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IS ISLAM AN OBSTACLE TO PROGRESS IN THE MODERN WORLD? THE RESPONSES AND ANALYSIS OF SAID NURSI

Salih Yucel*

Abstract: Said Nursi (1887-1960) is one of the most influential contemporary Islamic scholars who observed the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, colonisation of the Muslim World by Europe, and implementation of a very strict secular system in Turkey. Most Muslim scholars blame the Western world for the decline of Islamic civilisation and colonisation, while pro-Western intellectuals in the Muslim world attribute the decline to religion and see progress in complete Westernisation. Nursi held a critical view of both camps and saw the causes of decline within the Muslims. Nursi argues, in this modern age, striving for progress in this life, whether economic, scientific, social or physical, through Qur'anic principles is like *i'layi kelimetullah*, or exalting God's name, and a fundamental duty for every believer. As opposed to a holistic adoption of the West or uncritically clinging to classical tradition, Nursi proposes to stay true to Islamic ideas and principles, and identifies areas Muslims need to change in themselves and in the way they interpret Islam while critically evaluating the West and taking from it what is universal and beneficial. This article first examines Nursi's philosophy on the development and progress of the Muslim world in his historical setting. Second, it analyses the causes of backwardness from Nursi's perspective.

Keywords: *Islam, backwardness, progress, Said Nursi, madrasa*

INTRODUCTION

Said Nursi is one of the most influential Islamic thinkers of the twentieth century. Many of his writings have been translated into over 40 languages. His books are among the most read after the Qur'an and hadith in the Muslim world.¹ He observed the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the colonisation of the Muslim world by Europe, and the implementation of a strict secular regime in Turkey. Many Muslim scholars have blamed the Western world for colonisation and decline of the Islamic civilisation, while pro-Western intellectuals in the Muslim world have attributed the decline to religion and seen progress in complete Westernisation and secularisation. Nursi was critical of both camps and saw the causes of decline existed within Muslims. While many contemporary scholars of his time pointed to

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¹ Thomas Michel, "Grappling With Modern Civilization: Said Nursi's Interpretive Key," in *Said Nursi's views on Muslim-Christian Understanding* (Istanbul: Söz Basım Yayınları, 2005), 148.

external factors (enemy, state, regime, colonial powers, etc.) affecting Islam and Muslims, Nursi focused on internal causes. John Voll asserts “he [Nursi] was not part of the reactionary rearguard who continued to be opposed to modernization. Neither was he a part of the reformist intellectual elite identified by W.C. Smith as being “liberal modernists.”² Miharja asserts Nursi “employs critical reflection on various societal problems developing rational arguments concerning contemporary social realities. He places emphasis upon the materiality of progress, as in line with the Quran’s exigencies of faith, morality and knowledge.”³ For Nursi, striving for progress in this life, whether economic, scientific, social or physical, through Qur’anic principles is like *i’layi kelimetullah*, or exalting God’s name.⁴ In this modern age, material progress was the most effective way of “upholding the Word of God,” a fundamental duty with which every believer is charged.⁵ Nursi sates “if one who opens up a new way in the life of human society does not act in conformity with the natural laws in force in the universe, he cannot be successful in beneficial works and in progress. All his acts become on account of evil and destruction.”⁶

Arthur Bonner compares Nursi with John Wesley (1703-1791), suggesting “Nursi’s teaching represents at least the beginning of a reformation in Islam through his unique and new method of interpretation.”⁷ Voll calls him a ‘revivalist’ when he defines his approach as bringing together science and religion, rather than viewing them as competing opposites. This approach is also characteristic of Nursi’s broader attitude to issues of faith and practice in the modern context.⁸ Like other influential Islamic scholars, thinkers and philosophers, Nursi expounds his principles and concepts of progress, but does not elaborate on them in detail, instead leaving them open to various interpretations based on the conditions of time and place.

Nursi did not delve into theological discussions or debates like other scholars. He followed the traditional Islamic scholarship and belonged to the Shafi’ school of jurisprudence and the Ash’arite theological school of thought, but did not bring these into the foreground. He preferred not to discuss specifics because he wanted to cover topics that would lead to unity and avoid topics that could lead to discord.

This article examines Nursi’s understanding of what constitutes the integral aspects of Islamic progress and his re-examination of the reason for the backwardness of Muslim societies. It explores Nursi’s proposed solution for development and progress within the Muslim world while comparing his writings to those of his contemporaries.

² John Voll, “Renewal and Reformation in the mid-Twentieth Century: Bediuzzaman Said Nursi,” *Muslim World* 89, no. 3-4 (1999): 245–259.

³ Nurhidayahti Md Miharja, “Said Nursi and the Concept of Progress” (paper presented at International Symposium on The Risale-i Nur: Knowledge, Faith, Morality and the Future of Humankind, organised by the Istanbul Science and Culture Foundation, Istanbul from October 3-5, 2010), accessed December 19, 2016, <http://www.bediuzzamansaidnursi.org/en/icerik/said-nursi-and-concept-progress>.

⁴ Said Nursi, *Asari Bediyye* (Istanbul: n.p., n.d), 354.

⁵ Şükran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Said Nursi* (Albany: State University Press, 2005), 89.

⁶ Said Nursi, *The Flashes*, trans. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sözlere Publications, 2009), 226.

⁷ Arthur Bonner, “An Islamic Reformation in Turkey,” *Middle East Policy* 11, no. 1 (2004): 84–97.

⁸ Voll, “Renewal and Reformation.”

SAID NURSI IN THE MIDST OF A CHANGING WORLD

The decline of the Ottoman Empire saw a significant increase in political intrigues, most of which declared that Islamic law conflicted with modernisation and Western influence. The pan-Europeanists, pan-Turkists and pan-Islamists were the three major groups that became particularly influential before the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Not surprisingly, secularising trends had been present in the Ottoman Empire for at least a century. Even the early modern empire, basing itself on classical theories going back to the Seljuks, recognised state and religion (*din ve devlet*) as distinct spheres, but saw them as mutually interdependent. The Tanzimat period and the Hamidian⁹ era witnessed the transformation of administrative and educational institutions along European, particularly French, lines; in other words, the modernisation of the *devlet*, or state.¹⁰ Ameer and Mermer observe that “Indeed, by the 1840’s the Ottoman Empire, or at least, its capital Istanbul, was a bustling laboratory for Western experimentation of a scale hardly witnessed outside Europe.”¹¹

Islam was ignored, marginalised and ultimately rejected by the modernising classes.¹² To many Ottoman intellectuals who passionately shared this worldview, religion was the most dangerous type of philosophy and a major obstacle to social progress.¹³ Tevfik Fikret (1870-1915) and many others saw religion as an obstacle to development and believed it had no position within social, technological and educational developments.¹⁴ Fikret described his assessment of the value of the Qur’an in history as being that of an ‘antiquated book.’ In a highly representative example of the attitudes of the time, he wrote in a poem:

O antiquated Book, torn will be tomorrow
Your pages similar to cemeteries of ideas.¹⁵

Hence, all forms of modern understanding were distinctively separated from the Qur’an altogether. Not only were religious ideas buried in the past, but they were also declared to be ideas of an era that no longer related to the changing world. Hüseyin Cahit (Yalçın) (1875-1957), a journalist, states:

We are bound, whether we like it or not, to Europeanize ... Ibn Khaldun's (1332-1406) philosophy of history belongs to the infantile age of the science of history ... The modern science of history is to come from Europe, not from the Arabs.¹⁶

⁹ During the reign of Abdul Hamid II (1876-1909).

¹⁰ Erik-Jan Zürcher, “Ottoman Source of Kemalist Thought,” in *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy*, ed. Elizabeth Ozdalga (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 16.

¹¹ Redha Amer and Yamine Mermer, “Beyond the Modern: Said Nursi’s View of Science,” *Islam & Science* 2, no. 2 (2004): 119–142.

¹² Ali Alawi, *The Crisis of Islamic Civilisation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), x.

¹³ M. Şükrü Hanioglu, “Blueprints for a Future Society: Late Ottoman Materialists on Science, Religion and Art,” in *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy*, ed. Elizabeth Ozdalga (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 28.

¹⁴ Gencay Şaylan, *İslâmiyet ve Siyaset: Türkiye Örneği* (Ankara: n.p., 1987), 44.

¹⁵ İsmail Kara, “Turban and Fez: Ulema as Opposition,” in *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy*, ed. Elizabeth Ozdalga (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 179.

¹⁶ Ussama Makdisi, “Ottoman Orientalism,” *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2002): 51–65, accessed November 22, 2011, <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/107.3/ah0302000768.html>.

Serif Mardin identifies “the impact of Westernization on the Ottoman Empire was felt greatly by Said Nursi, as up until the nineteenth century it continued to encompass religion and religious institutions within its governmental and administrative machine.”¹⁷ Nursi was therefore placed within tidal waves of refusal and scepticism. What once served as the foundation of an influential and just way of life was being refuted from its very origins of existence, and the fading legacy of the Ottoman Empire was quickly overshadowed by European influence. The ‘geographic Muslims’ had been influenced by Western reflection, which Amir S. Arsalan (1869-1946) identified as being a tool to aid this transition rather than oppose it. He states “they had decided us by saying that the Western people have kicked out religion from their midst, only through irreligion which accounts for their progress, and that we will ... never attain success as long as we follow the path of Islam.”¹⁸

However, rejecting the path of religion in favour of a blind imitation of the West did not bring strength but division, conflicts and failure to the Muslim world, as Ismail Kara specifies:

For the Islamic world and the Ottoman state, the reflections on history that flourished among intellectuals in the West during the nineteenth century did not become sources of strength, but of weaknesses.¹⁹

Ali Alawi in his book *The Crisis of Islamic Civilization* states “the Muslim world has long been imitating the West under different types of regimes, but none of them have brought prosperity, development and progress.”²⁰ Serdar argues that “elite minorities in the name of traditionalism, nationalism, socialism and democracy have ruled Muslims since the day of their independence, without any real progress. The only sort of benefit was felt purely by the elites who worked only to serve their own interests.”²¹ Islamic intellectuals, therefore, concluded, as does Nursi, that the absence of religious ideals is responsible for the decline observed in the society. “It has to be mentioned that the adoption of a new cognitive pattern in society diminished the importance of Islamic knowledge and challenged its social status.”²²

After establishing the Republic of Turkey, aggressive secularists – whose aim was the complete Westernisation of Turkey and hence the removal of Islam from legal, social, political, economic and even family life – viewed Nursi’s philosophy as rejecting modern values of reason, science and all forms of development, innovation and progress. The aggressive secularists claimed Nursi’s aim was to bring a theocratic system to Turkey and destroy secularism. In addition, they accused Nursi of being against modernity and Western civilisation.²³ However, this was not necessarily the case, as he rejected the arguments of the

¹⁷ Serif Mardin, *In the Light of Said Nursi: Turkish Nationalism and the Religious Alternative* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 107.

¹⁸ Amir S. Arsalan, *Our Decline and its Causes*, trans. M. A. Shakoor, (Lahor: Kashmiri Bazar, 1944), 51.

¹⁹ Kara, “Turban and Fez.”

²⁰ Alawi, *The Crisis of Islamic Civilisation*, x.

²¹ Ziauddin Serdar, *The Future of Muslim Civilization* (London: Mansell, 1987), 70–73.

²² Bakim Agai, “The Religious Impact of Science and Natural Science in the Writings of Said Nursi,” n.d., accessed November 17, 2011, <http://www.bediuzzamansaidnursi.org/en/icerik/religious-impact-science-and-natural-science-writings-bediuzzaman-said-nursi%C2%B4s>.

²³ Tarık Z. Tunaya, *Türkiye'nin Siyasi Hayatında Batılılaşma Hareketleri* (Istanbul: Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2010), 190–194.

groups both for and against modernisation, and believed progress and innovation worked hand in hand with religion.

Nursi was consequently subjected to brutal persecution and exile due to the fact he declined the acceptance of foreign influences.²⁴ He was exiled from 1925 until 1949. Turkey by this time had changed into an authoritarian secular government. As John Esposito states, “religion became confined to personal practice.” Esposito adds Turkey embarked on a process of “Turkification and Westernization, and a secularization that transformed language and history ... politics and religion, namely everything that Nursi wanted to prevent.”²⁵

Nursi, “though a pious Muslim did not adopt the Pan Islamists position; neither did he belong to the supporters of the first two positions, Pan Europeanism and Pan Turkism. He can be described as the founder of a new position,”²⁶ for which he is called “*mujaddid*” (reviver) due to his having unified science with religion by marrying heart, mind or intellect and soul. He enthusiastically welcomed the increasingly significant role of science in the future, “No doubt, humanity will, in the future, turn to science and technology. It shall take its strength from science. Sovereignty and force will pass into the hands of science.”²⁷

Kelton Cobb identifies how Nursi was able to establish the middle ground. He says he was “firm in his confidence that the Qur’an is a trustworthy guide ... but equally firm in the discoveries that ‘Western’ science are genuine achievements that can be imitated.”²⁸ Bakim Agai observes Nursi does not see science as something apart from religion, but sees interrelations between them. He, therefore, considers it to be dangerous to blindly follow a positivistic view of science. This would mean causing harm to Islam. He breathed a spiritual aspect into material progress.²⁹

INTELLECTUAL REACTION TO NURSI IN THE EARLY TURKISH REPUBLIC

Nursi’s criticisms of the three major groups made him subject to dislike and false allegations. The prosecutor even accused him during his trial of being opposed to the use of modern technologies, such as the radio and automobile. Despite the fact Nursi refuted all of these accusations at the Denizli Criminal Court in 1943, he became accustomed to such allegations.³⁰ One of the prominent pan-Turkish intellectuals Nihal Atsız (1905-1975) accused Nursi of promoting pan-Kurdism and attacked him as “an ignorant person opposed to the products of civilization.” Atsız also stated Nursi was against science and technology.³¹ Neda

²⁴ Voll, “Renewal and Reformation.”

²⁵ John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat Myth or Reality?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 78.

²⁶ Agai, “The Religious Impact.”

²⁷ Said Nursi, *The Words*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 1998), 264.

²⁸ Kelton Cobb, “Revelation, the Disciplines of Reason, and Truth in the Works of Said Nursi and Paul Tillich”, in *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 131.

²⁹ Agai, “The Religious Impact.”

³⁰ Said Nursi, *The Rays Collection*, trans. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 2002), 298.

³¹ Nihal Atsız, *Nurculuk Denen Sayıklama: Makaleler III* (Istanbul: Ötüken Yayınları, 1964), 3–451.

Armaner, a professor at the School of Divinity at the University of Ankara, wrote that Nursi claimed the scientific definitions of electricity, meteorological phenomena and physics all contradicted Islam and were, therefore, an expression of atheism. Armaner labelled Nursi as “mentally deranged, fabricating mystical delusions and as a deviant of Islam.”³² She quoted this assertion from Nursi’s work *Ramazān Risalesi* (Letter on Ramadan), although there is no such statement in this work. In other parts of his writings, Nursi says “radio is a divine bounty.”³³ However, he asserts that radio can be properly used or misused.

Similarly, Kemalists assumed Nursi had declared Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938), the founder of the Turkish Republic, to be the *dajjal*, anti-Christ, and his regime as an enemy.³⁴ His spiritual influence did not go unnoticed by the political authorities after the military coup in 1960. A booklet called *Tuhfetürreddiye Ala Mezhebi Saidi Kürdiye*, “The Rejection of the Sect of Said Kurdi,” was printed and distributed in the name of the former Ottoman Sheik of Islam (the highest authority in religion) Mustafa Sabri Efendi who died in 1954. In that booklet, Nursi was accused of being ignorant in establishing a new sect that deviated from Islam. Yet, some passages quoted in this book were written by Nursi, but in 1957, three years after Sabri Efendi died. Later, it emerged this booklet was not written by Sabri Efendi, but by a committee that was established by the military rulers to discredit Nursi’s growing influence.

After the military took over in 1960, Nursi’s books were confiscated from bookshops and burnt by General Refik Tulga, the Governor of Istanbul in 1962. General Tulga suggested Nursi’s books were unscientific and imbued with ideas slanted against progress and development. When he was asked if he had read Nursi’s books, the answer was ‘no.’³⁵ Despite the struggles Nursi faced during his lifetime, his influence after his death grew exponentially.

Pan-Islamists can be further sub-categorised under: State Islam (political Islam), *Madrasa* Islam (scriptural Islam), *Tekke* Islam (mystical Islam) and Folk Islam (popular Islam).³⁶ Despite some reservations, Nursi was critical of this group as well. He says in his book titled *The Reasonings: A Key to Understanding the Qur’an’s Eloquence*, that those who are occupied in “physical or material matters lack sufficient knowledge or have only superficial understanding of spiritual matters.”³⁷ Nursi argued that ultimately this situation resulted from a lack of logic. Unlike the approach taken by pan-Islamists towards Westernisation, Nursi responded with reason.³⁸ Although the pan-Turkists aggressively professed their allegiance as purely to the nation and disregarded religion and history, Yvonne Haddad describes how Nursi

³² Neda Armaner, *İslam Dininden Ayrılan Cereyanlar: Nurculuk* (Ankara: Milli Eğitim Basımevi, 1964), 17.

³³ For detailed information on Said Nursi’s view on radio, see Nursi, *The Rays Collections*, 101, 111, 223, 287, 300, 301, 381, 389, 390, 512.

³⁴ Necip Hablmitoğlu, “Nurcuların Mahkûmiyet Belgesi,” *Yeni Hayat, Dergisi*, 5, no. 53 (1999): 3–12.

³⁵ Necmettin Şahiner, *Aydınlar Kanuşuyor* (Istanbul: YAY, 1977), 186.

³⁶ Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, “The Ottoman Empire and Islam: Framework for a New Interpretation,” From Medieval to Modern in the Islamic World, accessed November 21, 2011, <http://humanities.uchicago.edu/orgs/institute/sawyer/archive/islam/ocak.html>.

³⁷ Said Nursi, *The Reasonings: A Key to Understanding the Qur’an’s Eloquence* (New Jersey: Tugrah Books, 2008), 16.

³⁸ Adeb Khalid, “Pan-Islamism in Practice: The Rhetoric of Muslim Unity,” in *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy*, ed. Elizabeth Ozdalga (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 202–203.

formed a balance between these two extremes. She observes that Nursi's work calls for a strict adherence to the Qur'an and hadith. However, this does not imply the change Nursi promotes is pan-Islamist in nature.³⁹ Rather, the radical Islamic transformation he calls for is the creation of a truly Islamic order that recognises and encourages progress through science and modern transformation.

For this transformation to take place, Nursi asserts ignorance—one of the three major enemies⁴⁰ of civilisation—needs to be overcome through an educational system that would need to undergo radical changes. He viewed the educational system of his day as counterproductive as it produced animosity and conflicts between different groups, such as the traditionalists, mystics and intellectuals. For this conflict to end, the whole educational system, including the *madrasa*, needed reform.

Traditional Madrasa System

Since the eleventh century, the *madrasa* system played an integral role in the transmission of knowledge throughout the Muslim world. This institution served as the backbone of society and had been governed with intellectual stability. However, the *madrasa* educational system was based on *taqlid*, blind imitation, literalism and scholasticism, which all prevented an understanding of the religion and therefore restricted the scientific and modern knowledge that was embedded within it.

Nursi, therefore, argued that “literalists and their ignorant efforts are in vain.”⁴¹ He identified how the scholars were supposed to serve knowledge, yet they instead used knowledge to serve themselves, which led to the collapse of the *madrasa*.⁴² According to Nursi, the *madrasas* were unable to produce people suitable to the needs of the times due to three deficiencies – lack of order, insufficient progress and minimal professional training. By order, he means significant deficiencies in the internal structure. The *madrasas* were producing a ‘single-type’ person, with no room for expansion or specialisation within the knowledge that was taught. Nursi desired that the *madrasas* should be divided into branches for specialisation like the *Darü'l-Fünun* (University of Science) branches that were connected to one another.⁴³ Religious scholars would specialise in one area of Islamic sciences. However, this was lacking in *madrasa* curriculum. Although secular sciences were divided into many departments and focused more on the field education for new demands, the *madrasas* did not adopt the new educational system. Instead of specialising in one Islamic science and critically evaluating and interpreting it according to needs of the time, memorisation of text was the core principle of religious education.

³⁹ Yvonne Y. Haddad, “Ghurba as Paradigm for Muslim Life: A Risale-i Nur Worldview,” *The Muslim World* 89, no. 3-4 (1999): 297–313.

⁴⁰ According to Nursi the other two enemies are poverty and disunity.

⁴¹ Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 46.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 48.

⁴³ Ibrahim Canan, “The Chief Questions Facing the Islamic World and their Solutions According to Bediuzzaman Said Nursi,” Nur Web Pages, April 16, 2006, accessed November 12, 2011, http://www.nur.org/en/nurcenter/nurlibrary/The_Questions_in_The_Islamic_world_And_solutions_146.

Nursi envisioned a more stable academic community that dispelled all immorality, backwardness and weakness in the face of external enemies. Changing and refocusing the *madrasas*, *mektebs*, and *tekkes*, which acted as the three main branches of ‘guiding the public,’ would eliminate the ignorance that spread through the *madrasas* alone.⁴⁴

Sirozi argues “Nursi was well aware of the dominance of scholastic thought in the modern scientific approach.”⁴⁵ To achieve scientific recovery, he urges Muslims not to be preoccupied with this approach, lest they find themselves “fallen into the swamp of scholastic thought.”⁴⁶ Scholastic despotism, “an offspring of political despotism, which has opened the way to blind imitation (*taqlid*) and barred the way to searching for the truth”⁴⁷ was a cause for the stagnation and decline. At the same time, Nursi further argues that Muslims need to develop their own unique approach and characteristics for modern science. As he reflects on his personal experience: “They suppose me to be a *madrasa* professor sunk in the bog of scholastic thought, but I was occupied with all the modern sciences and the philosophy and learning of the present age.”⁴⁸ To this, Vahide writes “Nursi had aroused opposition through his practice of debating with the *ulama*. He now explains to the doctor that by doing so he wanted to offer a practical example for a solution to the stagnation in the *madrasas*.”⁴⁹

Vahide states “Nursi examines the reasons for the divergence and differences between the various branches of the classical Islamic educational system, which he states are one of the main causes of the backwardness of Islamic civilization, which in reality comprises the seeds of true civilization, in relation to modern civilization.” Nursi says: “Those in the *madrasas* accuse those in the *mektebs* of weakness in belief because of their literalist interpretation of certain matters, whereas those in the *mektebs* consider the former to be ignorant and unreliable because they have no knowledge of modern science. While those in the *madrasas* look at those in the *tekkes* as though they were following innovations ...”⁵⁰ While recognising the differences in their ways, he stresses the barriers between them should be broken down. By way of a remedy modern science to be taught in the *madrasas* “in place of obsolete ancient philosophy, religious sciences are taught ‘fully’ in the secular schools. Scholars from the *madrasas*, some of the most learned *ulama*, should be present in the Sufi *tekkes*.”⁵¹ For this reason, Nursi saw the importance of unity and of re-establishing the trust within the community that was continually threatened. He states, “Life lies in unity.”⁵² To Nursi, instead of constantly being in conflict, *madrasa*, *mekteb* and *tekke* should be complementary. Nursi says “the three fields of knowledge in Islam—the knowledge of the inner way, the knowledge of outer realities and

⁴⁴ Canan, “The Chief Questions Facing the Islamic World.”

⁴⁵ Muhammed Sirozi, “Nursi’s Ideas on Science Development in Muslim Countries,” accessed December 19, 2016, <http://www.bediuzzamansaidnursi.org/en/icerik/nursi%E2%80%99s-ideas-science-development-muslim-countries>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 66.

⁴⁸ Sirozi, “Nursi’s Ideas on Science Development.”

⁴⁹ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 70–71.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 71–72.

⁵¹ Ibid., 71.

⁵² Canan, “The Chief Questions facing the Islamic World.”

the knowledge that connects the two—meld into each other but maintain their distinctness. The subtlety of this relationship is embedded in Islam, and, according to Nursi, one of the three great causes of the decline of Muslim civilisation.”⁵³

To solidify unity between the three groups of traditionalists (*madrasa*), Sufis (*tekke*) and intellectuals (*mekteb*), teaching and research must be geared towards the community. Nursi insists that scholars must serve knowledge, not use knowledge for their own benefit. Some Muslim intellectuals and schools have altered the method and approach of understanding religion for their personal benefit. Ultimately, this led to the misuse of knowledge. Nursi says, “Many people who aspire to superiority and domination over others abuse knowledge, employing it as a force to exert their power.”⁵⁴ This, in turn, leads to disunity and conflict, another one of the three great enemies according to Nursi, and one of the causes of the decline of Muslim civilisation.

In 1911, Nursi delivered his famous Damascus Sermon and strove to re-establish the place of Islam within a rising secular world. Faith and reason were often viewed as being in conflict, especially in the philosophical traditions that had emerged as a result of the Enlightenment in Europe.⁵⁵ Nursi's “approach to bringing together science and religion rather than viewing them as competing opposites is characteristic of his broader approach to issues of faith and practice in the modern context.”⁵⁶ He says in his Damascus Sermon that:

History testifies that whenever the people of Islam have adhered to their religion, they have progressed relatively to former times. And whenever they have become slack in their adherence, they have declined.⁵⁷

Nursi introduced a new methodology for an educational system that combined theistic and rationalistic approaches as complementary to each other for progress in the historical setting. In his new system, specialisation and field education for each science including religious ones are necessary, but he declined blind imitation in Islamic disciplines and securitisation of sciences. In his philosophy, Islam is not an obstacle for reforming of education, but it can be complementary in progress. By viewing progress like *i'layi kelimetullah*, or exalting God's name, shows how important it is from Nursi's theological perspective.

Causes for the Backwardness of the Muslim World in Nursi's Thought

In *Risale-i Nur*, Nursi set out the major problems facing Islam as he understood them and offered solutions. He saw in Islam the potential for establishing the foundations of a true civilisation, neglected in what he saw as the material backwardness of his own time. This section will examine the causes of this backwardness from intellectual, institutional and social perspectives.

⁵³ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 264.

⁵⁴ Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 48.

⁵⁵ Voll, “Renewal and Reformation.”

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Said Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon* (Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 1996), 11–12.

Nursi argues the cause of backwardness in the Muslim world is not religion, but rather a variety of spiritual, social and political problems affecting Muslims. These include the lack of freedom, conflicts between traditional scholars (*ahl madrasa*), intellectuals (*ahl maktab*) and Sufis (*tekke*) as well as the use of religion as a tool for politics or personal gain, despair over the future, and the decline of righteousness leading to increasing animosity between Muslims.

Nursi highlights the fact that the causes of backwardness within the Muslim world, the fall of the Ottoman Empire and openness to foreign occupation, were due to the weakness of the Muslims. His sermon at Ummayad Mosque in Damascus, titled the Damascus Sermon, remains one of the most read and influential sermons throughout Muslim history.⁵⁸ Thomas Michel defines it as being a prescription for the sicknesses of our age.⁵⁹

Michel argues that Nursi's unshakable belief in God, achievements of Muslims in the past and the unending potential of Islam led him to diagnose the Muslim *ummah* with the cause of their backwardness, in the hope of providing a set of solutions that might rejuvenate their spirits, and clarify the position that religion had in their life and hearts.⁶⁰ He identified the impact Islam had on the world that applied to 1911 as it applies today. He therefore offers a return to the truth of what was forcefully being shunned. The strategies Nursi attributes to Islam lead to progress and not struggle.

For Michel, the Damascus Sermon is an effort to respond to this basic question and treat the six fundamental illnesses Nursi identifies as afflicting religious peoples. As Michel states, "one can say that Nursi's methodology is that of a physician who must: 1) examine the *symptoms* to discover what is wrong, 2) name the sickness in *diagnosis*, 3) encourage the patient with a positive *prognosis* that affirms that there is a cure, and 4) *prescribe* what must be done to promote the healing."⁶¹

Nursi defines the six characteristic causes for Muslim backwardness as: 1) rise of despair and hopelessness in social life; 2) the death of truthfulness in social and political life; 3) the love of enmity; 4) not knowing the luminous bonds that bind believers to one another; 5) despotism, which spreads like various contagious diseases – Despotism reduces man to the most abject valleys of abasement, has caused the Islamic world to sink into degradation, which arouses animosity and malice, has poisoned Islam and in fact, sows its poison everywhere by contagion, and has caused endless conflict.⁶² Indeed, freedom was the means of the progress of Islam.⁶³ It is the key to the prosperity of Islam – and 6) restricting endeavours to what is personally beneficial.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Colin Turner and Hasan Horkuc, *Makers of Islamic Civilisation: Said Nursi* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2008), 13.

⁵⁹ Thomas Michel, "Said Nursi's The Damascus Sermon," accessed January 10, 2012, <http://www.bediuzzamansaidnursi.org/en/icerik/said-nursis-damascus-sermon>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 84.

⁶³ Ibid., 88.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 89.

He treats these sicknesses with six ‘word’ attributes: hope, despair, honesty, love, unity and consultation. These six words are what constitute the sermon and Nursi’s methodology. Each word not only represents a solution, but together they represent the criteria of hope. This parallels Nursi’s belief that “what gives life to people is hope, while what kills them is despair.”⁶⁵

The first and second words with which Nursi starts his sermon are opposites that he believes caused the loss of faith in the Muslim world—hope and despair. Hope eliminates the despair and hopelessness in social life, as it is despair that kills high morals and undermines the public good.⁶⁶ Therefore, hope aims to overshadow any form of despair that may be present in a society. This is achieved, Nursi says, through acknowledgment of the necessity of religion in life, by creating a balance between what is traditional and what is modern.⁶⁷ He evaluates that “Why should the world be the world of progress for everyone and the world of decline only for us [Muslims]?”⁶⁸ For Nursi, the first thing Muslims need to do to regain their reputation within the field of science is to refuse to be carried away by despair and to oppose despair and hopelessness.⁶⁹

Nursi invites “his fellow Muslims to be realistic about the situation.”⁷⁰ M. Sait Özerverli argues that “Nursi explores the way in which Westernization and moderation work together.”⁷¹ He says the ‘plague’ of foreign influence, along with the ‘awakening’ of modern science, reaffirms the nature of humankind and importance of retaining faith that encourages the use of intelligence and thought.⁷² This approach preserves the foundations of one’s religious and social identity while allowing room for change and reform.⁷³

Likewise, the third and fourth words, honesty and love that cure the sicknesses, the ‘death of truthfulness in social and political life’ and ‘love of enmity’ work closely together. Nursi shows in his sermon the process through which the principle of honesty within Islamic ethics can contribute to a just and progressive society. He says “truthfulness is the basis and foundation of Islam,”⁷⁴ positioning Islam within the ideals that secular society is predicated upon. He clearly asserts, for the sake of “the foundation of the life of our society, we must bring to life truthfulness and honesty, and cure our moral and spiritual sicknesses with them.”⁷⁵ In explaining the second sickness, *the death of truthfulness* or deceit, Michel identifies the

⁶⁵ Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, 108.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁶⁷ M. Sait Özerverli, “The Reconstruction of Islamic Social Thought in the Modern Period: Nursi’s Approach to Religious Discourse in a Changing Society,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 38 (2010), 546.

⁶⁸ Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, 37.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Sirozi, “Nursi’s Ideas on Science Development.”

⁷¹ Özerverli, “The Reconstruction of Islamic Social Thought,” 532.

⁷² Marcia Hermansen, “Faith Development and Spiritual Maturation,” in *Spiritual Dimension of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi’s Riasale-i Nur*, ed. Ibrahim Abu Rabi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 94–95.

⁷³ Özerverli, “The Reconstruction of Islamic Social Thought,” 532–553.

⁷⁴ Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, 46.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

different forms of deceit to be hypocrisy, flattery, deception, duplicity, slander, and calumny.⁷⁶ Nursi argues that such sickness is present in secular and religious leaders when issuing decisive policies or *fatwas* for self-interest.⁷⁷

Lastly, the fifth and sixth words, unity and consultation, are the active components of Nursi's criteria. The establishment of unity is ordained by every individual's willingness to like for his brother what he would like for himself. Maharja states "on unity Nursi employs a strong example, emphasizing the way personal morality can affect the morality of an entire society. Nursi is effectively elaborating on the type of mass man that is anti-progress. It becomes a bigger problem when such individualism is characteristic of the society as a whole."⁷⁸

Nursi furthermore portrays the power and depth of unity even through the smallest personal actions. The imagery of a sin or deed that can spread and either hinder or bring progress to an individual and their community places a great significance upon unity. However, the notion of unity also presents a concern: in many cases, unity has been abused in the form of nationalism, which has prevented the strengthening of the *ummah*. As quoted above, Nursi patently declares the importance of 'remaining as one,' as Serdar shows, "nationalism within the Muslim world only caused Islam to become divided and weak, consequently causing the Muslims to be at the mercy of the other imperial forces."⁷⁹ It is such weakness that Nursi worked to avoid. Unity evidently appears to be the most difficult attribute to acquire between Muslims. Without unity, Nursi strongly argues, the results will always be disastrous.

NURSI'S PROPOSALS FOR PROGRESS

According to Nursi, it is an obligation for all Ottomans and Muslims to work for progress.⁸⁰ To him, the first principle for progress is education, a crucial point he could not emphasise enough. As Nursi puts it "That is possible through general education and widespread civilization, or in the name of the religion of Islam. Otherwise, absolutism will always prevail."⁸¹ Ignorance is highlighted as the real enemy of progress.

Nursi emphasises the materiality of progress as in line with the Quran's exigencies of faith (Qur'an 53:39), morality (91:9) and knowledge (39:9, 96:1-2). He states that what Muslims need is an excellent organisation of labour, arrangement of working hours, profitable cooperation and internal security. These are possible only through awareness of God and piety.⁸² He views poverty as a source of great corruption and one of the main causes of the decline of moral values; hence he considers material progress as necessary. As Miharja indicates "Nursi believes that moral progress is attained when there is the greater maturity of

⁷⁶ Michel, "Said Nursi's The Damascus Sermon."

⁷⁷ Miharja, "Said Nursi and the Concept of Progress."

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Serdar, *The Future of Muslim Civilization*, 64.

⁸⁰ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 89.

⁸¹ Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, 80.

⁸² Said Nursi, *Al-Mathnawi al-Nuri: Seedbed of the Light*, trans. Huseyin Akarsu (Light: New Jersey, 2007), 225.

values, judgment, and ethics in carrying out objectives, be it on an individual or societal level. Nursi speaks at length about human progress in a way that goes hand in hand with spiritual advancement.”⁸³

The ability to cure these sicknesses, Nursi promises, will lead to a moral, strong and stable society. Miharja asserts

he scrutinises the faith of the believers in the past, present, and future and answers their questions. Nursi not only prescribes the conditions necessary for progress but also diagnoses the societal sicknesses preventing progress and this he does effectively. This is because from the start, he establishes a clear relationship between religion and progress, which the lack of progress is attributed to the sicknesses of Muslim societies and not to their religion.⁸⁴

Regarding the progress of the Muslim world, Yusuf Kaplan states “Nursi combined, reviewed and reinterpreted the knowledge of al-Ghazzali (1056-1111), the wisdom of Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) and the civilization theory of Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) in accord with the modern age.”⁸⁵ Nursi added to Ibn Arabi’s concept of *insan-i kamil*, the perfect person, by stating perfection also implies productivity. As al-Ghazzali builds bridges between philosophy, Sufism and theology, Nursi also formed bridges between religion, science and material progress. Like Ibn Khaldun’s view on the cycle of civilisations, Nursi held that since progress is part of human nature, the existing dynamism in the Muslim world will eventually lead to progress.

The characteristic religious perspective he puts forward in his sermon highlights the sicknesses that rendered the Muslim world weak to respond to Westernisation and foreign occupation. They are the same sicknesses that continue to plague Muslims and prevent them from moving forwards within their communities.

CONCLUSION

Nursi emerges as a reviver, an agent of renewal, in the modern world. His philosophy reconciles secular and religious sciences, creating a relationship between the truths of Islam and Western civilisation while offering an extensive methodology to foster progress within the Muslim world. “His definition of true progress is when a balance is achieved between moral and material progress. Further, he acknowledges how both aspects of progress complement each other.”⁸⁶ In addition, Nursi states any attempts for progress must be in conformity with the natural laws in force in the universe.⁸⁷ He also views that striving for progress is like *i’layi kelimetullah*, or exalting God’s name, and a fundamental duty of every believer.

⁸³ Miharja, “Said Nursi and the Concept of Progress.”

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Yusuf Kaplan, “Bediuzzaman’in Açtığı Nebevi Çığır,” *Yeni Safak*, January 20, 2012, <http://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/yusufkaplan/bediuzzaman%C4%B1n-act%C4%B1g%C4%B1-nebev%C3%AE-c%C4%B1g%C4%B1r-3-30697>.

⁸⁶ Miharja, “Said Nursi and the Concept of Progress.”

⁸⁷ Nursi, *The Flashes*, 226.

He identifies the weaknesses of Muslims, and provides solutions drawn from the Qur'an in order that these truths may resonate in religion and life. In addition, he presents the importance of unity and solidarity between those who study secular science (*ahli maktab*) and those who study religious sciences (*ahli madrasah*), and the role of open universities that would see all these sciences brought together.⁸⁸

Hence, the search for knowledge and removal of ignorance proves to be a fundamental factor in the success of social development, which has obstacles created by human desire and lust. Thus, religious schools can only transfer or influence the students of religious science with orderliness and progress, while open universities will transmit their virtue and piety to the students of secular sciences. Voll affirms this balance as a practical means of the 'pluralistic affirmation of truth' that equips two parts of a whole with the means to influence, develop and grow within a changing world.⁸⁹ Similarly, it allows for a just social foundation that provides the opportunity for all individuals to share and contemplate religious and secular sciences, removing bias and envy.⁹⁰ In fact, Nursi views material progress through Quranic ethical principles as part of the religion and added a spiritual aspect into progress.

Islam serves not as an obstacle for progress, but as a means of unifying two pieces of a whole and advancing in a way that maintains the peace and public order of society. Nursi does not lay out in explicit detail how to realise this progress in the manner of a government or corporate plan. However, he sets forth the fundamental principles to be developed and applied by others according to their conditions.

⁸⁸ Said Nursi, *Denizli ve Emirdag Lahikasi* (n.p., n.d), 590.

⁸⁹ Voll, "Renewal and Reformation," 245–259.

⁹⁰ Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 29.

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