



Australian Journal of Islamic Studies

<https://ajis.com.au>

ISSN (online): 2207-4414
Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation
Charles Sturt University CRICOS 00005F
Islamic Sciences and Research Academy of Australia

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David R Law

To cite this article:

Law, David R. "The Prophethood of Jesus and Religious Inclusivism in Nursi's *Risale-i Nur*." *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2017): 96-111.



Published online: 9 April 2017



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THE PROPHETHOOD OF JESUS AND RELIGIOUS INCLUSIVISM IN NURSI'S *RISALE-I NUR*

David R. Law*

Abstract: This article examines Said Nursi's understanding of Jesus, his comparison of the prophethood of Jesus with that of Muḥammad, and his conception of Christianity and Islam as partners in the struggle against irreligion. Nursi's views are then placed in the context of interreligious dialogue and the argument made that Nursi's critical respect for Christianity can be read as an Islamic version of religious inclusivism, i.e. Nursi's recognition and valuing of the truth, goodness and holiness of Christianity, while affirming that these qualities reach full expression only in Islam.

Keywords: *Prophethood, Jesus, Muḥammad, exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, Christology, Sharia, Christian social teaching, the Gospel of John, the Anti-Christ, irreligion, collective personality, salvation*

Prophethood is one of the major themes of the *Risale-i Nur*, along with the unity of God, the hereafter, justice and worship. Prophethood is a central concept for Nursi because it is the means by which God communicates His will to humankind. Throughout the ages, God has appointed prophets to impart his message to human beings and teach them how to read the 'book of the universe,' the meaning of which would otherwise remain obscure to humankind. Among the prophets God has sent to humankind, the Qur'ān mentions several figures common to Judaism and Christianity, although the Judaeo-Christian tradition does not acknowledge all of them as *prophets*: Noah, Abraham, Lot, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Elijah, Jonah, Job, Zechariah, John the Baptist and Jesus.

Although from the Qur'ānic perspective all the prophets sent by God share the same message, Muḥammad is the Seal of the Prophets since he is the means by which God has revealed his divine message in its final and definitive form (Qur'ān 33:40). Nursi naturally follows this assessment of Muḥammad's status and in the *Risale-i Nur* devotes much attention to demonstrating the superlative character of Muḥammad's prophethood. Among the other prophets Nursi discusses is Jesus.

Although Nursi follows the Muslim refusal to ascribe divinity to Jesus,¹ in the *Risale-i Nur* he demonstrates – like all Muslims – a profound appreciation of Jesus. Nursi's respect for Jesus

* David R. Law is Professor of Christian Thought and Philosophical Theology at the University of Manchester. He has published extensively on modern Christian thought and has an interest in Christian-Muslim dialogue, particularly with reference to Said Nursi. His most recent books are *The Historical-Critical Method* (2012) and *Kierkegaard's Kenotic Christology* (2013).

¹ See Said Nursi, *The Letters* (Istanbul: Sözlür, 2001), 26th Letter, 384; 29th Letter, 510; Said Nursi, *The Words* (Istanbul: Sözlür, 2002), 25th Word, 425; Gleams, 730; Said Nursi, *The Flashes* (Istanbul: Sözlür

is apparent in his statement in the Twenty-Fourth Word that, together with the other Divine Names, “the Name of All-Powerful was predominant in Jesus.”² In the Thirty-First Word, Nursi reiterates this point, relating how during his ascension into heaven Muḥammad “met with Jesus (Peace be upon him), who manifested the Name of All-Powerful, in that sphere God Almighty Himself was manifested with title of All-Powerful.”³ Nursi also follows Muslim tradition in subscribing to the doctrine of the virgin birth. In the Ninth Flash he mentions “a wretched doctor saying that Jesus (Upon whom be peace) had a father.”⁴ Nursi rejects this claim as “a lunatic interpretation” and goes on in a footnote to comment:

The extraordinary achievements of an extraordinary human individual who is the leader of a quarter of mankind, transformed humankind into angels of a sort, and left this world to make the heavens his dwelling – these extraordinary achievements of his demand an extraordinary form of the law of reproduction.⁵

Furthermore, in so far as Europeans evince good morals and character, this is to be attributed to their following Jesus, while Europe’s corruption, vice and misguidance are due to its having “drawn far from the religion of Jesus.”⁶

In the following discussion, I shall sketch Nursi’s conception of Jesus, demonstrating where Nursi follows Muslim tradition, but also indicating where he strikes out in new directions and offers his own distinctive contribution to understanding the nature of Jesus’ prophethood. The branch of Christian theology concerned with making sense of Jesus of Nazareth is *Christology*, a term of Greek origin that literally means *discourse* or *reasoning* about Christ. This article provides an outline of what one might loosely call Nursi’s Christology. A further concern of this study is to consider Nursi’s conception of Jesus in the context of the theology of religions and demonstrate that Nursi’s Christology can be read as an example of *religious inclusivism*.

To understand Nursi’s conception of Jesus, I shall begin by considering why Nursi could not accept Jesus as the final prophet. I shall then turn to Nursi’s discussion of Jesus as the forerunner of Muḥammad, before examining what Nursi considers to be distinctive about Jesus’ mission.

THE INCOMPLETENESS OF JESUS’ SHARIA AND SOCIAL TEACHING

According to the Qur’ān, “for every nation there is a messenger” (Qur’ān 10:47). Each of these messengers teaches a consistent, unchanging message:

Publications, 2000), 28th Flash, 366. See also Nursi’s comment in the Fourth Flash, where he writes “...excessive love of Jesus (Upon whom be peace) is dangerous for Christians” (Nursi, *The Flashes*, 4th Flash, 41).

² Nursi, *The Words*, 24th Word, 344.

³ Ibid, 31st Word, 589.

⁴ Nursi, *The Flashes*, 9th Flash, 62.

⁵ Ibid, n. 8. Nursi, however, sees the virgin birth not as evidence for Christ’s divine Sonship, but as an evidentiary miracle of Jesus’ prophetic status.

⁶ Nursi, *The Flashes*, 17th Flash, 161.

Lo! We inspire thee as We inspired Noah and the prophets after him, as We inspired Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and Jesus and Job and Jonah and Aaron and Solomon, as We imparted unto David the Psalms (Qur'ān 5:163).

This consistent, unchanging message is the proclamation of the one God, who is all-powerful and merciful, the creator of the world and judge of humankind. Strictly speaking, it could be argued there is no difference between the prophets, since they each teach the same fundamental message. Any differences that might exist between them are due to the time and place in which they proclaimed their message, but pertain only to secondary matters and do not affect their basic message. Nevertheless, despite this fundamental consistency in the prophetic message, the Qur'ān affirms that Muḥammad is “the Seal of the Prophets,” a phrase that is normally interpreted to mean he is the last of the prophets who brings the message of his prophetic predecessors to completion by restoring it to its original, pristine Abrahamic form. This is also Nursi's view, who holds that “the Messengership of Muhammad (PBUH) is the greatest truth in the universe,”⁷ and “the prophethoods of all the other prophets are a proof of the veracity of the prophethood of Muhammad.”⁸ Nursi makes a similar point in *Signs of Miraculousness*, where, commenting on verse 4 of the second sura, Sūrat al-Baqara, he writes,

[just as] in accordance with the law of human progress a later teacher is better than an earlier one, and generally those who come later are more proficient than those who preceded them, [so too] Muhammad (Upon whom be peace) was the Sovereign of the Prophets, and the best and most perfect of them, just as the Qur'an is the more comprehensive and universal than their scriptures.⁹

Later in the same work Nursi claims, “the pivot and basis of the prophets' missions, and their dealings with their communities were found most perfectly and completely in Muhammad.”¹⁰ Similarly, in the Nineteenth Word, Nursi describes Muḥammad as “a luminous tree whose living roots are all the prophets, and fresh fruits are all the saints; whose claims all the prophets relying on their miracles and all the saints relying on their wonder-working confirm and corroborate.”¹¹

The pre-eminence of Muḥammad means, despite the prophets all preaching the same fundamental message, Nursi attributes a higher status to Muḥammad than to other prophets.¹²

⁷ Nursi, *The Words*, “A Flower of Emirdağ,” 473.

⁸ Ibid; Said Nursi, *The Rays* (Istanbul: Sözlür, 1998), 11th Ray, 10th Topic, 270-271; cf. Said Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness* (Istanbul: Sözlür, 2004), 184-185.

⁹ Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, 58.

¹⁰ Ibid, 182.

¹¹ Nursi, *The Words*, 19th Word, 243.

¹² There appears to be a hierarchy of prophets in Nursi's thought. At the pinnacle of the prophetic hierarchy is Muḥammad. There then appears to be a second rank of prophets, consisting of Moses and others. This seems implied by Nursi's description of Moses as “one of the five greatest prophets” (Nursi, *The Words*, 15th Word, Addendum, 200). These are presumably the five prophets (*rasul*) the Qur'ān mentions as having their messages recorded in writing: Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus and Muḥammad. Although Muḥammad is in one sense a member of this group, as the Seal of the Prophets he is their culmination. Third, there are those prophets mentioned in the Qur'ān, such as Jonah, Job and others, who are not described as having left a written record of their message. Finally, there is a fourth group of prophets, which are presumably the 124,000 prophets (*nabi*) mentioned in Islamic tradition, but which do not feature

Sometimes he illustrates this by comparing Muḥammad with some of the individual prophets who preceded him. Thus, to take just one example, in *The Rays* Nursi comments that “Muhammad (Peace and blessing be upon him) was greater than Abraham (Peace be upon him), and the recipient of greater mercy,”¹³ and, “For sure Abraham (Peace be upon him) was not equal to Muhammad (Peace and blessing be upon him).”¹⁴ This affirmation of Muḥammad’s superiority over other prophets is expressed particularly clearly in the Nineteenth Letter, where Nursi writes:

Since prophethood is a phenomenon of humanity, and hundreds of thousands of individuals who claimed prophethood and performed miracles have lived and passed away, of a certainty the prophethood of Muhammad is superior to all the others. For whatever evidences, qualities, and attributes made prophets such as Jesus and Moses (Upon whom be peace) be known as prophets and were the means of their messengership, they were all possessed in a more perfect and comprehensive fashion by Muhammad (Upon whom be blessings and peace). And since the causes and means of prophetic authority were more perfectly present in the person of Muhammad, this authority was to be found in him with more certainty than in all the others.¹⁵

Thus, although Jesus’ prophethood is of permanent value and, like that of all the prophets, was appropriate for the age in which Jesus exercised his prophetic role,¹⁶ his prophethood is not final and definitive. To what, then, does Nursi attribute the provisionality of Jesus’ message and the finality of Muḥammad’s prophethood? The reason for this difference in status between these two great prophets seems to be that Jesus’ Sharia was not as effective as that of Muḥammad. This would seem to be the implication of Nursi’s comment in the Nineteenth Letter that, “in the face of the burdensome Shari‘a of the Children of Israel, who did not recognize Jesus, [Muḥammad] came with an elevated Shari‘a which was easy, all-encompassing, and completed the deficiencies of Jesus’ Shari‘a.”¹⁷ Nursi seems to be implying, in contrast to Jewish law, which is difficult to fulfil, Muḥammad has brought a higher Sharia, which the true believer will find easier to follow. This higher Sharia brought by Muḥammad is furthermore able to salvage Jesus’ religion from the attacks of the Jews. Nursi writes: “Ahmad (Upon whom be blessings and peace) defended Jesus (Upon whom be peace) against the

much in Nursi’s thought. See Colin Turner, *Islam: The Basics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 121-122).

¹³ Nursi, *The Rays*, 6th Ray, 120.

¹⁴ Ibid, 121.

¹⁵ Nursi, *The Letters*, 19th Letter, 120.

¹⁶ See Nursi, *The Words*, 24th Word, 343; 27th Word, 500-501.

¹⁷ Nursi, *The Letters*, 19th Letter, 16th Sign, 211. The reference to “the burdensome Shari‘a of the Children of Israel” resonates with Paul’s teaching that the Jewish law was impossible to uphold and led human beings ever deeper into sin (Rom. 5:20-21; 7:5-23; Gal. 3:10-11, 23-25). There may also be an allusion to this notion in Nursi’s comment in the Fifth Ray that “at the Divine command Jesus (Peace be upon him) abrogated some of the burdensome ordinances of the Mosaic Law ...” (Nursi, *The Rays*, 5th Ray, 114). Nursi, however, parts company with Paul on the consequences of the failure of Jewish law. Where Paul sees justification by faith in the crucified and risen Jesus as the replacement for Jewish law (Rom. 7:24-25; 10:4; Gal. 3:13-14, 25; Eph. 2:15), so we are no longer subject to that law, Nursi holds that Muḥammad rectified the arduousness of Jewish law by bringing to humankind “an elevated Shari‘a.” In Nursi’s description of Sharia as ‘easy,’ there may also possibly be an echo of Matt. 11:30, where Jesus tells his listeners that, “my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

fearsome denials and slander of the Jews, and saved his religion from corruption.”¹⁸ Nursi does not elaborate on this point, but he may be arguing that the elevated Sharia brought by Muḥammad is able to deflect Jewish accusations that Jesus had subverted the law.¹⁹

In the Twenty-Ninth Letter, Nursi continues this theme of Muḥammad’s bringing Jesus’ religion to completion and fulfilment. In this letter Nursi raises the question of whether Islam needs a reformation or revolution similar to the events within Christianity that brought Protestantism into existence. In addressing this issue Nursi implies such revolutions stem from the fact that Christianity’s social teaching was due not to Jesus but to his followers. He writes:

... in the religion of Jesus, only the fundamentals of religion were taken from Jesus (Upon whom be peace). Most of the injunctions concerning social life and the secondary matters of the Law were formulated by the disciples and other spiritual leaders.²⁰

Although Jesus provided the foundations for religion, his followers drew either on “former holy scriptures” or “common laws and civil rules taken from outside” to construct Christian social teaching, neither of which were adequate resources for elaborating the true character of Jesus’ religion. Nursi traces the insufficiency of Christian social teaching to the fact that Jesus was not a political leader:

Since Jesus (Upon whom be peace) was not a worldly ruler and sovereign, and since he was not the source of general social laws, the fundamentals of his religion were as though clothed with the garment of common laws and civil rules taken from outside, having been given a different form and called the Christian law.²¹

Because the social laws of Christianity do not stem from Jesus, they are not God-given and consequently can be changed. This is why events such as the Reformation and French Revolution could take place in the Christian world, which overthrew the social and political forms in which the message of Jesus had been expressed. Nevertheless, Nursi emphasises that the fundamentals of Jesus’ message remain valid: “If this form is changed and the garment transformed, the fundamental religion of Jesus (Upon whom be peace) may persist. It does not imply denying or giving the lie to Jesus himself (Upon whom be peace).”²²

Reformations and revolutions are not possible in Islam, however, because in contrast to Jesus, Muḥammad is “the sovereign of the two worlds.”²³ That is, according to Nursi, Muḥammad is not only communicating a divine revelation about the next world, but is also laying down the guidelines for how we should conduct our lives in the present world. As “the Glory of the World” and “the owner of the religion and Shari’a of Islam,” Muḥammad, Nursi claims, “therefore both demonstrated the fundamentals of the religion of Islam, and brought the secondary matters and other injunctions of the religion, including even the most minor

¹⁸ Nursi, *The Letters*, 19th Letter, 16th Sign, 211.

¹⁹ Cf. Matt. 12:2/Mark 2:24/Luke 6:2; Matt. 12:10/Mark 3:2/Luke 6:7; Luke 13:14; John 5:16, 18.

²⁰ Nursi, *The Letters*, 29th Letter, 508.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

matters of conduct.”²⁴ This means, in contrast to Christianity, the social laws of Islam are not secondary interpretations created by Muslims to deal with areas of life that Muḥammad had not addressed, but belong to the core of divine revelation. Consequently, these social laws are not subject to change and therefore there cannot be reformations or revolutions in Islam like those that have taken place within Christianity. As Nursi puts it,

[Muḥammad] himself taught them; he commanded them. That is to say, the secondary matters of Islam are not like a garment capable of change, so that if they were changed, the essential religion would persist. They are rather a body to the fundamentals of religion, or at least a skin. They have blended and combined with it, so that they cannot be separated. To change them implies direct denial and contradiction of the owner of the Shari‘a.²⁵

For Nursi, then, Jesus is to be revered for the core revelatory message he brings. Because of the questionable way Jesus’ Sharia has been interpreted by his followers, however, together with the fact the prophetic attributes manifested in Jesus had not reached their fullest expression in him,²⁶ Jesus’ work had to be supplemented and completed by a new prophet, whose “Shari‘a abrogated all preceding ones and contains their virtues.”²⁷ This leads onto the next reason for Nursi’s reverence of Jesus: Jesus’ role as the forerunner of Muḥammad.

JESUS AS THE FORERUNNER OF MUḤAMMAD

Nursi’s reading of the Bible is determined by Qur’ān 61:6, which records Jesus as proclaiming, “I am the apostle of God (sent) to you, confirming The Law (which came) before me, and giving glad tidings of an Apostle to come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad.” Nursi turns to an analysis of the New Testament to support this Qur’ānic verse. He understands the term ‘good news,’ which is frequently employed in the New Testament (*euangelion*, i.e. ‘good news’ or ‘gospel’), to be a reference to the coming of Muḥammad.²⁸ Furthermore, Nursi holds there are some verses in the Bible that are prophecies of Muḥammad, although he concedes

the good tidings about the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) in the Torah, Gospels, and Psalms, are veiled and obscure, in consequence of which some of the adherents of those scriptures put various meanings on those passages and did not believe them.²⁹

On two occasions Nursi notes that Husayn al-Jisri found over 100 verses in the Bible that spoke of Muḥammad’s prophethood.³⁰ Nursi identifies 20 such verses. He writes: “out of hundreds in the revealed scriptures of the Torah, Gospels, and Psalms, brought by the prophets,

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, 508-9.

²⁶ This is implied by Nursi’s comment that, “For whatever evidences, qualities, and attributes made prophets such as Jesus and Moses (Upon whom be peace) be known as prophets and were the means of their messengership, they were all possessed in a more perfect and comprehensive fashion by Muhammad (Upon whom be blessings and peace)” (Nursi, *The Letters*, 19th Letter, 120).

²⁷ Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, 58.

²⁸ Nursi, *The Letters*, 19th Letter, 211; Nursi, *The Rays*, 5th Ray, 100.

²⁹ Nursi, *The Rays*, 5th Ray, 100.

³⁰ Ibid, 15th Ray, 599; Nursi, *The Words*, 31st Word, 602.

[there are] twenty verses about the prophethood of Muhammad (PBUH) which are close to being explicit.”³¹ He discusses these in the Nineteenth Letter, which is devoted to the consideration of Muḥammad’s miracles.

Of all the prophets, Jesus foretold the coming of Muḥammad more fully than any other. In the question Nursi poses in the Nineteenth Letter, he implies that Jesus’ superiority over other prophets stems from the fact he provides the fullest prophecy of Muḥammad’s coming: “Why is it that while the other prophets foretell the coming of Muhammad (PBUH), Jesus (PUH) does so more fully and in the form of good news?”³² In support of the view that Jesus has foretold Muḥammad’s coming more fully than any other prophet, Nursi cites not only the Qur’ān, but also the Gospel of John, following the common Muslim stratagem of taking Jesus’ references to the Paraclete in John 14:16, 26; 15:26; and 16:7-10 as prophecies of Muḥammad’s coming.³³ Here, Nursi is drawing on the argument of Muslim scholars that the Greek term *parakletos*, which appears in these verses and is usually translated in the New Testament as ‘comforter’ or ‘helper,’ is a corruption of the word *periklytos*.³⁴ The term *periklytos* is Greek for ‘praised one’ and thus seems to be the Greek equivalent of ‘Ahmad,’ which is derived from the same Arabic root as the name Muḥammad. On these grounds, Muslim scholars have read the references to the Paraclete in John’s Gospel as Jesus’ prophecy of Muḥammad’s coming. Nursi supplements this reading of the term *parakletos* by interpreting John’s reference to “the Spirit of truth” in John 14:17 and 16:13-14 not, as Christians have traditionally understood it, as an allusion to the Holy Spirit, but as another prophecy of the coming of Muḥammad.³⁵

In the Nineteenth Letter, Nursi appeals to another Johannine text as a prophecy of Muḥammad’s coming, when he comments that “Jesus often gave the good news, the Ruler of the World will come!”³⁶ Here Nursi appears to conflate Jesus’ reference to the coming of the ruler of the world (John 14:30) with the Synoptic Gospels’ account of Jesus’ preaching the good news of the coming of the kingdom of God (Mark 1:14-15, cf. Matt. 4:17).

In the Seventh Flash, there is a similar argument. Here Nursi states that “in the Gospels are verses like, *With him is a staff of iron, and his community is like him* describing the Prophet who was to come at the end of time.”³⁷ There is, however, no such verse in the Gospels and, judging by the footnote he has provided,³⁸ Nursi seems to have derived the verse from Yusuf Nabhani.³⁹ The closest New Testament text to the verse Nursi cites is Rev. 12:5 (cf. 2:27; 19:15), though this text refers only to the birth of “a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron,” and makes no mention of a community that resembles such a ruler.

³¹ Nursi, *The Rays*, 15th Ray, 599.

³² Nursi, *Letters*, 19th Letter, 211.

³³ Ibid, 204, 208, 210-11.

³⁴ There is, however, no manuscript evidence to support this claim. A survey of different manuscripts of John’s Gospel does not reveal a single instance of a text containing the term *periklytos*.

³⁵ Nursi, *The Letters*, 19th Letter, 209.

³⁶ Ibid, 211, cf. 208.

³⁷ Nursi, *The Flashes*, 7th Flash, 49, original emphasis; cf. Nursi, *Letters*, 19th Letter, 206.

³⁸ Nursi, *The Flashes*, 7th Flash, 49, n. 2; Nursi, *The Letters*, 19th Letter, 206, n. 318.

³⁹ Şükran Vahide, the translator of *The Flashes*, cites Nursi’s source as Nabhani, *Hujjatu’llahi ala’l-Alamin*, 99, 114.

Whatever its origins, Nursi links this prophecy of the coming of a prophet with a staff of iron to John 14:30, which allows him to claim, “The one bearing the ‘staff of iron’ would be the Ruler of the World. For in one place in the Gospels it says: ‘I am going so the Ruler of the World may come.’”⁴⁰

In the Nineteenth Letter and the Seventh Flash, then, Nursi interprets John’s reference to the ruler of the world as another prophecy about Muḥammad. As is evident from the condemnation of “the ruler of this world” in John 12:31 and 16:11, however, the Johannine usage of the phrase “ruler of the world” denotes not a future prophet, but the powers of darkness, who according to Johannine theology rule over the world, but whose powers are about to be broken through Christ’s death on the cross. The ruler of the world “is coming” in the sense that the Roman authorities, who for John are the agents of the powers of darkness, are coming to arrest Jesus. The conflation of the Synoptic account of Jesus’ preaching of the coming kingdom of God with John’s statement concerning the imminent arrival of the ruler of the world, however, allows Nursi to interpret John 14:30 as another reference to Muḥammad.⁴¹ This in turn allows him to see the prophecy of Muḥammad’s coming as the content of the good news Jesus preached and to understand Jesus as Muḥammad’s “forerunner and herald.”⁴²

Jesus thus stands in a similar relation to Muḥammad as Christians believe exists between John the Baptist and Jesus. Where John the Baptist was the forerunner who prophesied Jesus’ coming and prepared his way,⁴³ Jesus is the forerunner who prophesied Muḥammad’s coming.

THE CHARACTER OF JESUS’ PROPHEHOOD

There is, however, an important difference between the way Nursi understands Jesus’ role as forerunner and the way Christianity has interpreted John the Baptist’s relationship to Jesus. From the Christian perspective, John the Baptist’s role is wholly that of forerunner and once Jesus has arrived, the Baptist’s role is over.⁴⁴ In line with Muslim tradition, Nursi, however, attributes a continuing role to Jesus, despite the coming of Muḥammad and the definitive nature of Muḥammad’s prophethood as the Seal of the Prophets. This role consists in Jesus’ eschatological role in defeating the Anti-Christ and in his representing the collective personality of Christianity.

The Eschatological Jesus

Nursi subscribes to the doctrine of Christ’s second coming.⁴⁵ Because for God all things are possible, it is not impossible for him “to clothe Jesus (Upon whom be peace) in his body and

⁴⁰ Nursi, *The Flashes*, 7th Flash, 49.

⁴¹ In misreading John 14:30, Nursi unfortunately seems to have unintentionally identified Muḥammad with the powers of darkness.

⁴² Nursi, *The Letters*, 19th Letter, 210.

⁴³ Matt. 3:3, 11, 14; Mark 1:2-3, 7-8; Luke 1:76; 3.4, 16; John 1:23-36; 3:26-30.

⁴⁴ See, for example, John 3:30.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Nursi, *The Letters*, 1st Letter, 22.

send to the world, so to bring the religion of Jesus to a good conclusion.”⁴⁶ Not only is this possible for God, Nursi points out, but God has promised to bring about Jesus’ return. Since God keeps his promises, we can be certain Jesus will return at some point in the future.⁴⁷

When Jesus returns, he will carry out several functions. First, he will purify Christianity of its superstitious elements, which will allow a union to come about between Christianity and Islam. In the First Letter, Nursi bases this notion on “the Hadith the meaning of which is, ‘At the end of time Jesus (Upon whom be peace) will come and will act in accordance with the Shari’a of Muhammad (PBUH).”⁴⁸ Nursi interprets this *ḥadīth* to mean “at the end of time the religion of Christianity will be purified and divest itself of superstition in the face of the current of unbelief and atheism born of Naturalist philosophy, and will be transformed into Islam.”⁴⁹

Second, Jesus will play a major role in defeating the Dajjal or Anti-Christ, and the atheism and materialist philosophy the Dajjal propagates. A major reason why Nursi holds that Jesus continues to have a role to play despite the coming of Muḥammad is Jesus’ ability to work miracles. It is because of this capacity that Jesus is capable of overturning the rule of the Anti-Christ. Nursi writes:

It could only be a wondrous person with the power of miracles who could kill and change the way of the awesome Dajjal ... And that person will be Jesus (Peace be upon him), who is the prophet of the majority of mankind and whom most people follow.⁵⁰

Although the Dajjal will have a colossal form and Jesus will be very small in comparison, Jesus will defeat the Dajjal and overthrow his rule.⁵¹

Jesus as the Representative of the Collective Personality of Christianity

A distinctive feature of Nursi’s conception of Jesus is his notion of Jesus as *the representative of the collective personality* of purified Christianity. Nursi does not provide a detailed exposition of the notion of collective personality, nor does he explain how an individual can be its representative. From the comments he makes about Muḥammad and Jesus, however, it would seem that prophets can represent their communities because they are the leaders of these communities and because these communities express in their beliefs and practices the divine message the prophets have revealed to them. In “A Flower of Emirdağ,” Nursi writes of Muḥammad’s “universal collective personality and sacred rank, known as the Muhammadan Truth,”⁵² while in his discussion of Muḥammad’s prophethood in the Nineteenth Word, Nursi describes the collective personality of Muḥammad as one of the three “great and universal things which make known to us our Sustainer.”⁵³ According to Nursi, Muḥammad’s

⁴⁶ Nursi, *The Letters*, 15th Letter, 79.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 1st Letter, 22. Vahide cites as Nursi’s sources: Bukhārī, Mazālim 31; Buyū’ 102; Muslim, Īmān 242, 343; Ibn Māja, Fitan 33.

⁴⁹ Nursi, *The Letters*, 1st Letter, 22; cf. 15th Letter, 78.

⁵⁰ Nursi, *The Rays*, 5th Ray, 108; cf. Nursi, *The Flashes*, 16th Flash, 147.

⁵¹ Nursi, *The Rays*, 5th Ray, 109-110.

⁵² Nursi, *The Words*, “A Flower of Emirdağ,” 473.

⁵³ Ibid, 19th Word, 243. The other two proofs are “the book of the universe” and the Qur’ān.

collective personality is evident in the fact “the face of the earth has become his mosque, Mecca, his *mihrab*, and Medina, his pulpit.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, Muḥammad

is leader of all the believers, preacher to all mankind, the chief of all the prophets, lord of all the saints, the leader of a circle for the remembrance of God comprising all the prophets and saints.⁵⁵

This leadership function and personification of the core principles of belief are also characteristic of Jesus, although Nursi makes clear that Jesus represents the collective personality of a *purified* Christianity.⁵⁶ According to Nursi, on his return at the end of time, Jesus, having purified Christianity of its superstitious elements, will represent the collective personality of Christianity. This representative function will play an important role in undermining the dominance of atheism and materialist philosophy in the modern world. As Nursi puts it in the First Letter,

the collective personality of Christianity will kill the fearsome collective personality of irreligion with the sword of heavenly Revelation; so too, representing the collective personality of Christianity, Jesus (Upon whom be peace) will kill the Dajjal, who represents the collective personality of irreligion, that is, he will kill atheistic thought.⁵⁷

Nursi reiterates this point in the Fifteenth Letter, where he looks forward to the time when “the religion of true Christianity, which comprises the collective personality of Jesus (Upon whom be peace), will emerge.”⁵⁸ In a passage that resembles the description in the Revelation of St John of the descent from heaven to earth of the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2), Nursi claims, at the end-time, the religion of true Christianity “will descend from the skies of Divine Mercy.”⁵⁹ He makes a similar point in “Seeds of Reality,” where he claims “Christianity will either erupt, or being purified, will lay down its arms before Islam,” an event Nursi holds Muḥammad to be alluding to in his prophecy that, “Jesus will appear having descended from the skies; he will be of my community and will act in accordance with my Shari‘a.”⁶⁰ The result of this heavenly descent of true Christianity, Nursi claims, is that “Christianity will in effect be transformed into a sort of Islam” and, “Following the Qur’an, the collective personality of Christianity will be in the rank of follower, and Islam, in that of leader.”⁶¹

Jesus’ return as the representative of purified Christianity will play a vital role in the victory of religion over irreligion. Nursi seems to imply that neither Christianity nor Islam can alone

⁵⁴ Nursi, *The Words*, 19th Word, 243.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 243.

⁵⁶ Nursi’s application of the notion of representative of the collective personality to Muḥammad and Jesus would seem to indicate it is only those prophets whose divine message has resulted in the founding of a religious community who can become representatives of the collective personality. On this basis, one would expect Nursi to consider Moses to be the representative of the collective personality of Judaism, but I have not found any evidence in Nursi’s writings of his application of the notion of collective personality to Moses. This may be because Nursi’s primary concern was with the relationship between Islam and Christianity and for that reason he gave less attention to Judaism.

⁵⁷ Nursi, *The Letters*, 1st Letter, 22.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 15th Letter, 78.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, Seeds of Reality, 544.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 15th Letter, 78.

overcome the Dajjal, the forces of irreligion. He writes: “Although defeated before the atheistic current while separate, Christianity and Islam will have the capability to defeat and rout it as a result of their union.”⁶² Nursi ascribes to Jesus a leadership role in the establishment of true religion. Once the union of Christianity and Islam has come about, “The person of Jesus ... will come to lead the current of true religion.”⁶³ Further, as a result of the purification of Christianity, there will come about “A zealous and self-sacrificing community known as a Christian community but worthy of being called “Muslim Christians.”⁶⁴ These Muslim Christians “will work to unite the true religion of Jesus (Upon whom be peace) with the reality of Islam, and will kill and rout that society of the Dajjal, thus saving humanity from atheism.”⁶⁵ Nursi reiterates this point in *The Rays*, where he speaks of “truly pious Christians” who “will blend the essence of true Christianity with the essence of Islam and rout the Dajjal with their combined strength, in effect killing him.”⁶⁶

NURSI AS RELIGIOUS INCLUSIVIST

For Nursi, as for every Muslim, Muḥammad is the prophet *par excellence*. Muḥammad’s prophethood has paradigmatic status and his prophetic predecessors are measured according to this paradigm. Measuring Jesus by the conception of prophethood embodied in Muḥammad allows one to see some important points of contact between Christianity and Islam, for the notion of Jesus as a prophet is one that is common to both faiths. The Synoptic Gospels make clear that one of the terms applied to Jesus by his contemporaries is *prophet*. When Jesus asks his disciples in Matthew’s version of the Confession at Caesarea Philippi⁶⁷ what people are saying about him, Peter replies, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (Matt. 16:14). Furthermore, the doctrine of the ‘threefold office’ (*munus triplex*) identifies three functions carried out by Christ during his earthly ministry: *prophet*, priest and king. The designation of Jesus as prophet is thus present in Christian tradition and consequently provides an area of common ground between Islam and Christianity in the assessment of his significance.

There is also some truth in the Muslim claim that Jesus and Muḥammad teach the same message: submission to God. In the Matthaean version of the Lord’s Prayer and the Synoptic Gospels’ account of Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays that the Father’s will be done.⁶⁸ Jesus thus recognises submission (*islam*) to God’s will to be the highest duty of a human being.

A further area of overlap is the common affirmation of Jesus’ role at the eschaton. For Nursi, Muḥammad’s coming does not make Jesus redundant in the way that John the Baptist became

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 29th Letter, 515.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Nursi, *The Rays*, 5th Ray, 108.

⁶⁷ Matt. 16:13-23; cf. Mark 8:27-33; Luke 9:18-22.

⁶⁸ Matt. 6:10; Matt. 26:42/Mark 14:36/Luke 22:42.

redundant with the coming of Christ. Although Jesus' mission will be brought to completion by Muḥammad, Jesus continues to perform a unique, distinct role that is not annulled by the revelation Muḥammad brings. This role is the eschatological task of overturning the rule of the Anti-Christ. By representing the purified collective personality of Christianity, Jesus in conjunction with Muḥammad, presents a powerful front against the onslaught of modern atheism and secularism.

In short, Nursi recognises that Christianity and Islam complement each other. Although Nursi considers Christianity and its founder to be subordinate to Islam and holds that Christianity only achieves its full and proper character when purified by the agency of Islam, he does not speak of Muḥammad replacing Jesus or Islam supplanting Christianity.

There are, however, some significant divergences between the Muslim, and therefore Nursi's conception, of prophethood and the Christian understanding of prophethood. First, while Christians may recognise the appropriateness of conceiving of certain aspects of Jesus' ministry in terms of prophethood and accept that Jesus saw himself as heir to a long history of Hebrew prophets, they will hold fast to the conviction that the designation 'prophet' is not able to do justice to Jesus' full significance and the term must therefore be supplemented by other terms. This is precisely what has happened in the New Testament, where the description of Jesus as prophet is supplemented by such terms as "high priest," "the Word," and above all "Son of God," the latter of which became the dominant Christian term for describing Jesus' significance. From the Christian perspective, then, measuring Jesus' status according to the paradigm of Muḥammad's prophethood results in an impoverishment of the reality of Jesus.

Second, the Muslim and Nursian conception of prophethood is embedded in a different economy of salvation from that of Christianity. This affects the conception of prophethood and the way it is applied to Jesus. Where Christianity understands there to be a progressive revelation revealed gradually by the prophets in stages capable of comprehension by contemporary human beings until God's revelation reached its fulfilment in the person of Jesus Christ, Islam understands God to have given his primal message to the prophets from the very beginning. Although secondary aspects of this revelation may change according to the circumstances in which the individual prophet communicates to his contemporaries the divine message he has received, its fundamentals remain unchanged. For Christianity, however, God's revelation of Himself to humankind takes place in a series of advances whereby, through the ministry of the Old Testament prophets, Israel was able to develop a fuller understanding of God. Thus where Islam is characterised by the notion of the repetition of an unchanging revelation, Christianity conceives of revelation as the progressive accumulation of prophetic insights until these are taken up and fulfilled, but also transformed in the revelation of God Himself in the person of Jesus Christ.

This embedding of the figure of Jesus in a different economy of salvation results in a change in his significance in Islam and a shift in the meaning and function of Christian notions. The Qur'ānic acceptance of Jesus' virgin birth, for example, does not constitute an affirmation of Christ's divine Sonship, as it does in Christianity, but is an evidentiary miracle confirming

Jesus' status as a messenger of Allah. Such miracles are not signs of divine *nature*, but of divine *commission*. The Qur'anic economy of salvation also means subsuming Jesus under the category of 'Sharia,' which allows Nursi to speak of the 'Sharia' of Jesus. From the Christian perspective, this seems an odd notion. According to the Gospels, Jesus was critical of Jewish law, as is evident, for example, in his criticism of lawyers: "Woe also to you lawyers! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them" (Luke 11:46; cf. Matt. 23:4-5). The Qur'anic portrayal of Jesus ignores precisely the point that is decisive in the New Testament: *freedom* from the burden of the law and its replacement with the commandment of *love*.⁶⁹

These two different conceptions of salvation history could result in an unbridgeable gulf between Islam and Christianity. One of Nursi's contributions to interreligious dialogue is to show that this need not be the case and that there are productive ways in which Islam and Christianity can work together in a relationship of mutual respect. Nursi integrates Jesus into the Islamic economy of salvation in a way that shows respect for the distinctive contribution of Christianity, a contribution that is *not* supplanted by the coming of Muḥammad.

Nursi's positive assessment of Jesus and Christianity, while subsuming both into the Muslim economy of salvation, means Nursi's theology can be categorised as an Islamic example of *religious inclusivism*. Religious inclusivism is one of three possible positions believers can adopt to faiths other than their own.

Religious *exclusivism* denotes the view of believers that their religion is the only true faith and all others are wrong. A Christian example of such exclusivism is the Roman Catholic doctrine of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, "there is no salvation outside the church," a phrase first employed by Cyprian of Carthage in the third century, which has since become shorthand for summing up the conviction that, in the words of the Fourth Lateran Council (1225), "There is but one universal Church of the faithful, outside which no one at all is saved."⁷⁰

The exclusivist position fosters negative attitudes towards other religions: "In an ideal world there would be only one religion – mine." There is nothing of value in other religions. Exclusivism can thus lead to intolerance, perhaps even to violence, since if other faiths are wrong, then the next logical step would be to root them out so true religion can fill the earth.

Religious *pluralism* goes to the opposite extreme to religious exclusivism, in that it holds that no single religion is in full possession of the truth. All religions are partial expressions of the truth and contain a mixture of truth and error. This view is sometimes illustrated by the story of the blind men and the elephant. Each of the blind men touches a different part of the elephant and consequently gives a different description of the beast. The blind man who touches the broad side of the elephant thinks that the elephant is like a wall, while the blind man who feels the animal's tusk concludes that the elephant is like a spear and the man who

⁶⁹ Matt. 22:37-40/Mark 12:30-34/Luke 10:27-28; 1 John 4:7-12, 16-21.

⁷⁰ Jacques Dupuis, ed., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, 6th ed. (New York: Alba House, 1996), 16, § 21.

grasps the elephant's trunk believes he has seized hold of a snake.⁷¹ All of the blind men have grasped a truth about the elephant, but none of them is in possession of the full truth. One of the best known proponents of religious pluralism is John Hick, who in his *An Interpretation of Religion*, argues that the various religions are different ways of conceiving of ultimate reality.⁷² None of them, however, is *the way*.

The middle position between exclusivism and pluralism is *religious inclusivism*, which consists in an appreciation of other faiths, while remaining true to one's own. An example of Christian inclusivism is provided by the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner and his notion of the "anonymous Christian." According to Rahner, non-Christians could "in [their] basic orientation and fundamental decision ... have accepted the salvific grace of God, through Christ, although [they] may never have heard of the Christian revelation."⁷³ The devout Jew, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist can thus be regarded as anonymous Christians, despite their not having overtly accepted Christ as their saviour.

Nursi arguably belongs to the category of religious inclusivism. His notion of Jesus as the collective personality of Christians and recognition of the need for Christians and Muslims to co-operate in the struggle against irreligion and atheism indicates a profound respect for Christianity and an acknowledgement of the truth that Christianity contains. He sees Christianity, however, as the junior partner in the relationship between the two faiths and looks forward to the day when a purified Christianity will be transformed into Islam.⁷⁴

The danger of religious inclusivism, however, is that of interpreting other faiths in terms of one's own tradition and failing to acknowledge their distinctiveness. This can result in the subsuming of other faiths into the categories of one's own tradition and a failure to recognise the unique insights those other faiths offer. Thus Hans Küng comments, "It would be impossible to find anywhere in the world a sincere Jew, Muslim or atheist who would not regard the assertion that he is an 'anonymous Christian' as presumptuous."⁷⁵ John Hick describes Rahner's notion of the anonymous Christian as "being an honorary status granted unilaterally to people who have not expressed any desire for it."⁷⁶ We see a similar problem with Nursi's hope that one day Christianity "will cast off superstition and distortion, and unite with the truths of Islam. Christianity will in effect be transformed into a sort of Islam."⁷⁷ Nursi

⁷¹ See John Godfrey Saxe's poem, *The Blind Men and the Elephant*.

⁷² John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).

⁷³ Karl Rahner, "Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 12 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974), 161-78.

⁷⁴ It seems to me more appropriate to describe Nursi's position as religious inclusivism than to adopt Markham and Pirim's designation of "grounded pluralism." See Ian Markham and Suendam Birinci Pirim, *An Introduction to Said Nursi: Life, Thought and Writings* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 53-61. Pluralism denotes the equal validity and/or invalidity of all religious traditions. This is clearly not Nursi's view, as Markham and Pirim make clear by describing Nursi's pluralism as "grounded in a deep commitment to the particularities of each tradition" (Markham and Pirim, *Introduction to Said Nursi*, 53). A deep commitment to the particularities of religious traditions while affirming that one's own faith is the highest of these traditions, however, is not a pluralist, but an inclusivist position.

⁷⁵ Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 89.

⁷⁶ John Hick, *God has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 68.

⁷⁷ Nursi, *The Letters*, 15th Letter, 78.

does not state what Christian superstitions he has in mind, but it is unlikely that most Christians would recognise them as superstitions, particularly if Nursi has in mind such core Christian beliefs as the Trinity and the incarnation.

To avoid simply subsuming other religions under the categories of one's own belief system, religious inclusivism must be accompanied by the willingness to view one's faith from the perspective of the other. In his book *Religious Worlds*, William Paden employs the metaphor of the "comparative mirror."⁷⁸ Making use of this image, one could conceive of interreligious dialogue as holding up a mirror to see how one's religion is reflected from the perspective of other religions. In other words, what we need is what we might call "*reflective* religious inclusivism." Reflective religious inclusivists do not subsume other faith traditions into their own tradition and recognise only those elements of other traditions that correspond to their own tradition. Rather, reflective religious inclusivists will attempt to view other traditions through the eyes of the adherents of those traditions – in so far as that it is possible – and will employ this perspective to critique their own tradition. This can be a challenging but rewarding experience, which may help reflective religious inclusivists to become aware of the richness of their own tradition but also those aspects of their tradition that are stumbling blocks to adherents of other faiths. Christians, for example, can learn from Islam's rigorous monotheism, which can act as a corrective to the sometimes inadequately formulated Trinitarian conceptions of God that sometimes appear in popular Christianity. Muslims, on the other hand, if they can look beyond the problematic, gendered language in which the doctrine of the Trinity has often been expressed, can perhaps enrich their understanding of God with Christian insights into the dynamic and relational character of God, which is arguably one of the key insights of the doctrine of the Trinity.

If both sets of believers – Christians and Muslims – insist on the superiority of their religions, we are not likely to get very far in our dialogue with each other. On the contrary, any dialogue that could take place under such circumstances is likely to consist of attempting to show why the other's faith is wrong. The way forward is not to begin with questions of which religion is superior, but to begin with themes common to our two faiths. Reflecting on Nursi's understanding of Jesus, considering his veneration of Christ and the role he attributes to Christ in the divine plan for humankind provides a good place to start such a dialogue.

⁷⁸ William Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1988), 164.

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