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# BOOK REVIEW: A CONTEMPORARY TURKISH PRISON DIARY: REFLECTIONS ON THE WRITINGS OF SAID NURSI AND ALEKSANDER SOLZHENITSYN BY ISMAIL ALBAYRAK

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This book illustrates and compares the personal, intellectual, and spiritual transformations of Said Nursi (1877–1960) and Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008) during their respective exiles and imprisonments.

Said Nursi stands among the most influential Muslim thinkers of the modern era, widely regarded by his followers as a *mujaddid* (renewer of the faith). His scholarly project emerged from the intellectual and political crises of the late Ottoman Empire and early Republic of Turkey, particularly under the pressures of radical Jacobin-style secularism imposed by the Kemalist state. These reforms sought to marginalise religion from public life, leading to Nursi's repeated exile and imprisonment.<sup>1</sup>

Nursi responded not through political rebellion, but through what he conceptualised as a renewal of Islamic theology grounded in peaceful resilience. Transitioning from the activist “Old Said” to the contemplative “New Said,” he rejected direct political engagement and instead focused on reviving faith at individual and societal levels. His magnum opus, the *Risale-i Nur*, articulates a synthesis of revelation and reason, arguing that modern scientific enquiry, rather than undermining religion, can reinforce belief in God.<sup>2</sup> In this way, Nursi sought to defend Islam against materialism and atheism without dismissing rational thought.

Crucially, his experience of persecution under secularist policies shaped his methodology: rather than confrontation, he advocated education, moral reform, and spiritual renewal. This

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<sup>1</sup> Zeki Saritoprak, “Said Nursi on Muslim–Christian Relations Leading to World Peace,” *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 19, no. 1 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340701770261>.

<sup>2</sup> Zuleyha Keskin, “Inner Peace in the Life of Said Nursi,” *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 4, no. 3 (2019).

positioned him as a key architect of non-violent Islamic revival in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His writings emphasise inner transformation, ethical responsibility, and the harmonisation of faith and intellect, making his work accessible to traditional and modern audiences.

In one of the articles, Albayrak examines how incarceration shaped Solzhenitsyn's intellectual and spiritual transformations, prompting deep reflection on his personal life. Solzhenitsyn focused on ethical and existential critiques of authoritarianism in his works and his experience of exile.<sup>3</sup>

Nursi and Solzhenitsyn deeply contemplated nature and the world around them. The author intertwines these biographical narratives with personal reflections, recounting his imprisonment following the aftermath of the 2016 staged coup attempt in Turkey. His lived experiences, which encompass arrest, trial, torture, eventual release, departure from Turkey, and resettlement in Australia, are a contemporary echo of the historical struggles faced by Nursi and Solzhenitsyn. By interweaving personal testimony with comparative analysis, the author situates his story within a larger framework of spiritual endurance, exile, and the universal quest for freedom of conscience.<sup>4</sup>

The author's memoir begins with the shock and disorientation following the coup attempt in 2016, which ushered in a wave of arrests and purges in Turkey. The author, one of many unjustly imprisoned, describes the fear, isolation, and physical and psychological torment endured in the prison system. Yet amid despair, the prison cell became a space of introspection, mirroring the experiences of Nursi and Solzhenitsyn, two men who also suffered unjust incarceration under authoritarian regimes. Both scholars translated their prison life and exile into a paradise (p. 11).

The book delves into the profound religious experiences of two extraordinary figures who endured immense suffering under oppressive political regimes: Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, a prominent scholar within the Islamic tradition, and Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, a leading voice of the Russian Orthodox Christian world. Set against the turbulent backdrop of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an era marked by sweeping spiritual, social, political, and intellectual upheavals, the author traces how both men confronted persecution, imprisonment, and exile for their steadfast beliefs. Despite the trials imposed by authoritarian systems, Nursi and Solzhenitsyn displayed remarkable faith, perseverance, and intellectual vigour, continuing to write, teach, and inspire others through their spiritual insights and moral courage.

Throughout the book, striking parallels are drawn between the moral insights of Nursi, Solzhenitsyn, and the author's reflections, enriching the discussion on faith, suffering, and human dignity. This synthesis of autobiographical narrative and scholarly enquiry offers a compelling contribution to the study of spirituality under oppression.

Solzhenitsyn's imprisonment in the Soviet Gulag system reshaped his intellectual and personal life, transforming him from a Communist into a new spiritual person. He secretly

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<sup>3</sup> Ismail Albayrak, "Spiritual Growth of Said Nursi and Aleksander Solzhenitsyn in Prison," *Religions* 14 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070902>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

composed *The Gulag Archipelago*, his philosophical and literary works, memorising them line by line to avoid confiscation. Solitude, suffering, and reflection gradually led him to rediscover God and find his life's purpose. This spiritual awakening gave him a new framework through which to understand his suffering – not as meaningless punishment, but as a necessary purification (p. 34).

Aleksander Solzhenitsyn vividly and powerfully depicts his arrest as a cataclysmic event, such that he cries out in tribulation, “Lord! Lord! Under artillery shells and bombs I asked you to preserve my life. Now I ask you send me death” (p. 34). Similarly, after enduring many days of inhuman and barbaric torture in police custody, the author felt as though he was being transported to paradise while being taken to prison. As I read this, I could not hold back my tears.

Similarly, the First World War, then exile and imprisonment by the new Turkish state and its laicist social engineers, gradually transformed Nursi from the Old Said to the New Said, who sharply avoided politics and fully focused on a spiritual life.<sup>5</sup> Like Solzhenitsyn, his works were confiscated and banned. He also indicated that suffering, exile and imprisonment became a blessing for him in writing his inspirational works of the *Risale-i Nur* (The Epistle of Light). The author then reveals the inhumane torture in his custody at anti-terrorism police headquarters and the imprisonment of hundreds of thousands by the Turkish regime after the military coup attempt, focusing on his case and treatment while he was interrogated and about two years in jail for editing an academic book two years before the coup.

At the heart of the study lies an exploration of the paradox between spiritual confinement and inner expansiveness. It highlights how individuals may endure profound spiritual anguish even outside physical imprisonment, suggesting that true liberation or bondage exists primarily within the soul. The book investigates the historical and theological conceptions of captivity within Christianity and Islam, examining the circumstances surrounding the incarceration of Nursi and Solzhenitsyn. It further analyses their psychological and spiritual coping mechanisms, revealing how faith became a refuge and source of resistance against dehumanising conditions.

The book highlights how politics revolves around individual interest and human ideology, which gradually leads to dictatorship and causes human suffering. The book is not merely about surviving prison; it is about the inner transformation that suffering can ignite when met with faith, reflection, and the wisdom of those who endured before us.

The work will appeal to scholars and students of history, political science, sociology, religious studies, and Middle Eastern studies, as well as to activists and policymakers concerned with human rights, exile, and the transformative power of faith in confronting injustice.

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<sup>5</sup> Şükran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (State University of New York Press, 2005), 164–80.

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