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Mehmet Ozalp

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# READING THE UNIVERSE AND UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD: SAID NURSI'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND COSMOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ISLAMIC THEOLOGY

Mehmet Ozalp\*

**Abstract:** The way Said Nursi conceptualises the universe and natural world is central to his theological worldview and response to the intellectual challenges of modernity. This article examines Nursi's understanding of the universe and the world through a qualitative conceptual and theological analysis of sections of the *Risale-i Nur*. It argues that the universe occupies a foundational place in Nursi's epistemology and cosmology. In his thought, the universe as the "book of creation" and the Qur'an as the "book of revelation" originate from the same Divine source; therefore, they function as mutually reinforcing sources of knowledge. Human reason serves as the instrument through which the relationship between the two is discerned. The article explores Nursi's conception of the world (*dunyā*) and his distinction between its functions and purposes within the Divine order. Through this framework, Nursi redirects human attention from a materialistic and hedonistic understanding of existence to a *tawhīd*-centred worldview grounded in knowledge of God, moral responsibility, and preparation for the hereafter. The study concludes that Nursi's understanding of the universe and the world forms an integrated theological response to what he regarded as the two defining challenges of the modern age: atheism and worldliness.

**Keywords:** *Said Nursi, Risale-i Nur, Islamic theology, religious epistemology, Islamic cosmology, science and religion*

## INTRODUCTION

In an addendum to the 15<sup>th</sup> Ray, Said Nursi identifies two major challenges confronting Muslims in the modern age: the spread of disbelief reinforced by science and materialistic philosophy, and an increasing preoccupation with worldly pleasures that distracts people from God and the reality of the hereafter.<sup>1</sup> For Nursi, these twin challenges undermine faith and spiritual development. The first weakens conviction in the fundamental faith propositions of

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\* Mehmet Ozalp is Professor of Islamic Studies and Head of the Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation at Charles Sturt University, Australia. His research specialises in Islamic theology, Islamic history, and contemporary Muslim societies.

<sup>1</sup> Said Nursi, *Şualar* [Rays] (Söz Basım Yayın, 2004), 825–31. This passage was originally included in the introduction to the Turkish translation of the Damascus Sermon. In the print used for this chapter, it is included as an addendum to 15<sup>th</sup> Ray.

Islam, while the second redirects human attention from higher spiritual purposes to transient worldly concerns. Responding to these challenges became one of the central aims of his magnum opus, the *Risale-i Nur*.

The universe and the natural world occupy a pivotal place in Nursi's response. Rather than treating creation merely as the backdrop to human condition, Nursi regards it as a meaningful source of knowledge that reveals the existence, names, attributes, and purposes of God. At the same time, his understanding of the world provides a framework for evaluating human life, worldly pursuits, and the relationship between this life and the hereafter. Through this dual approach, Nursi develops an original and integrated theological vision in which belief, reason, empirical observation, and spiritual transformation reinforce one another.

This article examines Nursi's conceptualisation of the universe, the natural world, and human existence within his broader theological system. It argues that these concepts are not peripheral themes in Nursi's thought but form the foundation of his epistemology and cosmology. The study explores how Nursi employs the universe as a source of theological knowledge, how he interprets the meaning and purpose of the world, and how these ideas function in his response to modern materialism, atheism, and worldliness.

This article employs a qualitative conceptual and theological analysis of Said Nursi's writings. Through close textual reading of sections of the *Risale-i Nur*, it reconstructs Nursi's understanding of the universe and the natural world, examines the relationship between his epistemology and cosmology, and situates his arguments within broader discussions concerning revelation, reason, science, and materialistic philosophy.

It should be noted that Nursi's critique is directed primarily at the positivist and materialist intellectual currents of his time rather than at contemporary science as a discipline. Consequently, modern scientists and philosophers of science may not recognise their approaches in Nursi's characterisation of "science" or "philosophy." The purpose of this article is, therefore, not to evaluate the accuracy of Nursi's depiction of contemporary scientific practice, but to analyse how these concepts function within his theological and cosmological framework.

## **THE UNIVERSE IN NURSI'S ESTABLISHMENT OF ISLAMIC EPISTEMOLOGY**

The universe and the natural world play vital roles in Nursi's account of Islamic epistemology. The "book of the universe" forms one of three fundamental sources of knowledge describing God.<sup>2</sup> The key that unlocks the theological treasures of the universe lies in having the right focus and perspective.

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<sup>2</sup> Said Nursi, *Sözler* [Words] (Söz Basım Yayın, 2003), 319. Translations are mine unless specified otherwise.

The Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad (*sunna* or *ḥadīth*), the other two primary sources of Islam, are widely accepted by Muslim scholars across all disciplines.<sup>3</sup> Muslim scholars' rationale is that God and the Prophet are authoritative.<sup>4</sup> Since God revealed the Qur'an, it contains nothing but the truth. Also, since Prophet Muhammad was guided by God, and at times corrected through revelation, everything authentically attributed to him is also nothing but the truth.<sup>5</sup> Humans (scholars) are agents that determine the meaning and application of commands and truths expressed through the Qur'an and the Prophet.<sup>6</sup> For those outside Islam, this position appears subjective when it comes to determination of what is truth. Since the Qur'an is a text received on the authority of the Prophet and *ḥadīth* are traditions attributed to the Prophet, they could be seen as sources beyond the test of critical reason.<sup>7</sup> Doubting God and the veracity of religious sources has been a major issue with all faith traditions.

This problem has existed since philosophy challenged the rational basis of faith claims in the early Abbasid era (750–1258). As argued by al-Ghazali (1058–1111), the traditional response has been that theologians, using rational arguments, would prove God exists, is one and has essential attributes that necessitate Him to send prophets to humanity.<sup>8</sup> Theology would next deal with proofs of prophethood and revelation, and more specifically, the truth of the Qur'an as the word of God and Muhammad as the prophet of God.<sup>9</sup> Once this is established satisfactorily, the scope of theology ends and human reason abdicates to the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad. Al-Ghazali concluded, on these premises, what is transmitted (*sam'iyat*) through the Qur'an and the Prophet would be accepted as true.<sup>10</sup> Al-Ghazali and many other Muslim theologians followed this methodology as they identified the main issue in their time as the dichotomy between reason (*aql*) and transmitted knowledge (*naql*).<sup>11</sup>

In certain passages, Nursi follows a similar approach to al-Ghazali. He provides proofs for the Qur'an being the word of God,<sup>12</sup> and rational arguments and facts proving the authenticity of Prophet Muhammad's prophethood.<sup>13</sup> Yet he seems to relegate reason to a secondary status to revelation. In a long analogy, Nursi compares the respective capacities of revelation, reason and religious experience in attaining religious truth. The analogy compares light refracted on a flower (representing religious experience of the heart), reflecting through the moon (representing philosophical reason) to receiving light directly from the sun (representing revelatory truth of the Qur'an). Just as refracted light is filtered and moonlight is an incomplete

<sup>3</sup> Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (The Islamic Texts Society, 2003), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Khaled Abu El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oneworld Publications, 2001), 23.

<sup>5</sup> Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 58–64.

<sup>6</sup> El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name*, 25.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 23–29.

<sup>8</sup> Ahmad Zaki Mansur Hammad, "Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's Juristic Doctrine in *al-Mustasfa min 'ilm al-Usul*" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Tilman Nagel, *The History of Islamic Theology from Muhammad to the Present* (Markus Weiner Publishers, 2000), 148–60.

<sup>12</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 488–622.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 319–32.

reflection in comparison to direct access to the sun, for Nursi, revelation is far more complete in gaining religious truth in comparison to limitations of reason and subjectivity of spiritual experience. While this may seem to place revelation above reason, importantly Nursi explains three ways of attaining human perfection (*kamalat*)<sup>14</sup> and why there are differences between religions and important religious figures.<sup>15</sup> So, in Nursi's view, reason or religious experience on its own always falls short in reaching human perfection and the guidance of revelation is essential.

Nursi contentiously argues that whenever the chain of philosophy (reason) was combined with, and in a way subservient to, the chain of prophethood (revelation) and served it, humanity found peace and happiness. Whenever they separated, all virtue and goodness coalesced on the side of religion and all evil and destruction coalesced on the side of philosophy.<sup>16</sup> This assertion appears to place reason in a subservient role to revelation. Thorough examination of the 30<sup>th</sup> Word reveals that Nursi explains the role of self-awareness and the sense of 'I' (*ana*) within human nature (*fiṭra*) and the human self (*naḥs*), and identifies its key role in understanding God and how this sense of self manifested differently through human history.<sup>17</sup> Nursi's main argument is that revelation, as expressed through authentic religion, guides the majority of humanity towards goodness, virtue, and happiness in this world and the next. By contrast, reason when detached from revelation and operating through materialistic philosophy is susceptible to the influence of the ego, resulting in forms of progress and happiness that benefit only a limited segment of humanity.<sup>18</sup>

It is clear that Nursi does not trust human reason alone to reach ultimate truth and attain human perfection and happiness. Yet Nursi's works are replete with applications of critical reasoning and logical argumentation. Is this a methodological inconsistency for Nursi? The answer is no. Crucially, for Nursi, reason (*aql*) is not the counterpart of revelation (*naql*), but it is the universe. The universe, and therefore the natural world, is on par with revelation, not necessarily reason. The universe is an objective source of knowledge accessible to every person to test propositions of faith encapsulated within revelation. The universe has the capacity to confirm truths of revelation, just as revelation has the capacity to confirm the truths reflected in the universe. This insight is the most significant aspect in Nursi's theological epistemology and cosmology.

In my analysis, Nursi places the universe as a concomitant epistemological source with the Qur'an for two main reasons. First, for Nursi, this approach is the Qur'anic method. Just as modern Muslims are confronted by people who question the authority of the Qur'an and *sunna*, Prophet Muhammad faced a similar audience in his time. The people in his time did not accept his authority or the Qur'an as an authoritative Divine source. The only objective source of knowledge accessible to both sides was the universe and natural world. Consequently, the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 455.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 449–56, 24<sup>th</sup> Word, Second Branch.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 729.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 724–57.

<sup>18</sup> See also the 12<sup>th</sup> Word, where Nursi compares the wisdom of the Qur'an and the wisdom of philosophy.

Qur'an requests its readers to look for signs or verses (*ayahs*) in the universe and natural world, urging them to reflect using their critical reasoning.<sup>19</sup> In the Qur'anic vision and Nursi's method, the universe should be read like a grand book;<sup>20</sup> thus, the universe will confirm all truths of the Qur'an. Just as the Qur'an is a commentator of "verses of creation" (*ayat al-takwiniyya*) of the universe,<sup>21</sup> the universe is an exegete of the "verses of revelation" of the Qur'an (*ayat al-qur'anīyyah*).<sup>22</sup>

The second reason why the universe is a source of knowledge for religious truths is that this approach gives theological arguments an empirical basis and scientific certainty. Especially when philosophical developments since the European Enlightenment and scientific discoveries about the natural world and universe challenge the truth claims of all religions,<sup>23</sup> the empirical method becomes a necessity if religion (Islam) is to have any relevance in the modern world.

The 10<sup>th</sup> Word can be given as an illustration of how Nursi applies his methodology (see Figure 1).<sup>24</sup> The starting point is the Qur'anic verse 30:50: "Look, then, at the imprints of God's Mercy (*rahma*), how He revives the dead earth after its death. Certainly then it is He Who will revive the dead. He has full power over everything." Nursi uses the natural world to demonstrate God's mercy and compassion (*rahma*). His argument and logic is: All living species are clothed and fed according to their needs where the most powerless are provided the best of sustenance.<sup>25</sup> Animal, human, even plant mothers are compelled to serve their young with an impulse of compassion.<sup>26</sup> These examples are manifestations of a single source of love and compassion that can only be derived from the infinite mercy and compassion of God. Human life is short and transient. If there was only non-existence after a brief earthly life, this would constitute a great act of cruelty.<sup>27</sup> Since this is inconsistent with infinite compassion, humans will be resurrected for an everlasting life.<sup>28</sup> Nursi follows the same method and reasoning to provide at least ten separate arguments for God and resurrection in the 10<sup>th</sup> Word.

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<sup>19</sup> See for example, Qur'an 3:190-191. Ali Ünal, *The Qur'an with Annotated Interpretation in Modern English* (Tugra Books, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 224.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 490.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>23</sup> W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology* (Edinburgh University Press, 1985), 158.

<sup>24</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 82–176.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>28</sup> Mehmet Ozalp, *Islam between Tradition and Modernity* (Barton Books), 33.



**Figure 1: The Qur'an and universe are equally important sources as they confirm God's existence, names and attributes, and depend on one another**

It is safe to conclude that, in Nursi's epistemology, the universe (book of creation) and the Qur'an (book of revelation) have equal importance. Any claim for truth must be confirmed by the Qur'an and the universe. Human reason is an essential instrument to find this correlation. If there is direct correlation between the Qur'an and universe mutually entailed by the use of reason, then that truth claim can be deemed an absolute truth. Throughout his writings, Nursi follows this methodology and brings forward original arguments for God's existence, Divine names and attributes, the reality of life after death and other teachings of the Qur'an.

## PERSPECTIVE IS IMPORTANT IN HOW THE WORLD IS INTERPRETED

Crucially, materialistic philosophy – or disbelief in Nursi's terminology – also uses empirical data from the universe and natural world to support its claims for truth. Nursi and theologians following the same methodology, and famous atheist scientists and philosophers such as Richard Dawkins,<sup>29</sup> argue the complete opposite with a similar claim for certainty. Interestingly, the Qur'an seems to recognise that people can arrive at opposing conclusions using the same body of evidence from the natural world.<sup>30</sup> How is this possible and who is right?

According to Nursi, the answer lies in the inherent deceptive nature of human perception. Depending on one's perspective, it is possible to sense the natural world differently and arrive at two different conclusions. He calls these two perspectives *mā'nā al-ismī* (viewing things as possessing meaning in themselves) and *mā'nā al-ḥarfī* (viewing things as pointing beyond themselves to another reality).<sup>31</sup> He makes this distinction when he explains the difference

<sup>29</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Houghton Mifflin Co. Dawkins, 2006), 137–80.

<sup>30</sup> Qur'an 2:26; 10:101.

<sup>31</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 193. *Mā'nā al-ismī* and *mā'nā al-ḥarfī* are technical concepts that Nursi adopts from Arabic grammar and applies to his epistemology and ontology. In Arabic grammar, an *ism* (noun) possesses an independent meaning, whereas a *ḥarf* (particle) derives its meaning through its relationship to something else. Nursi extends this distinction to the natural world: *mā'nā al-ismī* refers to viewing things as possessing meaning and value in themselves, while *mā'nā al-ḥarfī* refers to viewing things as signs that

between how the Qur'an and positivistic science and philosophy talk about the natural world and the universe:

The Wise Qur'an (*Qur'an al-Hakim*) is the most elevated commentator and the most eloquent translator of the Grand Qur'an (book) of universe. It is the *Furqan*<sup>32</sup> that instructs humanity...in the verses of creation inscribed by the pen of power on the pages of the universe and the tablets of time. It looks at creatures--each acting like a meaningful letter--from the perspective of *mā'nā al-ḥarfī*. That is, it looks at them in the name of their Artistic Maker (*Sānī*). It says, 'how marvelously they have been made; how beautifully they point to the beauty of their Artistic Maker, and through this, it exposes the true beauty of the universe. Whereas, the philosophy, called natural philosophy or science, has plunged and lost itself in the adornments of creation and how they are related to one another, and therefore it has become bewildered and deviated from the path of truth. Instead of looking at the epistles in the grand book of creation from the perspective of *mā'nā al-ḥarfī*, (meaning indicative of the letter), that is in the name of God, it looks at the creation *mā'nā al-ismī*, that is in the name of creation itself. Instead of saying, 'how beautifully they have been made,' it says 'how beautiful they are' and in reality makes them appear ugly...in an act of defamation.<sup>33</sup>

This concept is one of the hardest to comprehend for readers of the *Risale-i Nur*. In a letter, Nursi clarifies the perspective to one of his students.<sup>34</sup> Nursi gives the analogy of an image in a mirror and the difference in what is seen depending on if one is focusing on *the mirror* or *the image in the mirror*. If one's attention is focused on the mirror, all one sees is the glass. The image in the mirror blurs and remains in the background as fuzzy detail. In this perspective, the mirror takes the role of *mā'nā al-ismī* and has as much material value as the glass. Conversely, if one focuses attention on the reflected image, one will see the image clearly and the glass becomes secondary. In this perspective, the mirror takes the role of *mā'nā al-ḥarfī*. The physical significance of the glass remains in the background and the mirror gains greater value and significance. Since the true function of a mirror is to reflect images, *mā'nā al-ḥarfī* is the right perspective to have. Similarly, the universe should be viewed as a mirror to see images of meanings.<sup>35</sup>

For Nursi, the *mā'nā al-ismī* perspective stops at the physicality of things and renders the entire universe meaningless and invariably leads to disbelief and rejection of God.<sup>36</sup> This would be akin to looking at the Statue of Liberty, for example,<sup>37</sup> without considering its artist, maker and historical context. Consequently, the statue would retain only its material value. Conversely, in the *mā'nā al-ḥarfī* perspective, every entity is perceived as part of a greater

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point beyond themselves to God and His names, attributes, and acts. Thus, the same reality can be understood as self-referential or indicative of a transcendent source.

<sup>32</sup> *Furqan* is a title of the Qur'an meaning the Criterion. This attribute is given to the Qur'an in verse 2:185 as it claims to set the criteria of what is right and what is wrong, especially in terms of theological disputes that previous generations fell into.

<sup>33</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 193–94. For this quotation, I have used Sukran Vahide's translation as a base and rendered it by crosschecking the translation with the original Turkish text.

<sup>34</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 1126.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 789–90.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 417–18.

<sup>37</sup> Example is mine.

meaning, just like a *letter* has no independent meaning, but, as part of a word, points to a greater meaning. The letter ‘r,’ for example,<sup>38</sup> has no meaning by itself. When used to construct meaningful words, ‘r’ gains meaning, and value beyond itself. In the *mā’nā al-ḥarfī* perspective, creation is viewed as part of a greater meaning where every entity is arranged like letters in a word to convey meaning beyond themselves. If viewed this way, creation will evidently be seen as the purposeful work of the Artistic Maker (God) and hence gains profound meaning and value. One will see the names of God reflecting on the mirror of the universe.<sup>39</sup>

Nursi contends that, when viewed through the lens of positivistic philosophy (through *mā’nā al-ismī*), science simply describes the sun in and of itself.<sup>40</sup> Although the scientific perspective gives us knowledge about the sun’s physical properties, it gives no meaningful spiritual knowledge. The Qur’an, on the other hand, looks at the sun as indicative of a greater meaning (*mā’nā al-ḥarfī*). It focuses on the sun’s role in the cosmic order. It says, “the sun revolves”<sup>41</sup> and brings to mind the orderly behaviour of the solar system that results in the night-day and summer-winter cycles as indicative of God’s cosmic order, as it is beyond the capacity of the sun to create this system. The Qur’an also says, “He has set up the sun as a lamp,”<sup>42</sup> highlighting one of the key purposes of the sun – to illuminate the earth and make it hospitable. It is clearly beyond the sun to think compassionately about creatures and assist in their survival.<sup>43</sup> For Nursi, the fact that everything in the universe and natural world serves a purpose greater than itself is one of the clearest teleological evidences for the existence of God.<sup>44</sup>

One could critique this argument and make the point that science identifies the night-day or summer-winter cycles as well as how the sun is critical for creatures’ survival. Importantly, Nursi is not entirely saying that positivistic science does not mention these aspects. His central argument is that positivistic science’s focus is not the role of the sun, but the sun in and of itself. The sun’s role is worth mentioning only in passing and accidental. Positivistic science examines and produces theories on how seasons change, but seldom mentions the significance this has on cosmic order and life on earth. Or if it does, it attributes these to chance. In defense of science, it could be argued that giving meaning to the natural world and universe is beyond the scope of science. Nursi argues this is precisely his point. Positivistic science is empirical and narrow in scope; thus, it will not be able to discover the whole truth. The Qur’anic approach is also empirical but holistic and hence rightly focused on leading to truth.

Therefore, in Nursi’s cosmology, the universe should be viewed as a mirror reflecting greater meaning and read like a book conveying a story and meaning beyond its composition.<sup>45</sup> It is only possible to read the universe correctly when it is viewed in the perspective of *mā’nā*

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<sup>38</sup> Example is mine.

<sup>39</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 730.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

<sup>41</sup> Qur’an 36:38

<sup>42</sup> Qur’an 71:16

<sup>43</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 331.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 906.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

*al harfī*. This perspective inevitably leads to discovery of God. In the alternative perspective, the meaning conveyed in the universe is masked. The universe appears unintelligible and meaningless.

How can one be so sure that the meaning Nursi mentions as conveyed through the universe is really there; could it be Nursi's subjective interpretation? Nursi does not pose this question, but he provides an answer.<sup>46</sup> If someone says they cannot decipher any meaning conveyed through the universe, it does not mean the meaning is not there. But if multiple people can decipher the same meaning from the same set of empirical data, the meaning is there. If a beautifully written Qur'anic text is shown to a person who cannot read or does not understand Arabic, the text will be meaningless. The best they can do is describe the properties of the book. But, if the same Qur'anic text is shown to Arabic speaking Qur'an experts, they will be able to read the text and explain the meaning in more or less the same manner. This demonstrates that the text conveys a meaning beyond its letters.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, since people with discerning eyes and reflecting minds can read the same meaning conveyed through the book of the universe, this proves the meaning is there in reality.

### THREE FACETS OF THE WORLD IN NURSI'S THEOLOGY

Having established that the universe functions as a book of creation reflecting the names and attributes of God, Nursi extends this perspective to the human relationship with the world (*dunyā*). The same theological lens that enables one to read the universe correctly also determines how one understands the purpose and value of the world and life within. For Nursi, many spiritual and moral problems arise when the world is viewed solely through its material and transient aspects. To address this, he develops a nuanced conception of the world that distinguishes between its different functions and purposes within the Divine scheme of creation. Rather than rejecting the world altogether, Nursi argues that the Qur'anic worldview presents three distinct facets of the world, each requiring a different attitude and response from human beings.

The starting point for Nursi is to establish a holistic view of the world. He feels the tension between the traditional religious view of the world and the contrasting modern positivistic view. On one hand, modernity pulls human attention to an artificial world of comfort and pleasure, and renders faith and religious virtue superfluous. On the other hand, religions or religious people may disparage the world; encourage believers to detach from it; warn followers not to fall into the trappings of the world; and value the afterlife more than this world. Human love for the world is usually treated with disdain by religions for it is seen as a cause to forget God and their mortality.<sup>48</sup> Is it possible to reconcile love of the world with the love of God? Are they mutually exclusive?<sup>49</sup> Nursi addresses this issue postulating that *dunyā* (world)

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 192–93.

<sup>48</sup> Said Nursi, *Mektubat* [Letters] (Söz Basım Yayın, 2003), 32.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

and *ashya* (things) have three faces in the Qur’anic worldview – a mirror pointing to knowledge about God, a fertile ground for human moral goodness and an alluring place to satisfy human desires.<sup>50</sup>

The first face looks at the *asmā al ḥusna* (Beautiful Names of God).<sup>51</sup> God’s names (and attributes) are reflected in the mirror of the universe and over the entire creation on earth.<sup>52</sup> As a mirror to God’s names, the world is like a book of God<sup>53</sup> composed for careful study, leading to understanding and knowledge of God. Nursi states this is one of the most important purposes for the existence of the universe. First, everything exists for God and His divine gaze.<sup>54</sup> In this respect, even a moment of existence is enough to fulfil this purpose. So, everything exists to display God’s power and works of His artistic creativity. Second, the names of God are reflected over His creative works for the appreciation of other conscious beings, such as humans and angels.<sup>55</sup>

What is unique to Nursi in this categorisation is the first purpose. God’s view of His creativity is usually not considered in theological discussions. With this lens, existence gains purpose independent of other beings and there is no futility in anything. Events occurring in distant galaxies and unseen species in Amazon rainforests are all witnessed by God even if no other conscious eye ever sees them. For a believer in God, this is an extremely satisfying thought.

Nursi quotes three verses from the Qur’an to illustrate the spiritual nature of existence: “Whatever is in the heavens and the earth, all glorify God;”<sup>56</sup> “...Whatever is in the heavens and the earth and in between all glorify Him...;”<sup>57</sup> and “It was We that made the hills declare, in unison with him (David), Our Praises, at eventide and at break of day.”<sup>58</sup> The entire universe awakens from apparent lifelessness with the words “glorify” (*ṣabbaḥa, tusabbiḥu*) in these verses.<sup>59</sup> The words of glorification of the cosmos are stars, galaxies and other cosmic objects. By the same token, the words of praise of the earth are animals, plants and trees. Just as every star and tree has a particular glorification, every continent, together with its mountains, seas and rivers, has a universal glorification of God appropriate to its disposition.<sup>60</sup> In particular, the glorification (*tasbīḥa*), worship (*‘ibāda*) and spiritual greetings (*taḥīyya*) of animals consist of their servitude in the majestic palace of the world through obedience to the commands of

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 410.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> The Qur’an refers to this face in verses such as: “He is God, the Creator, the Evolver, the Bestower of Forms. To Him belong the Most Beautiful Names: whatever is in the heavens and on earth, doth declare His Praises and Glory: and He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise” (59:24); “And to Allah prostrates all that is in the heavens and on earth, whether moving (living) creatures or the angels: for none are arrogant (before their Lord)” (16:49). See also verses 2:164, 2:259, 6:141, 10:22, 10:101, 13:4, 16:11, 36:34, 41:12 and 45:5.

<sup>53</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 286.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>56</sup> Qur’an 57:1. Other Qur’anic chapters start with similar expressions.

<sup>57</sup> Qur’an 17:44.

<sup>58</sup> Qur’an 38:18.

<sup>59</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 499–500

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 233.

creation (*awamir al takwiniyyah*) God has set for them, unleashing the higher purposes in their natures (*fiṭra*), and throughout their lives carrying out their natural duties.<sup>61</sup>

To give a more holistic explanation for the purpose of existence and bring all major propositions of Islam together, Nursi develops the “majestic palace” metaphor. He starts by quoting chapter 91 from the Qur’an and presents an analogy symbolising the universe and the earth as commentary. The main premise in this passage is “the one who has beauty (*jamal*) and perfection (*kamal*) naturally would want to see His own beauty and perfection and show other appreciating eyes.”<sup>62</sup> To display His *jamal* and *kamal* to Himself and to humans, God Almighty has designed and built the earth like a majestic palace. He then embellished and decorated this palace with His wonderful works of art exhibited in a harmony of colours, sounds and fragrances. He then invited humans to inhabit the earth so they can appreciate the artistic creativity of God and recognise the Artistic Creator (*Sāni*).<sup>63</sup>

Nursi shows an extraordinary ability to link verses of the Qur’an with what is observed in the universe, drawing amazing meaning out of the universe and assisting ordinary people to understand through analogies. Although this method and language are not meant to provide convincing logical proof, Nursi’s main aim is to provide religious seekers and believers – troubled with doubts asserted by materialistic philosophies – an alternative faith-based rational explanation that satisfies their minds and hearts. At the same time, he takes Islamic theology to new levels.

Describing the world in this way, Nursi addresses one of the most fundamental theological questions: Why would God create the universe and humans and not be directly visible? The implicit answer is that this approach provides a better platform for God to be known. In the process, as Nursi explains, humans potentially become the most comprehensive mirror to reflect God’s names and attributes.<sup>64</sup> With these explanations, Nursi is not trying to mystify theology, but demonstrate the significance of the universe and humans in the grander scheme of creation so humans do not waste their lives in transient pleasures.

So, while the primary purpose of human life is to worship God, this worship predicates knowledge and recognition of God as testified by other creatures as signs implanted in the natural world. Such recognition leads to belief in God, which in turn generates natural curiosity to find out more about God. When one increases their knowledge of God through His names and attributes, it generates the feeling of pleasing God. Nothing pleases God more than sincere acts of worship and devotion.

This insight makes every human as important as the universe. Every human is a world (*‘alam*) to themselves. They are like a “minor sample of the universe” (*mithāl al musaghghar*).<sup>65</sup> Just like a seed encapsulates a complete tree in plan and potential, a human

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 477.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 180–81.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>65</sup> Nursi, *Mektubat*, 460.

similarly encapsulates the entire cosmos.<sup>66</sup> Just as the seed of a tree can waste its potential if it does not fulfil its purpose of sprouting and becoming a tree, in a similar way if humans remain underneath the heavy soil of this worldly life without giving shoots into the spiritual world, they can never realise their full potential and will waste their once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.<sup>67</sup>

As a summation of the purpose for the entire universe, human life and existence, Nursi remarks:

The greatest purpose for this universe is to realise a universal and comprehensive human worship and servanthood (*'ubūdīyya al kullīyya al insānīyya*) in response to manifestations of Divine Lordship (*rubūbīyya*). And the ultimate purpose for human beings is to reach that servanthood (*ubūdīyya*) through knowledge, sciences (*ulūm*) and moral perfections (*kamalāt*).<sup>68</sup>

Significantly, this passage links God's purpose for the universe and human life not only to worship of God in a ritual sense, but also to human virtue and more interestingly to human knowledge about the universe encapsulated in science. Nursi makes the point that each scientific discipline ultimately originates from a name of God. Mathematics reflects the name *Muqaddir* (Determiner) and medicine depends on the name *Shāfi* (Healer), for example.<sup>69</sup> According to this discernment, Islam encompasses all spheres of existence – physical, spiritual, theological and scientific. The consequence of this holistic framework is that the study and discovery of the mysteries of the universe through science, if done in the name of God, becomes an act of worship.<sup>70</sup>

To further highlight the point, Nursi explains that in the first face of the world, there is no transience, separation or non-existence. There is only renewal and refreshment with change and transformation expressed through every event in the universe.<sup>71</sup> The verse “And call not, besides God, on another god. There is no god but He. Everything (that exists) will perish except His Face. To Him belongs the Command, and to Him will you (all) be brought back”<sup>72</sup> points to this truth. Everything is contingent and temporary by the aspect that looks at itself. However, through its role as a mirror to the Glorious Artist's names, everything is a witness to God and therefore gains permanence. Paradoxically, “in its existence (*wujūd*) there is non-existence (*ādam*) and in its non-existence (*ādam*) there is existence (*wujūd*).”<sup>73</sup> If humans conceive of their existence as independent of God, they drown in darkness, separation and transience. Without belief, one is separated from the tree of the universe even if one desperately tries to cling to it. Perhaps this desperate attempt to attach to the world is a proof of separation. Since

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<sup>66</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 393.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 431–32.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 853.

<sup>70</sup> One could argue that the Qur'an commands the study of the universe, hence science. Ritual worship and scientific discovery of mysteries of the universe in the name of God (*tafakkur*) are commandments in the Qur'an. See verses 3:190–191.

<sup>71</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 643.

<sup>72</sup> Qur'an 28:88.

<sup>73</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 643–44.

all existence reflects God's names (and attributes) and God is eternal, everything will gain eternity with this face that points to God.<sup>74</sup>

The second face of the world points to the afterlife.<sup>75</sup> The world is a fertile ground<sup>76</sup> for humans to seed good deeds,<sup>77</sup> which would produce their yield not only in this world, but also in the hereafter. Therefore, death and transience are transformed into everlasting life and permanence.<sup>78</sup> There is inconsistency between worldly, transient and physical purposes, and the extraordinary state of creation and vigorous activity in the vast universe. This gap indicates that everything has a purpose and a face that looks to the spiritual world. While the essence of everything is under the earthly soil, shoots and flowers expand into a spiritual realm.<sup>79</sup>

In the second face, the world turns into a marketplace<sup>80</sup> where a sensible person would trade their (spiritual and mental) capital wisely to earn a ticket for the final destination on their journey of life.<sup>81</sup> On this journey, the earth is a lookout where one should focus on fruitful results rather than what one perceives as ugliness and suffering,<sup>82</sup> because everything is good or beautiful in itself or by its consequences.<sup>83</sup>

The third face of the world looks at the human being<sup>84</sup> and is a place of satisfying the insatiable desires of the *nafs* (self). In this third face, selfish pleasures are ingrained in human nature as immediate payments to motivate humans to unconsciously realise the higher purposes mentioned in the description of the first face of the world. While one per cent of the complete set of purposes for creation looks at such selfish gains, 99 per cent of purpose looks at the former two faces of the world.<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, if unchecked, pursuit of worldly pleasures leads to love of the world in the name of one's desires leading to unending exploitation and inevitable destruction of nearly everything in one's life. A world that is only composed of desires and pleasures is deceptive,<sup>86</sup> temporary,<sup>87</sup> and leads to eventual death and separation. The world in this respect is a testing ground<sup>88</sup> to see who will resist and rise above their desires. To pass the

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Nursi, *Mektubat*, 410.

<sup>76</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 286.

<sup>77</sup> "He Who created Death and Life, that He may try which of you is best in deed: and He is the Exalted in Might, Oft-Forgiving" (Qur'an 67:2).

<sup>78</sup> Nursi, *Mektubat*, 410.

<sup>79</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 132.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 625.

<sup>84</sup> Nursi, *Mektubat*, 410.

<sup>85</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 117.

<sup>86</sup> "The life of the world is but a sport and a pastime. And if ye believe and ward off (evil), He will give you your wages, and will not ask of you your worldly wealth" (Qur'an 47:36).

<sup>87</sup> "Wealth and sons are allurements of the life of this world: But the things that endure, good deeds, are best in the sight of thy Lord, as rewards, and best as (the foundation for) hopes" (Qur'an 18:46).

<sup>88</sup> Nursi, *Mektubat*, 410. See also Qur'an verses: "Has there not been over Man a long period of time, when he was nothing--(not even) mentioned? Verily, We created Man from a drop of mingled sperm, in order to try him: So We gave him (the gifts), of Hearing and Sight. We showed him the Way: whether he be grateful or ungrateful (rests on his will)" (76:1-3); "He Who created Death and Life, that He may try which of you is best in deed: and He is the Exalted in Might, Oft-Forgiving" (67:2).

test, they should see the world as a guesthouse and live under the rules ordained by the Host (God).<sup>89</sup> With this perspective, they may quickly attain the highest rank – the rank of attaining God’s pleasure (*riḍā*) – because they will not spend their diamond-like potential on matters worthy of glass.<sup>90</sup>

So, for Nursi, the world could be loved, but only for the right reasons. The world is valuable and should be loved for the first two faces and channelled to the right direction and purpose in the third face. One can reach deeper knowledge of God and attain depth in worship through the first two faces of the world.<sup>91</sup>

Some Qur’anic verses<sup>92</sup> and prophetic narrations (*ḥadīth*) that appear to devalue the world do so with respect to the third face. Nursi quotes, for example, the *ḥadīth* “If the world to God was equal to a mosquito’s wing, then He would not allow the disbeliever to have a sip of water from it.”<sup>93</sup> In the third face, the world only exists as a finite reflection in the human lifespan. The hereafter and Divine blessings received in eternal life, even if as little as a wing of a fly, would be far more valuable than a lifetime wasted on satisfying one’s desires and finite matters that disappear with death.<sup>94</sup> This *ḥadīth*, according to Nursi, is not comparing the earth to the wing of a fly, but compares the slightest favour or creation of God to the personal world that reflects in the mirror of a human lifetime.

Nursi’s approach to the world is positive. He applies his principle of *musbet hareket* (positive action)<sup>95</sup> to theology as well. Even seeing two positive and one negative aspects makes the world liveable for all of us. Nursi’s analysis propels human attention from mere physical existence to something more profound. The importance of the world is shifted from a socio-economic and political existence for humans to a theological centre of gravity. It is rationalised and presented in a well-defined theology.

Furthermore, Nursi cuts a niche between some mystics, who devalue the world to project human focus to Divine existence and presence, and some Muslim theologians, who hesitate to establish interpretive links between God and the natural world. Nursi’s theological concept gives a framework that would be deemed more Qur’anic than that of mystics, theologians and jurists combined.

## THE IMPACT OF BELIEF ON HUMAN PERCEPTION AND VIEW OF THE WORLD

Nursi further develops his theology by distinguishing between an artificial world existing in human perception in reference to the human self and a real world in reference to the reality of the universe. For every individual there is a personal and unique world within the greater

<sup>89</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 286.

<sup>90</sup> Nursi, *Mektubat*, 60.

<sup>91</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 666.

<sup>92</sup> See, for example “The life of this world is no more than a deceiving enjoyment” (Qur’an 3:185).

<sup>93</sup> Abu `Isa Muhammad at-Tirmidhi, *Jami` at-Tirmidhi*, 2320, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi:2320>.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Said Nursi, *Emirdağ Lahikâsı* [The Emirdağ Letters] (Söz Basım Yayın, 2004), 214.

world.<sup>96</sup> Situated on a hilltop, if one holds a mirror towards a city, the image of the whole city would appear on the mirror. Similarly, human life is like a mirror encompassing a reflection of the entire outer world.<sup>97</sup> However, many people confuse the real, greater world with the subjective experience of the world in their lives.<sup>98</sup>

To illustrate his argument, Nursi gives an analogy of mirrors in a room. When four large mirrors are placed around a decorated room, the number of rooms increases to five – one real and four images.<sup>99</sup> Through manipulation, one can change the appearance, shape and colour of the room inside a mirror. The room could be altered or it could be destroyed by breaking the mirror. Crucially, the real room cannot be so easily changed.<sup>100</sup> In this analogy, our experience of the real world is comparable to the image inside a mirror projected towards the outer world. The world of humans is built on the foundations of their lives. The moment their lives end, their world also vanishes. While people have the power to play with the image of the world in their lives, they have minimal power to change the outer world. Belief can enable one to realise this truth and turn attention to the first two faces of the world, dramatically improving one's world; that is, one's life.<sup>101</sup>

If one confuses the transient specific world with the relatively more permanent outer world, one would be faced with the reality of the verse: “And do not be like those who are oblivious of God and so God has made them oblivious of their own selves. Those, they are the transgressors.”<sup>102</sup> Forgetting God and their mortality, they would attach themselves to and develop a deep love for the world. A love of the world, coupled with confusion about what the world really is, breeds misguided attachment and pity for all beautiful and living beings with limited life spans whose disappearance causes humans to be in a constant state of separation hurling them to despair and grief. Thus, the key to gaining the right perspective of the world is not to confuse the real world with the world reflected throughout one's lifetime.<sup>103</sup>

The distinction between the real and permanent world and the image of the world reflected in human life is unsettling for anyone, believer or disbeliever – precisely the effect Nursi is hoping for. It compels one to reflect on mortality and beyond the illusion of the superficial world created by humans on earth. He is also driving home the point that belief or disbelief inevitably colours the way a person perceives the surrounding world.

In Nursi's theology, there is a difference between not only the world as it really is and the world as we subjectively experience it, but also the human construction of the *world* is different from the reality of the *earth* within the spiritual and cosmic scale. The earth is the spiritual focal point of the entire universe. On earth, opposites such as good and evil merge. From such convergence originates a confrontation of opposites, which gives birth to conflict and suffering.

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<sup>96</sup> Said Nursi, *Lem'alar* [Flashes] (Söz Basım Yayın, 2003), 202.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Nursi, *Mektubat*, 33–34.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Qur'an 59:19.

<sup>103</sup> Nursi, *Mektubat*, 33–34.

This opens a wide arena for testing and competition from which all human progress as well as regression emerge.<sup>104</sup>

Furthermore, humans are the finest fruit of the tree of creation. They hold in their nature the essence of the entire universe. Even though it is miniscule in size compared to the vast universe, the earth functions as an exhibition hall for numerous works of art; the point of focus of all the manifestations of the Divine names; the place of assembly and reflection of unending Divine activity; the market of boundless Divine creativity in numerous species of plants and animals; and the efficient factories producing continuous yields for the hereafter. While the cosmos is a majestic but relatively calm ocean, the earth is like a continuously flowing tap. Over time, a tap can amass as much water as an ocean. Because of this spiritual function and significance, the Qur'an puts the earth on par with the entire cosmos. Driving home the equal importance of the earth compared to the universe, the Qur'an repeatedly states "Lord of the heavens and earth"<sup>105</sup> in one phrase.<sup>106</sup>

With this interpretation, Nursi addresses one of the most significant points of tension between modern science and religion: the relative value of the earth within the vast universe. Since the Copernican revolution, many scientists and cosmologists have argued that the earth occupies no privileged physical position in the cosmos and that human beings are therefore far less significant than earlier religious worldviews assumed. Nursi accepts the scientific observation that the earth is not physically located at the centre of the universe. However, he rejects the assumption that physical size or spatial location determines significance. In his view, the value of the earth derives not from its astronomical position or size but from its spiritual function. The earth is the arena in which the Divine names are most comprehensively manifested, the testing ground of human beings, the place where moral responsibility is exercised, and the point at which the purposes of creation become most fully visible to humans as conscious observers. For this reason, although physically insignificant when compared to the scale of the cosmos, the earth occupies a central place in the spiritual economy of creation. This distinction between physical centrality and spiritual significance enables Nursi to affirm the findings of modern science while maintaining the special status of the earth and humanity within the Qur'anic worldview.

If the universe is a book to be read, it is also open to interpretation. Belief and disbelief are key paradigms that profoundly influence how one perceives and interprets the universe and the natural world.<sup>107</sup> In Nursi's cosmological theology, materialistic philosophy of disbelief is a dark lens that makes everything seem ugly and frightening, while belief is a transparent lens that makes everything appear friendly and beautiful. It is inescapable not to have either of these lenses as one comprehends and relates to the world. Nursi's elucidation of the stark difference between the worldview of belief and disbelief is dramatically illustrated in six directions of

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<sup>104</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 250.

<sup>105</sup> Qur'an 13:16. See also 17:102 and 18:14.

<sup>106</sup> Nursi, *Sözler*, 250–52.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 420.

human life and existence,<sup>108</sup> representing important aspects of human relations with the world.<sup>109</sup> These are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: Summary of the six directions of the universe and the world in Nursi's theology**

Direction	Represents	Perspective of the disbeliever	Perspective of the believer
Right	Past	A gruesome cemetery where all things are buried into nothingness	Transition to another, better place; graves (death) are corridors to an abode of happiness
Left	Future	A terrible grave waiting to swallow all into oblivion	A festive day for all to witness the grace and mercy of God
Top	Cosmos	An infinite violent desert with innumerable stars and galaxies aimlessly moving at immense speeds	Cosmic objects are like orderly soldiers led by a Wise Commander; a light show in an art exhibition
Bottom	Earth	An animal in rage or a ship without a captain moving directionless through the ocean of space	A ship in the command of a Compassionate Captain on a journey of adventure and sightseeing
Front	Those that came before	A race towards non-existence in distress and grief	A migration from a transient world to a permanent destination through the gateway of the grave
Back	Those that came after	Unfortunate creatures coming to earth without a purpose, only to suffer	Fortunate guests and observers invited to witness a wonderful exhibition of God's miraculous creativity

Nursi does not deal with this issue as a mystic nor is he attempting to mystify belief in God. He is doing two things. He is first rationalising and presenting the matter in an intellectual way. One reason for this is his intended audience: people influenced by secularism, positivism, and materialistic philosophy, whether Muslim or non-Muslim. He is also dealing with the carnal human soul (*nafs*), who avoids pain and prefers immediate pleasure. By illustrating an immediate pain in disbelief and a corresponding spiritual pleasure in belief, Nursi aims to bring about spiritual transformation in his readers. Embryonic versions of his analogy of a spiritual hell on earth exists in Islamic thought, but Nursi reformulates them within the intellectual context of modernity and presents them through a distinctive theological framework.

## CONCLUSION

The way Nursi conceptualises the universe and natural world serves two interconnected aims: providing an intellectual framework for belief and demonstrating that a life centred solely on worldly pleasures and detached from God leads to spiritual impoverishment. The first aim is achieved through his distinctive theological epistemology, which treats the universe as a source of knowledge alongside revelation. Rather than presenting the Qur'an and the universe

<sup>108</sup> This approach is reminiscent of the Qur'anic verses 7:16-17: "(Iblis) continued: 'Now that You have allowed me to rebel and go astray, I will surely lie in wait for them on Your Straight Path. Then I will come upon them from before them and from behind them, and from their right and from their left. And You will not find most of them thankful.'" Although Nursi does not quote them, he provides an original exegesis of these verses.

<sup>109</sup> Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 487.

as competing authorities, Nursi argues that they originate from the same Divine source and therefore ultimately confirm one another. By reading the natural world through the perspective of *mā'nā al-harfī*, he develops a method of interpreting empirical reality as a network of signs pointing beyond themselves to God, His names, and His attributes. In this way, the universe becomes an important component of Nursi's argument for the Qur'anic understanding of God, creation, and the purpose of existence.

The second aim is realised through Nursi's cosmological interpretation of the world (*dunyā*). His distinction between the three facets of the world enables him to reconcile appreciation of the world with devotion to God. The world is not rejected as inherently evil or insignificant; rather, its value depends on how it is perceived and related to. When viewed as a mirror reflecting the Divine names and as a field for cultivating moral and spiritual growth, the world becomes a meaningful arena for attaining knowledge of God and preparing for the hereafter. Conversely, when reduced to a vehicle for satisfying the desires of the self, it becomes a source of deception, attachment, and spiritual suffering.

Nursi's theological vision is therefore epistemological and existential. He seeks not only to establish an intellectually coherent account of belief in the face of modern materialism and positivism, but also to transform the way human beings perceive themselves, the world, and the universe. His interpretation offers a *tawhīd*-centred cosmological worldview in which revelation, reason, and empirical observation are integrated into a unified framework. In doing so, Nursi makes an original contribution to modern Islamic theology, cosmology, and epistemology, while providing a compelling response to the challenges of atheism, materialism, and worldliness in the modern age.

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