Bediuzzaman Said Nursi’s Ethics of Non-Violence: Implications for Christian-Muslim Relations Today

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Abstract: Islam, unlike any other major religious tradition, is often associated with violence and extremism. This essay explores some of the elements of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi’s (1876/77–1960) ethics of non-violence and the historical context within which it evolved and was put into practice. It will become evident that Bediuzzaman's advocacy of non-violence is rooted in a Qur'anic framework by providing a holistic reading of scripture. This takes into consideration major Qur'anic ethical virtues of compassion and mercy and a re-interpretation of jihad suitable with those. Introducing the general Christian audience to these Muslim advocates remains crucial in fostering Christian-Muslim relations.

Key Terms: Islam, ethics, non-violence, Said Nursi, jihad, Qur’an

Christian-Muslim relations today are sadly still marked by tensions, misperceptions, and sometimes even violent acts. According to a recent Gallup report, a slight majority of Americans (53 percent) say their opinion of Islam is either “not too favorable” (22 percent) or “not favorable at all” (31 percent). When asked about their level of knowledge about Islam, many Americans have either “very little knowledge” (40 percent) or “none at all” (23 percent); these numbers constitute more than half of the population. An increasing number of the world’s approximately 1.6 billion Muslims—an estimated 45 million—live in Europe, while 2.6 million live in North America; neither population sees conflict between following Islam and living in a non-Muslim environment.

Yet, as Zeki Saritoprak rightly observes, if one were to ask a general audience to name a well-known Muslim figure advocating non-violence, predictably the response would be deep and long silence. For many people there is simply not one outstanding Muslim personality equivalent to Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mahatma Gandhi. Considering the above-mentioned statistics, it is therefore instructive to introduce the general American public to influential Muslim intellectuals who promoted non-violence, both as an effective means for fostering Christian-Muslim relations and to provide a more nuanced picture of Islam. Unfortunately, the powerful voices of Muslim peace activists are often marginalized in sensationalist media.

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi

One of those many important Muslim personalities is the theologian Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1876/77–1960), whose lifespan stretched through the painful and tragic experiences of World War I and II, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and the challenges of modernity and secularism.
While reflecting on the major social upheavals and turmoil Nursi went through, Ian Markham points out:

Nursi’s situation has so many similarities with the situation that confronts every person of faith in the West. 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; Nursi is a mirror that continues to reflect the challenges of the world in which we all live.⁵

Bediuzzaman’s advocacy of non-violence is strongly rooted in the scriptural framework of the Qur’an, and his legacy remains unaltered by his followers, known as the Nur Community, which has an estimated ten million members.⁶ The movement was originally founded in Turkey but gradually has become influential in Europe and North America.⁷ It therefore comes as no surprise that a growing number of Christian theologians have turned their attention to an examination of Nursi’s main work, the Risale-i Nur, a six-thousand-page commentary on the Qur’an.⁸

The scope of this essay is to offer insight into some of the specific elements of Nursi’s applied ethics of non-violence as he outlines it in the Risale-i Nur. Before this discussion though, it is necessary to briefly sketch out the complex historical setting and social atmosphere in which Nursi’s thought evolved, while also reflecting on his re-interpretation of the concept of jihad (Arabic: struggle).⁹ A closer examination of the historical circumstances will facilitate a deeper understanding of Bediuzzaman’s accomplishment.

**Nineteenth-Century Challenges and Nursi’s Rise**

In 1876/77, the year Bediuzzaman was born in the village of Nurs, close to the city of Bitlis in the Eastern province of the Ottoman Empire, the Tanzimat Fermanı (Imperial Decree of Reformation) was proclaimed. This represented the first form of a constitution designed to modernize the internal workings of the Ottoman Empire. The nineteenth century was an era in which the Ottomans were severely declining relative to the West. The caliphate, representing the political authority and unity of the global Muslim community, or 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 convincingly demonstrated their military and commercial superiority.

As Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi’ 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.”¹⁰ In brief, the first one was a nationalist response aimed at uniting all of the Turks under one umbrella, while the second reaction aimed to preserve the Ottoman Empire “without giving any central role to Islam in either society or politics.”¹¹ The representatives of this latter response were called the Westernists (Turkish: Garpeiler). In their view, the only way to save the Empire was through a process of westernization. The third solution to preserve the Empire, called the Islamic response (Turkish: Islamcılar), was to some extent a reaction to the Westernist school. The Islamcilar aimed to modernize the Empire while “preserving the status of Islam in that society.”¹² 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.¹³ For a time, 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.¹⁴ The Islamcilar used all their efforts to fight against the belief that Islam was an obstacle to progress.

**Nursi and Tahir Pasha**

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi was one prominent representative among the Islamcilar. Like other members
of the school, Nursi believed that there was an immediate need for change to save the Empire; however, he believed that this should be based on the principles of the religion of Islam. Nursi completed his education at various traditional religious schools (medrese) in the eastern part of the Empire and attempted to find solutions for its predicaments. Upon an invitation of Tahir Pasha, the governor of the province of Van, Nursi spent about three years in his residence. This period is particularly significant, for Tahir Pasha 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 Pasha's residence was a preferred meeting point for government officials, teachers, and other intellectuals to discuss various questions of interest.15

While staying at the governor's residence, Nursi read the newspapers and journals delivered to the governor's office and took advantage of Tahir Pasha's immense library. Through these readings Nursi was able to gain insight into the broader problems facing Ottoman society and the wider Muslim world. According to Colin Turner, it was probably at this stage that Nursi first understood that a new interpretation of Islamic theology was 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 a result of the growth of materialism, and that a study of modern science was necessary."16 Having access to a large library, Nursi had the opportunity to study a whole range of social and natural sciences, including history, geography, mathematics, geology, physics, chemistry, astronomy, and philosophy.17

A New Educational System

Nursi began to seek solutions, and came to the conclusion that educational reform was a dire need in the Muslim world. Soon he began to promote his reformist ideas. He envisioned an educational system that would create a fusion of the religious and the modern sciences. To his mind, such a synthesis would corroborate and strengthen the truths of religion. Nursi practiced this new method when he was teaching his own students and attempted several times to establish a university that would embody his ideas. This university, or Medresetu’z-Zehra as he would name it, would be founded in Eastern Anatolia and was supposed to be the sister university of the Al-Azhar institution in Cairo.18

Nursi hoped that the new project would be a powerful way of combating widespread ignorance and backwardness prevalent in the region, and also would solve its social and political problems. According to Sukran Vahide, Nursi learned enough from the government officials in Van to be alarmed about the extent of westernization and secularization among the Ottomans, and also about the doubts concerning 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 that the updating of the Islamic sciences in the light of modern advances in knowledge was a must.

This thought occupied Nursi’s mind until the beginning of World War I.19 During this stage, Nursi was highly involved in the political and social life in Istanbul, then the capital of the Empire. He tried to gain support for his educational reforms while delivering speeches, addressing gatherings, and publishing numerous articles in the newspapers and journals of the day. However, his activities did not yield significant fruits, and after running into trouble with the government and becoming disillusioned by political life, he returned to the Eastern provinces. Nursi continued to outline his thoughts on the freedom movement and constitutionalism, and did not see them as conflicting with Islamic precepts. Nursi’s primary aim to that point was to save the Ottoman state; that is to say, to build unity within the Empire. He saw education as the most important way 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."20

In early 1911, Nursi travelled to Damascus, which was known as the intellectual center of prominent Islamic scholarship. Here, Nursi was
asked to give a sermon at the Umayyad Mosque. Thousands of people listened to him, among them one hundred Muslim scholars. The Damascus Sermon (Hutbe-i Samiye) addressed six basic problems of the ummah and its remedies. After his stay in Damascus, Said Nursi left once more for Istanbul in order to accomplish his dream of founding the Medresetu’z-Zehra. Although this time some officials showed support for his project, Nursi still could not achieve his goal because of the conflicts that broke out within the Empire. This time, Nursi did not stay long in Istanbul and left again for Van, continuing to educate his close students.

In 1914, World War I broke out and Said Nursi was assigned to the army as a voluntary regimental mufti and ordered to form a militia force. 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. After two years in captivity, Nursi took advantage of the chaos caused by the Communist Revolution and fled, returning to Istanbul via Petersburg, Warsaw, Berlin, and Vienna. Upon his arrival in Istanbul, Nursi was appointed as the member of the Darü’l-Hikmeti’l-Islamiye (The Academy of Higher Islamic Studies).

The Old and the New Said

While in Istanbul, Nursi upheld the National Independence groups led by Mustafa Kemal. After the victory of the National Army in the War of Independence, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk invited him to Ankara. The Grand National Assembly gave Nursi an official welcome on November 9, 1922. In Ankara, Nursi was deeply disappointed after realizing that the government was pursuing the politics of secularization: “Atheistic ideas of philosophic materialism were being propagated, and deputies were demonstrating a lax attitude towards Islam and their religious obligations.” According to Abu-Rabi’, Nursi’s meeting with Kemal Ataturk was the moment in which the Old Said was transformed into the New Said. The Old and New Said are terms employed by Nursi himself to describe the two distinct periods of his life. The Old Said believed that involvement in politics would help his religious cause. The New Said realized that this was erroneous and began to refrain from any political involvement. The meeting with Ataturk was:

[...]

Once more, Nursi returned to Van, dedicating himself to contemplation and worship. This time he preached on fundamentals of belief rather than on political and social events and developments. He no longer believed that politics was a way to revive Islam and society, and it certainly would not combat the growing threat of aggressive atheism and materialism.

Exile and Imprisonment

It is important to mention the political instability present in the Eastern provinces. Some of the Kurdish tribal leaders were displeased with the government of Mustafa Kemal, partly because many members were known as being irreligious and secularist. As a consequence, the region was shaken by several revolts—the most famous being the uprising of Shaikh Said in 1925. Nursi refused to partake in any of these revolts, yet he was accused of having conspired with the rebels. Tragically, he was sent into exile in Burdur, a small town in southwestern Anatolia. This marked the beginning of his thirty years of exile and imprisonment ordered by the new Turkish government. During the long years of deportation and incarceration Nursi secretly wrote his magnum opus, the Risale-i Nur collection. This
qu’ranic commentary offers new approaches in reviving faith, and attempts to solve the issues that came along with the process of secularization and modernity. In the light of the Qur’an, Nursi addresses a wide range of topics in the work, such as the existence of God, the resurrection and the hereafter, prophethood, the existence of angels, and many other subjects.

Repeatedly Nursi was called to court and suffered major trials, often with the charge of trying to overthrow the state with his writings and building a secret anti-governmental group. Eventually, after investigation, all charges against Nursi were dropped, and he was released from prison. Bediuzzaman Said Nursi died in Urfa in 1960. Two months later his body was removed by the military to an unknown place in order to undercut his popularity among his followers.

Nursi’s Concept of Spiritual or Metaphorical Jihad

Before discussing Nursi’s ethics of non-violence, it is worthwhile to outline his new interpretation of the highly exploited concept of jihad (Arabic: struggle). This term appears at various points in the Qur’an, often referred to as “striving” and “struggling” on the path of God; and erroneously referred to as “holy war” in the general public discourse.30

Nursi lived during a time in which the term jihād was intensely and continuously utilized in Western polemic to describe annihilation, violent seizure, and various other brutalities attributed to Muslim extremists during the nineteenth-century confrontations with Western sovereignties in the Balkans, Greece, Armenia, Anatolia, Damascus, and Lebanon.31 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. The Ottoman thinker Abdullah Cevdet (1869–1932), for instance, had proposed Bahā’ism as an alternative to the problem of jihād.32

Contextualizing the Qur’an

Nursi was well cognizant of the fact that a new interpretation of jihād was crucial. It is essential to mention that he unapologetically accepted the fact that the sword historically played a significant role in the spread of Islam.33 This reality, he believed, had to be evaluated within the particular 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.”34 He also admitted that in the early time of Islam, Christians and Muslims were not able to truly befriend each other, as the qu’ranic verse 5:51 prohibited it. Again, Nursi offered a historically contextualized and nuanced interpretation:

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.35

Nursi’s point here is obvious, as he makes clear that in the early days of Islam, religious borders and identities were less defined. In order to foster the establishment of Islam, Muslims drew a firm line. Christians, who in the same way took their faith and its distinct practice very seriously, preferred a more isolated life. In the present, however, religious identities and faith traditions are well established, and most people do not take religion as a decisive factor of consideration when entering into relationships.

Throughout his lifetime, which was marked by outer and inner conflicts and imprisonment and torture initiated by the state, Nursi refrained from aggression or justifying the use of violence.
With the only exception of serving in the militia to defend the Eastern province from the Russian invasion, his advocacy of non-violence remained a major characteristic of his personality. Thus he did not pay mere lip service but actively promoted peace. Here, he stood in stark contrast with some of his other Muslim contemporaries.

Ignorance—The Real Enemy

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.³⁶ By contrast, Nursi instead defined a new enemy, which paved the way for unifying Christians and Muslims. For him, the common global enemies were primarily ignorance, poverty, and conflict. Although these concepts were promoted by individuals and certain groups, Nursi did not direct his criticism to personalities or factions of society. His intellectual endeavor concentrated on the content and results of these ideas.

He underlined the fact that human civilization is now in a period of time in which science and knowledge should rule the world rather than force and compulsion.³⁷ In his new interpretation of jihad, the spiritual or metaphorical jihad (cihad-i manevi) as he termed it, Nursi identified these new global threats as enemies, and thus essentially shifted from the idea of conceiving the West or non-Muslims as enemies. Particular individuals and groups were not perceived as overarching threats; rather, Nursi drew attention to global enemies that concern each and every group and each and every individual. His pietist, quietist understanding of jihad seemed to be grounded in foundational qur'anic themes. Though Nursi himself did not explicitly state how and on what basis he constructed his notion of jihad, his thought, particularly during the New Said period, was generally rooted in a scriptural framework. He himself stated that he took the Qur'an as his sole teacher.³⁸

Reinterpreting Martyrdom

As mentioned earlier, in Nursi’s thought the new object to be targeted was ignorance, prevalent in both non-Muslim and Muslim communities. It would be combated by promoting learning.³⁹ Nursi based this interpretation on two hadith, or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad: “The ink of scholars will have the same value of blood of martyrs on the Day of Judgment;”⁴⁰ 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 equivalency of one hundred martyrs.”⁴¹ Here, Nursi drew attention to a new concept of martyrdom that is not obtained through physical combat, but rather by pursuing knowledge. Spiritual or metaphorical jihad excludes using force as means to spread Islam. Reflecting on the qur'anic verse 16:24, “Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful discourse and debate with them in the best way,” Nursi regarded intellectual persuasion by word and tongue as the most influential way of teaching. In a civilized world, the following method was more appropriate: “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.”⁴²

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

[T]he way of the Risale-i Nur was peaceful jihad or ‘jihad of the word’ (ma’nevi 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.⁴³
Nursi constantly encouraged his students to promote peace and harmony in the society, and they are strictly adhering to it thus far. 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 ..." In another letter Nursi wrote to his students that "the most important duty of the Risale-i Nur students at this time is taking taqua (God-awareness) as the basis of their actions against the moral destruction ..." Nursi condemned causing disorder, chaos, and anarchy, which, for him, stood in direct opposition to God’s order and unity.

Nursi believed that human beings have the potential to be destructive and hateful. He argued that what is most worthy of being hated is hatred itself. This is the entity on which human anger should be directed. His motto was “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 render 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.

Therefore, a person should refrain from directing hatred or feeling enmity toward others. Negative feelings do not belong in a believer’s heart, as they destroy not only the individual but also society. He stated that “we are the competitors of love; we have no time for enmity.”

Compassion

Another notion Nursi drew much attention to is compassion. Compassion was an important aspect in his thought and frequently employed in his major work, the Risale-i Nur. 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." Compassion is a highly significant faculty in the hearts of human beings. 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.”

There were several occasions in Nursi’s life that clearly reflect his deeply 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 who spent time with him in Denizli, there were around 350 to 400 prisoners there, and most of them were guilty of murder. The rest were in prison either because of criminal activities or attempted murder. Fights and quarrels were quite usual among the prisoners, and these often ended in violence. Hunkar narrates that from 1939, the year when he was put in prison, until 1943, eighteen people were killed. In 1943, Nursi joined Hunkar, along with 126 of his students. According to Hunkar, Nursi had such an impact on the prisoners that they made a remarkable personal transformation. One account states that 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.

Another incident highlighting Nursi’s great compassion even for his oppressors happened during his 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 recalled, Nursi was intentionally put into a room that 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 quotes Nursi as follows: “[T]he prosecutor intentionally put me in this room so
that I could die. I can not stand this oppression anymore and I shall imprecate him.” As Nursi raised his hands, he saw a little girl passing by. He asked Halici, “Do you know this girl?” Halici replied, “She is the prosecutor’s daughter.” Once he knew she was the prosecutor’s daughter, he gave up on imprecating him, saying, “I am concerned that later on, the girl will cry and ask what happened to her father.” This was Nursi’s way of compassion. He even had pity for his oppressors.53

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 Isparit, a place close to Nursi’s hometown of Nurs. The forces Nursi was leading were able to suppress the Armenian forces. Nursi gathered the Armenian women and children in the area and handed them over to the Armenian forces.54 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 Nursi’s biographer, Abdurrahman, the Armenians were so impressed by his compassionate behavior that they refrained from killing innocent civilians on the enemy side.55

**Nursi and Christian-Muslim Relations**

Nursi’s approach to non-Muslims, particularly Christians, is worth examining in the following assessment. His view of Christian believers emphasizes the fact that he refrained from targeting particular groups but instead promoted unity between the two major traditions of Islam and Christianity.

As noted previously, after the declaration of the constitution (The Second Mesrutiyet) in 1908, Nursi travelled to different parts of the Eastern province of the Empire in order to explain to people the tenets of constitutionalism and the new freedoms. Many tribes were concerned about the new amendments granting Armenians the right to become governors and hold leadership positions. Nursi’s response was very interesting, for he did not believe that the different religious affiliation undermined particular leadership and governing skills. In his mind, the Armenians already occupied certain professions in the country, and just as their religious affiliation had not impacted their ability to carry out those professions, their leadership position would not be abused either. The governors are the paid servants of the people and thus obliged to follow the precepts of the constitution. Nursi was confident that the principles based on the constitution would be observed and followed by all.

Moreover, Nursi encouraged Muslims and Christians to come together 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.”56 Nursi himself offered a practical example for this ecumenical partnership, putting his words into action. In 1950, he sent a collection of his works to Pope Pius XII in Rome and received in reply, on February 22, 1951, a personal letter of thanks.57 According to Thomas Michel, though there is no official document to prove the correspondence, some of the documents promulgated by 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.”58 Nursi also visited the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras in Istanbul in 1953 in order to seek cooperation between Muslims and Christians against aggressive atheism.59 For him, Christians were his allies, instead of being a threat or representing a target.

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 considered them as martyrs—”[they] were martyrs of a sort, whatever religion they belonged to,” and that “their reward would be great and save them from Hell.” Therefore, he concluded, “it may be said with certainty that the
calamity which the oppressed among Christians suffer, those connected to Jesus [...] is martyrdom for them.” 60

**Nursi’s Qur’anic Ethics of Non-Violence**

Nursi began with the fundamental belief that every human being is created by God and thus possesses the highest value. 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 explained that every person desires to watch, show, and enjoy his/her skills. In the same way, God wants to watch the beauty of his attributes in his creatures. 61 Every individual is a mirror of these attributes and, therefore, is sacred.

Nursi stated that there are two ways of looking at the creatures of God. The first one is “self-referential” (ma’na-i ismi). Viewed from this perspective one regards the creatures exclusively in 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 encouraged people to look at creatures from the latter perspective, the other-indicative, on account of their Maker. 62 If you want to show your amazement, Nursi states, say, “[H]ow beautifully they have been made! How exquisitely they point to their Maker’s beauty!” 63 He discouraged 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. 64 The simple but fundamental fact that human beings are created by God and thus possess a sacred nature by being embodiments of God’s beautiful names does not leave room to apply any violence to human beings. Even a person who denies and rejects God continues to mirror and display God’s names. A crime against such an individual would ultimately mean a denial and rejection of God’s beautiful art. Regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or religion, every human being is a mirror of the Creator and cannot be the object of violence.

Another crucial element in his advocacy of non-violence is his interpretation of the recurring Qur’anic verse: “No soul shall bear the burden of another soul.” 65 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 one’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 ship. The end does not justify the means of killing an innocent person. 66

In this context it is important to mention that Nursi always attempted to employ his principle of “absolute justice” (adalet-i mahza) instead of “relative justice” (adalet-i izafiye). 67 In a society in which perfect justice flourishes an innocent person cannot be chosen as a scapegoat to be sacrificed for the whole community. 68 Within this context, Nursi closed 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. 69 Consequently, collective punishment can never be an option.

**Homo Sapiens Qur’anicus**

The previous examination provides merely a glimpse into Bediuzzaman Said Nursi’s understanding and practice of non-violence. So far, much of
his thought has been less explored in the English-speaking world partly due to the fact that not all of his works have been translated into English; he thus remains inaccessible to a large audience. Certainly, another possible explanation is that Muslim thinkers like Nursi, who tirelessly promote non-violence and co-existence, are overlooked, while major attention is given to the few radical-minded Muslims making constant appearances in the media. Unlike the latter, Nursi aimed to ground his ideas in an authentic Qur’anic framework by following a holistic approach and keeping its major core principles in focus. This stands in stark opposition to an atomistic and selective method of reading scripture that simply dismisses and ignores the overarching message of Islam, namely the struggle for peace and harmony.

Nursi was rightly characterized as a “Homo Sapiens Qur’anicus”—a human being deeply immersed in the Qur’anic worldview and dedicated to bringing Muslims back to the core of scripture.70 Compassion, mercy, love, justice, respect—terms often disassociated from Islam—were not merely abstract ideas for Nursi but were consistently modeled in his own actions, and continue to be lived out by his followers. It is particularly impressive that Nursi did not compromise his beliefs even during a time of major crises, social upheavals, and military conflicts. Indeed, it is this particular aspect of Nursi’s uncompromisingly devout Muslim practice that has made him so influential in the Muslim world.

Endnotes


2. For more details see The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, The Future of the Global Muslim Population: Projections for 2010–2030 (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2011). In the case of the U.S. it remains difficult to provide an exact number of the Muslim population, since neither the Census Bureau nor the Immigration and Naturalization Service is allowed to collect information rooted in religious faith.


4. There is disagreement with regard to the date of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi’s birth. Most sources mention either 1876 or 1877.


6. This is only an approximate number since no formal membership exists.

7. See for example the work of the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture (IIKV) based in Turkey, which disseminates Nursi’s ideas throughout the world, www.nursistudies.com/ (accessed June 8, 2011).

8. See for example Markham, An Introduction to Said Nursi: Life, Thought, and Writings (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2011); Markham, Engaging with Bediuzzaman Said Nursi; Markham and Ibrahim Oxendori, eds., Globalization, Ethics, and Islam: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2005). See also the essays of Thomas Michel S.J., Leo D. Lefebvre, W. Mark Richardson, and Gareth Jones in Theodicy and Justice in Modern Islamic Thought: The Case of Said Nursi, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi’ (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2010).


11. Ibid.


13. Vahide, Islam in Modern Turkey, 58.

14. The Young Ottomans (Turkish: Yeni Osmancilar) was a secret organization of Ottoman nationalist intellectuals formed in 1865 and influenced by such Western thinkers as Montesquieu and Rousseau and the French Revolution. They developed the concept of Ottomanism, aligned with these thinkers. They advocated a constitutional, parliamentary government. The organization was declared forbidden and its members exiled in 1867.

15. Vahide, Islam in Modern Turkey, 27.


17. Vahide, Islam in Modern Turkey, 36.

18. Ibid., 29.

19. Ibid.


22. Vahide, Islam in Modern Turkey, 111.

23. Ibid., 125.


25. The Darü’l-Hikmeti’l-Islamiye was a leading institution founded to find solutions to the problems facing the Muslim world. The group disseminated publications informing Turkish people about religious duties and how to uphold Islamic morality. Branches were opened in all provinces and major towns. Its members included Mehmed Akif, its first secretary; Izmirli Ismail Hakki; Emlâlî Hamdi Yazar; Mustafa Sabri Efendi; and Saedadetin Pasha. All were prominent religious scholars; the members were divided into three committees: jurisprudence (fiqh), ethics (akhlak), and theology (kalâm).


36. See for example the writings of Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), the major representative of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. In his most influential work, *Ma’alim fi al-Tariq* [Milestones], Qutb alleged that the West had a centuries-long enmity toward Islam that led it to create a well thought-out scheme to demolish the structure of Muslim society.

37. Nursi, “*Hutbe-i Samiye*,” 556.


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


52. Ibid.


55. Ibid.


57. Ibid., 2:433.


63. Ibid.

64. Ibid.


69. Ibid.