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SAID NURSI'S *MĀNĀ-YĪ HARFĪ*: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ANIMALS AND INSECTS

Leesa P. Giokas-Drakos*

Abstract: Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1877–1960) was a contemporary Muslim scholar who developed a unique exegetical method of understanding Islam. He believed it was humanity's responsibility to know God, and the only way to do that was by observing His Divine names found throughout the Qur'an and what Nursi termed the "Book of the Universe." Nursi considered the universe a beautifully written book that we are all a part of, in which God has carefully painted each letter. In reading this Book of the Universe, Nursi was able to directly and indirectly witness God and His Divine names everywhere and in everything. This is Nursi's theological concept of *mānā-yī harfī*, which functioned as his *Weltanschauung*.¹ Because of this worldview, he deeply valued all life forms, and his love for God's art extended right down to the atomic level. Though he believed that God placed humans at the top of nature's hierarchy, Nursi did not abuse this responsibility. Rather, he demonstrated an immense love for animals throughout his life, which surpassed many animal rights activists' today. This article will analyse Nursi's concept of *mānā-yī harfī* in the *Risale-i Nur* (Epistles of Light) collection, focusing on how it translated to his views and treatment of non-human life.

Keywords: *Said Nursi, mānā-yī harfī, animals, God's love, Book of the Universe, spirituality*

INTRODUCTION

God's love is not a new concept. It has been contemplated for centuries, by theologians and philosophers alike, and Bediüzzaman Said Nursi is one of many who have addressed this topic. Nursi's understanding that the core of this reality is a God who loves us fortified his faith and shaped his entire *Weltanschauung*. Due to Nursi's unique Qur'anic exegetical method and theological perspectives of *mānā-yī ismī* and *mānā-yī harfī*, he saw God reflected throughout all of creation. He saw God's love expressed throughout the natural world, and because of this, considered the entire universe as a beautiful book in which God has carefully painted each individual letter. Everything in this book reflected God's love and His Divine attributes, and as humanity was blessed with the ability to contemplate God, Nursi believed it

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¹ *Weltanschauung* refers to one's worldview and is essentially their philosophy of life.

was our responsibility to do so in every aspect of our lives. Because of this, he had deep love for all lifeforms, which was extraordinary.

In expanding on how Nursi saw God in everything through his concept of *mānā-yī harfī*, this article will be a discourse analysis of his works and integrate his semiotic theories throughout. Semiotics is the study of signs and how they convey meaning. It not only involves studying ‘signs’ found in everyday life, such as road signs or photographs, but includes anything that ‘stands for’ something else. This extends to numerous categories including words, images, gestures and objects.² As Nursi saw the signs of God everywhere, a semiotic framework is helpful for understanding Nursian theology.

Additionally, the article will focus on how his writings and ideas translated to his views and treatment of non-human life, particularly domesticated animals and insects. To achieve this, I will first introduce Nursi’s historical-social context and his concept of the “Book of the Universe.” I will then expand on his understanding of perspective in light of his theology of *mānā-yī ismī* and *mānā-yī harfī*, as it is only by first understanding these ideas that his views on the natural world make more sense.

After this, I will discuss Nursi’s views on the hierarchy of nature, and humanity’s place within it as caretakers of the earth, which is intimately connected with our ability to contemplate God. Finally, I will provide examples of Nursi’s writings from his magnum opus, the *Risale-i Nur* (Epistles of Light) collection, which focus on non-human life, and provide accounts of those who spent time with him regarding his behaviours towards non-humans. All this will expand on his *mānā-yī harfī* concept and demonstrate how he personally applied it to every living creature. To begin, we must first understand his origins, being a rapidly modernising Turkey.

BACKGROUND

Said Nursi was born in 1877 to a Kurdish family in the village of Nurs, Bitlis Province, an administrative division of the Ottoman Empire.³ He was an intelligent child and his formative years were greatly shaped by his surroundings. He was living at a tumultuous time in history, as the Ottoman Empire was collapsing and a new secular Turkish state was emerging. The empire was falling apart, and Turkey needed to modernise. Turkey’s slow move to secularism began to occur after the *Islahat Fermanı* (Imperial Decree of Reformation, 1856), and with this came a steady rise in atheism, which Nursi detested.⁴

² Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*, 2nd ed. (Oxon: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2007), 1–2; Priyaranjan Behera, “A Framework of Semiotics Theory to Understand the Signs and their Meaning in Society,” *International Journal of Arts, Architecture & Design* 2, no. 1 (2024): 77–78.

³ Sükran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi’ (State University of New York Press, 2005), 3.

⁴ As a devout Muslim holding Republican ideals, the type of secularism developing in Turkey greatly troubled him. Rather than promoting freedom of conscience, a core principle of the Government of the Republic, religious persecution was rampant and Nursi was constantly harassed. For example, he served a year’s prison sentence for Islamic dress, and due to his personal opinions on radios and aeroplanes, was falsely accused of opposing modern progress. Furthermore, not merely satisfied with relegating religion to

The Empire's eventual collapse resulted in four main ideological responses. The first was religious and focused on the "religious community, text, and Shari'ah." The second was a nationalistic response and aimed to unite all Turks under one ethnic umbrella. It was espoused by those who had no interest in an empire or religion and purposefully aimed to avoid Islamic influence on the state. The third was an intentional move towards European and Western ideals, thus it is considered the *Garpçilar* (Westernist) response. The Westernists espoused a synthesis and process of westernisation, which was considered by them as the "only way to save the empire." The fourth and final response, was the *İslamçilar* (Islamist) response. It arose as a reaction to the Westernists and attempted to modernise the country's infrastructure and educational system, while remaining Islamic.⁵ The *İslamçilar* were proponents of a multicultural and religiously plural Turkish society, and were egalitarian in their views, as they propounded the equality of all citizens. In this ideology, they were briefly supported at a time by the Young Turks, whose concept of Ottomanism and its "constitutional and parliamentary government,"⁶ somewhat aligned with theirs.⁷

As Turkey was moving towards full secularisation, Nursi found that traditional Islamic theology was unable to deal with the rising tide of materialism.⁸ Having had access to a wide array of literature, he had an excellent understanding of "history, geography, mathematics, geology, physics, chemistry, astronomy, and philosophy."⁹ Because of this, rather than arguing against the Qur'an, Nursi believed all these sciences confirmed Qur'anic truths, and in their unique ways, make God known.¹⁰ Thus, he believed, through developing a solid foundation of faith, which was based on personal reason combined with scientific knowledge, believers should naturally be in an excellent position that segues neatly to a love of God.¹¹ Understanding then that a healthy balance between modern science and Islam was not only possible, but necessary, Nursi soon began to propose educational and spiritual reforms with this fusion in mind.¹²

the private sphere, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey and man who deeply affected its transition to modernity, was adamant on replacing and subordinating Islam, so "the old elites could not fight back." See Said Nursi, *The Rays*, trans. Sükran Vahide, rev. ed., Risale-i Nur Collection, (Nur Publishers, 2019), 300; Badrane Benlahcene, "Turkey's Transition into Modernity and the Response of the 'Ulamā': The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," *Islamic Studies* 62, no. 3 (2023): 361–63.

⁵ Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', *Spiritual Dimensions of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Risale-i Nur* (State University of New York Press, 2008), vii-viii; Zeyneb Sayilgan and Salih Sayilgan, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Ethics of Non-Violence: Implications for Christian-Muslim Relations Today," *Dialog* 50, no. 3 (2011): 243.

⁶ Sayilgan and Sayilgan, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Ethics of Non-Violence," 251.

⁷ I say somewhat, as the entire concept of Ottomanism was considered by Muslims to be the embodiment of secularism. See Kemal H. Karpat, ed., *Ottoman Past and Today's Turkey* (Brill, 2000), 8.

⁸ Sayilgan and Sayilgan, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Ethics of Non-Violence," 244.

⁹ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 28.

¹⁰ Nursi, *The Rays*, 226.

¹¹ Salih Yucel, "Rereading of the Qur'an in light of Nursi's Risale-i Nur Collection: Shuhudi Exegesis," *Religions* 12, no. 12 (2021): 5.

¹² Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 59; Sükran Vahide, "The Book of the Universe: Its Place and Development in Bediuzzaman's Thought," *TSAQFAH Jurnal Peradaban Islam* 10, no. 1 (2014): 129.

OLD VS. NEW SAID

Nursi's life is divided into two parts. The first is the 'Old Said' (*Eski Said*) and the second is the 'New Said' (*Yeni Said*).¹³ The Old Said placed great importance on promoting Islam through political means (i.e. those aforementioned educational reforms), as he believed that an educated citizenry would strengthen the Empire and Islamic world.¹⁴ He valued the importance of scientific and educational progress,¹⁵ yet ultimately found his endeavours would be pointless unless people truly understood Islam. He observed scholars of the same Islam that he professed as truth acting un-Islamically toward each other, with some even going so far as to condemn those who disagreed with their political views as unbelievers.¹⁶ Eventually becoming so appalled with the political involvement in Islam, Nursi took refuge from "Satan and politics,"¹⁷ and decided to focus on revitalising peoples' faith. With this faith-driven goal in mind, the New Said emerged.

After this paradigmatic shift, the New Said saw two purposes to life. The first is to truly know God and continually thank Him for all that He has done for us. While the second is to gain an experiential understanding of God's names, which enables us to believe in them.¹⁸ New Said wanted all people to understand God, not just the spiritual elite who were in a position to devote their entirety to religious life. For one to know God, they needed a true knowledge of Him, *not* blind faith. Blind faith is not real faith, nor what God wants of us, and Nursi's aim was to move people away from this. Therefore, he expanded on his concepts in the *Risale-i Nur* collection with this purpose in mind. He presented his exegeses in a hybrid form, incorporating traditional and spiritual methodologies, and the use of scientific development to further understand and clarify the meaning of the verses. Additionally, in keeping to his goal of connecting with the common people, he strongly favoured the use of metaphors and parables.¹⁹

As Nursi believed that God made Himself manifest through His Divine names, he argued that humanity is asked to get to know God through those names.²⁰ This is only achieved through continual reflection on the Qur'an and what he called the "Book of the Universe" or "*kitab-ı kebir-i kainat*."

¹³ Nursi divided his life into two parts, with the 'Old Said' (*Eski Said*) existing from 1876 to 1920, and the 'New Said' (*Yeni Said*) lasting from 1920 to 1949. Due to his limited involvement in politics in later life, some biographers have also suggested that 1949 until his death is considered his third period. Zeki Saritoprak, "Bediüzzaman Said Nursi," in *The Islamic World*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Routledge, 2008), 390.

¹⁴ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 37.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁶ Said Nursi, *Letters – 1928-1932*, trans. Sükran Vahide, rev. ed., *Risale-i Nur Collection* (Nur Publishers, 2019), 311.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 312.

¹⁸ Said Nursi, *The Words: On the Nature and Purpose of Man, Life, and Afterlife*, trans. Sükran Vahide, rev. ed., *Risale-i Nur Collection* (Nur Publishers, 2019), 141.

¹⁹ Yucel, "Rereading of the Qur'an," 4, 5, 7.

²⁰ Nasrin Rouzati, "Divine Love as the Reason for Creation in Islam—An Exploration of Nursi's Epistles of Light," *Religions* 11, no. 12 (2020): 5.

THE QUR'AN AND THE “BOOK OF THE UNIVERSE”

Grounding the Qur'an in reality, Nursi interpreted its verses through investigation of the physical world.²¹ His *tafsir* methodology (*şuhudi/shuhudi*) was innovative, as he incorporated transempirical exegesis alongside rationalism.²² He interpreted all creation as a book that God has created, in which He has carefully written every letter and word on every beautiful page. Furthermore, every one of God's names, which are His attributes, are reflected throughout His 'book.' Therefore, every intricate detail of this universe is not only indicative of God's handiwork, but each letter also indicates His love, mercy and compassion for us.²³

This combining of traditions led Nursi to argue that the Qur'an was the only way to understand the true meaning of reality. It was “the pre-eternal translator of the universe, and the post-eternal interpreter of the various tongues reciting the verses of creation.”²⁴ As the eternal translator and interpreter of this great Book of the Universe,²⁵ Nursi found God's names and attributes reflected in the Qur'an. For Nursi, God's names “which are the rays of His beauty,”²⁶ were not only perfectly expressed throughout the entire Qur'an, but also throughout the entire creation. Furthermore, God's name of “All-Loving” reflects the notion that it is His love which energises the world.²⁷

With this in mind, Nursi had a holistic appreciation of our world and everything in it, even down to the atomic level. Everything was indicative of a loving Creator, who only wants the best for us. Thus, Nursi looked to the inherent beauty in everything and everyone, and saw God's beautiful nature reflected. He saw humanity and other creations as intricate pieces of art, and this is a beautiful perspective to hold. Every single minute detail is then considered a direct reflection and physical manifestation of God's beauty and love, and Nursi elaborated on this with his concepts of *mānā-yī ismī* and *mānā-yī harfī*.

THE NOTIONS OF *MĀNĀ-YĪ ISMĪ* AND *MĀNĀ-YĪ HARFĪ* IN NURSIAN THEOLOGY

“Even in the things which appear to be the most ugly, there is an aspect of true beauty.”²⁸

There is an inherent beauty in all of us, not only because we are all inherently beautiful creations, but because we are all creations indicative of an inherently beautiful Creator. In the process of our being, we all display God's eternal Names and reiterate His existence.²⁹ Furthermore, while we all point to God, we also point to ourselves. Therefore, Nursi believed

²¹ Hakan Çoruh, *Modern Interpretation of the Qur'an: The Contribution of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 54.

²² Yucel, “Rereading of the Qur'an,” 1–4.

²³ Nursi, *The Rays*, 167–69.

²⁴ Said Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness: The Inimitability of The Qur'an's Conciseness*, trans. Sükran Vahide, rev. ed., Risale-i Nur Collection (Nur Publishers, 2019), 16.

²⁵ Çoruh, *Modern Interpretation of the Qur'an*, 56.

²⁶ Nursi, *Letters*, 353.

²⁷ Rouzati, “Divine Love as the Reason for Creation in Islam,” 6.

²⁸ Nursi, *The Words*, 243.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 685–86.

that all things in the universe were beautiful. They were beautiful in themselves or regarding their results, thus were considered “essentially beautiful” or “relatively beautiful.”³⁰ This also extended to the events of one’s life, where Nursi believed that everything connects us to God. This view allowed him to interpret calamities and suffering as events that enable us to witness God’s names in action, ultimately altering our negative perceptions of them to positive ones.³¹

In terms of aesthetics, things we consider pleasing are essentially beautiful, thus have been deemed beautiful. Whereas relatively beautiful things, while we may deem them ‘ugly,’ are inherently beautiful because they point to God. Though aesthetic standards are subjective and culturally varied, they often influence (consciously or subconsciously) our actions towards and treatment of others. This extends to animals and even plants. For example, in our efforts to foster a better-looking garden, we may remove thorned plant life. Yet, from a Nursian perspective, we would be destroying great miracles of God’s power.³²

Nursi considered nothing or nobody in this universe to be worthless, because we all are part of God’s book and point to His authorship. Nothing is created in vain, because this book of art is something that God has personally taken effort to create and exists as something that has a purpose.³³ Thus, while we may personally find something ugly, the sheer fact of its existence declares otherwise. To further expand on this, I paraphrase Zuleyha Keskin’s explanation of Nursi’s mirror analogy:

When we look at a mirror, we see two things. The mirror itself, and the reflection. When we see the mirror as it is, reflecting our own image back to us, we understand that as its purpose, and appreciate that fact. Nursi labels this perspective as *mānā-yī īsmī*, which refers to an object’s self-referential nature. The second thing that we see is our own reflection within the mirror. Behind the mirror itself, exists an entire world tucked inside. When we look at it, we do not simply look at the mirror, but we look to what it tells us. This is considered the *mānā-yī harfī* perspective, and can be interpreted as other indicative.³⁴

Observing the universe, and all that God has provided for us in it, leads to praising and thanking God. Believers understand the beauty of the air they breathe, the sights they can see, and the people they not only get to be, but get to live in communion with. Everything is connected, and this analogy reflects Nursi’s unique exegetical method, which held letters and nouns as signifiers expressing universal truths. Thus, as with all things, every line, word, and letter is intimately connected, and they all allude to each other.³⁵

While Nursi’s exegetical approaches are unique, his use and interpretation of *Surah as-Sajdah* 32:7, which reiterates that everything has been perfectly created by God, falls in line

³⁰ Zuleyha Keskin, *Attaining Inner Peace in Islam: Said Nursi’s Perspective* (Springer Singapore Pte Ltd., 2021), 105.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 107, 108.

³² Nursi, *The Words*, 244.

³³ Qur’an 21:16; 23:115.

³⁴ Keskin, *Attaining Inner Peace in Islam*, 107–8, paraphrased.

³⁵ Nursi, *The Rays*, 38.

with varying scholars. One such scholar, whom Nursi's interpretation is most similar to, is Persian mystic Ruzbihan Baqli (d. 1209 CE), who explains that anything that looks ugly or indecent is a test from God to see how we react, because none of God's handiwork is inherently ugly.³⁶ Everything is good because God made it, and so as it is our responsibility to know and thank God; we must look to the beauty in all things, finding God's attributes reflected throughout. Nursi's exegetical method then takes the spiritual realities of the Qur'an to be literal and explores how those realities manifest in the physical world.³⁷

HIERARCHIES OF NATURE

Every thing ever formed, every single person ever born, and every single experience ever felt is because of our Creator. A loving deity has purposefully created each of us, and the passion Nursi felt for all earthlings, human and non-human, stemmed from this core belief. Therefore, when he looked at a person, animal, or insect, he held deep reverence for their being, seeing the craftwork of God reflected within them. For Nursi, there was no differentiation in the value of someone or something simply because they were different to him.³⁸ Whether a 'mirror' was one adorned with jewels and intricate designs, or a simple reflective panel was irrelevant, as it nevertheless existed for a reason and had a telos.

As we are all mirrors that point to God and His Divine plan, Nursi applied this principle to every created thing and treated all forms of life with love and reverence. We are all signs of God's handiwork, and each group of creatures exists as perfect glorifications of God. We are all vastly different from each other; therefore, we exist within separate communities. Yet, those communities are interwoven, and exist within a hierarchy, with human beings seated higher than all other earthlings.

In his views on nature and the animal kingdom, Nursi kept with tradition and regarded humans as superior. This is due to our ability to perceive causes and effects, express countless emotions, and our natural inclination to improve our circumstances.³⁹ In metaphorising the universe, he described it as a great tree, where conscious beings were considered its most perfect fruit. While everything is valuable to God, we are at the top of that tree because we can contemplate Him.⁴⁰ We have the ability to understand how God wishes to make Himself known, and to see the intricate ways in which the beautiful particulars of the universe directly point to His creative penmanship.⁴¹ Essentially, the world behind the mirror (God) can only be appreciated through the mirror, and because of our ability to see this world, we are placed at the top of this hierarchy of nature.

³⁶ Keskin, *Attaining Inner Peace in Islam*, 106.

³⁷ Çoruh, *Modern Interpretation of the Qur'an*, 53.

³⁸ Nursi, *The Rays*, 633.

³⁹ Çoruh, *Modern Interpretation of the Qur'an*, 79.

⁴⁰ Said Nursi, *The Flashes*, trans. Sükran Vahide, rev. ed., Risale-i Nur Collection (Nur Publishers, 2019), 247.

⁴¹ Nursi, *The Words*, 730–32.

In this vein, Nursi believed, if we obsess about the differences not only between communities of people, but non-humans too, those communities are eventually narrowed from wondrous chapters to individual words, and eventually to individual letters that ultimately bear no significance on our understanding of God.⁴² Nursi's understanding of God was that He is real, so all of us need to do everything we can to live out that truth. We all need to turn to God, because the opposite, being atheism, is far worse. Nursi believed this was not only a destroyer of souls, but of the earth and all her creatures. He believed that, when people forget God, and the ways that He is reflected throughout physical reality, they also forget to care about His art. Thus, he saw the rise of materialism and environmental destruction as directly correlated with atheism.

I mention atheism because it is intimately tied to our responsibility as caretakers of the earth, and why Nursi took it on himself to treat non-human life with great kindness. He argued it is because of our God-given position at the top of this hierarchy of nature that we are charged with taking care of the "land and sea."⁴³ While the angels argued in the Qur'an that humanity would cause atrocities with the power that we have been given, God placed us as His viceregents on earth.⁴⁴ Nursi saw this decision as reflective of God's Name *Oft-Forgiving*, because in allowing us to hold a position of authority on earth, despite our numerous rebellions, God has enabled us to retain a sense of eternal hope.⁴⁵ Therefore, it is specifically *because* of his remembrance of God's words in the Qur'an that Nursi's works are so sensitive to animal life. He believed we are all personally responsible for the just treatment of animals. Furthermore, if we fail in this, and spread corruption across the lands and seas that we are responsible for, we will be judged accordingly.⁴⁶

Because everything in the universe reflects God and His attributes, this extends from the largest animals right down to the tiniest ant and microscopic organism.⁴⁷ Nothing is meaningless and nothing in this universe could have come into existence without the hand of God. What was most important to Nursi was getting people to understand this *tawhidic* perspective. Humans had to holistically understand that, as the furthestmost boundaries of this continually expanding universe point to God's unity, the names of God can be seen on all living creatures.⁴⁸ In seeing God's reflection in everything, we understand that Nursi treated all non-human life with a level of care far greater than most animal rights activists, and more so, we understand *why* he viewed and treated animals and insects the way that he did.

⁴² Said Nursi, *al-Mathnawi al-Nuri: Seedbed of The Light*, trans. Hüseyin Akarsu (The Light, Inc., 2007), 352.

⁴³ Qur'an 30:41.

⁴⁴ Qur'an 2:30: When your Lord told the angels, 'I am putting a successor on earth,' they said, 'How can You put someone there who will cause damage and bloodshed, when we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your holiness?'

⁴⁵ Nursi, *The Words*, 453.

⁴⁶ Qur'an 30:41-45.

⁴⁷ Nursi, *The Words*, 453.

⁴⁸ Nursi, *The Rays*, 14.; Muhammad Widus Sempo and Norullisza Khosim, "Said Nursi's Thoughts on Environmental Sustainability in *Risale-i Nur*," *Afkār* Special Issue 2 (2020): 125.

REFLECTING GOD

With the Qur'an guiding him, Nursi read *Surah al-An'am*, and held that all creatures existed within communities that believed in and praised God.⁴⁹ He understood that each individual animal glorifies God, and proclaims a *tawhid*-centric worldview, where God is witnessed in all of creation.⁵⁰ Animals were then not merely material beings, worthy of mistreatment, but were also spiritual beings, and because of this, it was immoral to kill them without legitimate reason.⁵¹ Furthermore, as glorifications of God and works of His art, Nursi extended traditional exegesis and argued that all animals should not be harmed, even ones posing immediate danger to human safety. This view is considered incredibly modern and contradictory as compared to traditional Islamic exegesis, which permits such killings.⁵²

All creatures glorify and worship God through their existence, and in their inherent natures are said to perfectly display His names. As God's Divine names could be seen on all creatures, Nursi understood them to be workers of God. Though he did not believe them to possess intelligence, there is an enjoyment in their work. Thus, he considered their participation in nature, in which they fulfil certain roles, as a choice made from individual desires. They are wilful servants of God, and because they choose to obey His commandments, Nursi believed they even receive a small wage.⁵³

While animals pointed to God in their being, they also pointed to His Divine plan. Nursi would spend hours each day in solemn contemplation of God and believed that "the well-measured proportions of everything clearly showed Divine Determining."⁵⁴ Meaning that an animal or insect's being, or any action it naturally undertakes, is done in accordance with God's plan and to enact it. Alongside showcasing God's Divine Order via their existence, non-human lifeforms also play a vital role in maintaining the balance of natural ecosystems and the food chain.⁵⁵ More than the theological dimension, each creature allows God's plan to operate as intended,⁵⁶ and this additional ecological and functional component contributed to Nursi's high regard of them.

Nursi also considered every part of creation equal in its relation to God and His power, seeing flowers as equal to whole planets, ants equal to elephants and even microbes to be more wonderful than rhinoceroses.⁵⁷ The entire universe and everything in it was part of a carefully designed system, where all aspects were woven into an intricate living tapestry, bound by mutual relationships.⁵⁸

⁴⁹ Qur'an 6:38: All living beings roaming the earth and winged birds soaring in the sky are communities like yourselves.

⁵⁰ Qur'an 57:1; Nursi, *The Rays*, 158; Keskin, *Attaining Inner Peace in Islam*, 105, 107–8.

⁵¹ Salih Yucel, "An Islamic Perspective of the Natural Environment and Animals: Said Nursi and his Renewalist Philosophy," *UMRAN - Journal of Islamic and Civilizational Studies* 5, no. 2 (2018): 56, 64.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵³ Nursi, *The Flashes*, 170; Nursi, *The Words*, 329, 74–76, 677–79.

⁵⁴ Nursi, *The Words*, 496–97.

⁵⁵ Sempo and Khosim, "Said Nursi's Thoughts on Environmental Sustainability," 121.

⁵⁶ Nursi, *The Words*, 496–97.

⁵⁷ Nursi, *The Rays*, 633.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

Though this was a beautiful perspective to hold, it oftentimes deeply saddened Nursi. In considering even the smallest and lowest forms of existence as valuable works of God's art, particularly plants and animals, their "coming and going into non-existence" seemed incredibly wasteful. Yet, what would comfort Nursi in those times was his remembrance of God's Divine unity and his faith in the Qur'an. This reassured him that even though *we* may think that their lives are wasteful, every one of those lives produced a significant result in the eyes of God and were reflections of His many names.⁵⁹

Nursi praised animals in all aspects of their existences. He cared about them so much so that, when he would encounter random hunters in the forest, he would encourage them to not kill deer and rabbits for fun, and would reiterate to them the need to hunt only for survival and sustenance. One such hunter, Abdulkadir Badıllı, whom he encountered by chance, eventually became one of his students. With his love for animals guiding him, Nursi would instruct his students to leave a small portion of slaughtered meat behind for any wild animals who may need it.⁶⁰ This love did not end here and extended to domesticated animals and insects.

DOMESTICATED ANIMALS

Nursi showed far more respect to domesticated animals than those around him and intentionally avoided using negative terms to degrade them. An example of this is the fact that he honoured donkeys with the title of *işlek* (hard worker), instead of their traditional title *eşek*, which was a common insult between people.⁶¹ During one of his exiles, he was travelling with a group who were using cow carriages. It was a cold month of Ramadan, and out of the exiles, Nursi was the only one fasting. However, he cared not simply about himself, but for the cows too, as at one point he noticed that a cow's leg had started to bleed. On seeing the distress that the cow was in, he asked all the travellers to get off the carriage, as 'Mr Cow's' leg had been hurt. This did little to help the poor cow, as Kinyas Kartal, a former member of the Turkish parliament, insisted they keep riding it due to already having paid its owners to use it. Nevertheless, Nursi responded to Kartal by stating that, because God was the sole owner of all animals, they must be treated with dignity and respect.⁶²

Nursi not only praised larger domesticated animals, but also the smaller ones, including hens. In observing them protecting their chicks, he saw God's mercy reflected within their inherent natures and behaviours, and through their sense of courage and self-sacrifice. A mother hen would gladly sacrifice her life for her chicks, disregarding any sense of personal safety, by throwing herself in front of an attacking dog or deciding to attack a lion if need be. Furthermore, a hen will always remain hungry if it means her young will eat.⁶³

⁵⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁶⁰ Ian S. Markham and Zeyneb Sayilgan, eds., *The Companion to Said Nursi Studies* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017), 214.

⁶¹ Yucel, "An Islamic Perspective of the Natural Environment and Animals," 56.

⁶² Markham and Sayilgan, *The Companion to Said Nursi Studies*, 214–15.

⁶³ Nursi, *The Flashes*, 170–71; Nursi, *The Words*, 670.

These loving actions are all carried out by the mother hens because of their inherent pleasure in serving God. Yet, at a certain point in the development of her chicks, their reliance on their mother must cease. In this, not only must the chicks essentially ‘grow up’ fast, but the pleasure that their mother once gained from providing them with this protection and care must also cease. If a mother hen was to continue caring for her growing chicks as though they were still in total need of her, it would not only become burdensome for her, but would also indicate that her children are not yet fully prepared for life on their own in the violent animal kingdom.⁶⁴

By observing these behaviours, Nursi reminds us that we too rely on our Creator for everything. Nursi compares humans against the young chicks, and though we think ourselves to be superior, many of us essentially remain weak children, often relying on our mothers for basic necessities and emotional support well into our adult years. This oftentimes lasts up until the moment she is physically or mentally unable to care for us, reiterating Nursi’s statement that “humans are always children in one respect, and are all the time in need of compassion.”⁶⁵ All creatures rely on God’s compassion, for it is the only reason that we are alive. Nursi understood this and saw the compassion of God reflected in *all* mothers. Mothers do not simply care for their young to please God, but are genuinely sincere, and would sacrifice their eternal happiness for their children. Motherhood seeks no reward or bribes, and mothers’ compassion is as true and pure as God’s.⁶⁶

Nursi’s appreciation of animals also included cats, whom he considered blessed animals that greatly reflect God’s compassion. He admired their incredible hygiene and considered their physical purring as a type of glorification.⁶⁷ At one point, Nursi questioned how cats could be a blessed animal, who praise God and reflect His compassion, when all they do is eat, play and sleep. As physically weaker creatures, they are reliant on our compassion and often serve as our friends. Though this is true, Nursi believed they also constantly cry out for God’s mercy and compassion in their meowing. With *mānā-yī harfī* in mind, he would intently listen to them and believed their cries sounded like a sorrowful and eloquent recitation, and a sincere crying out for God’s help. Nursi believed this is because they inherently realise that God is the one to whom their loyalties lie.⁶⁸

Most domesticated animals strongly rely on their owners to survive. Cats, on the other hand, as any cat owner will tell you, often display an air of nonchalance in their behaviours and attitudes towards humans. They make it known that they do not need us, but that *we need them*. This is because they are loyal not to humans, whom they understand to be only the ‘tray-bearers’ of their food, but they are loyal to God, the ultimate Provider of that food.⁶⁹ Therefore, Nursi recognised that, when cats are stroked, and they meow and purr, they are giving thanks to God. They are thanking God, because through their sorrowful sounds he

⁶⁴ Nursi, *The Flashes*, 171.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 181.

⁶⁷ Yucel, “An Islamic Perspective of the Natural Environment and Animals,” 64.

⁶⁸ Nursi, *The Words*, 352.

⁶⁹ Yucel, “An Islamic Perspective of the Natural Environment and Animals,” 63.

would hear them cry out to God – saying “*Ya Rahim! Ya Rahim!* O Most Compassionate One! O Most Compassionate One!” – reiterating their total reliance on His mercy to survive.⁷⁰ In a world where communication is vital, the ability to express oneself articulately can ultimately affect one’s ability to not only survive, but thrive. Thus, when that sorrowful meowing results in positive behaviours toward them, such as loving attention and stroking, they give thanks to God. In naturally meowing and reciting “O Most Compassionate!” they also remind humans whose help we really need, and from whom it ultimately comes.⁷¹

Additionally, Nursi considered talking negatively about dogs as gossip, which the Qur’an forbids due its corruption of people’s hearts.⁷² One example of this was the time when a stray dog had entered the house of Molla Hamid and eaten the group’s meal, destroying the cooking pot in the process.⁷³ Hamid was enraged, and apart from complaining about the incident, was also planning to find the dog and severely punish it. When Nursi heard this, he reproached him. As it was only in the dog’s nature to search for food, a nature that was instilled by God, Nursi made sure that his students understood that dogs could not differentiate between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ as we humans do. Different moral standards must be applied to animals. Therefore, Nursi told his students that the dog was only doing “what it was supposed to do.” As we then operate within different moral contexts, Nursi reminded his students that, just because we are angry at an animal who knows no better, we must refrain from backbiting against it.⁷⁴

INSECTS

One creature who angers and annoys most of us is the fly. Here we see that the equality in which Nursi held all creatures was far more progressive than the majority of current animal rights activists. While most people focus on saving larger creatures, and rightfully so, they do not even begin to contemplate protecting flies.⁷⁵ Nursi, on the other hand, believed that “the creation of flies was such a miracle, that nobody could dispute that it is a dominical sign.”⁷⁶ Additionally, he considered them to be intelligent and hygienic.

Calling them “miniature birds,” Nursi recalls a time when he was imprisoned at Eskişehir Prison, and us “selfish humans” had begun spraying insecticides to kill the many flies there. Nursi not only pitied them, but he also understood their unique intelligence, as the flies, “in order to thwart the humans,” then began multiplying in great numbers. When they would land and line up on the washing-line in his cell, Nursi would tell his cellmate who was hanging his clothes not to disturb them and to hang his clothes elsewhere. Once again, as with the injured ‘Mr Cow’ situation, his cellmate would ignore this wish, as he saw flies as disease-carriers

⁷⁰ Nursi, *The Rays*, 22; Nursi, *Letters*, 87.

⁷¹ Nursi, *The Words*, 352.

⁷² Hussein Ali Ibrahim and Bakir Mahmood ALaw, “Backbiting, Gossip and Slander in Judaism and Islam – A Comparative Study,” *Surra Man Ra’a* 19, no. 78 (2023): 139.

⁷³ Markham and Sayilgan, *The Companion to Said Nursi Studies*, 214.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 185.

⁷⁵ Yucel, “An Islamic Perspective of the Natural Environment and Animals,” 61.

⁷⁶ Nursi, *The Flashes*, 338.

(as most of us do). Nursi did not and held them to be health workers and chemists, responsible for preventing the spread of contagious diseases and cleaning poisonous substances. He believed they sucked away diseases and would transform them into a different state.

While we may not hold this view, Nursi nevertheless maintained the belief that they were not only hygienic, but were actually making ablution. In this, he understood that his view on them was not the common one, yet he argued that flies were constantly washing their “eyes, faces, and wings.” After a fly landed on his hand, he saw it begin to clean itself, acting as though it was a soldier cleaning its rifle and uniform. It had an inbuilt nature to clean and respect what God has given it, *its body*, which served as a reminder to Nursi of our human duty to purify ourselves.⁷⁷

In holding to Nursi’s perspective, one could then assume that, since flies were constantly completing their ablutions when landing, they must consequently be continuously praying and glorifying God after they have finished these ablutions and have flown away. Thus, when Nursi looked to the behaviours and lives of flies, they reflected and reiterated the Qur’an, which tells humans that they are blessed by God for completing their ablutions.⁷⁸ Moreover, Nursi came to the conclusion that they are highly valuable, because of the fact they are extremely numerous, a statement that reiterates his belief that “valuable and beneficial things are multiplied.”⁷⁹

Not limited to flies, Nursi also appreciated bees. He believed that humans should be friendly towards them, as they not only provide us with such beautiful honey, but are imbued with incredible inborn faculties.⁸⁰ Bees have one of the most important tasks on earth: to pollinate plants. Though not solely responsible for this task, they are the earth’s main pollinators of agricultural crops, thus the most important.⁸¹ Once again using the Qur’an as a guide for interpreting the universe, the fact that the entire 16th chapter, *Surah an-Nahl*, is named after the bee strongly indicates their importance to God. They not only display His power in their functions and fulfilment of their vital task, but reiterate the careful planning that has been undertaken by Him in the process of their creation.

Bees not only contain within them a programming that allows every one of them around the globe to simultaneously “with the same wisdom, care and symmetry, at the same time and in the same fashion” complete their most important task, but they do this with the utmost care. While they are small and delicate creatures, such that an accidental footstep easily crushes them, Nursi reiterated that they have an inherent defence system: their stinger and its poison. This defence system, alongside the “purposiveness, perfect orderliness and

⁷⁷ Ibid., 338, 340; Qur’an 5:6.

⁷⁸ Qur’an 5:6-7.

⁷⁹ Nursi, *The Flashes*, 337–40.

⁸⁰ Yucel, “An Islamic Perspective of the Natural Environment and Animals,” 63; Nursi, *The Rays*, 633.

⁸¹ Rachael Winfree, “The Conservation and Restoration of Wild Bees,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1195, no. 1 (2010): 169.

equilibrium” in which bees operate, reiterates that an unconscious accident could never be the cause of this. Consequently, Nursi held this as further “self-evident proof of God’s unity.”⁸²

Nursi’s respect for insects was not limited to flies and bees, as he also loved ants. He famously praised their social natures and republicanism after seeing them working together, and similar to flies, saw them as health officials and sanitation workers, who were charged with constantly cleaning the land, taking apart, and consuming the rotting bodies of other creatures.⁸³ He would make sure that his students did not build on any of their nests, and believed, if we were to consider the entire earth as a non-living entity, which he did not, a single ant would be worth far more.⁸⁴ While the great value that Nursi placed on ants may seem absurd to many of us, who deem them worthless simply because of their tiny size and oftentimes annoying behaviours, his views aligned with *mānā-yī harfī* and the Sunnah.

In traditional Islamic exegesis, it is permissible to kill insects who may cause harm to humans and serve “no apparent benefit” to humanity. This is not the case with ants though, as Prophet Muhammad specifically forbade killing them (and bees).⁸⁵ Alongside this, in *Sunan Ibn Majah*, we see the story of an earlier unnamed Prophet, who after he was bitten by a singular ant, ordered its entire colony to be burnt. God is then said to have revealed to him that ants are a part of “a nation who glorifies God” and should not be killed aimlessly.⁸⁶ All ants are then considered part of a community that wilfully submits to God, and are, by Islamic definition, Muslims.⁸⁷ In this respect, they must be treated as true reflections of God’s Divine craftsmanship which glorify Him,⁸⁸ and held as a community worthy of life.

With his love of God guiding him in reading the Book of the Universe, it is important to mention that Nursi cared for ants oftentimes as much as he cared for himself. After being constantly harassed by his opponents, he was living alone, secluded in a tomb in the town of Tillo, in Siirt province. He needed all the sustenance that he could to survive. Despite this, when his younger brother Mehmed would bring him soup with a small piece of bread, he would carefully dip the bread in, eat it, and make sure that he fed his remaining crumbs to any ants around him.⁸⁹

In one final example before the conclusion, we look to the time when Nursi requested that his students build a small woodhouse in the mountains. On discovering that they were about

⁸² Nursi, *The Rays*, 177–78.

⁸³ This aligns with ants’ necrophoric behaviours, which has seen them demonstrating memory-based consistency in their disposal of dead nestmates. See Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 17; Nursi, *The Rays*, 304; Lise Diez et al., “Orientation in Corpse-Carrying Ants: Memory or Chemical Cues?,” *Animal Behaviour* 81, no. 6 (2011): 1172.

⁸⁴ Nursi, *The Words*, 757; Yucel, “An Islamic Perspective of the Natural Environment and Animals,” 66.

⁸⁵ Muhammd Bin Yazeed ibn Maja Al-Qazwini, *Sunan Ibn Majah*, trans. Nasiruddin al-Khattab, ed. Huda Khattab, vol. 4 (Darussalam, 2007), 305. It is interesting to note the connection between ants’ and bees’ necrophoric behaviours and Prophet Muhammad’s command not to kill them. See Diez et al., “Orientation in Corpse-Carrying Ants,” 1171.

⁸⁶ Ibn Maja Al-Qazwini, *Sunan Ibn Majah*, 4, 305–6.

⁸⁷ I refer to ants as ‘Muslims,’ meaning those (communities, in this case) who submit to God, rather than meaning humans practicing the religion of Islam.

⁸⁸ Qur’an 17:44; 6:38.

⁸⁹ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 17; Nursi, *The Rays*, 304, 85–86.

to build over and destroy multiple anthills in the process, he immediately ordered them to cease construction. Nursi would not allow for “one house to be built, whilst another was destroyed.” Thus, instead of building a new home for him and his students, he purposefully took great care not to disturb those ants and their homes that day. Furthermore, he made sure to leave them sugar, breadcrumbs, and bulgur wheat,⁹⁰ which served as a form of compensation for the physical and emotional distress that his students had inadvertently caused them.

CONCLUSION

As the Most-Compassionate, God is not only a spiritual reality, but is a reality that is made manifest within the physical world. Therefore, Nursi understood it is only through this physical world that we could holistically increase our knowledge of God and His nature. As a devout Muslim who was persecuted for his faith and unique worldview, Nursi never lost that faith. He used the Qur’an to teach him about God’s Book of the Universe, of which we are all a part. The world may seem meaningless to some, but for Nursi, every single dot of ink in God’s book had meaning. That meaning is to reflect God’s Divine names, which are His attributes, and to glorify Him. We need not fear an empty eternity, because in looking to the Qur’an and the Book of the Universe, a Most-Loving God has provided all the evidence that humanity needs. It is only by looking to the *mānā-yī harfī* aspect of creation, that we can see and know God. This is the point that Nursi was trying to make. He wanted people to understand the artist, and not simply the art.

When we understand the artist, we are reassured by their art. We have faith in them and that what they create has meaning. We have faith that they have put love and care into their art. When we see that they are a loving artist, we understand that the individual pieces that they make are unique creations. Yet, we also see those pieces intimately connected to the personality and nature of the artist. This makes us understand the similarities and differences between each piece, and enables us to see that artist’s signature throughout all of them. We are often taken aback, and we then wish to know more about who this artist is. Nursi knew God to be the sole artist of this great book. Because of this, he knew that when we see the universe as God’s beautiful book of art, we realise that we are the art. This is how Nursi saw everything, and how he wanted everybody else to.

We needed to understand this before reaching his treatment of non-humans. Only then could we understand that his love for them reflected his love of God. Not only humans are the art, but everything. Therefore, while many of his efforts to preserve the lives of innocent creatures may seem pointless, and many times still saw the creatures harmed, Nursi understood himself to be serving God, in his attempts to save them and to mirror God’s Divine attribute of “Most-Compassionate.”⁹¹

⁹⁰ Markham and Sayilgan, *The Companion to Said Nursi Studies*, 214.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 215.

No matter their size, colour or shape, Nursi believed that nobody had the right to mistreat anything or anybody. His worldview towards animals was highly spiritual and directly contradicted the juristic rule permitting the killing of harmful animals. Many people fail in practicing what they preach, yet Nursi was not such a man. Just because he saw humanity at the top of nature's hierarchy, that did not allow him to mistreat non-humans. Rather, because God has placed us at the top of this hierarchy, Nursi felt a deep responsibility to respect and honour that position.

Whether one is a Muslim or not, Said Nursi's perspective is beautiful to appreciate. In a world where people care less and less about other earthlings, seeing meaning in every lifeform's inherent being will certainly pave a way forward for a better future. A future where we treat all beings with dignity and respect is far more compassionate and loving, and for Nursi, this would be a future that totally reflected God and what He wants for us. As caretakers of the earth, it is our responsibility to keep God in mind at all times. Therefore, in looking to God's Book of the Universe and finding His reflection and artistry throughout, this is how Nursi believed we must achieve a 'true' and not 'blind' faith. A true faith that provides us eternal comfort and lets us know there is a Creator who loves every one of us.

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