Muhammedi Cemiyeti* (Society for Muhammadan Unity).⁶⁸ Later, Nursi was accused of being involved in the 31st March revolt in 1909 and put on trial by the military Court.⁶⁹ Nursi did not stay long in Istanbul after the trial and set off for Van.⁷⁰

As stated above, Nursi does not dismiss the social reality. He initially cooperated with members of the Young Turks in order to save the Empire.⁷¹ From his *Medresetu’z*

⁶⁶ Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Ilk Donem Eserleri: Divan-i Harb-i Orfi* (Istanbul: Soz , 2008), 421-22. (Nursi’s Old Said Period writings have not been translated into English yet; however, some passages including this one can be found in Vahide’s (2005) *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*.)

⁶⁷ Vahide, ‘The Life and Times of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi’, in *The Muslim World* (Special Issue: Said Nursi and the Turkish Experience) No. 89 (1999), 216.

⁶⁸ Serif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (New York: SUNY Press, 1989), 84. See also Vahide (2005), 66-8, Turner and Horkuc (2009), 15.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 84-5, See also Vahide (2005), 76-80.

⁷⁰ Vahide (2005), 83.

⁷¹ Although, in his formative years Nursi cooperated with Young Turks and supported their Committee of Union and Progress, he later criticized their policies. They also, unlike their first years, dismissed Islamic principles as a base in order to solve the problems of the Empire. In a newspaper article that appeared in April 1909, he replied to the question “In Salonica you cooperated with the Committee of Union and

Zehra project, his articles in the various newspapers, and his speeches, one can conclude that Nursi's aim was to save the Ottoman State, that is to say to build unity within the Empire. Nursi saw education as the most important means to accomplish this unity: "Unity cannot occur through ignorance. Unity is the fusion of ideas, and the fusion of ideas occurs through the electric rays of knowledge."⁷² Therefore, for Nursi, unity cannot be achieved without education. At this stage of his life, Nursi was very active in politics and did not hesitate to cooperate with some statesmen and institutions.

During the next two years in the Eastern region of the Empire, Nursi travelled to different provinces in order to explain the principles of the freedom movement and constitutionalism at gatherings. He advocated that constitutionalism did not contradict Islamic precepts:

The spirit of constitutionalism is from the Shari'ah and its life is from it. But under force of circumstance it may be that some details temporarily fall short of it. All situations that arise during the constitutional period need not necessarily have arisen from constitutionalism. What is there that conforms to the Shari'ah in every respect? Is there anyone who follows it in every respect? Since this is the case, a government, which is a corporate body, will not be free of faults either. Only Plato's imaginary virtuous city might be. However, with constitutionalism, the paths leading to abuses are mostly blocked up. With despotism, they are unobstructed."⁷³

This was a response from Nursi to a question raised by a leader of a tribe in the Eastern part of the Empire. Most of the tribes were very concerned that the new reforms and ideas were not consistent with Islamic principles. However, Nursi did not hesitate to passionately advocate constitutionalism.

Progress, why did you part from it?" His response was that "I did not part from it; it was some of its members that parted. I am still in agreement with people like Niyazi Bey and Enver Bey, but some of them parted from us. They strayed from the path and headed for the swamp" (Nursi, 'Lemean-i Hakikat,' *Volkan* nos. 103 (Mart 31, 1325/Nisan 13, 1909), 105 (Nisan 2, 1325/Nisan 15, 1909), quoted in Duzdag, *Volkan Gazetesi*, 504, 511.

⁷² Nursi, *Munazarat* (1977), 61 (cited in Vahide (2005), 37.

⁷³ Vahide, 86.

In early 1911 Nursi travelled to Damascus which was known as an intellectual center of many prominent Islamic scholars. Here, Nursi was asked to give a sermon at the Umayyad Mosque. Thousands of people listened to him, including a hundred Islamic scholars. In the sermon, Nursi addressed six basic problems of the global Muslim community and presented remedies for them. This famous sermon was, later on, published as *The Damascus Sermon*.

Following his days in Damascus, Nursi left once more for Istanbul in order to accomplish his dream of founding the Medresetu'z-Zehra.⁷⁴ Although he obtained support from the officials, he still could not achieve his goal because of conflicts within the Empire. This time, Nursi did not stay long in Istanbul. He returned to Van after his journey to Rumeli with Sultan Mehmet Resad.⁷⁵

In Van, Nursi continued to educate students in his medrese. In 1914, World War I broke out and Said Nursi was assigned to the army as a voluntary regimental mufti.⁷⁶ He was ordered to form a militia force and fought in the forefront of the war. Some cities of the eastern province fell in the war and Nursi was captured by the Russians. He was taken to the province of Kostroma in northwestern Russia.⁷⁷ After two years in captivity, Nursi took the opportunity of the chaos caused by the Communist Revolution and fled. Nursi returned to Istanbul via Petersburg, Warsaw, Berlin and Vienna.⁷⁸ Following his arrival in Istanbul, Nursi was appointed as the member of a *Darü'l-Hikmeti'l-Islamiye* (The Academy of Higher Islamic Studies).⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Turner and Horkuc, 16.

⁷⁵ Vahide (2005), 101.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 111.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 125.

⁷⁸ Turner&Horkuc, 17.

⁷⁹ The *Darü'l-Hikmeti'l-Islamiye* was a leading institution founded to find solutions to the problems facing the Muslim world and to respond to attacks upon it; to disseminate publications informing the people of

2 The New Said

While in Istanbul, Nursi supported the National Independence groups led by Mustafa Kemal. He was invited to Ankara by Mustafa Kemal following the victory of the National Army in the War of Independence. The Grand National Assembly gave Nursi an official welcome on November 9, 1922. In Ankara, Nursi was deeply disappointed with the situation after observing that the government was pursuing the politics of secularization, a pursuit that has been described in the following terms: “Atheistic ideas of philosophic materialism were being propagated, and deputies were demonstrating a lax attitude towards Islam and their religious obligations.”⁸⁰ However, Nursi’s dream regarding the New Republic was rather different when he was in Istanbul, describing the time as “The beginning of a new era and exactly the time to marshal their forces to make the new Republic the means for bringing about a renaissance of Islam and Islamic civilization, and make it a centre and source of support for the Islamic world.”⁸¹ Although Nursi was disappointed with the collapse of the Empire, he still had a hope in the New Republic that it would base its policies on Islamic principles. However, Nursi did not see any tendency towards Islam in Ankara. Nursi met Mustafa Kemal and warned him about this situation. It is not clear when exactly the period of the New Said started; however, it is obvious that the process began several years before Nursi’s time in Ankara. According

Turkey concerning their religious duties; and to uphold Islamic morality. Branches were opened in all provinces and major towns. Its members included Mehmed Akif, its first Secretary (Bas katip); Izmirli Ismail Hakkı; Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır; Mustafa Sabri Efendi; and Saadettin Pasha. All of them were prominent religious scholars; the members were divided into three committees: jurisprudence (*fiqh*), ethics (*akhlak*), and theology (*kalam*).

⁸⁰ Turner and Horkuc, 21.

⁸¹ Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati* (Istanbul: Nesil Publication, 1996), 2138.

to Abu-Rabi', Nursi's meeting with Kemal Ataturk is the moment that Nursi's transformation from Old Said to New Said phase became apparent:

This is, perhaps, the most momentous event in Nursi's life after his conversion to the 'New Said' several years before. He began to realize more acutely than ever before that Turkey was indeed at the crossroads, and that the political leadership of the Turkish nation represented by Ataturk and by his ideological cohorts was more determined than ever to get rid of the Shari'ah as the source of governing, and to pave the way for Turkey to follow a strict secular and Westernized path that would disavow its past identity. This discovery was appalling, to say the least, and confirmed Said's long-held suspicion that the intention of the new leadership was to kill the Islamic spirit of the Turkish nation.⁸²

Seeing the situation in Ankara, Nursi realized that the Old Said's method did not work to uphold the basic tenets of Islam against atheism and materialism. He understood that more innovative method were necessary for the new period. Thus, he left Ankara for Van in April 1923.⁸³

In Van, at this time, Nursi was not involved in politics. He gave up the Old Said's method. He devoted most of his time to contemplation. He preached on fundamentals of belief rather than on political and social events and developments. Nursi no longer envisioned politics as the means to revive Islam and society.⁸⁴

It is important to note that at this time the Eastern province was not very stable. Some of the Kurdish chiefs and shaykhs were not pleased with the government of the Committee of Union and Progress or with some of its members, who were known as irreligious and secularist among the people of the region. Receiving foreign support, several revolts occurred as a result including the uprising of Shaikh Said in 1925. Nursi

⁸² Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' (ed.), *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 64.

⁸³ Vahide (2005), 173.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 177-78.

refused to participate in any of these revolts. He did not want to draw his sword against his Muslim brothers.⁸⁵ Although Nursi did not take part in the revolts, he was later on accused of having conspired with the rebels. He was taken to Istanbul and questioned about the revolt. Nursi was sent to exile in Burdur, a small town in south-western Anatolia. This was the beginning of 30 years of exile and imprisonment in different parts of Turkey authorized by the new government.⁸⁶ Nursi's exile and imprisonment period gave birth to his magnum opus, the *Risale-i Nur* collection. In his writings Nursi developed new applications for classic Islamic principles in order to provide timely explanations and solutions for the challenges the Muslim community faced. In the light of the Qur'an, he explained a wide range of topics such as the existence of God, the hereafter, prophethood, jihad, and angels.

3 Conclusion

This chapter discusses the social and political environment in which Nursi spent his formative years. These years can be summarized as follows: First, Nursi's years of formation coincided with the dying years of the Ottoman State. Like many other intellectuals of the Empire, Nursi sought solutions to save the Empire. He started with his own region and proposed a project in order to enact some reforms in the traditional schools of the Eastern province of the Empire. However, he was not able to fulfill this dream. Second, Nursi cooperated with the Young Turks who initially believed that to save the Empire, some reforms must be made which should be in accordance with Islamic principles. Later on, the Young Turks turned their back to religion and embraced

⁸⁵ Ibid., 181-82.

⁸⁶ Turner and Horkuc, 22.

secularization and westernization. They could not prevent the collapse of the Empire either. This was Nursi's second disappointment. Third, Nursi took part in the National Independence Movement and supported the establishment of the New Republic. He hoped that the leaders of the New Modern Turkey would take Islamic principles as a base for the new state; however this did not happen either. A secular state, which did not tolerate Islam, emerged.

As outlined previously, although the young Said was active at different stages, his life was full of disappointments. Particularly after his visit to Ankara, he understood that in order to efficiently deal with the problems of the *ummah* a new approach was necessary. This is also the occasion on which the New Said became visible. In the New Said period, Nursi developed a new method through his new Qur'anic commentary, the *Risale-i Nur*, in which he explains the truths of religion of Islam according to the mentality of modern man. This marked also a new direction in the technique of preaching which focused more on a text-based method. Although Nursi addressed a wide range of subjects in his commentary, our focus will be his new interpretation of jihad and the ethics of non-violence, the subject of the next chapter. First, however, the chapter will begin by introducing Rene Girard's Mimetic Desire and Scapegoating Mechanism theory in order to analyze Nursi's thought in its light.

CHAPTER THREE

Said Nursi's Ethics of Non-Violence

This chapter aims to discuss Nursi's ethics of non-violence in the light of French philosopher Rene Girard's Mimetic Scapegoating Mechanism theory. It shall argue that within Nursi's understanding of non-violence, a new scapegoat was identified. During the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the decline of Muslim practice in the modern period, some segments of the Muslim community labeled non-Muslims as scapegoats in their attempt to find explanations for the various predicaments in the Muslim world. For instance, this becomes very evident in the writings of Sayyid Qutb.

In other words, Nursi formulates a new notion of enemy. The enemies are not visible and tangible anymore; rather they are invisible and abstract. The enemies are primarily ignorance, unbelief, hatred, and conflict. Although these concepts are promoted by individuals or certain groups, Nursi does not direct his criticism to personalities or factions of society. His intellectual endeavor concentrates on the content and results of these ideas rather than on the sources.

Before moving onto Nursi's view on non-violence, I shall begin with a brief sketch of the mimetic theory as presented in the work of Girard and will then examine Nursi's ideas on non-violence in the light of Girard's scapegoat theory. The last section concentrates on a detailed analysis of the Qur'anic themes on which Nursi's concept of non-violence is grounded. It will be evident that his notion of a "spiritual or metaphorical jihad" is drawn from his fundamental belief of these much deeper underlying Qur'anic principles.

1 Rene Girard and the Mimetic Theory

Religion is considered to be the antithesis of violence by many people. It has been a force for peace and social justice. The Ten Commandments, which have been the moral foundation for many of the world's religions, disallow murder and violence. The Hebrew Bible of the Jewish tradition, the New Testament of Christianity, and the Qur'an of Islam have verses that are critical of violence, and stand on the side of the weak and powerless. They regard life as a way of love, compassion, and tranquility. Despite this aspect of religion, one might also look from an opposite angle. As Elsie Boulding rightly points out, there is a duality in religious life. It moves between peace and holy war.⁸⁷ Some questions therefore remain: If religion has the potential to promote peace, why is it also frequently related to violence? Why is the sacred involved in violence? Why does killing sometimes become a sacred duty on behalf of religion?

There have been various approaches in order to answer these questions. Among them is French philosopher Rene Girard's psychological perspective. Girard wrote a great deal on the origin of violence and its relationship with the sacred. Among his most influential books are *Violence and the Sacred* and *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, in which he discusses the relationship between religion and violence.⁸⁸ Although Girard's academic background lies in French literature, the major influence from his writings has been on the origins of violence.

Girard begins with "acquisitive mimesis." This is the core of his theory. He regards violence as the result of envy and jealousy – emotions that he labels "mimetic

⁸⁷ Elsie Boulding, "Two Cultures of Religion," *Zygon* 21, no. 4 (1986): 501-516.

⁸⁸ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1977). See also *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1987).

desire.”⁸⁹ Much of human behavior, Girard states, is based on “mimetic desire” which is a broad appearance of imitation. The focal point of this desire is attainment and appropriation as the object of mimesis.⁹⁰ Girard mentions as an example two people who desire to obtain the same object. Both of them attempt to possess only the one object. Since there is merely a single object, their conduct leads them to conflictual behavior. This, Girard believes, is where the violence starts: “Violence is generated by this process; or rather, violence is the process itself when two or more partners try to prevent one another from appropriating the object they all desire through physical or other means.”⁹¹

Conflictual behavior drives society into danger. The initial object that was desired was lost; hence, the situation would lead society into division. The conflictual behavior becomes a mimetic desire and transfers to other generations. Here, according to Girard, an inescapable remedy called “the scapegoat mechanism” steps in. This mechanism, Girard states, is created by society’s unconscious search for a victim, a scapegoat. Although the victim is innocent, the society believes in the scapegoat’s guilt. Then a punishment follows that is either killing or exiling the victim. Through this scapegoat mechanism society is reunified.⁹²

Although Girard’s theory does not have a theological foundation, he speaks of religion to a great extent when it comes to the scapegoat mechanism. Particularly when speaking of Judaism and Christianity, Girard argues that religion has supported the scapegoat mechanism. “Sacrificial rites,” for instance, have played a significant role in

⁸⁹ Girard (1977), 143-168.

⁹⁰ Rene Girard, “Mimesis and Violence: Perspectives in Cultural Criticism” in *Berkshire Review 14* (1979): 9-19.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Rene Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 66-67 and 72.

this mechanism and are critical to avoiding war and violence. The classical example of a sacrificial rite is the killing of the scapegoat as part of the ancient Israelite Yom Kippur ritual. It is portrayed in the Hebrew Bible in the Book of Leviticus (16:2-30). The story goes as follows: One male goat was chosen by the high priest during the holiest service of the Jewish year in the Jerusalem temple to serve as atonement for the sins of community. After a complex ritual in the temple, the selected sacrificial goat was sent off to the Judean desert, where it was thrown from a cliff to its death. When news of death reached the temple, the high priest announced that all sins for that past year were forgiven, and the masses congregated in the temple precincts rejoiced and celebrated their good fortune.⁹³ According to Girard, the scapegoat ritual serves as an outlet for the collective anger and aggression that accumulates in social settings and, if expressed within the group, would destroy the social order. The purpose of the ritual is to “purify” violence; which is, to “trick” violence into spending itself on victims whose death will not inflame any act of vengeance.⁹⁴

As a progressive revelation, Girard explains, the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament endeavor to take the people away from a sacrificial religion. The biblical spirit which reveals the truth of violent origins, takes the side of the victim, and strives to overcome scapegoating as a possible means of social formation.⁹⁵ He goes further and argues that the crucifixion of Jesus dismantled the scapegoat mechanism: “It is because God knew beforehand that at the right time Christ would overcome his adversary by dying on the cross. God in his wisdom had foreseen since the beginning that the victim

⁹³ Charles Selengut, *Sacred Fury: Understanding Religious Violence*, (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2003), 52.

⁹⁴ Girard (1977), 36.

⁹⁵ Micheal Kirman, *Discovering Girard* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 2005), 63.

mechanism would be reversed like a glove, exposed, placed in the open, stripped naked, and dismantled.”⁹⁶ The following examination shall discuss Nursi’s approach to violence within the framework of Girard’s theory.

1.1 Said Nursi and the Mimetic Scapegoat Mechanism

Nursi lived in a time when the term *jihad* was intensely and continuously utilized in Western journalism and polemic to describe annihilation, violent seizure, and various other brutalities attributed to Muslim extremists during the 19th century confrontations with Western sovereignties in the Balkans, Greece, Armenia, Anatolia, Syria and Lebanon.⁹⁷ Not only Westerners, but also some intellectuals within the Ottoman State who were highly critical of Islam because of *jihad* took part in this polemic. Abdullah Cevdet, for instance, had proposed Baha’ism as an alternative to the problem of *jihad*.⁹⁸

Nursi was well cognizant of the fact that a new interpretation of *jihad* was crucial. It is essential to mention that he accepts that the sword historically played a significant role in order to spread Islam.⁹⁹ However, he is not apologetic when it comes to this matter. For Nursi, using sword and force, traditionally part of ordinary life, should be considered within the context of the time: “In former times, that is, when savagery prevailed, force and compulsion ruled in the world, which are the product of savagery and doomed to decline and extinction.”¹⁰⁰ While Nursi admits that violence has been part

⁹⁶ Girard (2001), 151.

⁹⁷ S. Abdullah Schleifer, “Jihad: Modernist Apologists, Modern Apologetics,” *The Islamic Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1984), 26-27.

⁹⁸ For more details see the first part of chapter two

⁹⁹ Nursi, *Hutbe-i Samiye in İlk Donem Eserleri* (Istanbul: Soz Publication, 2009), 556.

¹⁰⁰ Nursi, *Divan-i Harbi Orfi in İlk Donem Eserleri* (Istanbul: Soz Publication, 2009), 427.

of the Islamic history, he states that it was the product of savagery. Nursi also acknowledges that non-Muslims were historically considered a threat or enemies by Muslims. They were the main object of the scapegoating mechanism. This became obvious in Nursi's writing when he was asked whether the Christians and Jews should be taken as friends. This question was referring to a Qur'anic verse which discourages Muslims from taking Christians and Jews as friends.¹⁰¹ In reply Nursi wrote:

A mighty religious revolution occurred in the time of the Prophet, and because all the people's minds revolved around religion, love and hatred were concentrated on that point and they loved or hated accordingly. For this reason, love for non-Muslims inferred dissembling. But now ... what preoccupy people's minds are progress and this world... In any event most of them are not so bound to their religions. In which case, our being friendly to them springs from our admiration for their civilization and progress, and our borrowing these. Such friendship is certainly not included in the Qur'anic prohibition.¹⁰²

Nursi admits that non-Muslims were considered a threat during the Prophet's time. The establishment of the new religion was the most important issue for them and their minds were entirely occupied with it. However, humanity does not face such an issue anymore. All faith traditions are now well-established and rooted, Nursi believes. The modern time differs from the Prophet's time to the extent that people's minds are not solely occupied with religion any more. What occupies the modern mind are more worldly matters; people are not as strongly attached to religion as had been the case in the past. The Qur'anic prohibition, therefore, only refers to a particular historical setting.

As shown above, Nursi makes a clear distinction between the modern time and the past when it comes to this particular verse. It is important to note that Nursi was well-

¹⁰¹ The verse goes like this: "O believers do not take the Jews and the Christians as friends; some of them are friends of each other. Whoever of you takes them as friends is surely one of them. Allah indeed does not guide the wrongdoers." Qur'an 5:51

¹⁰² Nursi, *Munazarat*, in *Ilk Donem Eserleri* (Istanbul: Soz Publication, 2009), 483-84.

aware of the role of the mimetic desire in Islam, for imitation of tradition is the essence of Islam for its followers. A Qur’anic story might be considered in the context of jealousy and the mimetic desire. According to the story Adam had two sons. Their names were Habil¹⁰³ and Qabil.¹⁰⁴ Each of them presented a sacrifice to God. Habil’s sacrifice was accepted by God while Qabil’s was not. Therefore, Qabil became jealous of his brother and murdered him.¹⁰⁵ The envy Qabil felt against his brother led him to apply violence. Additionally, the way the Prophet, his companions, and the great leaders in the history of Islam interpreted and practiced *jihad* has been significant for Muslims. They have had the tendency to imitate their examples. One may argue that Nursi wants to break this chain of imitation of *jihad* in the history of Islam. He wants, therefore, to dismantle the scapegoat mechanism in Islam in which non-Muslims have become the main object.

Nursi also accepts the fact that human beings’ desire of violence (*kuvve-i gadabiye*) could be destructive: “a person would like to destroy everything he can, even the entire world when seen as an obstacle for his desire and greed.”¹⁰⁶ For Nursi, by following this desire, tyrants like Pharaoh, Nimrod, and Shaddad emerged in history.¹⁰⁷ One might add Hitler to this category, too. Nursi believes that Islam changes this destructive habit into tenderness. He gives an example from Arab society: “Yes the Arabs whose hardness of heart caused them to bury their female children alive, through Islam their hearts were cleaned and waxed to the extent that they became so sensitive toward creatures, that it prevented them from stepping on even ants.”¹⁰⁸ Like Girard, Nursi

¹⁰³ In the English Bible, Abel.

¹⁰⁴ In the English Bible, Cain.

¹⁰⁵ Qur’an 5:27 and Beyzavi, vol. 263.

¹⁰⁶ Nursi, *Muhakemat* in *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati II*, (Istanbul: Nesil Publications, 1996), 2032.

¹⁰⁷ Nursi, *Mesnevi-i Nuriye*, (Istanbul: Soz Publication, 2009), 261.

¹⁰⁸ Nursi, *Muhakemat* (1996), 2032.

believes that religion forms a mechanism which controls or changes the course of violence. Finally, Nursi was well aware of the rapid globalization of the world as is reflected by his statement that the world has become like a small village.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, he sensed that a new interpretation of *jihad* was crucial. Nursi underlines that Muslims are now in a different period of time and civilization in which science and knowledge should rule the world rather than force and compulsion.¹¹⁰ Additionally, by drawing attention to rapid globalization, one might argue that Nursi foresaw that homogenous societies will not exist in the near future. The circulation between the adherents of different religions and ethnicities has never been so easy. For Nursi, therefore, a new theology of *jihad* that pursues harmony and coexistence was essential. As will be analyzed in the next section, his new interpretation was intended to be capable of coping with the challenges of modernity.

2 Said Nursi's Conceptualization of an Ethics of Non-Violence

In his new interpretation of *jihad* Nursi identifies new elements as scapegoats, and thus essentially shifts away from the idea of conceiving the West or non-Muslims as enemies. Particular individuals and groups are not to be perceived as overarching threats; rather, Nursi draws attention to global enemies which concern each and every group and each and every individual. His pietist/quietist understanding of *jihad* is grounded in deeper underlying major Qur'anic themes, as the following analysis will make evident. Though Nursi himself does not explicitly state how and on what basis he constructs his

¹⁰⁹ Nursi, *Mesnevi-i Nuriye* (2009), 163.

¹¹⁰ Nursi, *Hutbe-i Samiye* (2009), 556.

notion of *jihad*, his thought, particularly during the New Said period, is generally rooted in a Scriptural framework. He himself states that he takes the Qur'an as his sole teacher.¹¹¹

2.1 The Sacred Nature of Human Beings

Nursi begins with the fundamental belief that every human being was created by God and thus obtained the highest value and deserves appreciation. Every individual is sacred on account of being a manifestation of God's most beautiful names and attributes (*al-asma al-husna*). The Qur'an employs this term several times and no matter what the discussion is, almost every verse refers the conversation back to God by mentioning a pair of divine attributes. The theology of the Divine names is a major theme in the Qur'anic world.

With respect to that, every person is a reflection of God's qualities and a unique combination of these divine characteristics. Nursi explains that every person desires to watch, show and enjoy his/her skills. In the same way, as he concludes in his analogy, God wants to watch the beauty of his attributes in his creatures.¹¹² Every individual is a mirror of these attributes and, therefore, sacred. Nursi states that there are two ways of looking at the creatures of God. The first one is "self-referential" (*ma'na-i ismi*). From this perspective one regards the creatures as they indicate their own existence. Their divine origin is not recognized. The second one is "other-indicative" (*ma'na-i harfi*). From this point of view all beings carry various signs pointing to their Creator. Nursi strongly encourages people to look at the creatures from the latter perspective, the 'other-

¹¹¹ Nursi, *Mektubat*, (Istanbul: Soz Publication, 2009), 496.

¹¹² Nursi, *Sualar*, (Istanbul: Soz Publication, 2009), 118.

indicative', on account of their Maker.¹¹³ If you want to show your amazement, Nursi states, say "how beautifully they have been made! How exquisitely they point to their Maker's beauty!"¹¹⁴ He discourages people from saying "how beautiful they are" when they look at the creatures of God. For him, the Maker should always be taken into consideration.¹¹⁵ The simple but fundamental fact that human beings are created by God and are embodiments of his beautiful names does not leave room to apply any violence to human beings. Such a crime would mean a denial and rejection of God's beautiful art. Regardless of ethnicity or nationality, every human being is a mirror of the Creator and cannot be the object of the violent scapegoat mechanism.

2.2 The Qur'anic Prohibition of "No soul shall bear the burden of another soul"

Another crucial element in his advocacy of non-violence is his interpretation of the following Qur'anic verse: "No soul shall bear the burden of another soul."¹¹⁶ Nursi refers to this single verse more than a dozen times in his writings. According to him, no one is allowed to judge anybody because of another person's shortcomings. The faults or mistakes of an individual cannot be taken over by somebody else. Consequently, no one can be a scapegoat for another's crime. Nursi alludes to this principle by drawing an example of a ship. If there are, for instance, nine passengers on this ship who committed serious crimes and one innocent person, this would not justify burning or sinking the

¹¹³ Nursi, *The Words*, trans. Vahide, (Istanbul: Sozler Publication, 2004), 145.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Qur'an 17:15, Qur'an 6:164, Qur'an 35:18, Qur'an 39:7.

ship. The goal does not justify the means of killing an innocent person.¹¹⁷ In this context it is important to mention that Nursi always attempts to employ his principle of “absolute justice” (*adalet-i mahza*) instead of “relative justice” (*adalet-i izafiye*).¹¹⁸ In a society in which perfect justice flourishes an innocent person cannot be chosen as a scapegoat to be sacrificed for the whole community.¹¹⁹ Within this context, Nursi closes the doors particularly for self-declared militant jihadists who commit violent acts against innocent civilians. Based on this Qur’anic prohibition, neighbors, relatives and fellow human beings in general cannot be accountable for another person’s evil acts. The individuality of a crime needs to be considered.¹²⁰ Consequently, collective punishment can never be an option.

Nursi refrains from designating particular individuals as enemies. Instead, the enemies he defines have a unifying component. Nursi attempts to bring different fragments of society together and calls for a unity of forces in order to fight those threats collectively. Nursi is aware of the mimetic desire in human nature and therefore develops a new concept of enemy. The scapegoats are not non-Muslims; rather, the ever present enemies are ignorance, conflict, poverty and unbelief.

3 The New Scapegoats

3.1 Jihad against Ignorance

¹¹⁷ Nursi, *Emirdag Lahikası II*, in *Risale-i Nur Kulliyatı II*, (Istanbul: Nesil Publications, 1996), 1882.

¹¹⁸ Nursi, *Sunuhat* (2009), 320.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1844.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

In Nursi's thought, one of the new objects to be targeted is ignorance, prevalent not only in non-Muslim but also Muslim communities. It will be combated by promoting learning.¹²¹ Nursi bases this interpretation on two sayings (*hadith*)¹²² of the Prophet Muhammad: "The ink of scholars will have the same value of as the blood of martyrdoms on the Day of Judgment,"¹²³ and "during the time of the innovations and aberrations those who follow my *sunna* (the way of the Prophet of Islam) and the truth of the Qur'an, their deeds are the equivalent of one hundreds martyrs."¹²⁴ Here, Nursi draws attention to a new concept of martyrdom which is not obtained through physical combat, but rather by pursuing knowledge. This new kind of jihad is termed by Nursi as "spiritual or metaphorical jihad" (*cihad-i manevi*). He did not approve using force as means to spread Islam. Reflecting on the verse of "Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful discourse and debate with them in the best way"¹²⁵ in the Qur'an, Nursi regarded intellectual persuasion by word and tongue as the most influential way of teaching. In a civilized world, Nursi believes, the following method should be used: "the way to defeat civilized people is the way of persuasion, and not the way of force, which is applied to those people who don't understand words."¹²⁶

3.2 Jihad against Unbelief and Conflict

¹²¹ Nursi, *Divan-i Harb-i Orfi* (2009), 396.

¹²² A hadith is a report of the sayings or actions of the Prophet Muhammad. Hadith collections are considered the most important source after the Qur'an for Islamic practice and law.

¹²³ Suyuti, *Camii's-Sagir*, no: 1006; el-Acluni, *Keshfu'l-Hafa* 2: 261 cited in Nursi, *Emirdag Lahikasi I* (Istanbul: Soz Publication, 2009), 246.

¹²⁴ al-Munzere, *at-Targeb wa Tarheb*, 1:41; Tabarane, *al-Macmau'l-Kaber*, 1394, cited in Nursi, *Emirdag Lahikasi I* (Istanbul: Soz Publication, 2009), 246.

¹²⁵ Qur'an 16:24

¹²⁶ Nursi, "Hakikat," *Dini Ceride*, no:70, Mart 1909 in Nursi, *Tarihce-i Hayat*, (Istanbul: Soz Publication, 2009), 77.

Combating aggressive atheism and irreligion is also a *jihad* for Nursi. However, he does not approve violence by any means in order to achieve this goal. As Vahide rightly puts it, Nursi emphasizes a peaceful way of combating unbelief:

[T]he way of the *Risale-i Nur* was peaceful jihad or ‘jihad of the word’ (ma’nevî *jihad*) in the struggle against aggressive atheism and irreligion. By working solely for the spread and strengthening of belief, it was to work also for the preservation of internal order and peace and stability in society in the face of the moral and spiritual destruction of communism and the forces of irreligion which aimed to destabilize society and create anarchy, and to form “a barrier” against them.¹²⁷

By condemning the *jihad* of the sword or military *jihad*, Nursi positioned peaceful struggle in the center of his writings. He constantly encouraged his students to promote peace and harmony in the society. Nursi called this manner positive action (*musbet hareket*): “Our duty is ‘positive action,’ not ‘negative action.’ It is solely to serve belief [in the truths of religion] in accordance with divine pleasure, and not to interfere in God's concerns... The positive service to belief, which results in the preservation of public order and security...”¹²⁸ In another letter Nursi writes to his students that “the most important duty of the *Risale-i Nur* students at this time is taking *taqwa*¹²⁹ as the basis of their actions against the moral destruction...”¹³⁰ Nursi does not leave room for conflict which might lead to disorder, chaos and anarchy and, therefore, contradicts God’s order and unity.

To illumine his principle of positive action a bit further it is worth looking into a particular scene in Nursi’s life. Several years after World War I, Nursi returned to Van. He visited his *medrese* and saw that just like the other buildings in the city, it had been

¹²⁷ Sukran Vahide, *Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: the author of the Risale-i Nur* (Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 1992), 352.

¹²⁸ Nursi, *Emirdag Lahikası II* (Istanbul: Soz Publication, 2009), 630.

¹²⁹ *Taqwa* means abstaining from sin and what is prohibited and acting within the bounds of good works.

¹³⁰ Nursi, *Kastamonu Lahikası*, (Istanbul: Soz Publication, 2009), 186.

completely destroyed by the Armenians during the Russian occupation. He began to remember his friends, brothers, and close students who had studied in his *medrese*. Most of them had lost their lives in the war and recalling the past events made Nursi cry. He wrote down his feelings as follows: “Then I understood that I could not endure this exile in my native land. I thought that I would either have to join them in the grave, or withdraw into a cave in the mountains and await my death there.”¹³¹ He then reflects on one of the verses in the Qur’an, “Whatever is in the heavens and on earth, let it declare the praises and glory of God; for He is Exalted in Might, the Wise. To Him belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth: it is He Who gives life and death; and He has power over all things.”¹³² This verse helped Nursi to find a way out from such a desolate situation. He saw that the fruits at the tops of the fruit-trees were looking at him smiling and saying “note us as well. Do not only look at the ruins.”¹³³ The reality depicted by the verses brought the following thought to his mind:

Why does an artificial letter written in the form of a town by the hand of man, who is a guest on the page of Van’s plain, being wiped out by a calamitous torrent called the Russian invasion sadden you to this extent? Consider the Pre-Eternal Inscraper, everything’s True Owner and Sustainer, for His missives on this page of Van continue to be written in glittering fashion, in the way you used to see. Your weeping over those desolate ruins arises from the error of forgetting their True Owner, not thinking that men are guests, and imagining them to be owner.”¹³⁴

This particular very emotional moment in Nursi’s life makes evident how seriously he implemented this notion of positive action into his own life. No matter how disastrous

¹³¹ Nursi, *Flashes*, Trans. Sukran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 2004), 316.

¹³² Qur’an 57:1-2

¹³³ Nursi, *Flashes* (2004), 317.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

and hopeless a situation, Nursi does not allow himself to looking for a scapegoat or to blame others. He held strongly to positive action even within moments of absolute despair and desolation.

Nursi's answer to the question of why the Muslim world was facing so many calamities, including the defeat in World War I, is also worth reflecting on while analyzing his view on positive action. He stated that God asked the believers to spend one hour a day in ritual prayer but instead they were overcome by laziness and did not fulfill it. However, through military drills and hardships God made them pray. Furthermore, God asked the pious to fast one month a year, but instead the command was ignored. God asked for giving the obligatory alms-tax (*zakat*) but people disobeyed. Therefore, God took all the charities that the believers were supposed to give.¹³⁵ As becomes clear, Nursi did not have the tendency to blame anyone or to assign guilt to particular groups even when faced with defeat in one of the most destructive wars. For him, the people who defeated the Muslims were not the scapegoats for the problem. Rather, the reasons for the defeats and all calamities were the Muslims themselves.

3.3 Compassion vs. Hatred

Nursi believed that human beings have the potential to be destructive and hateful. He argues that what is most worthy of being hated is hatred itself. This is the

¹³⁵ Nursi, *Sunuhat in İlk Donem Eserleri*, (Istanbul: Soz Publication, 2009), 345.

entity on which human anger should be directed. His motto is ‘love love and hate hatred’:

What I am certain of from my experience of social life and have learnt from my life-time of study is the following: the thing most worthy of love is love, and that most deserving of enmity is enmity. That is, love and loving, which renders man’s social life secure and lead to happiness are most worthy of love and being loved. Enmity and hostility are ugly and damaging, have overturned man’s social life, and more than anything deserve loathing and enmity and to be shunned.¹³⁶

Nursi names enmity, hostility, and hatred as scapegoats to be hated. He states that “we are the competitors of love; we have no time for enmity.”¹³⁷ Another concept that Nursi very much focuses on is compassion. Compassion is an important aspect of Nursi’s thought. If one encounters an enemy or a person who has shortcomings, the way of approaching such a person is by means of compassion rather than hatred, as he states in the following, “They [students of the *Risale-i Nur*] feel not anger at their enemies, but pity and compassion. They try to reform them in the hope they shall be saved.”¹³⁸ Compassion is a highly significant faculty in the hearts of human beings, as Nursi claims. If respect and compassion are taken out of human hearts, “reason and intellect would make human beings such horrible and cruel monsters to the extent that they would not be able to be ruled by politics anymore.”¹³⁹

There are several occasions in Nursi’s life that clearly reflect his compassionate attitude. One event occurred during his years in the prison in Denizli, a city in the southwestern part of Turkey. According to Suleyman Hunkar, one of Nursi’s students

¹³⁶ Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, Trans. Sukran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 1996), 49.

¹³⁷ Nursi, *Divan-ı Harb-i Örfî*, in *İlk Donem Eserleri* (Istanbul: Soz Publication, 2009), 426.

¹³⁸ Nursi, *The Rays*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 2004), 290.

¹³⁹ Nursi, *Sualar in Risale-i Nur Kulliyati I* (Istanbul: Nesil Publications, 1996), 888.

who spent time with him in Denizli, there were around 350-400 prisoners and most of them were guilty of murder. The rest were imprisoned either because of criminal activities or attempted murder. There were always fights and quarrels among the prisoners which often ended in violence. Hunkar narrates that from 1939, the year when he was put in the prison, until 1943, 18 people were killed.¹⁴⁰ In 1943 Nursi, along with 126 of his students, were put in the same prison in Denizli. According to Hunkar, Nursi had such an impact on the prisoners that they made a remarkable personal transformation. Even those who committed crimes of murder were hesitant to kill little insects out of their new understanding of compassion and love for God's creatures, as one account tells.¹⁴¹

Another incident highlighting his great compassion even for his oppressors happened during Nursi's years in the prison of Afyon, a city in the western part of Turkey. The winter season in Afyon is known for being very harsh and cold. As Sabri Halici, one of Nursi's close students and fellow prisoners recalls, Nursi was intentionally put into a room which had no window so that he would eventually die due to the severe cold. Nursi himself admitted that he could not bear this torture anymore and was about to curse the prosecutor. Halici narrates the story as follows: Nursi told me that "the prosecutor intentionally put me in this room so that I could die. I cannot stand this oppression anymore and I shall imprecate him." He then raised his hands, while he realized a little girl was passing by the window. Nursi asked me "Do you know this girl?" I said that "she is the prosecutor's daughter." Once he knew that she was the prosecutor's daughter he ceased imprecating him. Nursi, then, said "I am concerned that

140 Necmettin Şahiner, "Suleyman Hunkar Maddesi" in *Son Şahitler II* (Istanbul: Yeni Asya Publications, 1981), 268-73.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

later on, the girl will cry and ask what happened to her father.”¹⁴² This was Nursi’s way of compassion. He even had pity for his oppressors.

The final example stems from the period of the Old Said. During the Russian occupation in the Eastern province of the Ottoman Empire, Armenians were attacking villages like Ispart, a place close to Nursi’s hometown of Nurs. The forces Nursi was leading were able to suppress the Armenians forces. Nursi gathered the Armenian women and children in the area and handed them over to the Armenian forces.¹⁴³ In a time of major upheavals and tensions between Muslims and Armenians in the region, Nursi did not take the opportunity to kill innocent Armenian civilians. According to Abdurrahman, the author of Nursi’s biography (*Tarihce-i Hayat*), the Armenians were so impressed by his compassionate behavior that they refrained from killing innocent civilians on the enemy side.¹⁴⁴

So far, one can observe how Nursi made a shift in the scapegoat mechanism. He defined new objects of the mechanism such as ignorance, conflict, hatred and unbelief. For him, these are the real enemies in the era of civilization. Using force and sword in order to elevate the religion of Islam is no longer valid; instead, persuasion and communication by means of intellectual endeavors need to be considered. Compassion and loving create the core elements of his new method. In that regard, Nursi’s view on non-Muslims, particularly Christians, is worth pursuing in the following discussion. His view of Christians emphasizes the fact that he refrained from targeting particular groups

¹⁴² Omer Ozcan, “Said Ozdemir Maddesi” in *Risale-i Nur Hizmetkarlari Agabeyler Anlatiyor* III (Istanbul: Nesil Publications, 2009).

¹⁴³ Abdurrahman, *Tarihce-i Hayat*, 36 cited in Vahide (2005), 116-17.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

but instead promoted a unity of forces of the two major traditions of Islam and Christianity.

4 Nursi's View of Christians

Nursi states that there is a distinction between one's personality and his/her attributes. He states that "a person is loved not for his personhood, but for his character."¹⁴⁵ Nursi goes further and elaborates on some negative characteristics of Muslims that are not Islamic and do not deserve to be loved. He says that "it is not necessary that every attribute of every Muslim is Muslim; as it is not necessary that every attribute of every non-Muslim is non-Muslim."¹⁴⁶ Nursi does not pay attention to person per se, rather to attributes.

As outlined in the second chapter, after the declaration of the constitution (II. *Mesrutiyet*) in 1908, Nursi travelled to different parts of the Eastern Province of the Empire in order to "enlighten" people about freedom. Many tribes were concerned about the new amendments, such as the right of an Armenian to become a governor. Nursi's response is very progressive, as he did not believe that the religious affiliation of a person should be held as detrimental to their opportunities for leadership and government. At that time, he explains, "The Armenians have certain jobs such as horologer or machinist in this country; likewise they can become governors. The governors are the paid servants of the people if there is a precise constitution."¹⁴⁷ The principles based on the constitution

¹⁴⁵ Nursi, *Munazarat*, in *Ilk Donem Eserleri* (Istanbul: Soz Publication, 2009), 483.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Nursi, *Tarihce-i Hayat* (Istanbul: Soz Publication, 2009), 108. See also in *Munazarat* (2009), 478.

need to be observed and followed in any case. Again, the issue is not the person but the skills he or she reveals.

Moreover, Nursi encourages Muslims and Christians to unite their forces in order to work for social justice and combat unbelief. Immediately after World War II he stated, “believers should now unite, not only with their Muslim fellow-believers, but with truly religious and pious Christians, disregarding questions of dispute and not arguing over them, for absolute disbelief is on the attack.”¹⁴⁸ Nursi sets out a practical example for this ecumenical partnership and puts his words into action. In 1950, he sent a collection of his works to Pope Pius XII in Rome and received in reply, on 22 February 1951, a personal letter of thanks.¹⁴⁹ According to Thomas Michel, though there is no official document to prove the correspondence, the Second Vatican Council might have been inspired by Nursi’s efforts: “One observer notes that it was only little over ten years later that, at the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church proclaimed its respect and esteem for Muslims and asserted that Islam was a genuine path of salvation.”¹⁵⁰ Nursi also visited the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras in Istanbul in 1953 in order to seek cooperation between Muslims and Christians against aggressive atheism.¹⁵¹

Nursi considered Christians an ally instead of a threat or target. He believed that humanity was facing a different age; therefore the perception of non-Muslims should be changed. As referred in the beginning of this chapter, Said Nursi attempted to dismantle the object of the scapegoat mechanism while interpreting the Qur’anic verse of “O you

¹⁴⁸ Nursi, *Emirda Lahikasi I*, (Istanbul: Soz Publication, 2009), 265.

¹⁴⁹ Nursi, *Emirdag Lahikasi II*, (Istanbul: Soz Publication, 2009), 433.

¹⁵⁰ Thomas Michel, *Said Nursi’s Views on Muslim-Christian Understanding*, (Istanbul: Soz Publication, 2005), 36.

¹⁵¹ Sahiner, *Bilinmeyen Taraflariyla Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (6th Ed.), (Istanbul: Yeni Asya Publications, 1988), 405.

who believe! Do not take the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors.”¹⁵² He states that during the Prophet’s time people’s minds were very much occupied with religion, therefore “love and hatred were concentrated on that point and they loved or hated accordingly.”¹⁵³ However, what occupies people’s minds today in the present world are more worldly affairs. As he says, “Our friendship with Christians is because of our admiration for their civilization and progress. Therefore such friendship is certainly not included in the Qur’anic prohibition.”¹⁵⁴ Then he draws to a more nuanced understanding of religious believers, “Just as not all of the characteristics of an individual Muslim necessarily reflect the teaching of Islam, so also, not all of the qualities of individual Jews and Christians reflect unbelief.”¹⁵⁵ If Muslims find in a Jew or Christian qualities that are in agreement with Islamic teaching, they should consider these qualities praiseworthy. It is those good qualities that form the basis for a friendship with Jews and Christians. Nursi, then, asks the question “Can a Muslim love a Christian or Jew?” In reply he states, if a Muslim man is married to a woman of the People of Book, “Of Course,” he should love her.¹⁵⁶ As Michel rightly states, “Nursi’s argument is that the very fact that the Qur’an permits a Muslim man to marry a Jewish or Christian woman presumes that he can and should love her.”¹⁵⁷ It is also noteworthy to reflect on Nursi’s state of mind when he was grieving for the innocent Christians who lost their lives during the years of World War I. Nursi considers them to be martyrs: “[they] were martyrs of a sort, whatever religion they belonged to,” and that “their reward would be great and save them from

¹⁵² Qur’an 5:51

¹⁵³ Nursi, *Munazarat*, in *Ilk Donem Eserleri* (Istanbul: Soz Publication, 2009), 483-4.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Michel (2005), 38.

Hell.” Therefore, he concluded, “it may be said with certainty that the calamity which the oppressed among Christians suffer, those connected to Jesus ... is a sort of martyrdom for them.”¹⁵⁸

5 Conclusion

This chapter attempted to discuss Bediuzzaman Said Nursi’s view on the ethics of non-violence within the context of Rene Girard’s mimetic desire theory and its scapegoat mechanism. Girard uses a physiological approach to violence, while Nursi’s is based on a theological framework. Like Girard, Nursi believes that human nature has a tendency towards violence and imitation plays a significant role in the continuity of this violence. Nursi also accepts the fact that Muslims historically used violence, in other words, the sword, as a means to accomplish their goals. During the decline in the Islamic world, non-Muslims were seen as a threat and they became the object of the scapegoat mechanism. As stated above, in this sense Nursi is not apologetic. Physical struggle was not something peculiar to Islamic societies, but also to other societies as violence historically was part of people’s life. Therefore, the context should be taken into consideration.

Nursi believes that humanity is in a different stage of time, which is the time of civilization and knowledge. Violence cannot be used as a means anymore in order to spread Islam. He makes, therefore, a shift in the object of scapegoat mechanism. In the time of civilization, ‘persuasion’ is the most sufficient way to deal with non-Muslims. They are potential allies of Muslims in order to promote peace and justice in the world and combat unbelief. The new objects of the scapegoat mechanism are ignorance,

¹⁵⁸ Nursi, *Kastamonu Lahikası*, (Istanbul: Soz Publication, 2009), 141.

conflict, unbelief, and hatred. In other words, he develops a *jihad* against the threat of ignorance, conflict, unbelief, and hatred. He combats them with knowledge, positive action, belief, and compassion. Nursi also develops a new notion in which he values the attributes of a person, regardless of one's religious affiliation.

By contrasting and comparing Said Nursi with the Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Qutb, it will become apparent how entirely distinct Nursi's approach to violence is and how strongly Nursi's understanding promotes co-existence and harmony.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sayyid Qutb and Said Nursi – The Physical Jihad vs. Spiritual Jihad

1 Brief Comparison of Nursi's and Qutb's Biographical Background

The objective of this chapter is to compare Sayyid Qutb and Said Nursi with regard to their methods of transforming their respective societies. It will argue that although their societies faced more or less similar problems, their approaches and solutions to these problems differ. Qutb intended to change society, while Nursi targeted the individual. Beginning with a brief comparison of their biographies, the chapter shall present the problems that their societies faced and their solutions for them.

Qutb (1906-1966) and Nursi (1876-1960) were contemporaries. They were born in small villages, but had great visions for the Muslim *ummah*. Qutb studied in the United States, while Nursi traveled widely to various parts of the Ottoman Empire. This helped them realize what kind of problems the world in general and the Islamic *ummah* in particular were facing. Both were born at a time in which the Muslim world was severely declining. A personal encounter between Nursi and Qutb is not documented; however, from Nursi's writings one can come to the conclusion that at least Nursi was aware of the activities of the Muslim brotherhood (*ikhwan al-muslimin*). Moreover, the followers of Nursi and Qutb knew about each other. This becomes evident from one of Nursi's letters that an important member of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) sent to Nursi in which he congratulates Nursi on his efforts. Nursi asks his students to reply to the member of the Muslim brotherhood who was from Aleppo.¹⁵⁹ In addition, one can find a second letter in

¹⁵⁹ Nursi, *Emirdag Lahikasi II* (2009), 399.

the *Risale-i Nur* written by Isa Abdulkadir who was an editor of the Iraqi newspaper *ed-Difa* in Baghdad. The original letter was in Arabic and translated into Turkish by Nursi's students. In his piece Abdulkadir compares and contrasts the Nur Community (NC) of Said Nursi with the Muslim Brotherhood. The English translation of this article can be found at the conclusion of this chapter.

As a matter of fact, Qutb himself was not the founder of the MB, while Nursi established his own text-based social community. However, after the assassination of Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the MB, Qutb had been one of the most influential members of the MB. For further clarification, it is necessary to refer to Ibrahim Abu-Rabi's analogy.¹⁶⁰ In one of his interviews Abu-Rabi' states, "I would like to equate Qutb to Malcolm X and Hassan al-Banna to Elijah Muhammad. Many people speak about the tradition of Elijah Muhammad while reading Malcolm X or listening to his tapes. In the same vein many people speak of the tradition of Hassan al-Banna while listening to the ideas of Sayyid Qutb.¹⁶¹" While al-Banna is the founder of the movement, there is much more reference to Qutb.

Both Egyptian society and Turkish society were confronted by similar problems in the last decade of the 19th and in the first decade of the 20th century. During Nursi's formative years, there was a tremendous decline in the Empire and Nursi attempted to find solutions in order to prevent the waning of Ottoman rule in confrontation with the rapid rise of the West. The Empire broke down and the new Modern Turkey was

¹⁶⁰ Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' has been a distinguished pioneer in terms of introducing contemporary Arab Islamic thought to the English speaking world. He is the author of many books including *The Contemporary Arab Reader on Political Islam*, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History*, and *Contemporary Islamic Thought*. Abu-Rabi's *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World* is one of the most significant books to understand Qutb's thought. Abu-Rabi' is also the one who introduced Nursi to the Western audience and edited four books written on Nursi's thought.

¹⁶¹ Jean-François Mayer "Sayyid Qutb and His Influence: Interview with Professor Ibrahim Abu-Rabi'" in <http://www.religioscope.com/info/dossiers/textislamism/qutb_aburabi.htm> accessed on April 20, 2011.

established in 1923. Likewise, Qutb's homeland Egypt which was part of the Empire since the beginning of the 16th century was in decline. In 1798, Egypt was invaded by Napoleon Bonaparte's forces, though in 1801 they were repelled by British and Turkish forces. Once more, it became part of the Ottoman Empire. In 1882, the British took control of Egypt until 1922. In 1940, Italian and German troops invaded Egypt in order to capture the Suez Canal. In 1947, The United Nations voted to divide Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states. In 1948, Israel was formed which prompted Egypt and other Arab nations to go to war. In June 1953, Egypt was declared a republic. In the 1950s Egypt supported the Palestinian Arabs to regain control of Palestine from the Israelis. In October 1956, Israel invaded Egypt and occupied the Sinai Peninsula. Without the social and political context of Turkey and Egypt it would be difficult to understand Nursi and Qutb. Consequently, the social and political conditions of their societies shaped their thoughts to a great extent.

In his formative years, Nursi was primarily concerned about the existence of the Empire and sought solutions in order to keep it alive. As outlined in the second chapter, he was involved in politics and actively worked with various institutions to pursue his aims. With respect to that, he supported constitutionalism and educational reforms. The Empire, "the sick man" of Europe, collapsed and Nursi became disillusioned. The new Modern Turkey emerged from the ashes of the Empire. Nursi then tried to gain some influence in shaping the Republic of Turkey while hoping that the Republic would base its principles on Islamic values. That, however, did not happen since the Republic turned its face towards the West and secular ideas. As a result, Nursi changed his attitude from being engaged in the political sphere to strengthening the faith of individuals. This

transition is marked by Nursi as the New Said period. As the New Said, Nursi primarily focused on forming strong believers who would be able to resist the temptations and attacks of aggressive atheism, materialism and secularism. He promoted a new method and dismissed the efforts of the Old Said which he regarded later as unproductive. In his new phase, Nursi paid his whole attention to the Qur'an which he perceived as his sole master.¹⁶²

Like Nursi, Qutb had a parallel transformation in his life. In his formative years, one can characterize Qutb as a secular-literary man. He went to the Dar al-ulum in Cairo and was heavily influenced by Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad who presented his concepts of Egyptian progress and evolution in his literature.¹⁶³ In this earlier period, Qutb spoke like an Egyptian, as Abu-Rabi' explains, "Nothing better elucidates Qutb's anti-Islamic and anti-traditionalist attitude as a young critic and man of letters than two articles that he published in 1938 on the psychological underpinnings of the Arabic language. There, Qutb shows his preference for Egyptianism at the expense of both Islam and the Arabic language."¹⁶⁴ As a literary man he had a modernist approach which was against the whole of the Arab and Islamic tradition. He argued, "The ancient school is shallow in feeling, primitive in consciousness and ill-equipped psychologically and experientially, as compared to the expansive world of feeling of the modernist school and its rich psychological ammunition and existential experience."¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² Nursi, *Barla Lahikasi* (2009), 39.

¹⁶³ Ibrahim Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 96.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Qutb, "al-Dalalah al-nafsiyah li'l asalib wa'l itijahat al-hadithah" in *Sahifat Dar al-'Ulum*, 5(1), July 1938, 102 in Abu-Rabi' (1996), 97.

Like many other Egyptian intellectuals such as Taha Husayn, Ahmad Amin and his mentor Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad, Qutb underwent a transformation in the late 1940s. According to Haddad, this came as a result of British policies during World War II and after the creation of the state of Israel.¹⁶⁶ As Abu-Rabi' states, this created a shift from "the realms of literature and poetry to those of society and Islam."¹⁶⁷ This change is regarded as a radical ideological shift by some scholars. For instance, William Shepard points out that this was a move from "a Muslim secularist position in the 1930s to a moderate radical Islamism."¹⁶⁸ Qutb's work *Social Justice* expressed to some extent this transition. Abu-Rabi' identifies this move as follows:

Social Justice contains the theoretical principles and foundations of Qutb's pre-Ikhwan Islamic thought. This work is a radical departure from Qutb's early work in literary, to Qur'anic, and social criticism. Qutb emerges as a social critic with a radical Islamic agenda. He takes an inward look at what he considers to be the indigenous sources of Egyptian culture and thought –namely, Islam- and maps out the terrain of contemporary Egyptian society.¹⁶⁹

Like Nursi, Qutb turned his back to his former works and felt regret for having written them. In the late 1940s he wrote two books on Qur'anic topics emphasizing in the introduction that "I found the Quran."¹⁷⁰

As shown, both Nursi and Qutb were strongly influenced by their respective environments. Although both emphasized that they took the Qur'an as the mere source, their thought was also shaped by some prominent figures as will be evident in the following observation.

¹⁶⁶ Yvonne Y. Haddad, "Sayyid Qutb: Ideologue of Islamic Revival" in John L. Esposito (Ed.), *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 69.

¹⁶⁷ Abu-Rabi' (1996), 109.

¹⁶⁸ William Shepard, "The Development of the Thought of Sayyid Qutb as Reflected in Earlier and Later Editions of 'Social Justice in Islam' *Die Welt Des Islams*, vol. 32 (2), 1992 in Abu-Rabi' (1996), 109.

¹⁶⁹ Abu-Rabi' (1996), 120.

¹⁷⁰ Haddad (1983), 69.

2 Intellectual Influences on Nursi and Qutb

Unlike Qutb, Nursi did not receive a secular education. He studied in the *medreses* of the Eastern Province of the Empire. In these *medreses*, Nursi learned about “the various Islamic sciences, such as Qur’anic exegesis, Hadith, Arabic, and logic.”¹⁷¹ In the *medreses* Nursi learnt from the traditional scholars of the region such as Molla Fethullah, his elder brother Molla Abdullah, Seyyid Nur Muhammed, Molla Abdülkerim Efendi, Şeyh Mehmed Emin, Hazret-i Şeyh Muhammedü’l Küfrevî.¹⁷² Most of his teachers during the Old Said period were affiliated with a Sufi order, mostly the Naqshbandi and Qadiri orders. In his transformational years, from the Old Said (Eski Said) to the New Said (Yeni Said), Nursi often referred to Shaykh Abdulkadir al-Jilani, “With the support and guidance of Shaykh Abdulkadir al-Jilani the Old Said turned into the New Said phase.”¹⁷³ In his writings Nursi stated that Imam Ali, Shaykh Abdulkadir al-Jilani, Imam Ghazali, Mawlana Jalal al-Din al-Rumi and Imam Rabbani were his spiritual mentors from whom he received his lessons.¹⁷⁴ Throughout the New Said Period, Nursi often states that the Qur’an remains his sole mentor, “the Wise Qur’an is our guide, mentor, *imam* and advisor in every practice.”¹⁷⁵

As explained above, Qutb was influenced by Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad. According to Haddad, particularly during his second phase, Qutb was drawn to the writings of Muhammad Assad (Leopold Weiss) and Abu al-Ala Mawdudi whose works

¹⁷¹ Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi’, “How to Read Said Nursi’s *Risale-i Nur*” in Abu-Rabi’ (ed.), *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 66.

¹⁷² For more details see Necmettin Sahiner, *Bilinmeyen Tarafıyla Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Istanbul: Nesil Publications, 2004).

¹⁷³ Nursi, *Lem’alar* (2009), 375.

¹⁷⁴ Nursi, *Emirdag Lahikası II* (2009), 608.

¹⁷⁵ Nursi, *Barla Lahikası* (2009), 39.

became available in Egypt in 1951. Qutb often referred to them in his early writings.¹⁷⁶

Another important figure in Qutb's intellectual life was Abu al-Hasan al-Nadwi, an Indian by origin who had a major influence on contemporary Arab Muslim thought in general. In fact, al-Nadwi's *What Has the World Lost as a Result of the Decline of Muslims?* was translated into Arabic from Urdu and introduced to Egyptian society by Qutb right before he joined the Ikhwan in 1951.¹⁷⁷ Scholars like Yvonne Haddad, Olivier Caree, Muhammad Ahmad Khalafallah, Emmanuel Sivan, and William Shepard argued that Ibn Taymiyah was also important for Qutb's ideas.¹⁷⁸ However, according to Abu-Rabi', these influences are secondary. The primary impact on Qutb's thought were the historical events in Egypt and his understanding of the Qur'an.¹⁷⁹ Abu-Rabi' goes further by suggesting the opposite, namely that

The argument that the Qutbian discourse of the 1950s is a pirated copy of either the Mawdudi movement or Ibn Taymiyah's for the thirteenth century is unjustifiable. This argument cannot be supported by the foundations that gave rise to the Qutbian problematic in the 1950s – Nasserism in particular, and the challenges posed by the Arab nationalism and socialism in general. The Qutbian discourse developed dialectically against the background of Nasserism and its hegemonic proliferation in Egyptian society.¹⁸⁰

As obvious in the previous statement, Qutb devotes his whole attention to the Qur'an. "It is necessary," he declares, "to drink solely from the spring of the Qur'an."¹⁸¹ Extra-Qur'anic references were not taken into consideration anymore.

¹⁷⁶ Haddad (1983), 70.

¹⁷⁷ Abu-Rabi (1996), 18.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 139.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 165.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 169.

The tragic fact of imprisonment, both for Nursi and Qutb, played also an important role while formulating their programs for social or individual transformation. Their writings reflect a deep desire for social change; change, which stood in sharp conflict with their respective governments and was seen as a threat. As a result, both Qutb and Nursi spent many years in prison while their writings were banned by the authorities. An important part of their works was written during their time of imprisonment. Their writings were smuggled and secretly copied by hand by their followers.

The reasons that both Qutb and Nursi were considered a threat to their respective governments was related to their diagnoses regarding the problems of their societies which is to be discussed in the following section.

3 Nursi's and Qutb's Diagnoses Regarding Their Societies

Both Nursi and Qutb provided a detailed analysis of the problems that their societies faced. They were aware of the fact that in the modern world, the contemporary Muslim *ummah* needed a “map to give them direction in their own daily lives.”¹⁸² “This “map” must be a guide that both connects Muslims to the past and also orders the “present.”¹⁸³ Before offering a guiding map for the Muslim *ummah*, they began with diagnosing the problems.

As stated above, in his first phase Nursi sought new ways in order to prevent the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the Muslim world in general. However, the Empire

¹⁸² Serif Mardin, “Reflections on Said Nursi's Life and Thought” in Abu-Rabi' (2003), 49.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

collapsed and the new secular establishment of Turkey looked upon the religion of Islam as a major obstacle towards progress and improvement. Therefore, various programs were put into action in order to remove religion from the public sphere. Nursi became early on aware that the new regime was promoting radical secularism. Yet, Nursi created a resistance front by reaching out to particular individuals and showing major concern for personal faith. In an interview with Nursi conducted by Esref Edip, this concern is openly stated,

They ask me why I am rampaging around? I am not aware of that. There is a huge fire in front of me. Its flames rise to the sky. I see my child, my belief, is burning out in this fire. I am trying to extinguish this fire and save belief from it. It does not matter if someone impeded me on my way and my feet crashed into him. Compared to the huge fire, it is not worth mentioning this small case.¹⁸⁴

Nursi believed that atheism is a threat to the spirituality of the believers. In his *Şu'alar* Nursi says,

I have only one objective. In the time in which I am close to the grave, I hear the voices of Bolshevik owls in the Muslim lands. These voices harm the foundational belief of the Muslim World. They attract youth by promoting non-belief. With all of my strength I am dealing with this problem and inviting Muslims to belief. I am working against the community that promotes unbelief.¹⁸⁵

Nursi believed that the “castle” of belief was in danger and it is completely dissimilar from the past, “Unlike other centuries, in our time there is the disaster of unbelief. In the old ages, the unbelief was one in thousand. The reason for that would be ignorance; it was simple to solve it. However, in this century unbelief is promoted through the sciences and it is difficult to deal with it.”¹⁸⁶ As becomes clear, Nursi was convinced that faith was attacked within a scientific framework. In the same way,

¹⁸⁴ Nursi, *Tarihçe-i Hayat* (2009), 26.

¹⁸⁵ Nursi, *Şu'alar* (2009), 618.

¹⁸⁶ Nursi, *Mektubat* (2009), 48.

methods should be employed with which belief could be supported through benefits from science. Another issue of concern for Nursi was materialism. He deemed that constant focus on worldly things distracted believers from the hereafter and weakened their faith.

Like Nursi, Qutb started off by diagnosing the problems of his society. One of the terms that Qutb often employed was *jāhilīyah*.¹⁸⁷ He believed that the world was in a state of *jāhilīyah*,

If we look at the sources and foundations of modern ways of living, it becomes clear that the whole world is steeped in *jāhilīyah* and all the marvelous material comforts and high level inventions do not diminish this ignorance. This *jāhilīyah* is based on rebellion against God's sovereignty on earth. It transfers to man one of the greatest attributes of God, namely sovereignty, and makes some men lords over others.¹⁸⁸

Qutb went on and stated that the *jāhilīyah* in the present time and age is distinct from the *jāhilīyah* which existed before the advent of the Prophet of Islam. Unlike the latter primitive form of the ancient *jāhilīyah*, the current type “takes the form of claiming that the right to create values, to legislate rules of collective behavior, and to choose any way of life rests with men, without regard to what God has prescribed.”¹⁸⁹ There is, according to Qutb, more danger in this kind of *jāhilīyah* as it is wearing a mask in order to rebel against God's authority and oppress His creatures.¹⁹⁰ Qutb makes no distinction when it comes to *jāhilīyah*. For him “the whole environment, people's beliefs and ideas, habits and art, rules and laws – is *jāhilīyah*.”¹⁹¹ Moreover, “even to the extent that what we

¹⁸⁷ In the traditional understanding of Islam, the phrase *jāhilīyah* was usually used to understand the ‘era of ignorance’ which had preceded the advent of Prophet Muhammad. See Mawdudi, A.A., *A Short History of the Revivalist Movement in Islam*. Sayyid Qutb developed it to become the cornerstone of belief or many Islamic resurgent movements.

¹⁸⁸ Qutb, *Milestones*, (Kuwayt: IIFSO, 1978), 14-5.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Qutb (1978), 32.

consider to be Islamic culture, Islamic sources, Islamic philosophy and Islamic thought, are also constructs of *jāhilīyah*.”¹⁹² Qutb makes a comparison between the Islam of Mecca and modern Islam. He argues that in both cases Islam is under siege.¹⁹³

the *jāhilīyah* society is the primary problem that Qutb was at odds with and analyzes it in great details.. To begin with, he regards the West as a problem and threat to the ummah. He was against the idea of accepting modern culture and islamicizing it.¹⁹⁴ To his mind, the West is at war with Islam while using unconventional means to fight its adherents. As Abu-Rabi’ examines, he draws the ummah’s attention to the problem of intellectual and spiritual colonialism.¹⁹⁵ Qutb also talks about the West in the context of Christianity and capitalism. He believes that the West is a reflection of Christianity and the means by which capitalism is promoted. Further, the capitalist system left the people in an oppressed condition.¹⁹⁶ Qutb is very suspicious of these “enemies” and is convinced that they “have resorted to lifting the Islamic banner as a means of camouflaging their real intentions.”¹⁹⁷ Although he did not fully identify these enemies, he regards “international Zionism, international Crusaderism, and international Communism” as the three universal threats attacking Islam. Their intention is to “undermine the significance of *‘aqidah* as a bond of unity among Muslims, regardless of race, class, language and geographical location.”¹⁹⁸

So far, as shown, there are many commonalities between Qutb and Nursi. Both of them have two phases in their lives. In their first periods, they sought to find solutions for

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Qutb, *Zilal*, vol. 1, 139, in Abu-Rabi’ (1996), 172.

¹⁹⁴ Qutb (1978), 199-217

¹⁹⁵ Qutb, *Dirasat Islamiyah* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma’arif, 1966), 162 in Abu-Rabi’ (1996), 133.

¹⁹⁶ Qutb, *Maarakat*, 10-11 in Haddad (1983), 72.

¹⁹⁷ Qutb, *Zilal*, vol. 1, 105 in Abu-Rabi’ (1996), 189.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

their own societies. They were considerably engaged with the state authorities. However, in their second stage, they drew new visions which came into conflict with the dominant regimes. Both were perceived as threats to the authorities and spent important periods of their lives in prison. Their writings were banned and secretly distributed by handwritten copies to their loyal followers. Although extensive pressure was put on them by the authorities, they did not give up forming a new Muslim mindset. The following description provides some insight into their thinking on how to counter the perceived threats and enemies.

4 The Solutions Offered for the Future of the Ummah

4.1 Nursi's Agenda of Individual Transformation

The previous section has provided some insight in what Nursi and Qutb thought were the major concerns of their time. In trying to counter the common threat of aggressive atheism and materialism, Nursi primarily focused on cultivating individual faith. He believed that the main problem was the decline of personal belief. Once individual belief is strengthened and nurtured, society will inevitably transform into a community of ethically and morally good persons. Nursi deemed that the Muslim *ummah* was in a different stage of time in which it was difficult to practice Islam perfectly in the manner that the Prophet and his companions did. He pointed out that in this time a person who prays five times a day and keeps himself from the major sins will be saved, “The essential foundation to deal with immense spiritual distortion and negative ideologies is piety. A person who fulfills the obligatory part of religion (*fardh*) and

avoids major sins will be saved.”¹⁹⁹ For Nursi, Muslims are in an exceptionally difficult time and therefore a small deed is considered by God to be comparable to many, because there are many things that could distract people from good deeds.²⁰⁰ One may relate this approach of Nursi to one of the *hadith* in which the Prophet states, “O my companions! You are in a time in which if you did not fulfill one tenth of God’s commands you would perish. However, there will be a time in which if a Muslim fulfills one tenth of God’s commands he will be saved.”²⁰¹ In various parts of his writings, Nursi also highlighted the practical aspect of his method, “During the old times, it would take almost 40 years for a Muslim to reach the highest level of the truths of the belief; however, now with the blessings of God, one can reach to the same level perhaps within 40 minutes.” For Nursi, this goal can be reached by reading his writings, the *Risale-i Nur*.²⁰² This new method, Nursi argues, is easily accessible to people in the modern period. With respect to that, one might critique Nursi for limiting Islam to the basics.

Finally, it is crucial to mention that Nursi was against political Islam as means to reach his goals.²⁰³ Nursi believed that the most important duty of believers is working for genuine belief (*hakaik-i imaniye*). The other duties are secondary.²⁰⁴ He deemed that being on the side of a party on behalf of religion might result in hating your own brother in faith.²⁰⁵ Refusing a regime is not the *Risale-i Nur* students’ duty, as Nursi pointed out. He made a distinction between refusing and not accepting. Nursi made clear that he and his students are “not accepting the regime,” however, refusing is different since it is

¹⁹⁹ Nursi, *Kastamonu Lahikasi* (2009), 185.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Al-Tirmidhi, *Fitan*, 79.

²⁰² Nursi, *Mektubat* (2009), 48.

²⁰³ Nursi, *Emirdag Lahikasi II* (2009), 379.

²⁰⁴ Nursi, *Kastamonu Lahikasi* (2009), 84-85.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

actively working against the regime by physical means. Nursi gives the example of Jews and Christians who lived under the caliphate of ‘Umar (634-644). According to Nursi, though Jews and Christians did not accept the sharia based administration of ‘Umar, they did not refuse it either. That is why they were living in the Muslim lands in peace without being considered as a threat. Nursi thinks that the situation of his students under the secular regime can be compared to the one of the Jews and Christians during ‘Umar’s reign.²⁰⁶

As examined earlier, Nursi does not attempt to change the regime and establish a sharia based government. His primary focus was to preserve the individual’s faith. Other matters were secondary for Nursi. This new method was termed by him spiritual or metaphorical struggle (*cihad-i manevi*) which was discussed in the previous chapter. An outline of Qutb’s view will identify his major differences to Nursi’s approach.

4.2 Qutb’s Program of Social Transformation

As stated earlier, Qutb believed that the world is in the stage of *jahiliyya*. Like Nursi, as Abu-Rabi’ points out, “Qutb’s point of departure in his islamically committed oeuvre is to develop a reflexive theological, historical, and sociological method with which to investigate the main themes and arguments of the Islamic religious phenomenon and its relevance to modern times.”²⁰⁷ They both were concerned to demonstrate Islam’s relevance for the mindset of people of the modern time.

²⁰⁶ Nursi, *Kastamonu Lahikası* 206.

²⁰⁷ Abu-Rabi’ (1996), 94.

Unlike Nursi, Qutb focused very much on the transformation of the society as whole rather than an individual. A man's soul, according to Qutb, is so strongly connected to society and his environment that he will not be able to clean his soul if the external does not permit him to do so. If society does not allow the spiritual to come into practice, man can not engage with other human beings on a spiritual level. He will not be able to reveal his spiritual potential as he cannot benefit from the blessings of a spiritual community that combines Islam into every phase of life. It is this spiritual community which God has determined to exist. When man's atmosphere is Islamic, "every good value becomes well established and begins to yield fruit."²⁰⁸ Qutb emphasized the power of Islamic social influence. For him this was a great means to eventually eradicate evil and sin. Muslims, therefore, must create a fully Islamic society, as without such an establishment they could not reach the situation of spiritual perfection and full submission to God. As a further step Qutb believed that Muslims must use physical *jihad* as means in order to remove the obstacles that prevent establishing an Islamic social order, "This movement uses the methods of preaching and persuasion for reforming ideas and beliefs; and it uses physical power and jihad for abolishing the organizations and authorities of the *jahili* system which prevents people from reforming their ideas and beliefs, but forces them to obey their aberrant ways and makes them serve human lords instead of the Almighty Lord."²⁰⁹ Qutb believed that some scholars did not properly understand the concept of *jihad* in the way the Qur'an depicts it. He pointed out that the way they talked about *jihad* was an attempt to distort it. The following quotation summarizes in a significant manner Qutb's perspective on *jihad*. It is lengthy, but worth presenting as whole:

²⁰⁸ Qutb, *Zilal*, Vol 6. Trans. by Adil Salahi (London: The Islamic Foundation, 2002), 96.

²⁰⁹ *Milestones* (1978), 100.

When they speak about *jihad*, they speak clumsily and mix up the various stages, distorting the whole concept of *jihad* and deriving from the Qur'anic verses final principles and generalities for which there is no justification. This is because they regard every verse of the Qur'an as if it were the final principle of this religion. This group of thinkers, which is a product of the sorry state of the present Muslim generation, has nothing but the label of Islam and has laid down its spiritual and rational arms in defeat. They say, "Islam has prescribed only defensive war"! and think that they have done some good for their religion by depriving it of its method, which is to abolish all injustice from the earth, to bring people to the worship of God alone, and to bring them out of servitude to servants into the service of the Lord of servants. Islam does not force people to accept its belief, but it wants to provide a free environment in which they will have the choice of beliefs. What it wants is to abolish those oppressive political systems under which people are prevented from expressing their freedom to choose whatever beliefs they want, and after that it gives them complete freedom to decide whether they accept Islam or not."²¹⁰

As already shown, Qutb believed that *jihad* must be waged on the oppressive political systems which prevented Muslims from the service of God. Otherwise, a free environment in which the believers have 'the choice of beliefs' will not be available. Preaching alone is not enough, "those who have usurped the authority of Allah and are oppressing Allah's creatures are not going to give up their power merely through preaching."²¹¹ With the combination of *jihad* and preaching, the obstacles could be tackled.²¹²

Unlike Nursi, Qutb believed that the solution lies in changing the whole society. That is to say, instead of trying to change the individuals or to create a spiritual tendency in the individual, first, the societal settings and conditions need to be changed in order to ensure that humans can flourish. He thought, as Haddad rightly puts it that "salvation can only come through promoting an Islamic system that tolerates no differences and no

²¹⁰ Ibid., 99-100.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid.

compromise with alternate options or solutions to social problems ... only then will they [Muslims] be able to restore justice and virtue and implement their agenda of Islamizing the world.”²¹³

5 Conclusion

This chapter attempted to compare Nursi and Qutb’s method of bringing reform into their societies. Given the common historical setting it comes as no surprise that their communities shared to a large extent the same concerns. Once Nursi and Qutb attempted to make a transformation in their societies, they were considered a major threat. Both ended up in prison, Qutb even being executed for his views. Their writings were banned.

Yet, their methods in countering their enemies were quite distinct, just as their definition of who or what those enemies were. Though both utilized the same authoritative source, the truth of the Qur’an, to make their case and construct an agenda for change, they came to different conclusions on which tools to use. More specifically, it was a choice of either radical, active, physical means or the pietist quietist somewhat passive approach characterized by Qur’anic virtues of patience, endurance and gratitude. Nursi was offered - yet rejected - a political program, while Qutb regarded political Islam as significant means to change society. Nursi believed in *jihad-i manevi* (spiritual jihad) as a means, while Qutb regarded physical *jihad* as the solution to reach his goal.

As mentioned in the beginning, the chapter will conclude with a comparison of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Nur Community. This article was published in the *ed-*

²¹³ Haddad (2003), 239.

Difa newspaper by one of its correspondents Isa Abdulkadir in Arabic.²¹⁴ Later on, the article was translated into Turkish and published in the *Risale-i Nur* with the approval of Nursi himself²¹⁵:

Although the Nur Community and the Muslim Brotherhood share the same objectives which are working for the truths of the Qur'an and belief and serving, in the circle of unity of Islam, for the happiness of Muslims in this world and the hereafter, however, five or six aspects of the Nur Community (NC) differ from the Muslim Brotherhood (MB):

The First Distinction: The *Risale-i Nur* students do not involve themselves in politics, they escape from politics. If they are bound to involve themselves, they use the politics for religion, so that they could show the sacredness of religion to people who want to use religion as their instruments in politics. They do not have a political union at all. The Muslim Brotherhood, however, because of the situation in their environment, is working for religion and trying to establish a political union.

The Second Distinction: The *Risale-i Nur* students do not come together with their master and are not bound to do so. They do not feel that way. For them there is no need to assemble in order to learn. The whole country is like a classroom for them. They learn from the *Risale-i Nur* books, instead of going to their master Nursi. For them each treatise of the *Risale-i Nur* collection is equal to their master Nursi (meaning: reading a treatise of Nursi is just like talking to Nursi in person). They try to copy the treatises themselves and give them for free to people who are in need, so that they could read and listen to them. In this way, they are turning the whole country into a classroom. The members of the MB, however, visit their leader in order to get their orders. They also meet the assistants of their leaders in order to learn and get directions from them. Also, they give a report to their leader regarding the cost of the magazines and newspapers led by the movement.

The Third Distinction: the *Risale-i Nur* students, like students at a very good university, learn through scholarly communication. In this way, a whole city turns into a university. Although, they may not see and know each others and be far from each other, they still teach other and learn together. The members of the MB, however, because of the situation in

²¹⁴ Nursi, *Emirdag II* (2009), 553.

²¹⁵ The article was translated into English by Salih Sayilgan.

their environment, publish magazines and books. They distribute these publications and teach each other through them. Also, they learn from these publications.

The Fourth Distinction: the Risale-i Nur students spread out and are active in most of the Islamic countries. In order to spread their ideas, though they are different governments in various countries, they did not need to get their permission in order to do their mission. Because they do not involve themselves in politics, therefore they are not bound to ask for permission. However, the members of the MB, as part of their policy, are involved in politics and political unions, therefore they are bound to get permission from the governments. They are not known as much as the Risale-i Nur students. Therefore, they are primarily known and have centers in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, Sudan, Morocco, and Iraq.

The Fifth Distinction: The Risale-i Nur students are pretty diverse. They range from an eight years old child who is learning how to recite the Qur'an to ninety years old person, from man-woman, peasant, porter to parliamentarian, from an ordinary soldier to a commander. The objective of all the students of the *Risale-i Nur* is to learn and benefit from the truths of the Qur'an. All of their works are to spread the knowledge, the wisdom and the truths of the belief. It is not heard that they dealt with anything else. For twenty eight years, the courts and their opponents could not find anything as their goals other than their sacred objectives; therefore they could not convict and dispel them. The Risale-i Nur students do not feel bound to have people on their side. [They believe in this motto] "Our duty is servitude and we do not look for customers." They say "people should come and find us." Quantity is not important for them. They prefer one person who has a real sincerity to hundreds of people. However, the members of MB, in fact, like the Risale-i Nur students, try to spread the Islamic sciences, teachings of Islam and the truths of the belief, but, because they are involved in politics, the quantity is very important for them, so they could have many people on their side.

The Sixth Distinction: The real Risale-i Nur students do not value worldly benefits very much; some of them have the maximum practice of thriftiness and contentment. Besides being patient and content in their poor state, they work for the truths of the Qur'an with the real sincerity and sacrifice. In order to prove their sincere intention against their opponents and invite people who are in need of sincerity they sacrifice the benefits of social life. However, the members of the MB, though they have

similar objectives like the Risale-i Nur students, because of their conditions, could not give up worldly goods like the Nur students. They do not feel that they are bound to maximum sacrifice of the worldly goods.²¹⁶

²¹⁶ Nursi, *Emirdag Lahikası II* (2009), 553-4.

CHAPTER FIVE

Turkey Then and Now – An Analysis of the Influence of the Nur Community on Contemporary Turkish Society and Politics

The objectives of this chapter are twofold. The first one is to seek an answer to the question of how Nursi's followers have spread his ideas, particularly in Turkey and in the world in general. In order to accomplish this, I shall look at Turkey and Egypt as case studies. The second one is to examine the impact of the Nur Community on contemporary Turkish society and politics. I shall argue that Nursi's ideas have not remained as theory but have still widespread practical implications. In addition, this research attempts to demonstrate that the Nur Community played a substantial role in order to restrain the rise of political Islam in Turkey by preparing to some extent the groundwork which made apolitical Islam receptive among its people.

The first part of this research will analyze the contributions of study-centers (*dershanes*), publications, and symposiums in introducing Nursi's thought to masses and making it well-grounded in society, while the second part will discuss the involvement of the Nur Community in the shift from political to apolitical Islam .

1. The Dissemination of the Teachings of the *Risale-i Nur*

1.1 Study-centers – Rationale and Aims

After the death of Nursi in 1960, study-centers have become one of the most significant means to spread his ideas. These centers are mainly rented or owned apartments in which the members of the Nur Community meet in order to read, discuss, and engage with Nursi's writings. In other words, the study-center is the place in which the *Risale-i Nur* is communally read. In fact, the idea of study-centers was not something that Nursi's followers developed after his death and without his consent. It was initiated by Nursi himself and carried on by his followers during his lifetime. Nursi, in his *Risale-i Nur*, urges his students repeatedly to open study-centers. He converted the house in Barla in that he used to live in, into a study-center.²¹⁷ In one of his letters Nursi encourages his students as follows:

Since religious education has officially become permitted, it is our need and duty to open small study-centers for the nation everywhere as much as possible. Albeit it is possible to benefit from the *Risale-i Nur* individually, one, however, may not understand every matter of it by his own. The *RN* is the explanation of the truths of belief. It is a source of knowledge, education, and worship. What the old schools (*medreses*) would accomplish in 10 or 15 years, God willing, the study-centers of the Nur Community will accomplish within 5 or 10 weeks and they have been doing this for 20 years.²¹⁸

As it is evident, Nursi clearly encourages his students to establish study-centers everywhere possible and believes that this will further the religious education of people.

Nursi also asks his students to turn their houses into small study-centers. For him, family members should get together in their homes and read the *Risale-i Nur*. One should read the *Risale-i Nur* with neighbors if no family member is around. Even if a person is

²¹⁷ Mehmet Firinci, Personal Interview, May 5, 2011.

²¹⁸ *Emirdag Lahikası I* (2009), 317.

too busy to dedicate much time for reading, one should at least read five minutes communally.²¹⁹

Inspired by Nursi's writings and advice, the members of the Nur Community opened hundreds of study-centers during Nursi's lifetime. According to one of Nursi's closest students and witnesses Mehmet Firinci, Nursi's followers were opening study-centers in Isparta and inviting Nursi for the opening ceremony. Nursi would either go by himself or send some of his students. Once a new study-center was founded, students would take its keys and hand them symbolically to Nursi so that he would conduct the opening ceremony. Firinci states that Nursi received around 15-20 keys of new study-centers from the Isparta area alone.²²⁰ Moreover, one of the letters written by Nursi's students in the late 1950s reveals that there were over 200 study-centers merely in the Eastern part of Turkey.²²¹

Study-centers were also regarded as the realization of Nursi's famous project, the *Medresetu 'z-Zehra* university. As shown in the second chapter, Nursi attempted to establish this university with the hope that the religious and the natural sciences would be synthesized and taught in a combined form. However, this project was not realized. To some extent, Nursi's vision of such a fusion was fulfilled by the establishment of the study-centers.²²² Moreover, Nursi often referred to his followers as the students of the *Medresetu 'z-Zehra*.²²³

²¹⁹ *Emirdag Lahikası II* (2009), 481.

²²⁰ Mehmet Firinci, Personal Interview, May 5, 2011.

²²¹ *Emirdag Lahikası II* (2009), 619.

²²² *Ibid.*, 373.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 383, 413, 478.

1.1.1 The Structure of the Study-Centers

A study-center usually takes the form of a one apartment or a townhouse. The interior is quite decent and modest. It is usually furnished with couches and carpets including usually bookshelves with collections of the *Risale-i Nur* and secondary sources related to Nursi and his writings. Generally, around five students live in a study-center so that often times these centers are located close to universities. Some study-centers can be as big as a usual gym hall having around 1000 m² study space. This is usually the case in big cities where the community numbers into the thousands like in Istanbul. One can also find study-centers in small neighborhoods that do not have any university students. A study-center differs from an ordinary single house. Students periodically read Nursi's writings together and share the duties of the study-center such as cleaning, cooking and hosting guests. The students who live in these centers maintain a strong bond as they spend most of their time together while sharing breakfast, lunch, and dinner. If a specific problem or issue arises the students will gather together and consult with each other (*istisare*) in order to seek for a solution. This principle of consultation is not a novel element since it has its foundation in the Qur'an and Sunna; yet it became a major cornerstone within the Nur Community, for Nursi strongly advised to implement this Qur'anic principle on the *Risale-i Nur* path.²²⁴

1.1.2 Function of the Study-Centers

²²⁴ These observations rely on a study-center in Virginia, USA. I visited this study-center in April, 2011. It is a three bedroom apartment in which five graduate students stay.

The goal of establishing these study-centers is to provide a platform in which people of all classes have access to religious education and to create an awareness regarding the major problems of egotism, materialism, and atheism. Here, members of the Nur community come together on a weekly basis. They read, discuss and engage with the *Risale-i Nur* without following a distinct curricula or formal schedule. The studies are undertaken in a very informal way without constructing a hierarchical order. In that sense, *dersanes* do not have any resemblance with mystical Sufi orders or classic madrasa institutions which would designate a learned *shaykh* or most knowledgeable person. This fits into the larger concept of creating a collective personality (*sahs-i maneviye*) which Nursi frequently alluded to. The skills and knowledge of each and everyone flows together and creates a communal spiritual genius who is unbeatable in every aspect.²²⁵ Most of the circles are either held on Saturdays or Fridays as these days are more suitable for people who work during the week. Study-centers also occupy an important role in modernizing society while forming a text-oriented community.

As previously noted, the main activities in a study-center are reading and discussing the *Risale-i Nur*. The members are gathering around the text. In this sense, the Nur Community differs from other religious movements, for the members are not attracted by a particular charismatic figure, though Nursi explicitly said that whoever desires to meet and speak to him should turn to the *Risale-i Nur* which contained all that he had to say. With respect to that, Nursi's charismatic figure is somewhat embedded within his own writings. Yet, he frequently rejects the idea that the *Risale-i Nur* is his own personal intellectual product, rather it belongs to everyone.²²⁶ By pointing and directing people to

²²⁵ *Lem'alar* (2009), 279, *Emirdag Lahikasi I* (2009), 211, *Kastamonu Lahikasi* (2009), 242.

²²⁶ *Emirdag Lahikasi I* (2009), 75.

the text, Nursi makes sure that his legacy continues after his death and thus becomes somewhat eternalized. However, even the existence of a text does not ensure that people necessarily are attracted to it. Here, future empirical and sociological studies could allude to and need to be done in order to determine why it is the particular teachings of the *Risale-i Nur* that people turn to.

Promoting a text-oriented community through study-centers has had a great impact on the education of the Muslim community in Turkey. There are many members in the community who do not have any formal education, but who know how to read and interpret Nursi's writings. Particularly, after the language revolution on November 1, 1928 in which the new Turkish alphabet was introduced to Turkish society, Muslims no longer had access to their Islamic sources and it took years for the society to learn the new alphabet. Literally, a whole society became illiterate overnight. This gap was filled by study-centers in which people still were able to utilize the old language as the *Risale-i Nur*'s original language is Ottoman Turkish, which was written in Arabic script. It is also noteworthy to mention that most of Nursi's students did not have any formal education.

The study-centers' role in forming a text-oriented community was significant in two ways. First, they reduced the authority of the '*ulama* (scholars) over the text. Unlike in the past of Islamic history, the themes of the *Risale-i Nur* are not just discussed among the scholarly elite, rather, Nursi democratized religious knowledge and made it available in the study-centers for people from all classes and backgrounds. In relation to that, Serif Mardin suggests furthermore that,

In contrast to Ghazali, Nursi did not dwell much on the areas of Islamic social relations and forms of worship, but studied the areas that would assist Muslims in understanding their own religion. A point where the question is concentrated and to which I attach the utmost importance is that

in the modern world, contemporary Muslims need a ‘map’ to give them direction in their own daily lives.²²⁷

Unlike previous Muslim scholars, Nursi did not go into deep theological discussion but develops a new interpretation that would help Muslims understand their own religion in the modern world. In fact, the *Risale-i Nur* was not well received among the Ottoman scholars (*ulama*) and in later modern Turkey.

From the early days of the Nur community, the scholarly establishment was hesitant to join the *Risale-i Nur* path. Nursi shares several experiences revealing that the ulama were disapproving of the new teachings, partly because of jealousy that Nursi received so much attention instead of them.²²⁸ The Nur community as a principle never excluded anyone but implicitly made clear that religious authority is not really favored since a single genius was replaced by the collective personality (*sahsi-i maneviye*) ensuring equality of all members.

Due to the fact that people of all classes such as students, teachers, doctors, businessmen, labors, illiterate persons, professors, and politicians come together in an attempt to understand Nursi’s writings, scholars felt their authority was somewhat undermined. The egalitarian nature of the studies was not welcomed by everyone. Every individual had the same right when it comes to interpretation. Anyone who is well-versed in the *Risale-i Nur* can lead the discussion. There is no priority or authority to the religious scholars.²²⁹

One may argue that the lack of authority over the text and the participation of all various social classes made the Nur Community highly diverse and able to reach many

²²⁷ Serif Mardin, “Reflections on Said Nursi’s Life and Thought” in Abu-Rabi’ (2003), 49.

²²⁸ *Mektubat* (2009), 604-05.

²²⁹ These observations are based on my experience in a study-center in Istanbul last summer.

different groups in society. Since the community is not centered on the charisma of a particular leader, the members of the community are able to share their different interpretations of the text in public study-centers. It comes therefore as no surprise that the community went through several major divisions after Nursi's death. Sociologically, different reasons might be enumerated. However, the factors of flexible interpretation of the text and the lack of an authoritarian leader cannot be dismissed while reflecting on the question of why these divisions occurred. The text-based environment produced a democratic community which led to the emergence of different fragmentations within the community.

1.1.3 The Role of Study-centers in Modernizing Muslims

Faris Kaya, director of the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture (IFSC) dedicated to the dissemination of Nursi's thought, stated that there are about 2000 study-centers in the city of Istanbul alone.²³⁰ As mentioned previously, usually around five students reside in these study-centers. The students come from diverse backgrounds, not only with respect to their fields of study but also with regards to their cultural context. During my college years in Istanbul in 2003, I remember that about fifty percent of my classmates were living in study-centers. Most of these students were from the rural and impoverished areas of Turkey. Doubtless, many of these regions are still considered closed societies and the degree of religious education is still very low. Students coming from these areas usually had a simple dogmatic and strongly traditional understanding of religion. Therefore, many of these students were at first hesitant to join and mix with the

²³⁰ Faris Kaya, Personal Interview, May 10, 2011.

collegial environment prevalent in university life. With respect to that, study-centers provided a welcoming shelter and a place to get used to this major transition phase in which they tried to adapt to modern metropolitan life, but in which they could still hold onto their religious values. Interestingly, study-centers play a significant role in the integration of a student coming from a closed society and entering an open one. A simple calculation reveals to what extent study-centers assist in this transition period.

Accordingly, every year about 2,000 new students are entering the study-centers. That means a total of 20,000 students every 10 years in Istanbul alone. If the other cities in Turkey are taken into account, the contribution of the study-centers in modernizing traditional religious Muslims is immense.

Study-centers do not only play a significant role in the modernization of students but also lay people, even illiterate ones, from all sorts of classes. Every study-center has a weekly gathering at least once a week. These text-based circles transform individuals in the light of Nursi's modern ideas and form a new mindset which have neither regressive nor extreme tendencies.

The fact that the Nur Community has made contributions with regard to the modernization of Turkey was stated by several intellectuals. Metin Karabasoglu, one of the intellectuals of the community, argued that

The Nur movement, as a text-oriented movement, has participated in the overall process of modernizing Turkish society because of its emphasis on the printing and dissemination of the text. This made possible transmission of the message to other segments of society at large. In this respect, the movement's influence goes much beyond that typically associated with the movement itself.²³¹

²³¹Metin Karabasoglu, "Text and Community: An Analysis of the Risale-i Nur Movement" in Abu-Rabi' (2003), 286.

In addition, Serif Mardin’s basic argument in his *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* is that the Nur community’s role in modernizing Turkey cannot be dismissed. Mardin further says that, “the increasing range and variety of problems encountered in modern society have encouraged reinterpretations of his own [Nursi’s] Qur’anic interpretations, which enable many practices of modern society to be legitimized as Muslims practices.”²³² There is no doubt that these processes of legitimization occurred through the intensive reading and engagement with the *Risale-i Nur* in the study-centers.

1.1.4 The Network of Study-centers

It is difficult to present a sound number of study-centers and the members of the Nur Community. This is owing to two reasons. First, there is neither a formal membership process in the community nor a centralized administration overlooking these procedures. Secondly, study-centers are mainly founded by local people who agree with the philosophy of the Nur Community but who do not necessarily notify others after establishing such a center. However, it is a well-known fact that all cities and many villages in Turkey have study-centers. A small survey conducted by Kopru magazine, as shown in table 1.1, shows how the numbers of the study-centers have increased from 1970 to 2000.

Table 1.1 Growth in number of study-centers in major Turkish cities

	1970	2000
Adapazari	5	123
Bursa	5	94

²³² Mardin (1989), 228.

Eskisehir	0	19
Erzurum	6	67
Istanbul	23	349
Kayseri	2	60
Konya	3	182
Van	1	8

Source: *Kopru* magazine in Yavuz (2003)

The network of study-centers is world-wide. Japan, Indonesia, Philippines, Turkic states, Pakistan, India, Russia, USA, Canada and the Arabic speaking world are only some of the countries that have study-centers. As stated before, Nursi encouraged his students to spread his message not only in Turkey, but also in other countries. Therefore, Nursi's followers opened study-centers in different parts of the world after his death.

One might consider the community's spread into various part of the world as missionary work. I directed this question to Dr. Faris Kaya during my interview with him. Kaya clearly highlighted that the aim of founding study-centers in different countries is not to convert people to the religion of Islam. As he explains, "first, our crucial objective is dealing with problems that the Muslim community is facing today."²³³ Kaya does admit the fact that there have been incidents of conversion by means of the work of the study-centers in various countries; however this is not the main intention but rather a by-product which cannot be avoided or neglected. The goal of study-centers is to "teach moral values in order to form individuals who have moral responsibilities."²³⁴ He

²³³ Faris Kaya, Personal Interview, May 10, 2011.

²³⁴ Ibid.

went further and expressed his concern about “one’s happiness both in this world and the hereafter.”²³⁵ According to Kaya, the *Risale-i Nur* includes universal messages, particularly when it comes to spirituality. He pointed out that some Christians articulated at various occasions that the writings of Nursi strengthened their belief.²³⁶ Kaya gave an example to further clarify his point,

Imagine there is a person who lives in the desert and is very thirsty. The priority for another person who is passing by is to provide him some water. Likewise, presently, people are left in desert of egotism, materialism, and immorality. Our priority is to save people from these disasters, not to convert them to Islam.²³⁷

The inspiration of this approach stems from Nursi, as Kaya believes, for Nursi invited Muslims and Christians to leave their differences aside and cooperate in order to promote belief and morality in the world.

In the following section, I shall offer a closer examination of Egypt as a case study in trying to establish study-centers outside of Turkey. My assessment will primarily rely on my interviews with Mehmet Firinci, one of the living students of Nursi who initiated the study-centers in Egypt.

1.1.5 Study-centers outside Turkey: The Case of Egypt

First of all, it is important to note that Nursi prioritized the spreading of the *Risale-i Nur* into every corner of the world. In 1955, Nursi himself mailed his *Isaratu'l I'caz* and *Mesnevi-i Nuriye* and some of the other treatises to 54 addresses in different

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

parts of the world including Egypt, Sudan, the Vatican, and Pakistan.²³⁸ After the death of Nursi, his students continued to pursue this important agenda and fulfill his dream.

The initiation of a study-center in Egypt began with the Cairo International Book Fair which is the largest and oldest book fair in the Arab world. Two representatives of the Nur community attended this traditional book fair in Cairo in 1985. This was followed by establishing a publishing house in Cairo as the cost of publishing was much cheaper compared to Turkey. Afterwards, the community opened a study-center. Presently, the Nur community has eight study-centers in different parts of Egypt. According to Mehmet Firinci, students from more than ten nations are staying in these study-centers. Every week there are several study circles in these study-centers. Even some professors are hosting the study circles at their homes. The community in Egypt was able to engage with many scholars and students in Egypt. Dr. Abd al-Ghafur Mustafa Ja'far of Al-Azhar University listed Nursi's *Isaratu'l I'caz* as required reading for his class entitled 'The School of *tafsir* in Turkey and India.'²³⁹ In addition, Ahmet Behcet, a prominent columnist of Egypt dedicated his column to Nursi and his thought for 36 days in the major daily newspaper *Al-Ahram*.²⁴⁰ Another intellectual who engaged with Nursi is Huseyin Ashur. Ashur was a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood.²⁴¹ He attended Nursi symposiums in 1992 and 1995. Ashur is also the founder of *al-Muhtaru'l Islami*. He published many articles in his magazine on Nursi and his thought.²⁴² So far over forty intellectuals from various Egyptian institutions attended the Nursi

²³⁸ Mehmet Firinci, Personal Interview, May 12, 2011.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Kenan Demirtas, Personal Interview, May 13, 2011.

²⁴² "Who is who in Nursi Studies" in <http://www.iikv.org/file/wiw/index.php?ia=33> (accessed on May 5, 2011).

symposiums.²⁴³ If the engagement of these Egyptian intellectuals is taken into consideration, it is likely that Nursi's ideas regarding political Islam and non-violence have been discussed among the members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Four international symposiums were held in Egypt and one of them was organized by al-Azhar University, which was in March 1999.²⁴⁴ There are over twenty students in Egypt who completed or are presently doing their doctoral work on Nursi.²⁴⁵

The establishment of study-centers and the founding of a publication house in Egypt helped the Nur Community to open study-centers in other parts of the Arab world, including Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia.

1.2 The Role of Publication

It is important to note that until the end of 1960s, it was not permissible to print the writings of Nursi. Therefore, Nursi's students had to copy thousands of the *Risale-i Nur* collections by hand. With the election of the Democrat Party (1950-60) printing was made much easier. The *Risale-i Nur* was no longer banned from the late 1960s on and the literature was able to be copied. In the first decade after Nursi's death, his followers did not have an official publishing house. However, they were able to publish various treatises in different printing houses. In 1970, Nursi's students founded their own printing house and began to disseminate copies of the *Risale-i Nur*. The number of these publication houses founded by the Nur Community considerably increased over the course of time. In the following, I shall briefly mention the five major publication houses

²⁴³ "Who is who in Nursi Studies: Egypt" in <http://www.iikv.org/file/wiw/index.php?ulkeid=52&lg=tr> (accessed May 5, 2011).

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Kenan Demirtas, Personal Interview, May 13, 2011.

1.2.1 Yeni Asya (New Asia) Publication

Yeni Asya Publication was founded by several Nursi followers in 1968. It publishes four thousand copies of the *Risale-i Nur* every year. In addition to Nursi's primary writings, Yeni Asya published more than thousands of secondary books explaining basic themes of the *Risale-i Nur*. The publication owns a daily news paper, *Yeni Asya Gazetesi*.²⁴⁶

1.2.2 Sozler Publications

Sozler Publications is one of the official publication houses of the Nur Community. It was founded by several of Nursi's students in 1975 and has been a pioneer in translating the writings of Nursi into different languages. The major part of the *Risale-i Nur* was translated into English and Arabic by Sozler Publications. In addition, this publication translated various treatises of Nursi into 41 different languages including Kurdish, Tatar, Malay, Russian, and Indonesian. Every year, this publishing house publishes forty thousands copies of the *Risale-i Nur*, which includes 130 treatises.²⁴⁷

1.2.3 Hayrat Publications

Hayrat Publications was founded in 1974. They primarily focused on publishing the writings of Nursi in Ottoman Turkish, the original language of Nursi's writings.

1.2.4 Envar Publications

Envar Publications was founded in 1979 and publishes Nursi's *Risale-i Nur*. Other publication houses include Nesil, Sah Damar, RNK, Tenvir, Soz Basim, and Zehra.

²⁴⁶ "Risale-i Nur Her Zaman Cok Satanlar Arasinda", in daily *Yeni Safak* newspaper, December 10, 2010.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

1.3 Symposiums

Symposiums played a significant role in introducing Nursi's writings to the global academic audience. They are mainly organized by the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture (IFSC), dedicated to the dissemination of Nursi's thought. It is essential to note that until the early 1990s there was an immense pressure on religion in Turkey because of the 163rd article in the Turkish constitution. Even a small gathering regarding religion could be the grounds for arrest according to this article. Therefore, it was not possible for the Nur Community to gather publicly until the article was abolished in January 1991 by the Turgut Ozal administration.²⁴⁸ Though Nursi's writings were well-grounded among lay people, Turkish academia did not approve of Nursi's *Risale-i Nur*. His writings were ignored in the academic environment for a long time. For example, in 2004 IFSC decided to donate a collection of Nursi's collection to every university's library in Turkey. Some of these universities refused to have Nursi's books in their libraries. Though Nursi and his writings were acquitted of all the accusations in 1960s, a silent protest continued.²⁴⁹

Taking the abolishment of article 163 as an opportunity, the IFSC organized a symposium on Nursi on March 16, 1991. Scholars such as Serif Mardin, Mim Kemal Oke, and Colin Turner presented papers on Nursi's thought. Indeed, this was a breakthrough point. First, it was the first academic gathering to discuss Nursi's thought publicly. Second, this was to some extent a shift from the study-center method to a public academic gathering. It comes therefore with no surprise that the community showed some hesitation towards these events, for they meant endorsing a new method with which they

²⁴⁸ Faris Kaya, Personal Interview, May 10, 2011.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

were not well-acquainted.²⁵⁰ From the first symposium on, the IFSC organized a symposium either once every two years or three years. The interest has rapidly grown from the general public and scholars from various countries including Nigeria, Sudan, Canada, and Israel have attended thus far. For example, around 15,000 people joined the last symposium held in October 2011 in order to listen to over 100 scholars presenting papers. The scholars who participated in the symposiums in Turkey organized similar programs at their home universities. This has been the case so far in Algeria, Australia, Chad, Egypt, England, Canada, Germany, Indonesia, Jordan, Malaysia, Morocco, Netherlands, Niger, Philippines, South Africa, Syria, USA, and Yemen. Ironically, unlike in Turkey's case, most of the conferences and symposiums in these countries were organized by the universities.²⁵¹ According to Kaya, the symposiums have broadened the network of study-centers. Another important outcome of these symposiums is the fact that the participating scholars published articles in various journals on Nursi's thought and the Nur community.²⁵² In addition, many books both in Arabic and English were written by these participants and were published by major publication houses, both in the West and the Muslim World. A brief description of these books was presented in the literature review of this paper.

So far, I have tried to demonstrate how the Nur community has spread, particularly after the death of Nursi. As shown, the study-centers, publication houses and symposiums played a significant role in order to introduce Nursi's writings to people, especially in Turkey and generally in different parts of the world. These three means helped the

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² See *The Muslim World*, Volume 89, Issue 3-4 July-October 1999 and *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations (ICMR)* Volume 19 Issue 1, 2008.

community to reach out to millions of people. In the following, I shall attempt to seek an answer to the question of whether the Nur community played any role in the failure of extremism and political Islam in Turkey.

2 The Failure of Religious Extremism and Political Islam in Turkey: The Role of the Nur Community

Although there has been aggressive secularist policies and enormous pressure on Muslims in Turkey, the country did not experience cases of political Islam or extremist practices found in Islamic countries such as Egypt and Pakistan. A movement such as the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and the *Jamaat-e-Islami* of Pakistan has never found its roots in Turkey. That is to say, religious extremism and political Islam were not well received by Turkish people. It is true that political Islam was on the rise in certain periods, particularly with the effort of Necmeddin Erbakan's party *Milli Selamet* (National Salvation), later on *Refah* (Welfare), and *Fazilet* (Virtue.) However, with Recep Tayyip Erdogan's *Justice and Development Party* (AKP), an immense shift occurred in the sphere of political Islam in Turkey. Indeed, one of the major reasons that led to the disassociation of Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his friends from the *Fazilet* (Virtue) party was their dislike of utilizing Islam as a reference in their policy making. Eventually, this fundamental disagreement with Erdogan's mentor Erbakan led to a split and resulted in the establishment of a new party. Erdogan often highlighted this point in his speeches.²⁵³ This standpoint of Erdogan was in turn used by Erbakan to accuse him of dismissing Islam and to make propaganda against him among Turkish people. In his speeches on March 18, 2008, Lutfu Esengun, the vice president of the *Saadet* (Felicity)

²⁵³ Recep Tayyip Erdogan "Biz Milli Gorus Gomlegi Kac Kez Cikarttik" in <http://www.haber7.com/yorumlar.php?id=257136&s=7> (accessed May 5, 2011).

Party, founded on 20 July 2001 after the *Saadet* Party (FP) was banned by the Constitutional Court, criticized Erdogan with the following remarks, “President Erdogan and the administrative members of his party do not mention Islam and do not take it as a reference. They clearly state that they are not a religious-based party.”²⁵⁴

Clearly, Erdogan showed much resemblance with Nursi, who also refrained from using religion in the sphere of politics. It could be said that the activities of the Nur community might have played a role in shifting politics from a religious framework to a non-religious one due to the following reasons.

First, Erdogan received massive support from people for his newly founded party. Even though he publicly stated that his party was not an Islamic party and would not take the religion of Islam as a reference, he was still supported by a good number of practicing Muslims in Turkey. The main support for his party came from these people. According to a recent survey, 52 percent of Turkish society goes to Friday prayers and 80 percent fast during the month of Ramadan. Also, 48 percent of people know somebody who has a relationship with a religious order or movement in Turkey. The majority of people who enjoy relationships with an order are from the Nur community.²⁵⁵ These statistics reveal to what extent the Risale-i Nur students were receptive to Erdogan’s new politics.

The failure of political Islam and the role of the Nur community within that process was highlighted by Mustafa Akyol of the daily Star newspaper, who writes, “Nursi’s

²⁵⁴ Lutfu Esengun, “Kurdunuz, Kapatmak Istiyorsunuz” <http://www.saadet.org.tr/haber/kurdunuz-kapatmak-istiyorsunuz> (accessed May 5, 2011).

²⁵⁵ ANDY-AR Sosyal Arařtırmalar Merkezi, “Turk Toplumunun Cemaat Algisi Arastirmasi,” <http://andy-ar.com/turk-toplumunun-cemaat-algisi-arastirmasi/> (accessed on May 5, 2011).

thoughts played a significant role in the transformation that the AKP's founders went through from the beginning of 1990s leaving behind political Islam as a means.²⁵⁶

Second, if the extent of the activities of the Nur community is taken into consideration, it is likely that Erdogan and his fellow politicians are familiar with Nursi's thought. Indeed, Erdogan was the first Prime Minister in the history of modern Turkey who publicly referred to Nursi and his ideas in a speech.²⁵⁷ One of Erdogan's messages, read out loud in a symposium in 2011, emphasized that Nursi has greatly assisted Turkey's unity.²⁵⁸ A closer examination of Erdogan's discourse reveals much resemblance with Nursi's ideas. Similar to him, Erdogan avoided a nationalist discourse and emphasized religion as a historical tie that kept the nation united.

In addition, some of the major figures of Erdogan's party are well-versed with Nursi's writings. One of them is Huseyin Celik, the former minister of education and presently the deputy president of AKP. In a symposium organized in 1995 by IFSC, Celik delivered a paper on Nursi's perspective on nationalism. In his paper, Celik argued that the solution for the Kurdish issue lies in the Islamic brotherhood.²⁵⁹ In another paper, Celik stated that Nursi constantly struggled for justice and democracy. In fact, these values have become an important part of AKP's discourse.

Bulent Arinc, the former speaker of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey and presently deputy prime minister, has been another major figure in the AKP who engaged

²⁵⁶ Mustafa Akyol, "Demokratiklesme Surecinde Nurculugun Yeri," <http://pazarseminerleri.org/2010/10/21/mustafa-akyol-demokratiklesme-surecinde-nurculugun-yeri/> (accessed on May 5, 2011).

²⁵⁷ Erdogan, "Said Nursi'siz, Nazim'siz Noksan Kaliriz," in <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/haber.aspx?id=12615727&p=2> (accessed on May 5, 2011).

²⁵⁸ Recep Tayyip Erdogan, "Basbakan Recep Tayyip Erdogan'in Mesaji" in *Vakif Bulteni (IHKV)*, November 2010 (no.8), 3.

²⁵⁹ Huseyin Celik, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and the Ideal of Islamic Unity," in *Third International Symposium on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Volume two) (Istanbul: Sozler Publication, 1997), 247-62.

with Nursi's writings. In his opening speech at the Nursi symposium entitled *Knowledge, Faith, Morality, and the Future of Humanity* in 2010, Arinc emphasized Nursi's compassion and love for people, even his enemies.²⁶⁰ Mehmet Aydin, presently one of the ministers of the state, wrote a paper on Nursi's conception of evil and attended one of the symposiums on Nursi in 1995.²⁶¹

It is also necessary to mention the engagement of Ahmed Davutoglu, presently Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, with Nursi's writings. Davutoglu was listed by *Foreign Policy* magazine as one of the top 100 global thinkers of 2010, in respect of his role as one of the galvanizers behind Turkey's global reawakening. In his paper at a symposium on Nursi in 1995, Davutoglu stated that Nursi and his ideas regarding democracy, unity, identity, and politics might be a hope for the strength of the Muslim World.²⁶² Davutoglu initiated the "Zero Problem Policy," the core of which is to have peace, particularly with Turkey's neighbors, and generally with the world. The aspect of unity and condemnation of enmity was overtly emphasized by Nursi. Moreover, Nursi supported the Baghdad Pact which was initially signed between Turkey and Iraq in 1955, and was subsequently joined by Pakistan, Iran, and Britain. Vahide describes Nursi's attitude towards this agreement as follows, "In connection with this agreement, Nursi wrote a letter of congratulation to Menderes and the president, Celal Bayar, applauding

²⁶⁰ Bulent Arinc, "Bediuzzaman bir Ozgurluk Asigidir" in *Vakif Bulteni (IIKV)*, November 2010 (no.8), 6-8.

²⁶¹ Mehmet Aydin, "The Problem of Evil in the Risale-i Nur" in *Third International Symposium On Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Volume One), (Istanbul: Sozler Publication, 1997), 243-52.

²⁶² Ahmet Davutoglu, "Bediuzzaman and the Politics of the Islamic World in the 20th Century" in *Third International Symposium on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Volume two) (Istanbul: Sozler Publication, 1997), 286-311.

the move as a necessary first step toward securing peace in the area.”²⁶³ In the same letter, Nursi also stated that the pact would repulse the danger of nationalism.²⁶⁴

Third, unlike his mentor Erbakan, Erdogan did not refuse Western values. For example, when Erbakan came to power, he initiated the D-8 project in which he wanted to build a union among major Muslim countries Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Pakistan, Turkey, Iran, Egypt, and Malaysia in 1997.²⁶⁵ However, while building relationships with the Muslim World, Erdogan also implemented reforms to help Turkey in its membership efforts for the European Union. Particularly, in the first years of his administration, Erdogan prioritized the project of joining the EU. In addition, Erdogan initiated the Alliance of Civilizations with the prime minister of Spain, Zapatoro. Over a hundred countries are members of this project.²⁶⁶ This initiation would promote justice, peace, and dialogue in the world.

In fact, as shown in various segments of this research, Nursi did not have an overall or wholesale rejection of Europe and he did encourage his students to cooperate with pious Christians in order to combat injustice and unbelief. Presently, there are hundreds of institutions promoting dialogue, justice, and peace in the world that have been inspired by Nursi’s thought.

In a nutshell, this chapter attempted to examine the practical implications of Nursi’s thought and the impact of the Nur Community particularly in Turkish society and generally in the world. As demonstrated, Nursi’s modern ideas did not remain theoretical, but continue to have a profound influence. By means of establishing study-centers,

²⁶³ Vahide (2005), 325.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ For more details see <http://www.developing8.org/> (accessed on May 5, 2011).

²⁶⁶ For more details see the official web page of the project <http://www.unaoc.org/> (accessed on May 5, 2011).

distributing publications, and organizing symposiums, the community was able to reach out to millions not only in Turkey, but also, as shown in the case of Egypt, to different parts of the world. The community has had an immense impact on the new direction of Turkish politics and played an important role in the failure of violence and political Islam in Turkey. Not only did it prepare the groundwork which made Turkish Society receptive to apolitical Islam but also informed today's leading Turkish politicians in their policymaking and decisions.

CONCLUSION

This project aimed to examine the late Muslim theologian Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's ethics of non-violence. As shown, the non-violent ethics of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, based on the Qur'an, might be a relevant source in finding solutions to the global problem of religion and violence, particularly as it is experienced in the Muslim World. Nursi regards the problem of violence as a common fact and suggests relevant solutions. He moves beyond the traditional interpretation of physical jihad and draws attention to the aspect of spiritual jihad. Therefore, Nursi makes a shift in the concept of enemy. He does not identify a physical enemy, a category which has been traditionally interpreted as referring to non-Muslims.

Nursi formulates a new notion of enemy. These enemies are not visible and tangible; rather they are invisible and abstract. The enemies are primarily ignorance, unbelief, hatred, and conflict. Although these concepts are promoted by individuals or certain groups, Nursi does not direct his criticism to personalities or fractions of society. His intellectual endeavor concentrates on the content and results of these ideas rather than on the sources.

Nursi believes that humanity is in a different stage of time, which is the time of civilization and knowledge. Violence can not be used as means in order to spread Islam. He makes, therefore, a shift in the object of scapegoat mechanism. In the time of civilization, "persuasion" is the most sufficient way to deal with non-Muslims. They are potential allies of Muslims in order to promote peace and justice in the world and combat unbelief. In other words, he develops a *jihad* against the threat of ignorance, conflict, unbelief, and hatred. He combats them with knowledge, positive action, belief, and

compassion. Nursi also develops a new notion in which he values the attributes of a person, rather than the person, regardless of one's religious affiliation.

One of the reasons that this study focused on the non-violent ethics of Nursi was that his approach does not remain mere theory; it had and continues to have profound impact. This was, first, demonstrated in Nursi's comparison with Sayyid Qutb. In order to make a transformation in their respective societies, their approaches and solutions to these problems differ. Qutb intended to change the society, while Nursi targeted the individual. Their methods in countering their enemies were quite distinct just as were their definitions of who or what the enemies were. Though both utilized the same authoritative source, the truth of the Qur'an, to make their case and construct an agenda for change, they came to different conclusions on which tools to use. More specifically, it was a choice of either radical, active, physical means or the pietist quietist somewhat passive approach characterized by Qur'anic virtues of patience, endurance and gratitude. Nursi offered an apolitical program, while Qutb regarded political Islam as a significant means to change society. Nursi believed in *jihad-i manevi* (spiritual jihad), while Qutb regarded physical *jihad* as the means to reach his particular goals. The Nur Community and the Muslim Brotherhood differ in many ways. There are two important distinctions: First, one of the main principles of the Nur Community is not to involve in politics, while the Muslim Brotherhood aims to establish a political union. Second, the members of the Muslim Brotherhood assemble around a leader, while the members of the Nur Community assemble around the *Risale-i Nur*. One is leader-based and the other is text-based. Also, this study aimed to discover whether there are practical implications of Nursi's ethics of non-violence in Turkish society and globally. As shown in the last

chapter, Nursi's ideas have not remained as theory but have still widespread practical implications. By means of establishing study-centers, distributing publications, and organizing symposiums, the community was able to reach out to millions not only in Turkey, but also, as shown in the case of Egypt, to different parts of the world. The community has had an immense impact on the new direction of Turkish politics and played an important role on the failure of violence and political Islam in Turkey. Not only did it prepare the groundwork which made Turkish society receptive to apolitical Islam but also informed today's leading Turkish politicians in their policymaking and decisions.

Studies on Nursi and the Nur Community are still new in academic circles. As stated above Nursi does not receive the attention granted either to his Muslim intellectual contemporaries or to other Western figures who are known for promoting non-violence. This study hopes to be a small step in examining the non-violent ethics of Nursi and it is our hope that this project will be a humble contribution to further the new branch of Nursi Studies.

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