






-  Published online: 29 May 2025
-  [Submit](#) your article to this journal
-  [View](#) related and/or other articles in this issue

Countering Extremist Rhetoric: An Islamic Approach to Civility in the Digital Age

Zeki Saritoprak

To cite this article:

Saritoprak, Zeki. "Countering Extremist Rhetoric: An Islamic Approach to Civility in the Digital Age." *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 11, no. 3 (2026): e106. <https://doi.org/10.55831/ajis.v11i3.1473>

COUNTERING EXTREMIST RHETORIC: AN ISLAMIC APPROACH TO CIVILITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Zeki Saritoprak*

Abstract: This article explores an Islamic theological approach to navigating social media and digital communication. It highlights that, while instantaneous global communication possesses the power to cause immense societal harm or foster community solidarity, Islam views technology as inherently neutral. The ethical value of any technological tool is determined entirely by whether it is used for the betterment or destruction of humanity. Drawing from the Qur'an and hadith, the article emphasises the vital concepts of *husn al-khuluq* (beautiful manners) and *al-kalim al-tayyib* (good words), framing digital communication not merely as casual interaction, but as a highly accountable moral act. To bridge classical theology with modern platforms, the writings of 20th century Islamic scholar Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, whose teachings include the mass reach of radio, are presented as a direct analogue to today's social media landscape. Nursi's framework demonstrates how digital platforms multiply the spiritual weight of our words, exponentially increasing the burden of sins like slander and backbiting, as well as the rewards for positive, truthful speech. Ultimately, the article concludes that maintaining civility online is not just about politeness; it is a "cosmic duty" to align human interactions with universal harmony.

Keywords: *Islamic theology and technology, social media ethics, digital civility, husn al-khuluq (beautiful manners) al-kalim al-tayyib (good words)*

* Professor and Bediuzzaman Said Nursi Chair in Islamic Studies at John Carroll University.

INTRODUCTION

We are living in important yet dangerous times. Words travel across the world seemingly faster than the speed of light and reach the world's 7 billion people in a matter of moments. One post on social media can be as damaging to the harmony of communities today as the biggest weapons of war. One negative word on social media can be destructive to an individual, a community, or even more. On the other hand, a positive word, praise or compassion can have the opposite effect. It can lift people and communities, has the potential to bring people together, and can further social harmony and community solidarity. Islam has much to say to contemporary readers about the nature of words and how they can be destructive and uplifting. In this article, I develop what can best be described as an Islamic theological method to respond to the threats and possibilities posed by social media.

On the surface, the question "What does Islam teach us about social media?" might seem anachronistic and illogical. However, if we explore the variety of Islamic theological writings, writings rooted in the Qur'an, sunnah and revelations of the earlier prophets, Islam has much to say about modern technologies and societies, and social media is no exception. In fact, much in the Qur'an, hadith and Islamic tradition more broadly gives us a good guide for how to use social media and other instantaneous communication forms that we have at our disposal thanks to modern technology. The major references of Islam, the Qur'an and hadith contain principles that when applied broadly to our current media and communication environment give a blueprint for how Muslims, and all people, can use social media in a healthy and productive manner. More to the point, 20th century Islamic scholars like Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (d. 1960) have developed an Islamic approach to dealing with technologies such as radio that are analogous to an Islamic approach to social media and other technologies of today.

ISLAM AND TECHNOLOGY

Islam broadly sees technology as a gift from God and theologians such as Said Nursi have argued that prophetic stories in the Qur'an are not merely about them using technology, but instructions to people to follow the prophets materially and physically. In other words, they are stories of the prophets inspiring modern technological developments that help to ease the life of people. Based on Nursi's understanding, some key prophetic stories regarding technology are: Abraham harnessing fireproof equipment when he was thrown into the fire and it did not burn him (21:68–71), Moses' use of water finding equipment (2:60), Solomon as the pioneer for air travel and communications technologies (34:12 and 27:40), and Jesus as a pioneer in the medical sciences (3:49).¹ Said Nursi first made this argument in his book *Sozler* (The Words) and specifically the 20th Word. Nursi offers a profound reading of the value of the prophetic stories for the modern technological landscape. He says:

¹ For a summary of these arguments see Zeki Saritoprak, *Islamic Spirituality: Faith and Practice for the Modern World* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 55–58.

Indeed, investigative scholars and the science of rhetoric agree that all the Qur'an's verses contain numerous aspects of guidance and instruction. The verses on the miracles of the Prophets, which are the most brilliant of the Qur'an of Miraculous Exposition's verses, are not therefore mere historical stories, but comprise numerous meanings and sorts of guidance. Yes, in mentioning the Prophets' miracles, it is tracing the final limit of man's science and industry. It is pointing the finger at his furthest aims. It is specifying his final goals. And by striking the hand of encouragement on man's back, it is urging him forward towards them. Just as the past is the store of the seeds of the future and mirror to its attributes, so the future is the arable field of the past and the mirror to its states.²

Nursi then proceeds to outline several stories and shows how the Qur'an gives them as guidance for humanity; guidance that was only beginning to truly flourish in Nursi's time. In relation to Jesus' story, he says: "Just as the Qur'an explicitly urges man to follow Jesus' (Peace be upon him) high morals, so it allusively encourages him towards the elevated art and dominical medicine of which Jesus was the master."³

When speaking of its general approach, Islam, *per se*, considers technology and technological development as neutral. No technology is religious and no technology is irreligious. What determines whether technology is good or bad is how it is used. Is it used for the betterment of humanity and the rest of creation? Or has it been used in a destructive manner? When it is used positively, the user receives the reward whereas when technology is used negatively the user is blameworthy. From a theological perspective, no technologies can be commonly categorised as haram (i.e. prohibited), just as there are no technologies that are universally halal (permissible).⁴ It is the way that a given technology is used that is positive or negative; Islamic or un-Islamic.

Digital technologies, including social media, are just that: technologies. They are not a special category despite their ubiquitousness in the contemporary world. As such, Islam does not inherently see them as good or evil. To gauge whether digital technologies, or technologies in general, should be considered Islamically acceptable, it is necessary to ask:

1. What are the possible applications of that technology? What are the limits to how the technology can be used? What is the balance between its positive and negative uses?
2. How is that technology being used? Is it being used for the benefit of people or is it being used to harm people?

² Said Nursi, *The Words*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Sözler Neşriyat, 1997), 261–62. Nursi has a long section in the 20th Word about this concept under the heading "The Second Station of the Twentieth Word." All quotations from Nursi in this article are taken from the translations by Sukran Vahide with minor modifications based on my reading of the original texts.

³ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁴ While there is debate within philosophical, sociological, and scientific literature about the neutrality of technology, speaking from a purely theological and legal framework, in Islam one must see technology as neutral since it has the possibility of being used positively or negatively. Technologies do not enter Paradise, but they can be used in a positive way to help one enter Paradise or in a negative way that keeps one out of Paradise. An analogous case in Islam is that of a shovel. A shovel can be used positively or negatively, but the shovel does not have a positive or negative value *per se*. Theological literature on this point is not well developed, but for an approach that is based on Islamic jurisprudence, see Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *The Parameters of Halal and Haram in Shari'ah and the Halal Industry* (International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2013).

3. Can the technology be used in the service of human beings and how can that service be actualised?

Thinking about the first aspect of technology in Islam as it relates to social media, we should begin with the Qur'an. Chapter 2, verse 83, which tells all people:

And remember We took a covenant from the Children of Israel: Worship none but God, treat with kindness your parents and kin, and orphans and those in need, speak good words to people, be steadfast in prayer; and practice regular charity.⁵

This command from God requires that when people are speaking to one another, the words they say should be beautiful and kind. That is, to speak good words to people. This verse establishes an important universal rule of communication that when people speak, they should speak good words (*al-kalim al-tayyib*). This command should be read as referring not just to spoken words, but broadly to written language, including digital communications. Therefore, this simple command is at the heart of an Islamic approach to social media.

Theologically speaking, there is no place for ugliness of word or action in Islam. A Qur'anic verse says: "And tell My servants to say that which is best. Indeed, Satan induces [dissension] among them. Surely, Satan is ever, to mankind, a clear enemy."⁶ While this verse speaks of the importance of good words, it also shows that Satan creates animosity, conflict and division among people by encouraging them to say bad words. Because good words are so important, the Qur'an equates them with charity: "Kind words and forgiveness are better than charity followed by pain. And Allah is All-Sufficient, All-Clement."⁷ Also, good words contribute to spiritual victory over bad deeds: "To Him ascend the good word (*al-kalim al-tayyib*) and righteous deed ascend to Him."⁸ That is, in the realm of spirituality, there is a war between evil and good. Nursi in his interpretation of this verse says that increasing the number of good words against bad and evil words will help with the victory of good against evil in the realm of spirituality. Even when they are asked to speak to a tyrant like Pharaoh, the Qur'an reminds Moses and Aaron to speak gently: "Both of you must speak with him in a gentle manner so that perhaps he may come to himself or be afraid of God."⁹ Furthermore, the Qur'an encourages people to respond to a greeting with a better greeting: "When you are greeted with a greeting, greet in return with one better than it or (at least) return it equally. Indeed, Allah is ever, over all things, an Accountant."¹⁰ That is, if someone greets you by saying *as-salāmu 'alaykum* (peace be with you), you should respond with something equal or better, i.e. *wa 'alaykum as-salām wa Raḥmatullāh* (peace and blessing of God be with you). The verse pushes beyond minimal politeness toward generosity in social interaction. The closing reminds that even small acts, like greetings, are morally significant and accounted for. This verse provides an important principle regarding speech, civility, and fostering goodwill in everyday interactions. Basically, one can argue that the Qur'an does not

⁵ All Qur'an translations should be considered my own with reference to extant translations.

⁶ Qur'an 17:53.

⁷ Qur'an 2:263.

⁸ Qur'an 35:10.

⁹ Qur'an 20:44.

¹⁰ Qur'an 4:86.

merely prohibit harmful speech; it elevates communication to an ethical act of worship, requiring believers to choose not just good words, but the best words, while remaining constantly aware that every utterance is morally accountable.

Said Nursi's interpretation of the *tashahhud* (a reenactment of a conversation between the Prophet and God during his Mir'aj) suggests that the prayer is not just a ritual, but a template for the highest form of refined, purposeful communication. By reciting the words of *tashahhud* in the five daily prayers, such as "*al-tahiyyat*," "*al-salawat*" and "*al-tayyibat*," a believer adopts the "civilised" and "universal" language used by the Prophet (pbuh) in the Divine presence. Nursi provides a detailed discussion about the highest conversation ever recorded:

The blessed phrases of the *tashahhud* were spoken by Almighty God and His Messenger (Peace and blessings be upon him) on the night of his Ascension, so what is the reason for their being recited in the ritual prayers?

The Answer: For all believers, the five daily prayers are a sort of Ascension. The words of the *tashahhud*, which were fitting for the Divine presence, were spoken during the Supreme Ascension of Muhammad (Peace and blessings be upon him), and by reciting them, believers recall that sacred conversation. Through the recollection, the meanings of those blessed words cease being particular and become universal; their sacred, comprehensive meanings are, or may be, conceived of. Through such a conception, their value and light are enhanced and expanded.

For example, instead of giving the greeting of "peace" that night to Almighty God, the Noble Messenger (Peace and blessings be upon him) said: "Salutations to God" (*al-tahiyyatu lillah*). That is, "O my Sustainer! All the vital glorifications living beings display through their lives and the gifts they present to their Maker through the manner of their creation are Yours alone. By visualizing them and through my belief, I too offer them to You."

Yes, with the word "salutations," God's Most Noble Messenger (PBUH) intentionally offered to God all the worship living creatures perform through the mode of their creation. Similarly, through the word "blessings," (*al-mubarakat*) which is the summary of "salutations," he was representing the natural blessedness, plenty, and worship of creatures, especially seeds, grains, and eggs, which are the means of blessings and abundance, and cause one to exclaim: "How great are God's blessings!" For they are the essence of life and living beings. He said it with this broad meaning.

Through the word "benedictions" (*al-salawat*), which is a summary of "blessings," he was visualizing all the particular forms of worship performed by beings with spirits, who are the essence of living beings, and offering it to the Divine Court with that comprehensive meaning.

With the word "good things," (*wa'l-tayyibat*) the summary of "benedictions," he intended the luminous, elevated worship of perfected human beings and the cherubim, who are the summaries of beings with spirits, and offered this to the One he worshipped.

Almighty God saying that night: "Peace be upon you, O Prophet!", was an indication and indirect command that in the future, hundreds of millions of people would say at least ten

times daily: “Peace be upon you, O Prophet!” The Divine greeting afforded the words an extensive light and lofty meaning.

Similarly, the Noble Messenger (Peace and blessings be upon him) replying to the greeting by saying: “Peace be upon us and upon all God’s righteous servants” expressed that he was requesting his Creator hopefully and beseechingly that in the future his vast community and the righteous members of it would reflect Islam, which represents the Divine greeting, and that all his community would greet each other: “Peace be upon you!” “And peace be upon you!,” which, between believers, is a universal mark of Islam.

Gabriel (Peace be upon him), who took part in the conversation, said that night at the Divine command: “I testify that there is no god but God, and I testify that Muhammad is God’s Messenger,” giving the happy news that all the Umma would testify in that way until the Last Day.¹¹

Believers are expected to follow this path even when negative words might be called for. There is no reward in Islam for them. Islamic scholars have noted that negative words, cursing others, even if they deserve it, have no reward in the afterlife. Generally, it is allowed for one to curse Yazid, the leader of the mob who murdered the grandson of the Prophet, and theologically speaking there is permission for cursing certain other “bad” individuals, but this is just a recommendation and not a requirement, so one should not waste time cursing people. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the Prophet of Islam ever used vulgarities and all Muslims are expected to follow suit. To this point, Abu Huraira reported that, when the Prophet was asked to invoke a curse on the polytheists, he said: “I have not been sent as the invoker of curses, but I have been sent as mercy.”¹² In a similar hadith, the Prophet says “The invoker of a curse would neither be witness nor intercessor on the Day of Judgment.”¹³ The Qur’an describes the Prophet as a mercy to the worlds: “We [God] have not sent you [O Muhammad] except as a mercy to the worlds.”¹⁴ The Prophet rejects cursing even towards his enemies and this is an important message for social interactions, especially for Muslims. That is why the Qur’an prohibits insulting, using bad nicknames, mocking, and humiliating people: “Let not one group mock another...nor insult one another, nor call each other offensive nicknames...”¹⁵ By extension, this verse prohibits online shaming, trolling, and labelling culture: “And do not backbite one another.”¹⁶ The Qur’an asks humanity to act in a peaceful way: “When the ignorant address them harshly, they say: ‘Peace.’”¹⁷ It provides a model for disengagement from toxic online exchanges. It also says: “Repel evil with what is better...”¹⁸ The verse instructs that human beings can transform conflict into reconciliation, which is an element of a digital civility framework.

¹¹ Said Nursi, *The Rays*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Sözler Neşriyat, 1997), 118–19.

¹² Abu al-Husain al-Qushayri al-Nisaburi Muslim bin al-Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim*, ed. Muhammad Fu’ad ‘Abd al-Baqi (Al-Maktabat al-Islamiyya, n.d.), hadith no. 2599.

¹³ Ibid., hadith no. 2598.

¹⁴ Qur’an 21:107.

¹⁵ Qur’an 49:11.

¹⁶ Qur’an 49:12.

¹⁷ Qur’an 25:63.

¹⁸ Qur’an 41:34.

The Qur'an strongly prohibits believers from spreading rumours about someone,¹⁹ and in another verse says that hearing, sight, and heart are accountable: "And do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge. Surely, the hearing, the sight and the heart, all of those will be questioned."²⁰ It seems it draws human beings' attention to things that are related to hearing, which ranges from normal gossiping to audio clips or podcasts through which people can easily spread rumours. With the mention of sight, the Qur'an emphasises that human beings should be careful about how they use their sight or productions for the sight of other people, including videos, images, and other digital contexts. With the mention of the heart, the Qur'an wants to ensure that human beings are not using their intellect in the wrong direction or judging people unjustly. These Qur'anic lessons are essential for a harmonious social life for human beings. A saying of the Prophet warns human beings about their words:

A person may utter a word which pleases Allah without giving it much importance, and because of that Allah will raise him to degrees (of reward): a person may utter a word carelessly which displeases Allah without thinking of its gravity and because of that he will be thrown into the Hell-Fire.²¹

This hadith is a warning about impulsive speech and instant posting culture, without giving enough attention to potential consequences. The Prophet describes a believer's character: "The believer is not one who insults, curses, or speaks in an obscene or foul manner."²² Related to controlling the tongue and sexual desire, the Prophet says, "Whoever guarantees me (the chastity of) what is between his legs (i.e. his private parts), and what is between his jaws (i.e., his tongue), I guarantee him Paradise."²³ These hadith indicate that speech control is central to moral discipline.

Abu Huraira narrates that the Prophet said: "whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day, should speak what is good or keep silent."²⁴ Each person is accountable for every word they utter. The Qur'an states, "Not a word does he utter except that with him is an observer ready [to record it]."²⁵ One can argue that every tweet, post, or message is morally recorded. In fact, this verse gives us a strong theological foundation for digital responsibility.

The Qur'an uses a beautiful metaphor for good words and bad words or "beautiful words and ugly words." It uses a powerful metaphor of trees to describe the impact of human speech. In the chapter named after Abraham, verses 24–27 compare a "good word" (beautiful) and an "evil word" (ugly) to two types of trees:

Have you not considered how Allah presents an example, [making] a good word like a good tree, whose root is firmly fixed and its branches [high] in the sky? It produces its

¹⁹ Qur'an 24:15–16.

²⁰ Qur'an 17:36.

²¹ Abu 'Abdillah Muhammad bin Isma'il al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, ed. Mustafa Dayb al-Bugha (Dar Ibn Kathir, 1990), hadith no. 6478.

²² Abu 'Isa Muhammad bin 'Isa bin Sawra al-Tirmidhi, *Jami' al-Tirmidhi*, ed. Ibrahim 'Atwa 'Awad (Maktabat Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1975), hadith no. 1977.

²³ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, hadith no. 6807.

²⁴ Ibid., hadith no. 6136.

²⁵ Qur'an 50:18.

fruit all the time, by permission of its Lord. And Allah presents examples for the people that perhaps they will be reminded.²⁶

This tree consistently produces fruit in every season, representing speech that is truthful, beneficial, and enduring.

For the ugly word, the Qur'an says, "And the example of a bad word is like a bad tree, uprooted from the surface of the earth, not having any stability."²⁷ Since it has no firm foundation, it cannot endure or provide benefit. These verses are highly relevant to modern digital communication and social media etiquette, specifically the longevity of posts. Just as the good tree has deep roots, a positive and truthful post can have a lasting, beneficial impact long after it is shared. Conversely, ugly words (hate speech, trolling, or misinformation) may spread quickly but lack the foundation of truth and eventually wither or cause chaos. Social media civility suggests that our words should be "fruitful;" that is, they should add value, encourage others, or spread peace. If a comment does not yield fruit (i.e., benefit the reader), these verses suggest it is better left unsaid.

What if one is the subject of ugly words online? The "firmness" mentioned in verse 24:27 suggests that maintaining civil speech, even in a toxic online environment, provides the speaker with internal mental peace and prevents them from "stumbling into confusion" or reacting out of anger. These Qur'anic verses remind that words are not just fleeting data; they are "recorded" as part of one's character and have consequences beyond the digital screen and this temporal life. Thus, keeping one's composure and not resorting to a form of an eye-for-an-eye approach to online discourse is important to one's spiritual and mental wellbeing.

While some Islamic scholars allow for cursing of individuals in limited circumstances, Said Nursi's approach and understanding is considerably different. Nursi's understanding of language seems relevant to a discussion of social media. As Nursi explains: "According to Shari'a if a person never brings to their mind evil people and never curses them, there is no harm in it at all because insulting and cursing are not like praising and love. They are not included in *a'mal salihah* (good deeds)."²⁸ So, for Nursi, no negative can be found in forgetting bad people because cursing is not reward worthy. Beyond this, rewards come from saying good words not from refraining from bad ones. Based on Nursi's approach, ten minutes of good, praiseful words create more benefit and reward than a whole day of negative and harmful words. This approach is supported by a hadith narrated by Abu Hurraira in which the Prophet said:

A servant (of Allah) may utter a word which pleases Allah without giving it much importance, and because of that Allah will raise him in degrees, (However), a servant (of

²⁶ Qur'an 14:24–5.

²⁷ Qur'an 14:26.

²⁸ See Said Nursi, "Emirdag Lahikasi" [The Emirdag Appendix], in *Risale-i Nur Kulyati* (Nesil Yayinlari, 1996), 1765. This text contains letters written by Nursi to students while he was in exile in the city of Emridag.

Allah) may utter a word which displeases Allah without thinking of its gravity and because of that he will be thrown into the Hell-Fire.²⁹

HUSN AL-KHULUQ

Islam has an important theological concept called *husn al-khuluq* or beautiful manners. It originates in a hadith in which the Prophet says the heaviest on the scale of judgement are *husn al-khuluq*: “Nothing is placed on the Scale that is heavier than good character. Indeed, the person with good character will have attained the rank of the person of fasting and prayer.”³⁰ One important aspect of *husn al-khuluq*, kindness, is a principle that is instilled in people based on the Qur’an 2:83. Additionally, the word used in the verse when it speaks of the recipients of these beautiful words is *nas*, human beings. It says to speak good words to human beings, which includes believers and non-believers. Too often, people choose not to speak beautiful words to those with whom they disagree and become victims of their anger. People miss the Divine command to always use good language and never respond to an insult with another. As the Qur’an says: “The servants of the Most-merciful are those who walk on the earth modestly and who, when the ignorant address them, say, ‘Peace.’”³¹ The Prophet reinforced this idea when he reminded people that the hero is the one who can swallow their anger when they become angry: “There is nothing swallowed with a greater reward from Allah than a servant who swallows his rage, seeking thereby the pleasing of Allah.”³²

On social media, it seems that few people follow this Prophetic advice and swallow their rage. Quite the opposite: the ugliness of social media discourse is one of its hallmarks. The anonymity of posting and quickness of posts and reactions lead to users not thinking about the consequences of their actions and this in turn leads to the worst of human behaviour towards fellow human beings. When people speak negatively on social media, they are not following the path of the Prophet. It is well-known that the Prophet never spoke ill of people or even used foul language. Abdullah ibn Amr narrated:

I used to write everything which I heard from the Messenger of Allah (PBUH). I intended to memorize it. The Quraysh prohibited me saying: ‘Do you write everything that you hear from him while the Messenger of Allah (PBUH) is a human being: he speaks in anger and pleasure?’ So, I stopped writing and mentioned it to the Messenger of Allah (PBUH). He signaled with his finger to his mouth and said: ‘Write, by Him in Whose hand my soul lies, only right comes out from it.’³³

²⁹ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, hadith no. 6478.

³⁰ Al-Tirmidhi, *Jami’ al-Tirmidhi*, hadith no. 2003.

³¹ Qur’an 25:65.

³² Abu ‘Abdillah Muhammad bin Yazid al-Qazwini ibn Majah, *Al-Sunan*, ed. Muhammad Fu’ad ‘Abd al-Baqi (Dar Ihya’ al-Turath al-Arabi, 1975), hadith no. 4189. A similar idea is found in another hadith: “The strong is not the one who overcomes the people by his strength, but the strong is the one who controls himself while in anger” – Al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, hadith no. 6114.

³³ Sulaiman bin al-Ash’ath al-Azdi al-Sijistani Abu Dawud, *Al-Sunan*, ed. Muhammad ‘Awwama (Mu’assasat al-Rayyan, 1998), hadith no. 3646.

This is related to one of the clear problems with social media, which is the prevalence of slander and other forms of vicious speech. Such words and forms of speech are clearly prohibited by the Qur'an. A famous verse states:

O you who believe! No people shall ridicule other people, for they may be better than they. Nor shall any women ridicule other women, for they may be better than they. Nor shall you slander one another, nor shall you insult one another with nicknames. Evil is the return to wickedness after having attained faith. Whoever does not repent, these are the wrongdoers.³⁴

Slander and the use of derogatory nicknames, e.g. calling someone a name based on a negative feature or attribute, are clearly widespread in social media. Even when done in jest or play, they are not Islamically appropriate.

When speaking of Islam and social media, one must also address the Qur'anic prohibition of backbiting or *ghībah*. Backbiting is a major sin and can be defined as talking behind someone's back regardless of whether the thing being said is true (if it is untrue, it becomes backbiting and slander). There are at least two references to this and its prohibition in the Qur'an. The most famous states:

O you who believe, avoid most suspicion. Some suspicion is sinful. And neither spy on one another, nor backbite one another. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You would detest it. So remain mindful of God. God is the Most-accepting of repentance, the Most-Merciful.³⁵

In the conclusion to his 22nd Letter, Nursi has a long discussion on this verse and backbiting. Nursi says: "Backbiting is the vile weapon most commonly used by the people of enmity, envy, and obstinacy, and the self-respecting will never stoop to employing so unclean a weapon." He further says:

Backbiting consists of saying that which would be a cause of dislike and vexation to the person in question if he were to be present and hear it. Even if what is said is true, it is still backbiting. If it is a lie, then it is both backbiting and slander and a doubly loathsome sin.³⁶

While there are a few exceptions that Nursi mentions, including making an official complaint or giving advice to someone without giving unneeded information, it is clear that much social media discourse can be considered in the broadest sense as backbiting, so one should refrain from social media use that would fall under the category of backbiting.

This leads to another important implication for Muslims. It is true that if one slanders or backbites another person or transgresses on the privacy of another person, this is a great sin. At the same time, the opposite, i.e. not exposing another's faults, is reward worthy. The Prophet said,

³⁴ Qur'an 49:11.

³⁵ Qur'an 49:12.

³⁶ Said Nursi, *The Letters*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Sözler Neşriyat, 1997), 322.

A Muslim is the brother of a fellow Muslim. He should neither commit oppression upon him nor ruin him, and he who meets the need of a brother, Allah would meet big needs, and he who relieved a Muslim from hardship Allah would relieve him from the hardships to which he would be put on the Day of Resurrection. Anyone who conceals the faults of a believer God will conceal his faults in the afterlife.³⁷

Too often, the actions that the Prophet condemned in this hadith are found on social media whereas those that are praised, unfortunately, are not practiced in this realm.

Moreover, on social media, one instance of such a sin will be duplicated or replicated many tens, hundreds, thousands, or even millions of times over. Each time the original is repeated or reproduced, the sin multiplies. So, a small slight posted quickly without thinking can lead to a great sin. There is a belief in Islamic teaching that, because Cain murdered Abel, whenever a murder occurs, the sin goes not just to the murderer, but an equal portion of that sin goes to Cain. A hadith makes this clear:

The Prophet said: “He who introduced some good path in Islam which was followed after him (by people) he would be assured of reward like one who followed it, without their rewards being diminished in any respect. And he who introduced some evil path in Islam which had been followed subsequently (by others), he would be required to bear the burden like that of one who followed this (evil path) without theirs being diminished in any respect.”³⁸

Such would be the case on social media. If you repost a slanderous story or hurtful gossip, accusing someone of actions they did not do, not only is that a sin for you, but the same amount of sin is given to the post’s originator. This is why one sin does not remain alone in this era of social media.

Likewise, just a small negative word can be reproduced many times over to the detriment of the original poster, a small, good word can lead to a great reward, as the hadith indicates. If someone posts a small word praising God and other people repost or use that word, the reward is multiplied for everyone who shares it. It is not just the act of posting but the idea behind the post. For instance, if you post about a charity event in your community, you will receive a reward when others participate in that activity.

Said Nursi has a remarkably powerful insight about the radio. The interpretation he developed about the radio is analogous to our modern social media landscape, as radio was the social media of his time and had a similar effect on communications that social media does today. Nursi, in a letter to his students, said:

An issue suddenly occurred to my heart:

With regard to the end of times, there are [hadith] narrations suggesting that the mistakes and sins of an individual will constitute a great and unimaginable total. In the past, I used to think, “How can an ordinary person commit sins equal to that of a thousand people? And what sins, beyond the sins we know, are there in the end of time that are so powerful

³⁷ Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, hadith no. 2580.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, hadith no. 1017.

that they attack the foundation of the universe, bring the destruction that will cause Doomsday to occur, and lead to the destruction of worlds?” Now, in this era, we have seen many causes [for these hadith narrations.] For example, of the multiple aspects of these narrations, radio broadcasts which have a great many aspects to them, with one word, a single individual can commit a million major sins at once and by making millions of people listen, he leads them into sin.

Yes, the atmosphere, which through radio has hundreds of thousands of words at once and one of the planet’s tongues, was given to human beings as a gift. As a response to this gift, people have to fill the air with thankfulness and gratitude and praise of the Divine. If they do not use this required gift, they use this gift for human indulgence that comes from misguidance and then they surely will get slapped.³⁹

Just as this extraordinary element of civilization, is a divine gift, this civilization did not use it with gratitude and proper actions and turned the divine blessing into destruction with its good-for-nothing and cruel civilization; it received such a slap that it lost all the happiness of life. And it lowered the people who are considered the most civilized to a level lower than the most primitive and savage people. Before going to Hell, it makes them taste the torment of Hell.⁴⁰

Yes, radio with regard to it being a comprehensive gift requires comprehensive gratitude, and that comprehensive gratitude, in the form of a universal and multi-lingual heavenly Hafiz, must always recite the Qur’an throughout the universe to simultaneously reach all the present addressees of the Eternal Word of the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth, so that the comprehensive gratitude for that blessing is fulfilled and the blessing is maintained.⁴¹

While Nursi is speaking about the radio, it is clear analogous to our situation today vis-à-vis social media. The mass spreading of bad information is a misuse of the technology and leads to Divine punishment, whereas the beneficial and productive use of the technology leads to great rewards.

This is not just for individuals, but institutions as well. The media should use etiquette and have high moral standards because they are a trusted source of information. Due to the number of followers media companies and journalists have, their words for good or ill can be multiplied many times over. Theologically speaking, honesty is an essential element of Islam; therefore, honesty in the narration of stories is important. Fake stories, regardless of the reason they were created, are unacceptable. Even what might seem like a playfully innocent made-up story, e.g. something made with AI, if it is passed off as true, whether done for good or bad, is still an unacceptable action. The Qur’an says “O you who believe! If a malicious

³⁹ Nursi uses the word *tokat*, which literally translates as slap. By using this word, he is referring to natural disasters or great calamities that will befall humanity as a form of Divine punishment if they fail to use this technology wisely, thankfully, and in the way God intended.

⁴⁰ Nursi describes the World Wars as the “slap” given to human beings due to their misuse of technology, which is a Divine gift. This Divine gift is given to human beings as a result of using their minds, which is a Divine gift. If human beings do not follow their Divine gifts – misuse them or are not thankful for them – they receive a “slap” from the Divine.

⁴¹ Said Nursi, “Kastamonu Lahikası” [Kastamonu Appendix], in *Risale-i Nur Kulliyatı* (Nesil Yayınları, 1996), 1597. This text contains a letter written by Nursi while he was in the city of Kastamonu.

person comes to you with news, verify it, lest you harm people in ignorance, and afterwards you become regretful for what you have done.”⁴² This should be a foundational principle for the media in all its interactions.

Muslim scholars have cautioned writers and journalists against negativity in their writings. In his famous *Damascus Sermon*, delivered in 1911, Nursi said: “Writers must be well-mannered. Furthermore, they should be disciplined with Islamic etiquette. Let the regulations of the press be organized by the religious sentiment in their consciences.”⁴³ They should not simply write what comes to mind, hastily without thinking and without moral boundaries. Writers should follow the rules of etiquette and morality. For the sake of humanity, they should spread positive behaviour and, especially if they are Muslim, they should adhere to the basic principles of Islam, which is to speak with kind and beautiful words. Such sentiments apply equally well today as then. Nursi was directly addressing a newspaper publisher, advising him and by extension the media as a whole not to print negative, slanderous stories that dehumanise others and are against the principles of Islam. For Nursi, this is an issue of consciousness and not governmental control.

While it is good to try to Islamise or civilise social media, one must ask the question of whether such an approach to what is said on social media would be limiting to free speech? Two points matter here. For Islam, freedom of speech is a principle, but freedom of speech requires positive actions. Therefore, the actions that Islam requires are civility *and* integrity. Spreading false information is lying, which is a moral depravity and cannot be the attribute of a believer. Whoever does this, be they Muslim or non-Muslim, goes against the teaching of Islam and most general ethical principles. The Islamic principle of doing what is beautiful and encouraging people to do good deeds is fulfilling the Divine message that describes the Islamic community as one that commands what is good and forbids what is evil. Doing this through social media is essential, without spreading harmful and evil words. The Qur’an encourages people to speak truth: “O you who believe! Fear God and speak words that are straight (truthful and right).”⁴⁴ The term used in this Qur’anic verse is “*qawlan sadīdan*,” which implies accuracy, integrity, and fairness; that is, to not be misleading or use manipulative language.

CONCLUSION

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi says that his writings use soft language (*qawl layyin*). He practices this in all his writings. Media should have kind words and be equated with the ethics of the Qur’an. Nursi explains that, during the five daily prayers, our small, personal words expand to a universal scale. Social media does this literally where a single comment can reach a “universal” audience of millions of people at once. Therefore, we have a spiritual and social responsibility to ensure our words are *tayyibat* (pure, beautiful, and wholesome)

⁴² Qur’an 49:6.

⁴³ Said Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Sözler Publications, 1989), 109.

⁴⁴ Qur’an 33:70.

because they no longer belong only to us once they are sent; they become part of the collective atmosphere.

Using the Qur’anic message “to Him ascend good words,”⁴⁵ as a reference, one can argue that speech has an upward, constructive trajectory. Civility is not just “being nice;” it is an act of alignment with the harmony of the universe. Coarse language, bullying, or “ugly” speech acts as a pollutant in a system designed by the Creator of the heavens and earth for beauty and good purpose. By applying Said Nursi’s insights on the *tashahhud*, we see that civility is a cosmic duty. Just as the Prophet represented the “pure words” of all creation in the Divine presence, we should treat our digital platforms as spaces where only *tayyibat* are worthy of being broadcast, turning our social media interactions into a reflection of universal harmony rather than personal conflict, which will result in positive eternal, beautiful consequences whereas the opposite will result in negative ones.

⁴⁵ Qur’an 35:10.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abu Dawud, Sulaiman bin al-Ash'ath al-Azdi al-Sijistani. *Al-Sunan*. Edited by Muhammad 'Awwama. 4 vols. Mu'assasat al-Rayyan, 1998.
- Al-Bukhari, Abu 'Abdillah Muhammad bin Isma'il. *Sahih al-Bukhari*. Edited by Mustafa Dayb al-Bugha. Dar Ibn Kathir, 1990.
- Ibn Majah, Abu 'Abdillah Muhammad bin Yazid al-Qazwini. *Al-Sunan*. Edited by Muhammad Fu'ad 'Abd al-Baqi. Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-Arabi, 1975.
- Kamali, Mohammad Hashim. *The Parameters of Halal and Haram in Shari'ah and the Halal Industry*. International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2013.
- Muslim bin al-Hajjaj, Abu al-Husain al-Qushayri al-Nisaburi. *Sahih Muslim*. Edited by Muhammad Fu'ad 'Abd al-Baqi. Al-Maktabat al-Islamiyya, n.d.
- Nursi, Said. "Emirdag Lahikasi" [Emirdag Appendix]. In *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, 1679-1950. Nesil Yayinlari, 1996.
- Nursi, Said. "Kastamonu Lahikasi" [Kastamonu Appendix]. In *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, 1571-1676. Nesil Yayinlari, 1996.
- Nursi, Said. *The Damascus Sermon*. Translated by Sukran Vahide. Sözler Publications, 1989.
- Nursi, Said. *The Letters*. Translated by Sukran Vahide. Sözler Neşriyat, 1997.
- Nursi, Said. *The Rays*. Translated by Sukran Vahide. Sözler Neşriyat, 1997.
- Nursi, Said. *The Words*. Translated by Sukran Vahide. Sözler Neşriyat, 1997.
- Saritoprak, Zeki. *Islamic Spirituality: Faith and Practice for the Modern World*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.
- Al-Tirmidhi, Abu 'Isa Muhammad bin 'Isa bin Sawra. *Jami' al-Tirmidhi*. Edited by Ibrahim 'Atwa 'Awad. Maktabat Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, 1975.