Said Nursi's Views on Muslim-Christian Understanding

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Eight Papers by Thomas Michel S.J.
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NURSI’S VIEW OF TOLERANCE, ENGAGEMENT WITH THE OTHER AND THE FUTURE OF DIALOGUE

1. A methodological problem

The topic assigned to me is that of Said Nursi’s view of tolerance, engagement with the other, and the future of dialogue. There is no doubt that Nursi had much to say on these points, which are of great relevance to our world today, but first I must begin by stating a methodological problem. Terms come into vogue at certain times in history and gradually take on accepted meanings which, as the exchange of views continues to progress, undergo their own evolution and take on greater clarity and precision.

Although a term comes into popular or academic usage at a certain given historical period, this does not mean that the concept itself is new. The idea may have been discussed in previous ages, but other terms were used to describe it. The above-mentioned terms of tolerance, engagement with the other, and future of dialogue are good examples of this. In the years when Said Nursi was writing the Risale-i Nur, terms such as the other, and future of dialogue were not part of everyday speech. Since Said Nursi was writing his immense commentary on the Qur’an not as an academic exercise but as a practical guide for ordinary believing Muslims who were seeking to live their Islamic faith in the context of rapidly modernizing societies, it is not surprising that unfamiliar terms such as dialogue and the other appear but rarely in the Risale-i Nur. Hence, our task is to discover Nursi’s views and advice on what today we call tolerance and dialogue, although Said Nursi may have couched his ideas in the popularly accepted terminology of the day.

2. God’s dialogue with humankind according to the Risale-i Nur

On the few occasions when Nursi speaks explicitly of dialogue, he is first of all thinking of the way that God communicates His message to humankind. Dialogue is seen as an aspect or style of God’s revelation and finds its most perfect expression in the Qur’an. When God reveals His word through the prophets, God is engaging humans in a process of discovery whereby they learn what they would not otherwise know and, in revealing His word to humans, God elicits a response on part of the person who studies the Qur’an. This dialogical nature of the Qur’an is, for Nursi, an sign of the miraculous nature of the Qur’an.

The value, superiority, and eloquence of a speech or word is apparent through knowing, from whom it has come and to whom, and for what purpose. The Qur’an then can have no like, and none can reach it. For the Qur’an is the speech and address of the Sustainer of all the worlds and Creator of the whole universe and a dialogue in no way hinting of imitation and artificiality.1

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Thus, the concept of dialogue is primarily meant to form and shape the approach of Muslims to the Sacred Book. The Qur’an is not a dry, ancient text to be preserved and honored, nor is it a list of regulations to be blindly followed, but rather a living conversation with the sovereign Creator who teaches people what they did not know about the works of his own creation. As Nursi says:

The Qur’an is a dialogue with no imitation... It describes and explains the matters concerning happiness in this world and the next, the results of the creation of the universe, and the sovereign purposes within it. It expounds also the belief of the one it addresses, which was the highest and most extensive of belief and bore all the truths of Islam. It turns and shows every side of the huge universe like a map, a clock, or a house, and teaches and describes it in the manner of the craftsman who made them.²

The idea of God in ongoing dialogue with humankind is not limited to the nature of the Qur’an as revealed Scripture. For Nursi, dialogue is a constant aspect of God’s creative activity, an idea he expresses in a beautiful passage written near the end of his life. In reflections inspired by his old age and the nearness of death,³ he turns to the Light Verse in the Qur’an (24: 35) for guidance, and then catalogues the wonders of creation, which he sees as signs or manifestations of the loving and compassionate nature of God. He sees God as a skilled architect who designs a palatial structure to reflect his own admirable qualities and aesthetic sense.

One who sees the exhibition of wonders and beauties of the magnificent palace of this world, that is, the universe, will realize that the palace is a mirror, decorated the way it is in order to show the beauties and perfections of another. Since there is nothing similar to the palace of the world from which its beauties could have been imitated and copied, certainly its Maker possesses the necessary beauties in himself and in his Names. It is from these that the universe is derived and according to them that it was made.⁴

The skill which the Divine architect employs to beautify the palace of the natural universe is surpassed only by what He has bestowed on His creatures who are able to possess a conscious awareness of the Creator. God has blessed human beings, men and women, with an ability to know God and has invited humans to respond freely to God’s gifts. He has called people to relate to God as His friends and to establish a dialogue with the Creator. It is friendship and dialogue with God which should thus characterize the human religious experience. God speaks and teaches, but also listens and responds to prayers.

In order to please conscious creatures [humankind] and make them happy and friends of Himself, He has bestowed every sort of delightful bounty from unexpected places in a way it is impossible to attribute to chance. Also to be observed are His generous treatment, his establishing a relationship of mutual acquaintance and friendly dialogue with a readiness to speak and a compassionate response to supplication which make [God’s] profound compassion and elevated mercy able to be perceived.⁵

³ Pope Paul VI on the dialogue of salvation

³ The Rays, p. 83.
⁴ The Rays, p. 88.
⁵ The Rays, p. 89.
As a Christian, I would like to pause for a moment and reflect on Nursi=s understanding of creation as a dialogue of God with humankind, in the light of my Christian faith as enunciated by the late Pope Paul VI. Writing in 1964, only four years after the death of Said Nursi, hence less than a decade after Bediuzzaman wrote the above words, Pope Paul VI, in his encyclical Ecclesiam Suam, elaborated on the idea of human history as a dialogue of salvation initiated by God with men and women. Many of the phrases used by the Pope show the correspondence of thought between these two men.

The noble origin of this dialogue is in the mind of God Himself. Religion of its very nature is a certain relationship between God and man. It finds its expression in prayer; and prayer is a dialogue. Revelation, too, that supernatural link which God has established with man, can likewise be looked upon as a dialogue... God tells us how He wishes to be known: as Love pure and simple; and how He wishes to be honored and served: His supreme commandment is love. Both child and mystic are called to take part in this unfailing, trustful dialogue, and the mystic finds there the fullest scope for his spiritual powers.\(^6\)

God Himself took the initiative in the dialogue of salvation. \(^7\) God has first loved us. We, therefore, must be the first to ask for a dialogue with men, without waiting to be summoned to it by others.\(^7\) Our dialogue should be as universal as we can make it,... relevant to everyone, excluding only those who utterly reject it or only pretend to be willing to accept it.\(^8\) Our dialogue must take cognizance of the slowness of human and historical development and wait for the hour when God may make it effective. We should not on that account postpone until tomorrow what we can accomplish today. We should be eager for the opportune moment and sense the preciousness of time.\(^9\)

**4. Dialogue in Nursi=s life and thought**

Paul VI=s view that, since God has invited humans to enter into a dialogue of salvation, religious believers must be the first to seek dialogue with others, \(^6\) without waiting to be summoned to it by others,\(^7\) would provide a good description both of Said Nursi=s life as well as the thought of the Risale-i Nur. Although by nature attracted to solitude and silent reflection, Nursi=s life shows him in constant dialogue with Muslim scholars of various points of view, with secular authorities and ideologues, with ordinary people who posed questions to him on countless topics, even with his jailers, magistrates and others who oppressed him. Particularly toward the end of his life, he took the initiative to seek dialogue with committed Christians and Jews.

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\(^6\)Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, Vatican City, 1964, par. 70.  
\(^7\)Ibid., par. 72.  
\(^8\)Ibid., par. 76.  
\(^9\)Ibid., par. 77.
A glance at Said Nursi’s biography gives evidence of a life characterized by repeated dialogue. His early education grew out of a fascination with intellectual interchange. Whenever the opportunity arose, and especially in the long winter evenings, Said would go and listen to any discussions being held by students and teachers of the medreses, that is, the religious schools, or by religious figures. These discussions, often about the famous scholars, saints, and spiritual leaders of the past, usually took the form of contest and debate\(^\text{10}\) (p. 4). His discussions were not limited to religious topics, but included philosophy and the natural sciences. On one occasion a debate with a teacher led him to memorize a geography book, and on a second occasion, he is said to have mastered the principles of inorganic chemistry in five days (p. 24).

It was, however, questions of religion that most stimulated his desire for dialogue with men of differing points of view, first at the Van residence of the Governor, Tahir Pasha (p. 28), later at the Fatih medrese (p. 40), then with schoolteachers on the train to Skopje (p. 107), and much later with court officials in Afyon (p. 285). As Mardin points out, Said Nursi’s dissatisfaction with the medrese system, with its emphasis on rote memorization and its discouragement of intellectual speculation, led him to develop his thought in ongoing interaction and disputation with a wide variety of religious and political viewpoints.\(^\text{11}\)

As much as his life gives evidence of an approach to knowledge based on the give-and-take of intellectual interchange, it is the thoughts on dialogue enunciated in the Risale-i Nur that are of primary interest today. For Nursi, dialogue is to be a typical mark that characterizes Islamic society. For Muslims who are convinced of the revealed message received from the Creator, all elements of social intercourse are to be employed in the pursuit of truth. This was the case already in the earliest period of Islamic history. He states:

At the time of the first generations of Islam and in the marketplace of that age, deducing from the Word of the Creator His wishes and what He wants of us were the most sought-after goods, the way to gain through the light of prophethood and the Qur’an eternal happiness in the world of the hereafter...At that time, since people’s minds, hearts and spirits were directed with all their strength towards understanding the wishes of the Sustainer of the Heavens and the Earth, the discussions, conversations, events, and circumstances of social life all looked to that. Since they occurred in accordance with those wishes, in a person of high ability, his heart and nature unconsciously received instruction in knowledge of God from everything. He received knowledge from the circumstances, events, and discussions which took place at that time. As though everything became a teacher for such a person, and inculcated in his nature and disposition the preparatory knowledge for independent judgments.\(^\text{12}\)

Nursi laments, however, that in modern times, this kind of dialogue, while no less necessary, has become a greater challenge. Modern people are too often cut off from the life of the spirit and their attentions scattered in many directions. Interreligious dialogue presumes that all those involved are serious in their desire to understand the will and commands of the Creator, yet modern people are frequently alienated from the Source of true knowledge.

\(^{10}\)Said Nursi, Bediüzzaman Said Nursi: the Author of the Risale-i Nur, translated from Turkish by Ükran Vahide, p. 4.

\(^{11}\) Serif Mardin, Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: the Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, SUNY, 1989, pp. 68-69.

At this time, due to the domination of European civilization and the supremacy of natural philosophy and the preponderance of the conditions of worldly life, minds and hearts have become scattered, and endeavour and favour divided. Minds have become strangers to non-material matters.\textsuperscript{13}

The concerns of dialogue in the form of good communication determine Nursi=s approach to theological discourse. He is impatient and critical with those whose goal in discussion is simply to impress others with their cleverness and erudition or to claim for themselves positions of pre-eminence.\textsuperscript{14} Sincere dialogue should follow the pattern of divine revelation, which takes into account the knowledge, background and presuppositions of the hearer. God knows and regulates the thoughts of the heart, and through an exposition of this sort, transforms that simple and unlettered level of discussion which takes into account the minds of ordinary people into an elevated, attractive, and general conversation for the purpose of guidance.\textsuperscript{15} Thus, in elaborating the ideas of the \textit{Risale-i Nur}, Nursi adopts a \textit{a}simple and common language in a straightforward style,\textsuperscript{16} rather than an erudition aimed at impressing the reader.

This concern to adapt one=s discourse to the needs of one=s partner in dialogue Nursi sees as the model followed in Muhammad=s preaching as reported in the Qur\textit{a}n.

As for the Medinan Suras and verses, since the first line of those they were addressing, those who opposed them, were the People of the Book, such as the Jews and Christians who affirmed God=s existence, what was required by eloquence and guidance and for the discussion to correspond to the situation, was not explanation of the high principles of religion and pillars of belief in a simple, clear, and detailed style, but the explanation of particular matters of the \textit{shari\text{\textasciitilde}a} and its injunctions, which were the cause of dispute, and the origins and causes of secondary matters and general laws. Thus, in the Medinan Suras and verses, through explanations in a detailed, clear, simple style, in the matchless manner of exposition peculiar to the Qur\textit{a}n, it mostly mentions within those particular secondary matters, a powerful and elevated summary; a conclusion and proof, a sentence relating to Divine unity, belief, or the hereafter which makes the particular matter of the \textit{shari\text{\textasciitilde}a} universal and ensures that it conforms to belief in God.\textsuperscript{17}

Nursi has something important to say on the limits of dialogue. In dialogue, one cannot prove matters of faith to one who does not believe. One can strive to explain clearly what faith teaches and to show how that faith is a blessing from God, but it is not possible to demonstrate aspects of religious teaching to one who does not profess any religious faith. Speaking in the context of the Night Journey and Ascension of Muhammad, Said Nursi has this to say:

\textsuperscript{13}The Words, p. 496.
\textsuperscript{14}The Words, Twenty-seventh Word, Addendum, p. 511.
\textsuperscript{15}The Rays, The Fruits of Belief, p. 268; cf. also The Words, A Flower of Emirda\text{\textasciitilde}, p. 470.
\textsuperscript{16}The Words, Tenth Word, p. 59.
\textsuperscript{17}The Words, A Flower of Emirda\text{\textasciitilde}, p. 469.
The Ascension is a question that results from the essentials and pillars of belief and follows upon them...The Ascension cannot be proved independently to irreligious atheists who do not accept the pillars of belief, because it cannot be discussed with those who neither know God, nor recognize the Prophet, nor accept the angels, and who deny the existence of the heavens. Firstly those pillars must be proved. Since this is the case, we shall address the discussion to a believer who, since he considers it unlikely, has misgivings about the Ascension...However, from time to time we shall take into account the atheist who is the position of listener and shall set forth the matter to him.\footnote{The Words, p. 583.}

Said Nursi mentions a second important limit to dialogue. One must not dispute about questions of belief. Since religious faith comes from God, the elements of faith held by each believer are holy. They are matters that touch directly upon the believer’s relationship with God and, as such, should not be submitted to the same kind of disputation that is common in political or economic affairs. It is permissible to discuss questions of faith with the proper respect and reverence, but people should not get into arguments about them as they would over worldly matters.

At one point, some disciples asked Said Nursi questions in an argumentative fashion and tried to draw him into a dispute. Nursi refused to get involved in the dispute, but some days later, when tempers died down, he prepared a thoughtful response to the questions submitted to him and advised his hearers to consider his views, not as they would read a newspaper article, but as the sharing of one believer to another.

You asked me a question that night and I did not reply, for it is not permissible to argue over questions of belief. Your discussion of them was in the form of a dispute. Now I am writing very brief replies to your three questions which were the basis of your dispute. You will find the details in The Words...It did not occur to me to mention the Twenty-Sixth Word, about divine determining and man’s faculty of will. Look at that too, but do not read it like a newspaper.\footnote{The Letters, Twelfth Letter, p. 61.}

5. Dialogue between Muslims and Christians

At the Fourth International Symposium on Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, held in Istanbul in September, 1988, I gave a paper entitled \textit{A Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Cooperation in the Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi\textsuperscript{20}}, which treated this topic. I will not repeat what I said in that paper, but would like to note several points which I believe to be relevant to the need for interreligious dialogue in the world situation at the present time.

Very early on in his career, Nursi stressed the need to distinguish, on the one hand, between sincere, believing Christians and, on the other, Western civilization, which Nursi saw as \textit{A Christian\textsuperscript{21}} in name, but non-religious and materialist in reality. Time and again in the \textit{Risale-i Nur}, Nursi affirmed that the enemy of the Muslims was not all Christians; rather, true

Muslims and true Christians must see one another as allies in confronting the true danger to human society, that is, the refusal to believe in God and to respond to God in faith. If Muslims and Christians are together to work to uphold the principles of faith in the modern world, they must move beyond ancient polemical debates and inimical attitudes toward each other and put aside, least for the time being, discussion of issues that divide the followers of the two religions. Nursi emphasizes that this is not simply his own opinion, but part of the Islamic heritage rooted in the sound hadiths from the Prophet. He states:

It is recorded in authentic traditions of the Prophet that at the end of time, the truly pious among the Christians will unite with the People of the Qur’an and fight their common foe, irreligion. At this time, too, the people of religion and truth need to unite sincerely not only with their own brothers and fellow believers, but also with the truly pious and spiritual Christians, [and refrain] temporarily from the discussion and debate of points of difference, in order to combat their common enemy - aggressive atheism.21

It is interesting that this passage was added by Nursi as a footnote to his Nine Rules for acting with sincerity. Because of the relevance of these rules for understanding Nursi’s view of dialogue, I include them here:

1. To act positively out of love for one’s own outlook, but avoiding enmity for other views, not criticizing them, not interfering in their beliefs and sciences or in any way meddling in their affairs.
2. To make unity within the fold of Islam, irrespective of particular outlook, remembering those numerous ties of unity that evoke love, brotherhood and concord.
3. To adopt the just rule of conduct: the follower of any right outlook has the right to say, AMy view is correct, or the best, but not that AMy view alone is true, or that AMy view alone is good, thus implying the falsity or repugnance of all other views.
4. To consider that union with the people of truth is a cause of Divine favor and the high dignity of religion, [i.e., God will bless those who work for unity].
5. To realize that through the union of the people of truth, the attacks of the followers of misguidance and falsehood will inevitably be defeated, [i.e., truth will win out in the end].
6. To preserve truth from the assaults of falsehood, [i.e., the jihad of the word or the pen].
7. To abandon the self and egoism,
8. To give up the mistaken concept of self-pride,
9. And to get rid of all petty feelings of rivalry.22

In these nine rules, Nursi is primarily concerned with showing how through the practice of sincerity, the unity of the Islamic umma can be built up and preserved. Differing points of view need not cause division, factions, and enmity within the community. If each Muslim is willing to admit that others also have part of the truth, even when they disagree with one’s personal view, unity can be maintained despite differences of opinion. One might say that Nursi’s understanding of a positive tolerance towards others and differing views is summed up in these nine rules of sincerity.

21 The Flashes, The Twentieth Flash, AOn Sincerity, p. 203.
22 Ibid.
By adding the above-mentioned hadith at the end of the nine rules, he notes that these principles indicate not only the way that Muslims should relate to one another but also imply how Muslims should act towards sincere and pious Christians - and, I might add, point out the way that Christians should act towards sincere and pious Muslims.

One point needs to be clarified, that is, Said Nursi=s view of aggressive unbelief as the most dangerous enemy of modern man. Nursi is not trying to turn back the clock, to return to some traditional way of life based on a nostalgia for the past. He recognized that there is much good in modern civilization, whose origins he locates in the prophetic tradition which has influenced the development of society.

However, there is also a negative current in modern life that, if followed, will alienate modern people from their roots in the teachings of the prophets, will alienate them, in fact, from their own true nature. This negative tendency can be called a radical secularism that either denies God directly or, more often, simply ignores God=s prophetic message and pushes religion to the margins of social life. Against this destructive ideology, which can reduce modern people to becoming pleasure-seeking consumers, pious, believing Muslims and Christians must together struggle against.

I would like to draw a final point out of Nursi=s view of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in modern pluralist societies. Dialogue must characterize the way that religious groups live together in every place, and it makes no difference who is governing and who is governed. Said Nursi is not in favor of religiously segregated societies, but advocates societies in which each individual and religious community has an inalienable right to their proper freedom. This right is one which must be respected by governments and is limited only by people=s willingness to abide by and contribute to societal harmony. He adds that those who study the Risale-i Nur are restrained thereby from causing trouble and dissension in society. There were Muslims under Zoroastrian rule and Jews and Christians under the Islamic government of the Caliph >Umar. All those who do not cause trouble to the government or disturb public order have personal freedom, and this may not be curtailed. Governments look to the hand and not to the heart. Without doubt, no one can attack me and my brothers [students of the Risale-i Nur] on grounds of governmental wisdom, the laws of politics, and principles of justice. If they do, it is due to misunderstanding or out of hatred or obduracy.

6. Conclusion: The true meaning of tolerance

It should be obvious from the above that what Nursi is advocating is tolerance in human relations, not only towards students of the Risale-i Nur and other Muslims, but towards Christians and other believers whose outlook is different. Tolerance is an ambiguous term, and because of this ambiguity, some prefer to avoid it. Tolerance can mean putting up with someone even though one would wish to be rid of them. This kind of tolerance, of gritting one=s teeth and suppressing one=s anger, is no virtue.

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23 The Flashes, The Seventeenth Flash, Fifth Note, p. 160.
This is not what Nursi means by tolerance. He sees tolerance as a loving acceptance of the other despite that person’s failings and differences. In this sense, tolerance means letting the other be himself and not trying to make him like one’s own self. It means recognizing that it is in the nature of persons to err and fail and that we should not judge other’s failures more harshly that the merciful and compassionate God would do. In the *Risale-i Nur*, Nursi frequently asks his brothers to look fairly and with tolerance at any of his faults, mistakes, or shortcomings. He asks them to correct him when they are able and to pray for his forgiveness. He is not asking them merely to put up with him, but to accept him as a brother who, like them, is not perfect. This kind of tolerance which Nursi taught is much needed in our world today.

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25 The Words, Twenty-fifth Word, p. 375;  
26 The Words, Thirty-Third Word, p. 723.
It is an honor to be invited here to present a paper at the International Symposium, “A Contemporary Approach to Understanding the Qur’an: the Example of Risale-i Nur.” I must admit from the start that I am not an expert on the thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, and that I understand my presence at the symposium more as a “learner” than as a “scholar” on the subject. I look forward during these days to deepening my own understanding of the Qur’an as approached and interpreted by a great modern Muslim thinker, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi.

As a Christian believer reading the voluminous writings of Said Nursi, I find many attitudes and viewpoints expressed with which I immediately resonate. I have discovered in the writings of this committed Muslim thinker so many points of contact with my own faith in the One and Only God, as well as so many areas where I find myself wishing that I had known Said Nursi in person, so that I could have asked him questions and profited from his responses.

My task in this brief presentation is not to survey the broad outlines of the thought of Said Nursi nor to list the many areas where he offered new and valuable insights, but to look precisely at one topic, that of “Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Cooperation in the Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi.” Over the years, and even at moments of great tension between Christians and Muslims, such as during the First World War and the following years, Said Nursi was a seminal thinker on the question of Muslim-Christian dialogue. His insights are valid for our own reflection, and many of his insights on the subject are only now bearing abundant fruit within the Muslim and, I hope, Christian communities of believers.

Muslims and Christians united in a critique of civilizations

One of the main tasks of every community of believers in God is to face the challenges of the age. Every period in history provides its own unique set of challenges, because people of every historical era and each cultural setting continually succumb to the temptation to replace the values of God’s will with those of their own desires. The Christian faith has been marked by Jesus’ confrontation with the evils of his age: the collusion of power and religious leadership, a legalistic mentality that gave greater weight to human legal opinions than to the values of compassion and love, an exclusivist religiosity that provided special privileges to some groups while marginalizing the poor, the outsider, the female, and the individual unversed in religious subtleties. Similarly, Islam carries on the tradition of the struggle of Muhammad against the values of unbelief in the Arabia of his time: the arrogance of those who had no use for God and no belief in eternal life, the idolatrous worship of the traditional cult of jahiliyya times, the oppression wrought by powerful persons against slaves, women, orphans, the outcast, the wayfarer.

Our present age has produced its own challenges to sincere believers in God who seek to do God’s will in all things. These can be summed up in what is usually called “modern civilization.” It is a civilization which is not all evil, and has brought many benefits to
humanity. Not all of its spiritual values are opposed to God’s will, but it affirms and supports many good human qualities. However, modern civilization can include a way of thinking in which people no longer feel a need for God. Not only can people claim to feel no need to worship, thank, and seek help from God, but often they do not look to God’s Word for guidance and instruction concerning the way to lead their lives. They may choose to follow their own self-conceived philosophies and ideologies.

For those who desire to lead their lives in every respect according to God’s will, a critique of modern civilization is an inescapable task. Said Nursi was one of the pioneer thinkers in our century to recognize that this task of formulating a critical approach to the values of modernity is one that should be carried out together by Muslims and Christians. In 1946, shortly after the end of the Second World War, he stated: “Believers should now unite, not only with their Muslim fellow-believers, but with truly religious and pious Christians, disregarding questions of dispute and not arguing over them, for absolute disbelief is on the attack.”

For Said Nursi, the enemy of human happiness and ethical uprightness is unbelief, irreligion. It is people deciding to find their own path through life, not seeking Divine Guidance, not caring about God’s will or wise design for humankind, not wishing to give up their own pet desires and ideas to submit to God’s teaching about human nature and destiny. In seeking to affirm a Divinely-guided way of life in the modern age, Muslims find their natural allies in those Christians who are committed to following the teachings of Jesus and seek to live according to the truth. Facing a common enemy, that of “aggressive atheism,” Muslims should unite, according to Said Nursi, “not only with their own fellow-believers, but also with the truly pious Christians.”

If such a common effort is to be possible, Christians and Muslims will have to refrain, at least for the some time, from disputes between these two families of believers. In saying this, Said Nursi is not implying that there are no differences between Muslims and Christians or that those differences which exist are not important. There are real and important differences between Christian and Islamic faith. His point, with which I agree, is that concentrating obsessively on these differences can blind both Muslims and Christians to the even more important common task which they share, that of offering the modern world a vision of human life and society in which God is central and God’s will is the norm of moral values.

It must not be thought that Said Nursi is some kind of anti-modern traditionalist who seeks to turn back the clock. He recognizes that “there are numerous virtues in [modern] civilization.” These positive values were not solely the products of Europe, but are the property of all and arise from “the combined thought of humankind, the laws of the revealed religions, innate need, and in particular from the Islamic revolution brought about by the shari’a of Muhammad.” With such positive values of modern civilization, religious people have no quarrel. Rather, they accept and rejoice in the benefits this civilization brings to humankind.

His nuanced evaluation of modernity is paralleled by a subtle evaluation of the role of Europe as the main exponent of modern civilization (and, of course, America as its most active disseminator.) He is no doctrinaire hater of Europe, but recognizes that its contributions to modern life are ambiguous and require careful discernment. On the one hand, Europe has brought much good to many people but, on the other, it has caused much damage.
to human life. He considers that various currents of thought in Western history have enabled negative qualities of modern civilization to emerge and sometimes even predominate over the good. Basically, these developments were two. Firstly, Western civilization, according to Said Nursi, became distant and estranged from true Christianity and based its personal and societal views on the principles of an anthropocentric Greco-Roman philosophy which exalted the human person to the center of the universe and pushed God to its margins. Secondly, Western civilization in its unchecked market policies, was based on “appalling inequality in the means of livelihood.”

The result, from the point of view of those who believe in God, is a Europe which presents a double face - a “good” Europe and a “bad” Europe. As he said already in 1933-1934,

“Europe is two. One follows the sciences which serve justice and right and activities beneficial for the life of society through the inspiration it has received from true Christianity. This first Europe I am not addressing. Rather, I am addressing the second, corrupt Europe which, through the darkness of the philosophy of naturalism that considered the evils of civilization to be its virtues, has driven humankind to vice and misguidance.”

This negative current, he holds, seeks to destroy both Muslims and Christians by alienating them from the source of spiritual and moral values and by creating enmity between Christians and Muslims. All those who believe in God and seek to promote a theocentric approach to life must recognize the dangers involved: “It is essential,” he states, “that missionaries, pious Christians as well as Nurcus, be extremely careful, for with the idea of defending itself against the attacks of the religions of Islam and Christianity, ‘the current from the North’ will try to destroy the accord of Islam and the missionaries.” It is not by accident that these words of Said Nursi date from 1945-1946, a time when atheistic communism was extending its rule throughout Eastern Europe.

In his view, modern civilization is the product of various sources and results in a value system which, despite its evident good qualities, is often in contradiction with Divine teaching. Not all the sources of modernity were human; some appear to be the result of demonic inspiration. In his commentary on the Qur’anic verse, “O People of the Book! Come to a common term between us and you,” he stated: “Modern civilization, which is the product of the thought of all mankind and perhaps the jinn as well, has taken up a position opposed to the Qur’an, which individuals and communities have failed to dispute.” In this situation, the Qur’an’s injunction to come to a ‘common term’ with the People of the Book carries the meaning of Muslims and Christians coming to a mutual awareness that as communities founded on faith in God, they have a common mission to bear witness to Divine values in the midst of modern civilization. Far from being divided by a supposed ‘clash of civilizations,’ they are called to work together to carry on a critical civilizational dialogue with the proponents of modernity.

Tensions between Christians and Muslims

It is a sad fact of human history that Christians and Muslims, despite their communitarian nature as peoples (umam) called to worship and obey the One and Same God, have often been in conflict and even at war with one another. They have seen one another as enemies to be resisted and overcome. Energies which should have been employed to cooperate in the establishment of God-centered societies have been dissipated in mutual suspicion, domination, and bloodshed. Writing at a time of serious tensions and massacres
between the two communities at the end of the First World War, Said Nursi offered a way out of this historical impasse.

Kurdish tribesmen in Eastern Anatolia found the idea of freedom for Greeks and Armenians repugnant, and they asked Said Nursi’s advice. His answer not only affirmed the right to liberty of these Christian peoples as something commanded by the *shari’a*, but went deeper to turn the question back on the tribesmen, challenging them to recognize the deeper problem as one that lay at the heart of their own ignorance and hard-heartedness. He said,

“Theyir freedom consists in leaving them in peace and not oppressing them, for this is what the *shari’a* enjoins. More than this is their aggression in the face of your bad points and craziness, their benefiting from your ignorance.”

He went on to state that the real enemy is not this or that group of Christians, but rather the situation of degradation into which all had fallen. As he said, “Our enemy, that which is destroying us, is Ağa Ignorance, his son Poverty Efendi, and grandson, Enmity Bey. If the Armenians have opposed us in hatred, they have done so under the leadership of these three corrupters.” As a Christian, I find his approach, which reaches to the heart of the problem, similar to what I read in the writings of St. Paul, who said: “Our battle is not against human forces, but against the dark powers that govern this world.” In other words, at the deepest levels of spiritual striving to do God’s will and build harmonious and peaceful societies, our true enemies are not other persons, but rather the powers of ignorance, poverty, and aggression that cloud the powers of perception of us all and prevent us from acting as we should. These dark powers lie not outside ourselves, but within our own hearts. For this reason, both Islam and Christianity have always stressed repentance (Ar. tawba, Gk. metanoia) as the key to all personal and societal transformation.

The message of Said Nursi is as valid for our own day as it was when he wrote these words almost 80 years ago. At the root of tensions and conflicts between Muslims and Christians today lie not so much the evil nature of the other as our own egoistic desires to dominate, control, and retaliate. In this sense, the freedom of others from these “dark forces” is a part of our own freedom or, as Said Nursi put it: “The freedom of non-Muslims is a branch of our own freedom.”

**The reward of innocent martyrs**

Writing during one of the most tragic periods in the history of Anatolia, Said Nursi could not ignore the reality of the deaths of so many innocent persons. It is to his great credit that he rose above sectarian loyalty to address the question of innocent Christians as well as Muslims who fell victim to the times. “Even if those innocent people were unbelievers,” he stated,

“In return for the tribulations they suffered due to that worldly disaster, they have such a reward from the treasury of Divine mercy that if the veil of the Unseen were to open, a great manifestation of mercy would be apparent in relation to them and they would declare, ‘O Lord, thanks be to You! All praise belongs to God.’”

Said Nursi noted that he was moved to intense compassion and pity when he saw the sufferings of innocent people, and he was “touched strongly by the afflictions, poverty and hunger visited on unfortunates as a result of mankind’s disaster and the winter cold, as well as by a harsh non-physical, spiritual cold.” He held that those innocent people who died in such circumstances “were martyrs of a sort, whatever religion they belonged to,” and that
“their reward would be great and save them from Hell.” “Therefore,” he concluded, “it may be said with certainty that the calamity which the oppressed among Christians suffer, those connected to Jesus (UWP)...is a sort of martyrdom for them.”\(^\text{12}\)

Those who oppressed others and perpetrated evil against their neighbors will be punished by God. By contrast, he adds, “If those who suffered the calamity were those who hastened to assist the oppressed, and who strove for the welfare of humanity, and struggled to preserve the principles of religion and sacred revealed truths and human rights, their rewards will be so great from God as to completely transcend their earthly sufferings.

This willingness to understand and empathize and with both the sufferings and the goodness found in persons of other religious communities is the sign of an honest man guided by Divine teaching. Too often the vision of a religious individual does not go beyond the trials and accomplishments of one’s own community. In this context, the attitude of Said Nursi towards the Christian “martyrs” of his time reminds me of what Pope Paul VI said in Uganda in 1969. Referring to those Ugandan Christians who gave their lives in the last century rather than renounce their faith, the Pope called the attention of his hearers to the fact that there were also many Muslims in that country who chose death over betraying or compromising their Islamic faith. These too, he held, are true martyrs and witnesses to faith in God.

**Peace, reconciliation, and friendship between Muslims and Christians**

Said Nursi was aware that Muslim-Christian relations were not limited to an alliance of believers in critically confronting the dangers of modernist ideology, to the resolution of conflicts and empathizing with innocent victims, but should move in the direction of peace, reconciliation, and even friendship. Five years before his death, in supporting the Baghdad pact, he noted that an advantage of the pact was not only that Turks would gain 400 million brothers and sisters among Muslim peoples, but that the international accord would also gain for Muslim Turks “the friendship of 800 million Christians”\(^\text{13}\) and be a step toward a much-needed peace and general reconciliation between the two communities of faith.

In his final years, Said Nursi exerted his personal efforts at building reconciliation and friendship with Christians. In 1950, he sent a collection of his works to Pope Pius XII in Rome and received in reply, on 22 February 1951, a personal letter of thanks. One observer notes that it was only little over ten years later that, at the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church proclaimed its respect and esteem for Muslims and asserted that Islam was a genuine path of salvation. In the same way, a few years later in 1953, Said Nursi visited the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras in Istanbul to seek cooperation between Muslims and Christians in the face of aggressive atheism.

Many years before in 1910-1911, Said Nursi was questioned concerning his desire to build relations of friendship with Christians. He was confronted with the restrictive interpretation that some Muslims had placed on the Qur’anic verse: “O you who believe! Do not take the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors (5: 51).” In the light of this verse, he was asked, why did he say that Muslims and Christians should be friends?

His answer is instructive, not only for understanding Said Nursi’s desire to encourage love and friendship between Muslims and Christians, but for his approach to Qur’anic interpretation. In his view, the Qur’anic proscription is not general but absolute and, as such, can be restricted.
“Time,” he states, “is a great interpreter; if it determines its limits, it cannot be gainsaid. That is, when a matter becomes clear in the course of time, one cannot object to it. Moreover, if the judgment is based on derived evidence, the source of the derivation shows the reason for the judgment.”

In applying this principle to the interpretation of this verse, he holds that the prohibition from friendship with Jews and Christians is effective only when they reflect Jewishness or Christianity. “But,” he concludes, “just as not all of the characteristics of an individual Muslim necessarily reflect the teaching of Islam, so also, not all of the qualities of individual Jews or Christians reflect unbelief.” If Muslims find in a Jew or Christian qualities that are in agreement with Islamic teaching, they should consider those qualities praiseworthy. It is those good qualities that form the basis for friendship with Jews and Christians. “Can a Muslim love a Christian or Jew?,” he asks and in answer gives as example a man married to a woman of the People of the Book. “Of course,” he should love her.”

His argument is the very fact that the Qur’an permits a Muslim man to marry a Jewish or Christian woman presumes that he can and should love her.

Return of Jesus

In no area is interpretation more difficult than those passages of sacred writings which speak of the future and the coming age. Such passages, whether one is speaking of Qur’anic verses which point to the approach of the Hour of Judgment or of apocalyptic writings in Christian Scriptures, are customarily clothed in difficult and complex symbolism and obscure allusions. Interpreting such passages demands the discipline of an interior grappling with the text by an interpreter soundly grounded in faith. Otherwise, the interpreter can be easily led astray by his own preconceptions and prejudices.

We see Said Nursi employing this careful regimen in his efforts to interpret in the context of our century the hadith reports of Muhammad that relate to the return of Jesus before the Final Hour. He accepts the soundness of these hadith reports and awaits the return of Jesus. “Since [God] promised it, He will most certainly send him.” At present, Jesus is, like Idris, present in the heavens in his earthly body. But at the end of time, Jesus will return to earth to fight and kill the Dajjal.

The meaning of these hadith, he says, must be understood in terms of the concept of collective personality.

“The Christian religion 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. At that point, the collective personality of Christianity will kill the fearsome collective personality of irrelligion. Representing the collective personality of Christianity, Jesus will kill the Dajjal, who embodies the collective personality of irreligion. That is, he [Jesus] will kill atheistic thought.”

Said Nursi foresees two great threats to religion, two currents of unbelief represented by the evil figures of Sufyan and Dajjal. The first, that of Sufyan, will seek to destroy the shari’a of Muhammad and will be defeated by the Mahdi from the family of the Prophet. The second, represented by Dajjal, will promote naturalist and materialist philosophy and lead to the total denial of God. Both will work through secret societies to subvert God’s reign over human hearts and eliminate the element of the sacred in social life. It is against this second current which the true, purified Christianity, which comprises the collective personality of
Jesus, will emerge. The true Christianity will reject superstition and distortion and be in unity with Islamic teachings. In effect, wrote Said Nursi, “Christianity will be transformed into a sort of Islam.”

It is not necessary that everyone recognize Jesus when he returns. Said Nursi believes it more likely that only those who are true believers and close to Jesus will know him to be the true Jesus, but it will not be generally evident to all. What is more important is that the Dajjal, symbolizing atheistic currents in humanity, will be a huge and powerful opponent who will deceive many with promises of a false paradise, alluring amusements, and the varied enticements of civilization. It is impossible for the reader of Said Nursi’s descriptions of the Dajjal not to find allusions to the vast empire of the former Soviet Union as well as to the secular hegemony of European nations.

However, he looks forward to the day when the true religion of Christianity will emerge and spread its light to many to fight against the secret societies of Sufyan and the Dajjal. This purified Christianity he describes as “a zealous and self-sacrificing community known as a Christian community but worthy of being called Muslim Christians.” It will work “to unite the true religion of Jesus with the reality of Islam. In killing the Dajjal of rampant atheism, it will save humanity from godless destruction.”

Thus, the kind of purification that Said Nursi expects to occur in Christianity seems to be not that of Christians abandoning their religion in order to enter Islam, but rather a completion of what they already have that is good. He states:

“The Qur’an does not order you to abandon your religion completely. It proposes only that you complete your faith and build it on the fundamentals of religion that you already possess. The Qur’an...is a modifier and perfecter of basic principles. As for its nature as establisher, this only concerns such details as are subject to change and alteration because of differences of time and place.”

**Conclusion**

In all this, Said Nursi offers original and thought-provoking insights on Muslim-Christian dialogue and cooperation. His central thesis is that Muslims and Christians together can build a true civilization according to God’s plan in which human dignity, justice, and fellowship will be the norm. This is possible if they seek to ground their mutual relationships on love. In his famous Damascus Sermon, he states that the Fourth Word on which civilization is to be built is love. “The thing which is most worthy of love,” he states, “is love, and that most deserving of enmity is enmity. It is love and loving -that render people’s social life secure and that lead to happiness- it is these which are most worthy of love and being loved.” “The time for enmity and hostility is finished,” he concludes.

This call to love, even across the boundaries of one’s religious community, still rings true today. Events which have occurred in our world since Said Nursi first delivered his Damascus Sermon in 1911 have underlined the importance of this message: two World Wars, conflicts between India and Pakistan, massacres in Rwanda and Burundi, the plight of the Palestinian people, the destruction first of Bosnia and now possibly of Kosovo, and so many other bloody conflicts around the world remind us that love is the only solution to fratricidal destruction. The world still looks to Muslims and Christians as two communities of faith founded on the Loving and Compassionate God to show the way to love as the Divine Alternative to hatred and war.
10. Justin McCarthy, in Muslims and Minorities: the Population of Ottoman Anatolia and the End of Empire (New York: 1983), 120-121, shows that the loss of life among Muslims and Christians in Anatolia during the years of the First World War was far greater than in other European countries.
12. Kastamonu Lahikası, 75.
15. Münâzarat, 27.
17. Letters, 22.
18. Letters, 22.
20. Letters, 78.
23. The Damascus Sermon, 50.
In this talk, I will attempt to present the main ideas of Said Nursi’s famous Damascus Sermon and to respond to religious vision expressed in that Sermon. The treatise to which I will respond was first delivered in early 1911 as the Friday sermon at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. Almost 10,000 persons are said to have filled the great mosque to overflowing. Today, after the passage of almost 90 years, the Sermon has been often reprinted and is still being read and studied. It is clear that the Said Nursi’s analysis of Muslim societies and his spiritual counsel have continued to speak to the needs of Muslims of this past century. My reflections are the thoughts of a Western Christian and, as such, my paper can be regarded as an exercise in interreligious dialogue.

Two preliminary questions

Two preliminary questions of interest to scholars must be addressed before we examine the content of the Sermon. Scholars of history will be interested in the textual question. The Sermon was originally delivered in Arabic and subsequently twice printed in that language. Another Arabic edition was made in 1922. Much later, in the 1950s, Said Nursi himself translated the Sermon into Turkish and in doing so introduced revisions which addressed the current state of world affairs and appended addenda in response to questions put to him by his disciples. The text which I studied is the English translation of Said Nursi’s amplified Turkish version.

The Sermon, first delivered in the early years of the 20th century, in the twilight period of the Ottoman state, looks forward to the questions of faith that would occupy religious believers in the tumultuous decades to come. The Turkish version can be regarded as the author’s own commentary on his original sermon, made 40 years later in light of developments in world history which had in the meantime intervened - the birth of the Turkish Republic, two disastrous world wars, the rise of communism incarnated in the Soviet Union, the barbarous threat to humanity of Nazi and Fascist ideologies, as well as events contemporaneous with Said Nursi’s Turkish translation: the extension of the communist system to Eastern Europe, the Maoist revolution in China, and the emergence of post-colonial nations in Arab countries, Africa and Asia.

Now, 40 years after the Turkish version, at the start of a new century, we find equally dramatic changes in geopolitical conditions: the Soviet experiment concluded and the Soviet Union dismembered, China moving toward a market economy, Turkey as well as the former Eastern European satellites applying for membership in the European Union, and Asian and African nations grappling with the challenges and problems of neo-colonialism and the globalization of market economy. The contemporary reader today must inevitably ask: "What is the relevance of the Damascus Sermon for religious believers after almost a century of turbulent change?"
Scholars of religion will ask another question. The Damascus Sermon was delivered by a Muslim preacher to Muslim worshipers in the context of Islamic congregational prayer. The reflections I am about to offer are those of a Christian. Christianity and Islam are sister religions which, together with Judaism, look back to Abraham as our common ancestor in faith. Both Christians and Muslims profess to worship God alone and seek to do God’s will in all things. Yet our two communities have not always treated one another with the love and respect which God desires of those who worship Him. Errors have been committed on both sides and the deeds of some members of our communities toward the other can only be described as criminal. With this background, both of common bases in faith and a history that has all too often reflected enmity rather than love, we are led to pose a second question: "Does Said Nursi have anything to say to Christians in the Damascus Sermon? Are his words directed exclusively to Muslims, or do they have a relevance for all those who profess active faith in the One God?"

The structure of the Damascus Sermon
Keeping these two preliminary questions in mind, let us turn our attention directly to the Damascus Sermon. The structure of the sermon is simple. After beginning by praising God and seeking God’s blessing, Said Nursi states what he sees to be the most agonizing question for believers of his time: why are non-believers who have abandoned God and religious principles progressing so rapidly in material development, while those regions of the earth where religious faith is strong are stagnating and even regressing towards greater levels of backwardness and poverty? Said Nursi’s basic query, at the beginning of the 20th Century, reflects a believer’s formulation of the basic criticism of religion posed by philosophers such as Feuerbach, Comte, Marx, and Nietzsche and embodied in policies of the Italian risorgimento, the Mexican and Russian revolutions, and the Liberal parties in various European countries: religion is a characteristic of primitive sages of humanity, but has become in the modern world an opiate, an obstacle to human progress and nation-building.

Said Nursi does not respond to this critique of religion by hurling condemnations. Rather, he admits that some of the diagnosis is correct. Religious communities are themselves to blame for the malaise that afflicts them. He notes six "dire illnesses" that must be confronted if religious believers are to make a positive contribution to human progress in the coming decades. While noting the failures of believers, he also rejects the godless and materialist solutions proposed by the critics, which he foresees will lead to disaster, a claim which the subsequent history of the century proved to be only too accurate.

The remainder of the Sermon is an effort to respond to this basic question and to treat the six fundamental illnesses which he saw to be afflicting religious peoples. Said Nursi does this in the form of Six Words which correspond to one of the spiritual sicknesses suffered by religious societies. One can say that Said Nursi’s methodology is that of a physician who must: 1) examine the symptoms to discover what is wrong, 2) name the sickness in diagnosis, 3) encourage the patient with a positive prognosis that affirms that there is a cure, and 4) prescribe what must be done to promote the healing. Let us examine these Six Words to see how Said Nursi acts as spiritual physician to treat the basic maladies of the age.
1. The sickness: *despair* - the cure: *hope*

The first sickness faced by religious societies is despair. Looking at the material progress of others and the relative stagnation of their own societies, believers are tempted to hopelessness, to feeling that God has abandoned them, that the future belongs to proponents of godless materialism who have the power, wealth, and energy needed to dominate the world. To meet this spiritual illness, Said Nursi prescribes *hope*. There are real grounds for hope, he declares. Not only has God promised that "the future belongs to Islam" and "its ruler shall be the truths of the Qur'an and belief" (*DS*, p. 27), but solid bases for hope can be found in history and in analysis of contemporary situations. If Muslims review their history, they will see that Muslims increased in civilization and progress to the degree they lived in accord with Islamic truths. Conversely, they fell into savagery, decline, disaster and defeat to the extent that they abandoned those truths (*DS*, p. 28).

Another basis for hope is rooted in human psychology. Both individuals and societies cannot live happily and successfully without religion. In times of crisis, even the most irreligious person will take refuge in religion. Similarly, societies might prosper materially without religious faith, but in doing so must fall continually into competition, greed, and warfare which ultimately overwhelm and destroy their achievements. Thus, although religion would appear to be in decline in the 20th century, one can expect that basic human needs for God will ultimately prevail over materialist ways of thinking and acting. Another sign of hope can be found in increased education, in that as people move beyond blind following of their leaders and begin to think for themselves, the intrinsic worth of the basic truths of religious faith can be better understood and valued.

Said Nursi sees grounds for hope that Muslim societies will attain material prosperity. There is a strength rooted in religious faith that no human ideology can replace. Values rooted in faith in God - an appreciation of human dignity, the strength that comes from a commitment to follow God’s command to "compete in doing good,” courage balanced by compassion, a transcendent vision which surpasses immediate prospects of short-term gains, and a sense of justice which neither oppresses nor tolerates oppressors - are strengths that give genuine hope for a more humane, just, civilized and prosperous future. If the fruits of despair are indifference, despondency, laziness and self-contempt (*DS*, p. 44), hope enables people to attain the perfection intended by God in creating humans as the summit of God’s creative activity. The battle between good and evil is not an equal contest. Evil, ugliness, and futility are secondary and minor in God’s creation (*DS*, p. 40), with none of the innate strength of truth, beauty, and goodness. Since the aim of God’s creation has been goodness, beauty, and perfection, believers can legitimately hope that God is guiding humanity towards these ends.

If I have tended to belabor this first sickness of despair and the word of hope, it is because in his Sermon Said Nursi devoted more space to despair and hope than all the other illnesses combined. It is clear that for him, the basic disease afflicting modern Muslims is *despair* and the most important word of encouragement that needs to be offered is *hope*.
Said Nursi is speaking of Islam and his Sermon is addressed to Muslims. However, as a Christian I find myself in agreement with his analysis, with his diagnosis of the situation, and with his prescription for overcoming the spiritual illness of our time. Christians agree that there is no spiritual malaise that closes our minds to God’s grace more deeply than despair. Despair is in itself a form of unbelief, for it questions the power, the mercy, and the goodness of God to overcome our weaknesses and make us into the persons, and our societies into the societies, that God wants us to become. Christians believe that of all God’s gifts, the greatest are three: faith, hope, and love.

Hope is that quiet gift that enables us to trust in God’s presence even in moments of greatest darkness and failure, that leads us to throw ourselves on God’s mercy and seek forgiveness when we have fallen into sin, that inspires us to mobilize our spiritual and physical energies to accomplish great things for God even when the tasks can seem greater than our abilities and the obstacles seem impossible to overcome. Thus, I conclude, following Said Nursi, that the great fruit of a life of faith that Muslims and Christians can offer to the modern world is that of hope, a solid hope rooted in God’s own nature, a hope that is affirmed and confirmed by reflecting on the realities of modern life.

2. The sickness: deceit - the cure: honesty

The second malady of the age of which Said Nursi speaks in his Sermon is the lack of truthfulness in social and political life. Honesty and truthfulness must form the basis of an Islamic society, yet the reality is that their contraries are debilitating weaknesses endemic to Muslim societies of his time. The lack of truthfulness is not simply telling lies but takes on many forms (DS, p. 45). Hypocrisy is a form of dishonesty by publicly affirming one thing but privately doing the opposite. Flattery is cowardly and self-serving insincerity. Deception involves manipulation of the truth, distortion of facts and promotion of half-truths. Duplicity involves playing both sides against the other while pretending to befriend both. Slander and calumny are destructive forms of dishonesty that not only harm others but destroy communal solidarity. Religious leaders are not exempt from dishonesty, as seen in the production of self-interested fatwas. Politicians display dishonest behavior in campaigns of political propaganda, by rationalizing and justifying their behavior and by misusing their positions to pursue their own ends and abuse the power that accrues to their office.

To the malady of untruth, Said Nursi prescribes honesty and transparency in public life. Muslim societies will never be able to offer the modern world a viable alternative to lying and corruption unless they themselves embody the principles of truthfulness and responsibility. In the Turkish translation of his original Sermon, he makes the point that this principle is as valid in the 1950s as it was when he delivered the original Sermon: "O my brothers in the Umayyad mosque! And O my brothers, 40 to 50 years later who form the 400 million believers in the vast mosque of the world of Islam! Salvation is only to be found through truthfulness and honesty...the strongest chain with which to be bound to salvation is honesty (DS, p. 48)."

3. The sickness: enmity - the cure: love

A third reason for the weakness of the Muslim world is that of enmity and hostility. The two world wars of the 20th century, not to mention countless local and civil conflicts around the
world have shown "how evil, destructive, and what an awesome wrong is enmity (DS, p. 50)." The roots of enmity and hatred lie in human arrogance and self-worship. They result in unjust hostility toward others without one’s even being aware of it. Enmity can take on subtle forms, even among religious believers, and show itself as feigned approval, not interfering with wrongdoing, and insincere friendliness. People usually consider that the evils others do are proper grounds for hostility, but Said Nursi teaches that, unless others are aggressive, one should "not let the evils of our enemies attract your enmity. Hell and Divine punishment are enough for them (DS, p. 50)."

To the destructive sickness of considering others one’s enemy, Said Nursi prescribes love. "The thing most deserving of love is love, and that most deserving of enmity is enmity (DS, p. 49)." It is love and loving others that make a person’s social life secure and lead to happiness. He sees "love, brotherhood, and affection" as basic to Islam, its bond. Fairness and thinking favorably of others, giving others the benefit of the doubt, must mark the Islamic character (DS, p. 51).

4. The sickness: disunity - the cure: unity
The fourth sickness that Said Nursi finds in Muslim societies of his time is that of disunity. Ethnic and linguistic suspicions and tensions divide the worldwide Islamic umma. Even in a given nation the factors of language and ethnic identity can be a destructive factor in weakening Muslims. In raising this issue, Said Nursi was confronting real situations. He delivered his original Sermon in Damascus, which in 1911 was a restive part of the Ottoman state. Within a decade, Syria would become a French protectorate. Said Nursi prepared his Turkish translation of the Sermon 40 years later when Syria and its Arab neighbors were emerging as independent nations. Said Nursi’s plea is that Muslims not allow ethnic and linguistic differences to divide and weaken the unity of their nations, nor that relations between Muslim nations be determined on national, ethnic and linguistic lines.

To the sickness of disunity, Said Nursi prescribes the unity of the Islamic umma. "The time for Islamic unity is beginning," he tells his hearers. "This necessitates not paying attention to one another’s personal faults (DS, p. 54)." He tells the worshipers in the Umayyad mosque that they cannot claim that there is nothing they can do to promote Islamic unity and brotherhood. Such an attitude, he claims, is nothing but an excuse for laziness and idleness (DS, pp. 52-53). He appeals to Muslim leaders and preachers to work together in unity to rebuild the bonds of brotherhood among Muslims. He calls on the newly-emerging independent Arab nations to emulate the model of the United States of America who, by working together in unity, can in a short time achieve success and restore their people to their former glories.

5. The sickness: despotism - the cure: Islamic dignity
Said Nursi is well aware of the toll taken by colonial domination in Muslim regions. The foreigners have systematically plundered Muslim regions of their precious possessions and have paid them “a rotten price” in return (DS, p. 54). However, the material theft is the least destructive of the colonizers’ legacy. Worse is that they have stolen from Muslims "our elevated morals" and "fine character in relation to social life." Here Said Nursi is pointing out the psychological damage inflicted by the colonial system - the corruption of morals in
situations of oppression and servitude and the destruction of social character through a demeaning loss of dignity. The colonizers have left us, he states, with "dissipated morals and dissipated character."

Muslims must admit this sickness and exert their efforts to correct it. Otherwise the effects of colonial indignity and dissolution will continue to weaken Muslim peoples. The way for Muslims to treat this spiritual illness is by finding in Islamic teaching the path to restore their God-given human dignity. This is not, he insists, a call to involve themselves in politics which, of itself, cannot rebuild shattered morals or social character. Nor must Muslims allow their Islamic faith to be manipulated and made a tool to serve any particular political interests. It is only by absorbing and integrating into their daily behavior the teachings of Islam that Muslims can rise from their lowly, dissolute state. He states: "Beware, my brothers! Do not imagine that I am urging you with these words to busy yourselves with politics. God forbid! The truth of Islam is above all politics. All politics may serve it, but no politics can make Islam a tool for itself."

6. The sickness: individualism - the cure: consultation
The final sickness in Islamic societies which Said Nursi addresses is that of "restricting one’s endeavors to what is personally beneficial." Muslims cannot blame all their weaknesses on colonial rule. Belief means not humiliating others by oppressing them, nor bowing down before tyrants and acquiescing to their oppression. Such would be a form of shirk by allowing a human person to play God over one’s life (DS, p. 57). If each person engages only in those projects which benefit him personally, the common good will be ignored and progress postponed indefinitely.

The Islamic answer to the sickness of individualism is consultation. He sees consultation as the Islamic alternative to individualistic despotism, just as it is the sound basis for true freedom and progress. Consultation "is the freedom that is in accordance with the Shari’a, born of the consultation enjoined by the Shari’a, and the noble-mindedness and compassion of belief that will loosen and remove the fetters and chains of the various forms of tyranny (DS, p. 56). By a willingness to move beyond one’s self-interest and personal projects to consult with others in sincerity and solidarity, "ten persons can perform the work of a thousand" (DS, p. 57).

Said Nursi acknowledges that there are no simple answers. The needs are endless. People can only hope to achieve lasting gains by consulting with one another, learning from each other, and working together to achieve common goals. He concludes his Sermon with these words: "In the face of endless enemies and innumerable needs, man can continue his personal life only through the support and assistance proceeding from belief, and can maintain his social life only through the mutual consultation enjoined by the Shari’a that proceeds from the truths of belief. Only thus can he halt his enemies and open up a way to secure his needs" (DS, p. 58).

Final reflections
Obviously, Said Nursi’s concern in the Damascus Sermon was with Islamic societies. By analyzing these societies and offering directions on how they can treat the weaknesses and defects in these societies, his intention is clearly to set Muslims on the path to building
effective, strong, and prosperous Muslim societies. As a Christian reading the Sermon, I find no indication that his intention is to mobilize Muslims against Christians. It is obvious from his other writings in the Risale-i Nur that Said Nursi has no quarrel with real Christians, whom he regards as co-believers in God who seek to live according to divine values. He holds that the modern world needs the joint witness of true Muslims and Christians to the values that derive from faith in God.

In my opinion, the social analysis carried out by Said Nursi on the weaknesses of Muslim societies could be usefully employed by Christians to view critically their own societies. Christian societies in Latin America and Africa, while often rich in faith, are no less wounded by the effects of colonialism, no less prone to the sicknesses of despair, deceit, enmity, disunity, despotism, and individualism, and no less in need of hope, honesty, love, unity, human dignity, and consultation than are Muslim societies. Prosperous Christian and post-Christian societies of North America and Europe can profit from the Sermon’s warnings about the dangers of adopting a competitive, aggressive economic agenda which ignores the centrality of God and the human need for a spiritual vision.

At the end of this study, I can answer my preliminary questions in the affirmative. Yes, the Damascus Sermon continues to be relevant to the challenges of the 21st Century, and, yes, there is much in Said Nursi’s analysis that should offer food for reflection by modern Christians. I believe that the Sixth Word, consultation, is one that needs to be carried out not only by Muslims within their own circles, but by all those who profess faith in God and seek to do God’s will on earth. It is by following the call to mutual consultation between Muslims and Christians that I have offered here my reflections on Said Nursi’s Damascus Sermon.
THE ETHICS OF PARDON AND PEACE:  
A DIALOGUE OF IDEAS 
BETWEEN THE THOUGHT OF POPE JOHN PAUL II 
AND THE RISALE-I-NUR

At international congresses around the world, there are always many papers and speeches about peace. We hear the speakers of each religious group profess that their religion wants peace, teaches peace, builds peace. The leaders of various nations say how they are committed to peace among nations, peace in their regions, civil peace within their societies. There is a human paradox here that we must face. It seems like everyone is in favor of peace, no one ever admits to being against peace, and yet there is very little peace in the world. The problem, I believe, lies in the fact that we are all in favor of peace in the abstract, but without saying in what peace consists, and without examining what is involved in building peace.

Of those religious thinkers of modern times who have attempted to study the concept of peace to explore what is involved in establishing and maintaining peace, I want to compare the thought of two persons who have made an remarkable contribution to the topic. One is a Christian, Pope John Paul II, leader of the Catholic Church, and the other a Muslim, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, the author of the Risale-i-Nur. In this paper I hope to bring together the thinking of these two scholars and religious teachers into a kind of dialogue on the theme: “the ethics of peace.” I will do this by summarizing the position of the Pope as the basis or point of view from which I will then read and explain the views of Said Nursi as found in the Risale-i-Nur.

1. John Paul II: Peace rests on two pillars: justice and forgiveness

As he does every year on 1 January, also this year, 2002, Pope John Paul II sent a message for the World Day of Peace at the beginning of the new year. In this message, the Pope proposes that true peace must rest on two pillars: justice and forgiveness. Without these, you cannot have real peace. Both justice and pardon are necessary. One element without the other is not enough.

The Pope’s reasoning is like this. Any real peace, if it is to be more than simply a “cease-fire” or temporary cessation of hostilities, has to get to the heart of the conflict and try to heal the breach in human relations which was ruptured. When peoples are at war, when individuals are estranged and alienated from one another, they are angry, suspicious, and resentful of one another. They see the other as an enemy to be overcome, defeated, the object of retaliation, rather than a fellow-human with whom one ought to be reconciled. Thus, no talk about peace cannot proceed effectively without addressing the issue of broken relationships and without taking positive steps to repair those relations.
If one group or individual is being oppressed or treated unjustly by another, one cannot hope for peace between the two until there is justice. The Pope sees justice in two ways: firstly, as a “moral virtue,” that is, as a human quality which a person can acquire and develop with God’s powerful assistance (which Christians call grace), and secondly as a “legal guarantee,” that is, part of the functioning of the national and international rule of law. The aim of justice, both as a personal quality and as an element of the international system of relations among peoples, is to insure “full respect for rights and responsibilities” and to carry out a “just distribution of benefits and burdens.”

Justice is thus a first, indispensable condition for peace. Unless one person treats another justly, that is, with respect for the other’s rights and duties and by giving them their proper share of what is due to them, there will be no peace between them. The same holds true between social groups, ethnic groups, peoples and nations. Where there is aggression, oppression, occupation, transgression, there can be no peace. First, justice has to be established, then peace can be built.

All of this the Pope has said before. However, in his Day of Prayer for Peace message, he adds another element that he sees as intrinsic to the peace-making process. This is forgiveness, which goes beyond strict justice to strive to heal the historical burdens brought about by one individual’s or one group’s injustice and wrongdoing towards another.

Every nation, every religious or ethnic group, can draw up a long list of grievances that we have against each other, of wrongs that our group has suffered at the hands of the others. This is the human burden of past misdeeds experienced that we bring into our relations with others, that complicate the way we relate to individual members of the other group, that can poison all efforts at cooperation and reconciliation, and that can flare up into violence the slightest provocation. Justice alone is not sufficient to heal these wounds; we need to exercise forgiveness. Forgiveness is, as the Pope states, “a personal choice, a decision to go against the natural instinct to pay back evil with evil.” In doing so, it always involves an apparent short-term loss, but brings about the possibility of achieving a real long-term gain. “Violence,” the Pope notes, works exactly the opposite: “opting for an apparent short-term gain, but involving a real and permanent loss.” “Forgiveness,” the Pope notes, “may seem like weakness, but it demands great spiritual strength and moral courage.”

It should not be surprising to discover that both Christianity and Islam lay great importance on the notions of justice and forgiveness, if these are to be the indispensable pre-conditions of peace. In the Gospel, Jesus taught his disciples: “You have heard it said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy,’ but I say to you ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.’” In a similar vein, the Qur’an permits vengeance up to the limits of strict justice but no farther, and then always adds: “But it is better to forgive.”

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2 Ibid., p. 12.
2. Social Ethics in the Risale-i Nur

When we turn to the Risale-i Nur, we find that for Said Nursi, as for Pope John Paul II, ethics, as the study of what is good and bad, is primarily oriented toward the social sphere. In the thought of both men, a religiously based ethical system above all must treat questions of right and wrong in society, and only secondarily regards the goodness or evil of acts of private morality. Moreover, both root this primacy of social ethics in the Scriptural teaching of their respective faiths. For Said Nursi, ethical systems drawn up by philosophers and put into practice by public and private welfare associations fail to reach the levels of social commitment demanded by the teaching of the Qur’an. He states: “Together with all its associations for good works, all its establishments for the teaching of ethics, all its severe discipline and regulations, [society] has not been able to reconcile these two classes of mankind [the rich and the poor], nor heal the two fearsome wounds in human life.”

The evils of which he is speaking here are social complacency on the part of the wealthy who feel no responsibility to share what they have with the poor and needy, and class struggle on the part of the poor who seek to take by force from the rich what they will not give freely. “The Qur’an, however,” Said Nursi continues, “eradicates the first [social irresponsibility] with its injunction to pay zakat, and heals it, and uproots the second [class struggle] by prohibiting usury and interest, and cures that. Indeed, the Qur’an stands at the door of the world and declares usury and interest to be forbidden. It reads out its decree to mankind, saying: ‘In order to close the door of strife, close the door of usury and interest!’ and forbids its students to enter it.”

Instead of the ethics of the jungle where the rich and powerful take what they can and defend what they have by use of force, and that of class struggle in which the poor and oppressed seek to obtain their rights by force, Said Nursi sees the Divinely-guided ethic proposed by Islam as one in which truth, justice and harmony are paramount. “The civilization the shari’a of Muhammad (PBUH) comprises and commands is this: its point of support is truth instead of force, the marks of which are justice and harmony. Its goal is virtue in place of [selfish] benefit, and its characteristic marks are love and attraction. Its means of unity are the ties of religion, country, and class, in place of racism and nationalism, and the mark of these are sincere brotherhood, peace, and only defence against external aggression. In life is the principle of mutual assistance instead of the principle of conflict, the mark of which is accord and solidarity.”

Said Nursi holds that philosophically-based ethical systems fail to reach the heights of moral teaching proclaimed by the Qur’an because they fail to take into account an essential element of the human reality, that is, human weakness. If an ethical system presumes that people know what they want and will always work to achieve their desired goal, it will miss the point, for in fact people often act against their best interests out of anger, timidity etc., and for reasons of selfishness, laziness, ignorance, and the like fail to achieve what they desire.

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3 The Words, Twenty-fifth Word, First Light, Third Ray, p. 422.

4 The Damascus Sermon, Seeds of Reality, p. 106.
However, a religious outlook, exemplified in Qur’anic teaching, takes into consideration and allows for the reality of human failure by urging believers to return to God in repentance, seeking forgiveness, and starting over. Thus, he calls on believers to be shaped by a “God-given ethics,” which he holds to be an essential element in the message of all the prophets. “Be distinguished by God-given morals and turn towards God Almighty with humility, recognizing your impotence, poverty, and defectiveness, and so be a slave in His presence.” Philosophically-based ethical systems, he holds, tend to ignore this element of human nature and selfishly aim at perfection through human efforts alone.

This Nursi sees as basically self-deception. “The essence of humanity,” he states, has been kneaded with infinite impotence, weakness, poverty, and need, while the essence of the Necessarily Existent One is infinitely omnipotent, powerful, self-sufficient, and without need.” He concludes: “The aim of humanity and duty of human beings is to be moulded by God-given ethics and good character, and, by knowing their [own] impotence to seek refuge with Divine power, by seeing their weakness to rely on Divine strength, by realizing their poverty to trust in Divine mercy, by perceiving their need to seek help from Divine riches, by seeing their faults to ask for pardon through Divine forgiveness, and by realizing their deficiency to be glorifiers of Divine perfection.” Thus, if they are to act in an ethical way people need to be informed and guided by God’s revelation and to be supported by God’s strength or grace. These two elements (Divine guidance and Divine strength) are often ignored in philosophically-based ethical systems that do not take into account elements of God’s revealed word.

3. Inner peace

a. How does the concept of peace fit into Said Nursi’s ethical thought? In the Risale-i Nur, he treats various aspects and elements of peace, not from a theoretical perspective, but as a practical guide for those who seek to pursue peace. In the first place, he treats of peace in the eschatological sense, as the ultimate goal of human life, almost synonymous with salvation. Specifically, it is the final destination of the collective personality of those who study the Risale-i Nur. He sees the Risale-i Nur students, through their efforts carried out in solidarity and sincerity, as contributing in their diverse activities to the building of an eternal realm of peace and happiness. “O Risale-i Nur students and servants of the Qur’an! You and I are members of a collective personality...like the components of a factory’s machinery which produces eternal happiness within eternal life. We are hands working on a dominical boat which will disembark the community of Muhammad (PBUH) at the Realm of Peace, the shore of salvation. So we are surely in need of solidarity and true union, obtained through gaining sincerity.”

This concept not only gives meaning and direction to individual acts, but in this way the believer also achieves a kind of conquest over death. “Through the mystery of true brotherhood on the way of Divine pleasure...there are spirits to the number of brothers. If one of them dies, he meets

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5 The Words, Thirtieth Word, First Aim, p. 564.

6 The Words, Thirtieth Word, First Aim, p. 563.

7 The Flashes, Twenty-First Flash, On Sincerity, p. 214.
death happily, saying: ‘My other spirits remain alive, for they in effect make life continue for me by constantly gaining reward for me, so I am not dying. By means of their spirits, I live in respect of merit; I am only dying in respect of sin.’ And he lays down in peace.”

b. A second way in which the Risale-i Nur looks at peace might be called the psychological sense, as tranquillity and peace of mind, an inner confidence born of faith that enables the religious believer to face adversity without anxiety or despair. Particularly when one is facing the approach of death, the believer can attain a peace of mind which will enable the person to overcome spiritual turmoil and fear.9 Reflecting on the long periods of his incarceration, he notes that his close companions, students of the Risale-i Nur, who were imprisoned with him did not waste their time or give in to selfish expressions of worry, complaint, or pride, or try to change what cannot be altered, but they achieved a peace of mind and steadfastness that bore witness to the spiritual values and dignity that they had achieved.10

This interior peace, not only of individuals but of whole societies, he sees as one of the marks of Islamic civilization. Along with justice, harmony, brotherhood, solidarity, human progress and spiritual advancement, peace should characterize the Islamic community.11 It is peace as the basis of societal relations which should be the force that attracts others to Islam.

c. A third aspect of peace studied by Said Nursi is universal peace. Particularly in his rewriting of the Damascus Sermon in the years immediately following the Second World War, he reflects the widespread conviction of the time that humankind can sink no lower in criminality towards its own kind12 and expresses the longing for a time of peace and prosperity for all.13 This Said Nursi sees as the specific mission of Islam, that “God willing, through the strength of Islam in the future, the virtues of civilization will prevail, the face of the earth cleaned of filth, and universal peace be secured.”14 He is optimistic that this hope for peace through Islam is no vain desire, but that people may confidently “expect from Divine mercy to see true civilization with universal peace brought about through the sun of the truth of Islam.”15

It is in his analysis of peace, based on truth, as the only viable alternative to the use of brute force that the thought of Said Nursi prefigures that of Pope John Paul II. Said Nursi notes that wars

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8 The Flashes, Twenty-First Flash, On Sincerity, p. 215.
10 The Rays, Thirteenth Ray, p. 343.
11 Letters, Seeds of Reality, p. 548; The Damascus Sermon, 106.
12 The Damascus Sermon, p. 29.
13 The Damascus Sermon, p. 43.
14 The Damascus Sermon, p. 38.
15 The Damascus Sermon, p. 39.
and violence can never resolve ethical conflicts concerning who is in the right. All that wars and violent actions can accomplish is to show which party has access to reserves of force which it can use to coerce others to obey and to punish the recalcitrant.\textsuperscript{16} Truth, on the other hand, is characterized by justice and harmony and seeks goodness and virtue instead of selfish gain.\textsuperscript{17}

He sees a tendency in modern governments and rulers which is relevant for the discussion of globalization as a theme of this symposium. He criticizes modern governments for fomenting a kind of false nationalism, which in reality amounts to a type of racism, by picturing those of another nationality or religion as the enemy against whom war must be waged. Meanwhile, the governments concentrate on providing amusements to gratify the senses and favor consumerist policies to “create needs.” The result, he states, is “a sort of superficial happiness for about 20% of mankind and cast 80% into distress and poverty.”\textsuperscript{18} By contrast, the Qur’an, he states, takes truth rather than force as its starting point. Hence the Qur’an proposes an alternative to the use of force in resolving conflicts, that of negotiation, compromise and uprightness, rather than the employment of brute force with the very limited aim of “winning.”

Said Nursi’s opposition to war as an inhumane and ultimately useless endeavor was highly controversial in his time, for in any nation all citizens are expected to support whatever wars are decided and carried out by their governments, and anyone opposing war is accused of being disloyal. In fact, ruling parties and cliques have been known to foment conflict and war in an attempt to increase their popularity and rally support for unpopular or incompetent government. In the \textit{Flashes} collection, Said Nursi notes that he was often challenged because of his commitment to peace. Critics claimed that war against British and Italian incursions provided an opportunity to revive Islamic zeal and to assert the moral strength of the nation. They charged Said Nursi, who proposed prayers for peace and negotiated settlement as indirectly supporting the invaders’ aims.\textsuperscript{19}

In response, Said Nursi held that he wanted release from the attacks of aggressors, but not by using the same methods which the attackers were employing. In other words, he rejected the practice of opposing force by force. Religion teaches people to seek truth and uprightness, not to try to achieve their aims by use of force. In consequence, he felt that the students of the \textit{Risale-i Nur} could better use their time studying the Qur’an than by engaging in military service. Later in his life he was asked whether freely relinquishing one’s rights for the sake of peace could not be considered a form of compromise with wrongdoing. Again reflecting on his prison experiences, he responded that “A person who is in the right, is fair. He will sacrifice his one dirhem’s worth of right for the general peace, which is worth a hundred.”\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{The Words}, Twenty-Fifth Word, First Light, Third Ray, p. 422.

\textsuperscript{17} Letters, Seeds of Reality, p. 548.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{The Words}, Twenty-Fifth Word, First Light, Third Ray, p. 422.

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{The Flashes}, Sixteenth Flash, p. 144.

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{The Rays}, Thirteenth Ray, p. 345; \textit{The Flashes}, Twenty-Eighth Flash, p. 362.
In the long run, he concludes, the preoccupation with current events and international crises is of secondary importance to seeking the personal, interior transformation of peace that comes through the study of Scripture. Said Nursi carried this principal to an extreme degree, as he recounts: “For a full two years in Kastamonu and seven years in other places I knew nothing of the conflicts and wars in the world, and whether or not peace had been declared, or who else was involved in the fighting. I was not curious about it and did not ask, and for nearly three years did not listen to the radio that was playing close by me. But with the Risale-i Nur I triumphantly confronted absolute unbelief, which destroys eternal life, and transforms the life of this world even into compounded pain and suffering.”

This attitude, which places a higher value on interior peace which is based on the study of God’s Word than on current events, presents a challenge to modern people for whom the daily newspapers and evening news on television are fixed appointments in their daily schedules. However, when one reflects on the degree to which the news media is slanted by the prejudices, policies and propaganda, not only of individual journalists but also of those who own and direct the communications industry, one can see in Said Nursi’s practice the freedom of the honest individual who renounces an obsession with transitory events which will be forgotten in a few years in favor of the search for eternal, unchangeable truth presented in the Word of God.

The irony here is that Said Nursi was often accused of being a troublemaker guilty of disturbing the peace and inciting his followers to revolt. He was accused of “working secretly in Emirdag. He poisoned the minds of some people giving them the idea of disturbing the peace.” In defending himself against false accusations of fomenting public disorder, he also defends the students of the Risale-i Nur against similar charges. “In twenty years, six courts of law and the police of ten provinces...have not recorded any incident involving the disturbance of public order and breaching of security in connection with the 20,000 or perhaps 100,000 people who enthusiastically read copies of the Risale-i Nur.

He asserts that this reputation of being a troublemaker and rabble-rouser is based on fear of non-religious people for those who take religious faith seriously. “‘The worldly’ are exceptionally and excessively suspicious of me. Quite simply, they are frightened of me, imagining non-existent things in me, which even if they existed would not constitute a political crime and could not be the basis of accusation, like being a shaykh, or of significant rank or family, or being a tribal leader, and influential, and having numerous followers, or meeting with people from my native region, or being connected with the affairs of the world, or even entering politics, or even the opposition. Imagining these things in me, they have been carried away by groundless fears.”

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He makes it clear that his silence must not be interpreted as agreement with all decisions made by public officials, but should be understood rather in terms of passive resistance. He states: “I support neither intellectually nor on scholarly grounds the arbitrary commands, called laws, of a commander, which have made Aya Sophia into a house of idols and the Shaykh al-Islam’s Office into a girls’ high school. And for myself I do not act in accordance with them. But although for twenty years I have been severely oppressed during my tortuous captivity, I have not become involved in politics, nor provoked the authorities, nor disturbed public order. And although I have hundreds of thousands of Risale-i Nur friends, not a single incident has been recorded involving the disturbance of the peace.”

Along with Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Said Nursi must be seen as one of the Twentieth Century’s great exponents of non-violent resistance.

4. Peace and forgiveness

When we turn to the question of the relationship between peace and forgiveness, the similarity of thought between Said Nursi and the later views of Pope John Paul becomes even more striking. He analyzes the nature of wrongdoing. In the case of a crime such as murder, the killer might derive a momentary satisfaction by having taken revenge on his enemy, but he pays for it over and over by suffering the consequences, not only of imprisonment, but of fear of retaliation by the relatives of the murdered person. The result is fear, anger, anxiety. “There is only one solution for this,” states Said Nursi, “and that is reconciliation, which the Qur’an commands, and which truth, reality, benefit, humanity, and Islam require and encourage.” He notes that Islam commands that “one believer should not be vexed with another believer for more than three days,” and that so long as there is no reconciliation, both sides perpetually suffer the torments of fear and revenge.” His conclusion is that “it is essential to make peace quickly.”

Often a person’s unwillingness to forgive arises, according to Said Nursi, from a lack of self-knowledge, a resistance to finding in oneself many of the same qualities that one condemns in the other. If someone is unwilling to confront the defects in ones own attitudes and actions, it is much easier to demonize the other and regard them as an enemy. Said Nursi’s advice is to “Look at the defect in your own soul that you do not see or do not wish to see. Deduct a share for that too. As for the small share which then remains, if you respond with forgiveness, pardon, and magnanimity, in such a way as to conquer your enemy swiftly and safely, then you will have escaped all sin and harm.”

Thus, self-awareness should lead to repentance, repentance to forgiveness, forgiveness to reconciliation and the seeds for a lasting peace are laid.

So long as no reconciliation takes place, the wounds to the human relations fester and grow and turn into resentment. Discord produces more discord, violence engenders even greater violence, and the state of conflict is perpetuated. The only way out of a spiraling succession of violent reactions and counter-reactions is for one party to take the initiative to reconcile. Reconciliation heals what force can never heal, the suspicion and resentment caused by wrongdoing one against

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another. As Said Nursi puts it, “A minor disaster becomes a large one, and continues. But if they make peace, and the murderer repents and prays continuously for the man he killed, then both sides will gain much and become like brothers. In place of one departed brother, he will gain several religious brothers.”

Said Nursi’s analysis of peace and reconciliation is very similar to the words of the Pope with which I began this talk: “Forgiveness is a personal choice, a decision to go against the natural instinct to pay back evil with evil. In doing so, it always involves an apparent short-term loss, but brings about the possibility of achieving a real long-term gain. Violence works exactly the opposite: opting for an apparent short-term gain, but involving a real and permanent loss. Forgiveness may seem like weakness, but it demands great spiritual strength and moral courage.” Here we find a strong convergence between these two great religious teachers.

So important is the element of forgiveness in human relations that Said Nursi commands the students of the Risale-i Nur to pardon each other’s faults speedily. In fact, mutual forgiveness should be a characteristic mark that identifies students of the Risale-i Nur. “It is absolutely essential,” he states, “that you completely forgive each other. You are brothers closer to each other than the most devoted blood brother, and a brother conceals his brother’s faults, and forgives and forgets. I do not attribute your uncustomary differences and egotism here to your evil-commanding souls, and I cannot reconcile it with the Risale-i Nur students. I rather consider it to be a sort of temporary egotism found even in saints who have given up their souls. So on your part, do not spoil my good opinion through obstinacy, and make peace with each other.”

Since the study of the Risale-i Nur creates a relationship even closer than that of blood brothers, there is no offence so serious that it should go unforgiven among its students. Said Nursi goes so far as to state, “I swear that if one of you were to insult me most terribly and entirely trample my honor but not give up serving the Qur’an, belief, and the Risale-i Nur, I would forgive him and make peace with him and try not to be offended.”

Said Nursi sees a relationship between God’s abundant forgiveness of the faults of humans and the need for believers to forgive one another. Just as God is generous in forgiving any one who repents, so Said Nursi encourages the students of the Risale-i Nur to imitate these Divine qualities by acting with love and forgiveness toward those who wronged them. “Your sincerity, loyalty, and steadfastness are sufficient reason to disregard one another’s faults...For the powerful brotherhood within the Risale-i Nur is such a good thing it causes one to forgive a thousand evils. Since at the Last Judgement when good deeds will preponderate over evils, Divine justice will forgive, you too, seeing that good deeds preponderate, should act with love and forgiveness.”

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One must even forgive one’s enemies and those who have done them wrong. Said Nursi repeatedly expressed his forgiveness for his prison wardens, judges, government officials, law officers, and civil authorities, who had treated him unjustly during his period of courtroom trials and subsequent imprisonments. His point in forgiving others is that the relationship of enmity created by the wrong done by one person to another can only be overcome and superceded by forgiveness. Otherwise, one becomes a prisoner of circumstances, events, and the deeds of others, and history becomes a string of injustices and retaliations. This chain of evil and violence can only be broken by one who is willing to take the initiative to forgive.

In conclusion, I might mention that according to Said Nursi forgiveness and peace-making should not be limited only to students of the *Risale-i Nur* or, more generally, to fellow Muslims. He argues that members of the People of the Book, Jews and Christians, if they want to make peace, should be allowed to do so. “A Christian may,” he states, “accept some sacred matters and may believe in some of the prophets, and may assent to Almighty God in some respects.”

5. A convergence of ideas

When I examine the thought of Pope John Paul and that of Said Nursi, I am stuck by the many similarities. Both understand peace to be not only a universal human longing, but also a cornerstone of the Message which God has revealed to humans. It is not only that humans long for peace, but God desires and intends that men live in peace. Both are convinced that the use of violence and force can never be the truth path to peace. Both hold that societies can succeed only if they are founded on the principles of justice and harmony. Both agree that the cycle of injury and revenge, wrongdoing and retaliation, violence and counter-violence can be broken when people take recourse to forgiveness and pardon. This act, which seems to be a sign of weakness and to result in a short-term loss, is in fact a courageous effort to move beyond past conflicts and establish reconciliation. Both agree that true forgiveness is beyond humankind’s unaided resources and is possible only by the guidance and strength that come from God.

The human race would certainly be facing a better future if people would heed the advice of these two great moral teachers.

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1. The need to discern

One of the most difficult challenges which our age presents to every believer in God is to assess critically the modern civilization in which we live. The life in which we find ourselves today is a confusing, even bewildering, mix of contradictions. There is much in modern civilization that is attractive, much that is useful and that makes life easier, more comfortable, and more enjoyable. At the same time, everyone who takes seriously the gift of faith with which God has blessed him or her is aware that modern civilization is not always in agreement with that faith and, in fact, it often seems to oppose the life of faith and obedience to which we are called.

To many people, religion seems unnecessary, for many of the reasons that in former times led people to turn to religion are today handled by science. When modern people are sick, they go to the doctor. When depressed, they see a psychiatrist or counselor. When they need water for their crops, they don’t pray for rain, but install an irrigation system. From that, it is a short step for modern people to say that they no longer need God, for science can provide adequate solutions to the problems that arise in regard to survival, health, and well-being.

For believers, it is not simply that modern civilization tends to exile God to the margins of daily consciousness and activity. Modern civilization also offers a value system that is at odds with that of religion. It defines happiness differently from religious thought. Success and failure are counted in different terms. Self-fulfillment is regarded as a basic human motivation, and possession of consumer goods is considered a mark of personal achievement. It follows from this that competition becomes the moving force of modern life, and the world comes to be divided into the winners and the losers.

For those of us, Muslims, Christians, and others for whom God is the beginning, the center, and the end of our existence, and for whom God’s will is the criterion of good and evil, we need a way to sort out what is truly valuable in modern civilization from what is ephemeral and destructive. We need intellectual tools to be able to analyze the civilization in which we live so that we do not buy rotten fruit along with the fresh, so that we do not throw out the baby with the bath water.

In my opinion, it is the lifetime achievement of Said Nursi that in the Risale-i Nur he was able to provide modern Muslims with the interpretative tools they need to analyze modern civilization, so that they can discern what is of genuine and lasting value in modern life and so that they can also see clearly the harmful and self-destructive tendencies that lie beneath its glittering surface. Nursi’s analysis of modern civilization is complex and subtle, and I can do no more than mention several aspects that appear to me as especially worthy of our reflections today. I will approach this topic in two parts, firstly, by summarizing Said Nursi’s critique of modern civilization in the
Risale-i Nur and, secondly, by looking at his efforts to reconcile what is good in this civilization with the demands of religious faith.

PART I: NURSI’S CRITIQUE OF MODERN CIVILIZATION

2. Modern civilization is two

What we are accustomed to call “modern civilization” or “Western civilization” Said Nursi usually referred to as “European civilization,” or simply as “Europe.” This is logical, since modernity, not only in the sense of scientific and technological advances, but also in its philosophical underpinnings, first took root in Europe and from there was brought to every corner of the world. Today much of the leadership in propagating the modern world-view and life-style has been taken up by the U.S.A., which employs its extensive financial, military, organizational, and communication resources to this end. The globalization trends which Nursi foresaw almost a century ago have now made what he was accustomed to refer to collectively as “Europe” into a truly worldwide phenomenon, with cities like Tokyo, Seoul, Singapore, and Sao Paolo taking their place as focal points of disseminating modernist ideas alongside earlier centers such as Paris, London, Berlin and Washington.

So when Nursi makes his famous statement, “Europe is two,” he is really writing about the modern world in which we are all living today. Looking at our world at the start of the 21st Century, religious believers could well apply Nursi’s basic insight and say “Modern civilization is two” [i.e., “two-faced” or “two-sided.”] From this starting point concerning the duality of modern civilization, Nursi posits the need to discern and distinguish among the contradictory phenomena that go to make up globalized modernity. He states:

Europe is two. One follows the sciences which serve justice and right and the industries beneficial for the life of society through the inspiration it has received from true Christianity; this first Europe I am not addressing. I am rather addressing the second, corrupt Europe which, through the darkness of the philosophy of naturalism, supposing the evils of civilization to be its virtues, has driven mankind to vice and misguidance.27

If Nursi’s evaluation of European civilization can sometimes appear to focus on the negative, it is because he has no quarrel with the “first Europe,” which retains the values of faith, justice, and social harmony. He is concerned rather with warning people about the destructive elements in modern civilization so they can take the necessary measures to withstand its dangerous charms. He is seeking to refute the corrupt Europe’s false claims and lay bare its harmful philosophical infrastructure. He notes:

On my journey of the spirit at that time I said to Europe’s collective personality, which apart from beneficial science and the virtues of civilization, holds in its hand meaningless, harmful philosophy and noxious, dissolute civilization: “Know this, O second Europe! You hold a diseased and misguided philosophy in your right hand, and a harmful and corrupt civilization in your left, and claim, ‘Mankind’s happiness is with these two!’”28

27 Seventeenth Flash, Fifth Note, p. 160.
28 Ibid.
Nursi sees modern man at a crossroads. What direction is he going to go? What path will he take? Will he accept and live according to the whole package that modern life offers, or will he take the time and effort to stop to analyze and distinguish? What intellectual and spiritual tools will he employ to sort out the grain from the mass of dirt and stones with which it is gathered? For Nursi, it is the Qur’an that offers the criteria for what is to be saved and what is to be discarded.

Of two brothers, one is a believing spirit and a righteous heart. The other is an unbelieving spirit with a depraved heart. Of the two roads, the one to the right is the way of the Qur’an and belief in God, while the left one is the road of rebellion and denial. The garden on the road is man’s fleeting life in human society and civilization, where good and evil, and things good and bad and clean and dirty are found side by side. The sensible person is he who acts according to the rule: ‘Take what is pleasant and clear, and leave what is distressing and turbid,’ and goes on his way with tranquility of heart.²⁹

3. A civilization built on materialist values

In numerous places, Nursi points up the contrast between the societal values proposed by modern civilization and the vision of society presented by the Qur’an. To Nursi the Qur’anic vision differs only in details from what had been proposed by all the prophets before Muhammad, hence it is a vision that Muslims share with “true Christians” who genuinely follow the teachings of the prophet Jesus. Jesus’ Christian followers sought to build Europe on these prophetic values, but this effort was sabotaged from the beginning by their reliance on Greco-Roman philosophy.³⁰

In the 18th-19th Centuries, by way of the naturalist and materialist philosophies propounded by the scholars of the Enlightenment, even the vestiges of prophetic teaching which remained in European civilization were attacked and abandoned. Thus, the Enlightenment philosophers set about building “modern Europe” on principles of their own making, and modern Western civilization is the fruit of their labors. Since the principles on which they based the new civilization were the result of their human rationalist speculations which rejected the teaching of the prophets, modern civilization offers a very different set of values which should characterize social relations.

Nursi saw the same process that had previously occurred in Europe taking place in Turkey in his own day. Working on the notion that religion was an obstacle to progress, many in the Turkish Republic were attempting to replace religious values and way of life with ways of acting derived from modern Europe, and consequently they opposed the dissemination and study of the Risale-i Nur. In his defense in the Afyon court, Nursi pointed out the futility of the campaign to replace a religious outlook with one of secular modernity. “An irreligious Muslim does not resemble any other person without religion. No sort of progress or civilization can take the place of religion, or righteousness, or the learning of the truths of belief in particular, which are the innate need of the

²⁹ Eighth Word, p.45.
people of this country, who for a thousand years have illumined the world with their religion and heroically preserved their firmness of faith in the face of the assaults of the whole world."

Those promoting modern values claim that they are simply interested in providing a good life for the majority of the people. Upon examining this concept of the good life, Nursi concludes that it is one of the “deceptive, opiate fantasies of civilization.” What the concept involves is limited to responding to bodily needs, on the supposition that if people have food in their stomachs, a roof over their heads, and access to medical treatment when needed, they have achieved “the good life.” To Nursi, this is a short-sighted understanding of the true needs of humankind. A person also has spiritual needs, which cannot be met by the facilities of modernity. “O foolish friend! Do you suppose your life’s duty is restricted to following the good life according to the requisites of civilization and to gratifying the physical appetites? Do you suppose the sole aim of the delicate and subtle senses, the sensitive faculties and members, the well-ordered limbs and systems, the inquisitive feelings and senses that make up your life are restricted to satisfying the low desires of the base soul in this fleeting life?”

The basic problem, according to Nursi, is that modern civilization has clouded people’s minds so that they are unable to see the value of the life of the spirit. Modern life focuses on the immediate, the temporal, the ephemeral, and finds it difficult to see beyond to questions of eternal importance. “At this time, due to the domination of European civilization and the supremacy of natural philosophy and the preponderance of the conditions of worldly life, minds and hearts have become scattered, and endeavor and favor divided. Minds have become strangers to non-material matters.” Instead of seeking the truly good life intended by God for people, men and women are caught up in a rat race of seeking wealth, prestige, pleasure, and political power in the mistaken fantasy that these things will bring them happiness.

The psychological toll of modernity is high, and people can become frozen into inactivity. Modern man, “since his thought is submerged in philosophy, his mind plunged in politics, and his heart is giddy at the life of this world,” is unable to evaluate seriously questions of eternal weight. His mind becomes dulled to reality and he becomes unable to take serious decision and to exert his creativity in a positive direction. “Through philosophical investigation and natural science, and the seductive amusements of dissolute civilization and its intoxicated passions, sick philosophy has both increased the world’s frozen state and inaction, and made denser heedlessness, and increased its opaqueness and turbidity, and caused the Maker and the hereafter to be forgotten.” By contrast, the teaching of the Qur’an “gives the world a transparency and removes its turbidity.”

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31 Fourteenth Ray, Defense to the Afyon Court, p. 379.
32 Thirteenth Word, Addendum to the Second Station, p. 167.
33 Eleventh Word, p. 139.
34 Twenty-seventh Word, Third Obstacle, p. 496.
35 Ibid.
4. Contrast between European and Qur’anic civilization

In the aphorisms that make up the *Seeds of Reality*, Nursi succinctly summarizes some elements of difference between the two visions. “Modern civilization, he states, has been founded on five negative principles.”

1. Its point of support is force, the mark of which is aggression.
2. Its aim and goal is self-interest, the mark of which is competitive jostling.
3. Its principle in life is conflict, the mark of which is strife.
4. The bond holding the masses together is racism and negative nationalism, which is nourished through devouring others; its mark is collision.
5. Its enticement is inciting lust and passion and gratifying the desires.\(^{37}\)

The five principles might be stated succinctly as follows:

1) might makes right,
2) self-interest and competition,
3) the law of the jungle, everyone for himself,
4) my race and nation are superior,
5) I have a right to whatever I want.

To these principles, which Nursi sees as both destructive and self-destructive, he contrasts the teaching of the Qur’an:

The civilization the *shari’a* of Muhammad (PBUH) comprises and commands is this: its point of support is truth instead of force, the mark of which is justice and harmony. Its goal is virtue in place of self-benefit, the mark of which is love and attraction. Its means of unity are the ties of religion, country, and class, in place of racism and nationalism, and the mark of these is sincere brotherhood, peace, and only defense against external aggression. In life is the principle of mutual assistance instead of the principle of conflict, the mark of which is accord and solidarity. It offers guidance instead of lust, the mark of which is human progress and spiritual advancement.\(^{38}\)

The contrast is clear; the Qur’an proposes very different principles. In the civilization envisioned by the Qur’an (and the teachings of the earlier prophets):

1) it is *truth*, not might, which makes right.
2) *Virtue*, non self-interest, is the proper motivation for human acts.
3) *Unity* rather than conflict should be the basis for social relations, and
4) *mutual assistance* instead of cutthroat competition.
5) It upholds divine *guidance* rather than human whims as the norm for ethical behavior.

A society built on such principles will be characterized by values like justice, harmony, love, peace, brotherhood, and solidarity. It will attract others by virtue of its own good qualities, rather than by imposing its views or by dominating and looking down on others.

When a civilization accepts the principle of “might makes right,” the result is injustice. When civilization operates on the principle of immediate gratification of desires, the result is laziness, inactivity, and torpor. Nursi accuses Muslim societies of having too often adopted these negative

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\(^{37}\) *Seeds of Reality*, aphorism 61. Cf. also The Twelfth Word, Third Principle, where he elaborates the same points of contrast. Cf. also, “Flowers from the Seeds of Reality: A Dream Assembly”.

\(^{38}\) Ibid.
principles of modern civilization and the result is “hunger, financial loss, and physical trials.”

The Qur’an teaches hard work and industry and to share one’s wealth with the poor. But Muslims have not lived according to this teaching and followed instead the principles of modern civilization. He says, “When comparing modern civilization with the principles of the Qur’an, all immorality and instability in the social life of man proceeds from two sources: 1) ‘Once my stomach is full, what do I care if others die of hunger?’ and 2) ‘You work, and I’ll eat.’”

5. Destructive social, political, and spiritual consequences

The effects of trying to recreate society on the basis of a materialist outlook are not found only in the cultural field, but also in the economic and political realm. Nursi saw a clear ideological development from the principles of the French revolution which led eventually to dehumanizing values of Soviet communism. In rejecting and even oppressing the sacred, man removes all limits to class and national conflict and ends in anarchy. Applying the Qur’anic teaching about Gog and Magog to modern history, Nursi traces a direct development from French libertarianism to communism to anarchy.

Socialism sprang up in the French Revolution from the seed of libertarianism. Since socialism destroyed certain sacred matters, the ideas it inculcated turned into bolshevism. Because bolshevism corrupted even more sacred moral and human values and those of the human heart, of course the seeds it sowed will produce anarchy, which recognizes no restrictions whatsoever and has respect for nothing. For if respect and compassion quit the human heart, those with such hearts become exceedingly cruel beasts and can no longer be governed through politics.

Nursi sees the almost continual warfare that has occurred in the modern age as the most tragic effect of ordering society on materialist principles. He views the two World Wars as “a manifestation of Divine Wrath in punishment for the vice and misguidance of civilization.”

This need not be understood as God unleashing divine wrath to bring about wars as punishment for humankind’s misdeeds, but rather in God allowing the natural effects of human error and arrogance to run their destructive course. If people build civilization on the principles of conflict, competition, and enmity, the result will inevitably be war and mutual destruction. He comments on the Qur’anic passage about “the blowers on knots” in the context of 20th Century history.

The sentence the blowers on knots ‘coincides’ with the dates when due to their ambition and greed the Europeans tyrants who caused the two World Wars, instigated a change of Sultan and the Balkan and Italian Wars with the idea of spoiling the consequences of the Constitutional Revolution which favored the Qur’an. Then with the outbreak of the First World War, through the political diplomats blowing their evils, material and immaterial, and their sorcery and poison into everyone’s heads through the tongue of the radio, and inculcating their covert plans into the heart of human destiny, they prepared the evils that would savagely destroy a thousand years of the progress of civilization, which corresponds exactly with the meaning of the blowers on knots.

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40 Fifth Ray, Second Station, Fifteenth Matter, p. 105.
41 Kastamonu Lahnkas, pp. 80-81.
42 Eleventh Ray, Eleventh Topic, p. 287.
It is clear from the Risale-i Nur that for Said Nursi, the “spiritual darkness arising from science and philosophy” was not merely an intellectual problem. It was a burden that affected him personally. In his “Treatise for the Elderly,” he records that the struggle brought him great inner pain and struggle. He states that “relying on what they had learnt from the people of misguidance and philosophers, my soul and Satan attacked my reason and my heart.” He thanks God for the victory over the despair and confusion against which he was struggling and shared his experience of spiritual crisis in the hope that it might help others who had been led astray in their youth “by matters which though called Western philosophy or the sciences of civilization, are in part misguidance and in part trivia.” Through meditation on the Qur’an, Nursi was able to arrive at an understanding of Divine unity that recognized in all creatures the artwork of a loving Creator. As he says,

And so, through this most subtle, powerful, profound, and clear proof, my soul, which had been a temporary student of Satan and the spokesman for the people of misguidance and the philosophers, was silenced, and, all praise be to God, came to believe completely. It said: “Yes, what I need is a Creator and Sustainer who possesses the power to know the least thoughts of my heart and my most secret wishes, who will answer the most hidden needs of my spirit and will transform the mighty earth into the Hereafter in order to give me eternal happiness.”

6. Demonic influences

In the previous section, we noted that Nursi observed, even in his own thinking, Satan making use of the intellectual underpinnings of Western civilization to tempt him to disbelief. He saw demonic influences responsible for much of the evil in modern society.

Modern civilization is ambiguous because its sources of inspiration are varied. From the truths of revealed religion, modern civilization retains basic notions of the importance of love, harmony and justice. However, the destructive elements of modernity come from anti-religious philosophical ideologies and perhaps also from evil spirits. “Modern civilization, which is the product of the thought of all mankind and perhaps the jinn as well, has taken up a position opposed to the Qur’an. With its sorcery it impugns the miraculous nature of the Qur’an.”

He sees a satanic strategy in false nationalist ideologies which seek to impose a way of life based on European civilization. It promises much, but it offers nothing of value, particularly to pious believers and to those who suffer. Nursi states:

Is the greatest benefit of the believers and the pious to be found in a European-type civilization? Or is it to be found in thinking of eternal happiness by means of the truths of belief, in traveling the way of truth and finding true solace? The way that the misguided and bogus patriots have taken extinguishes the spiritual lights of the pious people of belief, destroys their true consolation, and shows death to be eternal nothingness and the grave to be the door to everlasting separation. Are the benefits of disaster victims, the

43 Twenty-sixth Flash, 11th Hope, p. 306.
44 Ibid.
sick, and those who have despaired of life, to be found in the way of a European-type, irreligious civilization?\textsuperscript{46}

Nursi sees a diabolical element in the tendencies to material luxury and self-satisfaction, a conscious effort to replace the Paradise intended by God for those who believe with an earthly paradise. This is the work of Dajjal, whom Nursi finds in the collective personality of the “second Europe.”

The Dajjal is superficially like a human being. He is arrogant and Pharaoh-like and has forgotten God, a foolish satan and intriguing person who calls his superficial, tyrannical rule godhead. His huge current of atheism, his collective personality, is truly vast...The Dajjal’s false paradise are the alluring amusements and enticements of civilization. [He] brings a false paradise for the dissolute and the worldly, while for the people of religion and Islam, like the angels of Hell it brings dangers in the hand of civilization, and casts them into captivity and poverty.\textsuperscript{47}

Nursi is not pessimistic, however. He feels that a union of Muslims and Christians will in the future succeed in defeating the Dajjal and its false promises. The need for unity in combating the attacks of atheistic philosophy and behavior Nursi sees as one of the strongest motivations for true Christians and Muslims to come to an understanding between themselves.

At that point, when the [atheistic] current appears to be very strong, the religion of true Christianity, which comprises the collective personality of esus (Upon whom be peace), will emerge. It will descend from the skies of Divine Mercy. Present-day Christianity will be purified in the face of that reality; it will cast off superstition and distortion, and unite with the truths of Islam. Christianity will in effect be transformed into a sort of Islam. Following the Qur’an, the collective personality of Christianity will be in the rank of follower, and Islam, in that of leader. True religion will become a mighty force as a result of this union. 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.\textsuperscript{48}

\section*{7. The dangers of consumerism}

One of the most pernicious aspects of modern civilization is the proliferation of material goods and the consequent urge to convince people that they need such goods to obtain happiness. This does not happen by accident. Nursi sees this preoccupation with the material as a direct result of the abandonment of the spiritual side of life. Having rejected the value of loving obedience to God in daily behavior and given up the hope of everlasting life with God, modern people become obsessed with the acquisition of material goods and comforts in order to give meaning to their lives. In a letter written near the end of his life after visits to Istanbul, Said Nursi wrote:

Since modern Western civilization acts contrary to the fundamental laws of the revealed religions, its evils have come to outweigh its good aspects, its errors and harmful aspects its benefits. General tranquility and a happy worldly life, the true aims of civilization, have been destroyed. Since wastefulness and extravagance have taken the place of

\textsuperscript{46} Twenty-ninth Letter, Fourth Satanic Strategy, p. 493.
\textsuperscript{47} Fifteenth Letter, Answer to the Fourth Question, p. 80.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.
frugality and contentment, and laziness and the desire for ease have overcome endeavor and the sense of service, it has made unfortunate mankind both extremely poor and extremely lazy. In explaining the fundamental law of the revealed Qur’an: *Eat and drink, but waste not in excess,* and *Man possesses naught save that which he strives*, the Risale-i Nur says: Man’s happiness in this life lies in frugality and endeavor, and it is through them that the rich and poor will be reconciled.\(^{49}\)

Nursi explains that in former times, people only needed a few material things to make them content and they were willing to work hard to obtain those basic needs. In modern life, however, “through wastefulness, misuse, stimulation of the appetites, and such things as custom and addiction, present-day civilization has made inessential needs seem essential, and in place of the four things which someone used to need, modern civilized man is now in need of twenty.”\(^{50}\)

To Nursi, consumerism is directly linked to the abandonment of religion. It is at once an impoverishment and a source of depravity and aggression. If in former times, wars were fought for reasons of religion and justice, today they are fought for possession of oil fields, water rights, and control of markets. Said Nursi states:

> Since modern Western civilization has not truly heeded the revealed religions, it has both impoverished man and increased his needs. It has destroyed the principle of frugality and contentment, and increased wastefulness, greed, and covetousness. It has opened the way to tyranny and what is unlawful…It has encouraged depravity and dissipation, and wasted lives on useless things.”\(^{51}\)

**PART II: RECONCILING RELIGION AND MODERN CIVILIZATION**

**8. Thanking God for human progress**

If one were to read only Said Nursi’s critique of modern civilization, one might conclude that he is fixated on the past, intent on promoting a nostalgic return to a romanticized past age when life was in better order. Such a conclusion would, in my opinion, be a misreading of the Risale-i Nur.

To view Nursi as unalterably opposed to all forms of progress and to all aspects of modernity is to forget his basic premise: that modern civilization is by its nature dualistic. “Europe [that is, modern civilization] is two.” Against the first he has no complaint; it is the “second Europe” of irreligious philosophers, scientists, and politicians that he directed his criticisms.

Said Nursi was not an obstinate traditionalist who sought to turn back the clock. He affirmed that “there are numerous virtues in [modern] civilization,” and went on to hold that the positive values of modern life were not solely the products of Europe, but are the property of all and arise from “the combined thought of humankind, the laws of the revealed religions, innate need, and in particular from the Islamic revolution brought about by the *shari’a* of Muhammad.”\(^{52}\) With such

\(^{49}\) Emirdağ Lahıkası, ii, 97-99

\(^{50}\) Ibid.

\(^{51}\) Ibid.

elements of modern civilization, religious people have no quarrel, but rather, they accept and rejoice in the benefits this civilization brings to humankind.

In fact, during his lifetime Nursi was often accused by his opponents of being totally opposed to progress and the advancement of civilization. Such accusations were regularly leveled against him in the frequent court proceedings at which he was forced to appear. In the charges brought against him in the Denizli Court, he was accused, for “having criticized the evils and faults of modern civilization,” of rejecting the use of the radio, airplanes, and trains. In his defense speech, Nursi had to defend himself against what he regarded as preposterous accusations. He stated that such technological achievements were actually blessings from God, but instead of thanking God wholeheartedly for guiding men to invent such modern wonders, men have used them to attack and destroy one another.

Almighty God’s great bounties of the airplane, railway, and radio should be responded to with great thanks, yet mankind had not done this and had rained down bombs on men’s heads with the planes. While thanks for the vast bounty of the radio would be shown by making it a universal million-tongued reciter of the Qur’an, which would allow people all over the earth to listen to the Qur’an... Although I urged Muslims to work towards these wonders, I am accused of “opposing modern advances like the railway, airplane, and radio.”

In his court defense, Nursi repeatedly claims that he has been unjustly deprived of the very rights that the proponents of modernity claim to be championing. He states: “The way I have been treated these six years has been arbitrary and outside the law. They looked on me as though I had been stripped of all the rights of civilization and even of all worldly rights.” In his righteous anger, he challenges those who have persecuted and imprisoned him on the basis of their own modernist philosophies to act according to the upright principles they proclaim. If they speak of human rights and justice, they should apply those also in his case.

Through the strength of the All-Wise Qur’an, I challenge all Europe including your irreligious people. Through the lights of belief I have published, I have razed the sturdy bastions they call the physical sciences and Nature. I have cast down lower than animals their greatest irreligious philosophers. If all Europe, of which your irreligious people are a part, were to gather, through God’s assistance, they could not make me recant a single matter of that way of mine.

It is the false proponents of modern civilization who violate their own principles. “What right do you have to propose to me the principles of your civilization?” he asks. “Casting me outside the laws of civilization, you have wrongfully forced me to reside in a village for five years prohibited from all social intercourse and correspondence. While you left all the exiles in the town with their friends and relations, then gave them the papers granting them an amnesty, without reason you isolated me and did not allow me to meet with anyone from my native region with one or two exceptions. You do not count me as a member of this nation and a citizen. How can you propose to me that I apply your civil code to myself?”

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53 Twelfth Ray, Defense Speech in the Denizli Court, p. 300.
54 Ibid.
55 Sixteenth Letter, Addendum, p. 95.
56 Sixteenth Letter, Fifth Point, p. 92.
9. Reconciling religious and secular education: the Medresetü’z-Zehra

Nursi’s great dream, which was never realized due to political circumstances, was to erect the university-level Madrasat al-Zahra’ (Medresetü’z-Zehra) in Eastern Turkey. This grand project, for which he planned and sought funds as late as 1951, was to have two main goals: 1) to promote Islamic unity by bringing together Kurds, Turks, Arabs, and students from the Caucasus and Central Asia, and 2) to “reconcile the sciences of philosophy and those of religion, and make peace between European civilization and the truths of Islam.”

For this school, Nursi envisioned a new type of education, one which would unite secular and religious education. He foresaw a truly modern school in agreement with the teaching of the Qur’an. If, as he says, that the great enemies of humankind are “ignorance, disunity, and poverty,” it is easy to understand Nursi’s passionate desire for the medrese in Eastern Turkey which would combat all three enemies in one single project.

It is clear from this lifetime project of Nursi’s that he found much in modern civilization which was not contradictory to religious belief. He held that the study of science was essential for modern believers, a conviction which he proved in his own life by spending much time in scientific studies. He notes that the Qur’an does not prohibit Muslims from having “admiration for the civilization and progress” of Europe, or from borrowing from what is good in their civilization.

10. Human progress in civilization should lead to the awareness of the Creator

It was often the context of Nursi’s court trials that occasioned some of his strongest statements in favor of the positive elements of civilization. At his 1948 defense of Risale students in Afyon, he denied that he was encouraging the students of the Risale-i Nur to reject modernity. Rather, he claimed that by reading the Risale-i Nur his students were laying the foundation for a true modern civilization grounded in the teaching of the Qur’an and defending the nation against the communist threat. He concludes:

The basis of all human society, and especially the Islamic nation, is earnest love between relatives, concerned relations between tribes and groups, brotherhood and moral assistance for fellow believers arising from Islamic nationhood, self-sacrificing concern for one’s fellow-countrymen and the members of one’s nation, and unshakeable attachment and devotion to and support for the truths of the Qur’an... It is only by denying these bonds, which secure the life of society, and by accepting the Red Peril - which is scattering the terrible seed of anarchy in the north, destroying nations and their youth, and by drawing everyone’s children to itself, annihilates kinship and nationhood, and opens the way to the total corruption of human civilization and society - that the Risale-i Nur

59 Münâzarat, pp. 26-27.
students can be called a political society in the sense of its being a crime. The Risale-i Nur students therefore do not hesitate to display their attachment to the truths of the Qur’an and their firm relations with their brothers of the hereafter.\(^{60}\)

It is not simply a case of believers tolerating and passively accepting the human progress embodied in modern civilization. Said Nursi believes that reflection on the fruits of civilization should actually lead people to God and to an understanding of the Divine plan of creation. He recounts this in the parable of a man from a primitive society who enters a palace but cannot understand its marks of civilization or where they came from. The palace represents the world, and its furnishings represent the “fruits of civilization.” He compares the man in the parable to a modern atheist, who looks at the world and the accomplishments of human endeavor and yet fails to recognize the God who has created this and guided human progress and achievement. The naturalist philosopher thinks that all this came about by accident and that human progress is the effect of unguided human design. To this person Nursi says: “Study His decree, listen to the Qur’an! Be delivered from your delirious raving!\(^{61}\)

As Nursi looks to the future, he envisions a new civilization which will arise from the destructive international and national relations of the present day, which will be firmly rooted in the Islamic \textit{shari’a} and will incorporate the positive features of modern civilization. This new civilization, which will overcome and move beyond the present dichotomy between religion and science, will be one that Muslims will be the first to accept.

For wondrously this calamity has made unfold compassion, Islamic solidarity and brotherhood, the leaven of our lives, and has expedited the shaking, the destruction, of civilization. Present-day low civilization will change form and its system will fall apart. Then Islamic civilization will emerge, and Muslims will certainly be the first to enter it voluntarily.\(^{62}\)

**11. Engagement in and withdrawal from civilization**

I hesitate to raise this final aspect of Said Nursi’s approach to civilization, for the topic deserves a serious paper to itself. It is the whole question of involvement of the religious believer in worldly society and withdrawal from that society. Civilization, as we have seen, not only encompasses advances in technology – in Said Nursi’s day, cars, trains, and airplanes; in our day, computers, internet, and cellular handphones – but it includes the active engagement in worldly affairs.

A fundamental question which every believer must answer for oneself is whether it is God’s will that they should live out their religious commitments in the context of the complexities and dangers of worldly life, or whether they are called to retire from the activities of civilization. Many of the Sufis felt that in order to pursue their goal of achieving a union of love and will with God they must withdraw from the world which presented temptations and obstacles to reaching their goal. Similarly, in Christianity, many followers of Jesus down through the centuries have felt called to “renounce the world” in order to pursue a monastic life dedicated to the worship of God, good deeds, and hospitality.

\(^{60}\) Fourteenth Ray, p. 415; cf. also, Eleventh Ray, Eleventh Topic.
\(^{61}\) Twenty-third Flash, p. 243.
\(^{62}\) Flowers from the Seeds of Reality, a Dream Assembly.
It is inevitable that a spiritual master like Said Nursi would be asked about the issue. Some disciples noted that the great Sufi saints had abandoned the world, yet the Companions of the Prophet were usually very actively involved in worldly affairs of civilization at that time. Said Nursi was challenged to defend his view that the least of the Companions was greater than even the holiest saint. Nursi responded that to the Companions, the world was an arable field which had to be sowed, plowed, and reaped. It is true that they were greatly involved in the concerns of the civilization of their time, but this did not alienate them from their commitment to follow the Qur’an.

The world, he teaches, has a face that looks toward the Hereafter, and for believers to love that face is a path to attaining perfection. Moreover, there is an aspect to all worldly life, including the civilization of the present time, that reflects the Divine Names, that is, that point to and show forth the various qualities of God. In other words, to involve oneself in civilized life with a view to carrying out God’s work – the sowing and reaping – does not separate one from the life of faith, nor does the effort to discover the beautiful qualities of the Creator in all that He has provided. The Companions of Muhammad engaged themselves in worldly activities in this spirit, and as such attained a high degree of goodness and uprightness.

The error of misguided people is to love the world and civilization for its own sake, a love that can never be reciprocated. He paraphrases one who holds such a view: “I consider happiness in this world and life’s pleasures, and the progress of civilization and perfection of arts as all lying in refusal to think of the hereafter and to know God, in love of this world, in absolute freedom and license and in relying exclusively on myself.” The love that such people should direct to God, they waste in triviality and self-interest, and for this they suffer the consequences. In short, engagement in the life of civilization without recognizing or serving God is both self-defeating and self-destructive.

In accordance with the principles that ‘the consequence of an illicit love is suffering a merciless torment,’ you are suffering a fully justified punishment, for you are unlawfully employing your innate capacity for love, knowledge, thanks and worship that relate properly to the essence, attributes and Names of God Almighty, on your own soul and the life of this world. You have lavished the love that belongs to God Almighty on yourself. Your own soul has become your beloved and will cause you endless suffering: you are not giving true peace to that beloved.

However, there comes a time in the life of the believer when it is necessary to withdraw from the world, to meditate in solitude, to devote oneself to pursuits of eternal import. Circumstances often dictate such times; sickness, old age, or imprisonment, all of which Said Nursi experienced in his own life led him to an attitude of retirement. In the beautiful “Treatise for the Elderly,” he notes that such times are not to be regarded as loss, but can be a source of spiritual riches, growth in understanding of God’s will, and a preparation for death. After one of his final visits to Istanbul, he wrote of his retreat to Sarıyer to study the teachings of the spiritual masters, and offers his experience as counsel to elderly disciples:

63 Twenty-seventh Word, Addendum, Second question, p. 510.
64 Thirty-second Word, Third Stopping Place, pp. 663-664.
65 Twenty-sixth Flash, Thirteenth Hope, p. 310.
After receiving this reminder of the Qur’an, the graveyard became more familiar to me than Istanbul. Solitude and retirement became more pleasurable to me than conversation and company. I found a place of seclusion for myself in Sarıyer on the Bosphorus. There, Ghawth al-A’zam (May God be pleased with him) became a master, doctor, and guide for me…, while Imam-i Rabbani (May God be pleased with him) became a companion, sympathetic friend, and teacher…I was extremely happy I had approached old age, withdrawn from civilization, and free of social life. I thanked God. And so, respected persons who have entered upon old age and who frequently recall death through its warnings! In accordance with the light of the teachings of belief taught by the Qur’an, we should look favorably on old age, death, and illness, and even love them in one respect. Since we have an infinitely precious bounty like belief, both old age is agreeable, and illness, and death.\textsuperscript{66}

In short, for Said Nursi, it is not a question of which is better, engagement or retirement, but the attitude with which either is faced. If one is seeking to do God’s will and to discover the Divine Names in one’s circumstances, even imprisonment, old age, and death can be seen as blessings. Civilization becomes a destructive alternative to a life of faith when it is regarded as an end in itself, as a way of loving and serving oneself, rather than of loving and serving the Creator and Final Goal of life. Ultimately, there are aspects of modern life which reflect God’s qualities. These can be accepted and one should thank God for them. But those aspects of modernity that deny or ignore God or banish God to the margins of consciousness and activity make lying promises they cannot keep. It is divine wisdom to recognize and reject these false promises, but to accomplish this, the modern believer must discern and distinguish the good from the bad in modern civilization according to the interpretative light of the teaching of the Qur’an.

\textsuperscript{66} Twenty-sixth Flash, Tenth Hope, p. 304.
IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ABRAHAM

It is fitting that our encounter today should be called “In the Footsteps of Abraham.” It is the faith of Abraham in the One and Holy God that forms the deepest link between Jews, Christians, and Muslims because it lies at the very origins of our religious histories. Through the centuries, Jewish rabbis, Christian theologians, and Muslim scholars - thinkers, teachers and mystics of all three traditions - have found in the stories of Abraham recounted in the Hebrew Bible, the two Christian Testaments, and the Qur’an rich material for meditation. Even in our modern world, religious teachers like Martin Buber, Pope John Paul II, and Said Nursi have drawn inspiration from the stories of Abraham that form a key element in our common spiritual heritage.

I would like to mention several points on which our reflections on Abraham can affirm how much we as Jews, Christians, and Muslims, hold in common. I am especially impressed with how often Pope John Paul II, the spiritual head of the Catholic Church to which I belong, has gone back to the figure of Abraham in order to illustrate his affirmation of the common values held by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and I would like to share some of those references with you.

1. Abraham, the model of faith. Abraham’s trust in God, his believing in God’s promises even when what was promised seemed impossible and even when God seemed to be working against their fulfillment, shows the importance of absolute trust in His faithfulness. Faith in God gives Jews, Christians, and Muslims the strength and confidence they need to make a positive contribution to society, to endure setbacks, overcome discouragement and to continue to work for peace and human fellowship even at moments of failure and in the face of apparently insurmountable obstacles.

John Paul II’s first visit outside Rome after becoming Pope was to Ankara, Turkey, in 1979. Speaking to the Christians at the Mass, the Pope stressed both the spiritual unity of the three communities descended from Abraham as well as the effects of having an active faith like that of their spiritual ancestor. He said:

Faith in God, which the spiritual descendants of Abraham, Christians, Muslims, and Jews profess, when it is lived sincerely so that it penetrates life, is an assured foundation of human dignity, brotherhood and freedom and a principle of rectitude for moral conduct and life and society. As a consequence of this faith in God the transcendent Creator, human beings find themselves at the summit of creation.

In the New Testament, St. Paul devotes the fourth chapter of his Letter to the Romans to a reflection on the theme of Abraham. His main point is that Abraham was justified by God, not because of any merit on his own part, but because of God’s sovereign goodness and grace. “Abraham,” he says, “is the father of us all,” not because he deserved to be so, but because God freely bestowed that favor upon him.

2. Abraham, the Friend of God. Abraham is called “the intimate friend of God” by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. In the Hebrew Bible, on the lips of the prophet Isaiah God calls the
Jewish people “My servant, seed of Abraham my friend” (Isaiah 41: 8). This is repeated by Paul in the Christian New Testament when he refers to Abraham as “a just man and friend of God” (Romans 4: 2). In the Qur’an, Abraham is “Al-Khalil,” God’s intimate friend, as in the verse which says: “Allah has taken Abraham as a friend (Qur’an 4: 125). The common recognition of Abraham as God’s friend can still speak to modern people like us, reminding us that at the deepest level, religion is not about rituals, regulations, and doctrinal formulations, but rather it is a matter of living in a close, personal relationship with God. Abraham, Al-Khalil, remains a model for Jews, Christians and Muslims because he inspires us to seek to deepen our own relation to God, a relationship of love, obedience, and trust, a relationship where we aspire to be, like Abraham, “God’s servant.”

This relationship can be summed up in terms like “holiness,” “uprightness,” or “service,” and Jews, Christians, and Muslims are all called to be holy before God. In 1985, Pope John Paul II addressed a Muslim-Christian seminar on holiness and noted how our common faith in Abraham should open the door to mutual exploration of what is involved in true holiness. “As I have often said in other meetings with Muslims,” said the Pope, “your God and ours is one and the same, and we are brothers and sisters in the faith of Abraham. Thus it is natural that we have much to discuss concerning true holiness in obedience and worship to God.”

3. Abraham, the patron of migrants. One of the marks of modern life is mobility. People have been on the move throughout human history, probably even before God called Abraham to bring his family from Ur to the land which God would guide him. In modern times, this movement of peoples is greater than ever, sometimes for economic reasons, sometimes to flee war or discrimination, sometimes to get a new start in life for their family. For example, a century ago, there were few Muslims in Western Europe, but now they number in the millions.

Migration, however, is not without its dangers. When people move to new regions with new cultures and languages, they can too easily lose their roots, forget their values, discard their moral principles, even abandon their faith in God. For this reason, Pope John Paul II, speaking to Muslim migrants to Europe in Mainz, Germany, urged them to “Live your faith also in this foreign land.” “When you are not embarrassed to pray publicly, you thereby give us Christians an example worthy of respect.” The Pope regards migrants who bring their faith to new lands as following the pattern of Abraham and his family who faithfully responded to God by leaving their homeland and trusting that God would accompany them and guide them. He said: Not all the guests in this land are Christians. Especially, there is a great community who identify themselves with the faith of Islam. When with sincere hearts you brought your faith in God from your homeland to this foreign land, where now you pray to God who is Creator and Lord, you truly follow in the footsteps of that great pilgrim band of people who from the time of Abraham until today have continued to leave their native lands in order to seek and find God.

4. Abraham, the model of hospitality. Complementary to migration is hospitality. Migrants do not move to uninhabited regions, but to lands where others have been residing for centuries. They meet peoples living there with their own cultures, traditions, languages, and ways of life. The Bible (Genesis 12-23) recounts Abraham’s encounters, both good and bad, with the peoples of Harran, Canaan and Egypt. Abraham and his family did not enter these regions as invaders or conquerors, but as guests. They had to learn new ways and customs, to adapt, to make friends, to make a home for themselves among people who were previously strangers to them.
For the residents of any country, it is not easy to make the necessary adjustments to accommodate newcomers. Elements of pluralism are introduced. Old ways of doing things can often not be sustained in the new context. Moreover, migrants not only have much to learn in their new surroundings, but their physical and emotional needs are often great and, at least in the beginning, beyond their ability to resolve alone.

For this reason, hospitality is a key virtue among all descendants of Abraham. Welcoming others is not merely good manners and a sign of civility, but for Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike, hospitality is an expression of faith and an act of worship of God. For this reason, St. Paul says: “Make hospitality your special concern” (Romans: 12: 13).

The key role of women in both migration and hospitality must not be underestimated. Sarah accompanied Abraham on his wandering - sharing the dangers, caring for guests, and rejoicing at the promise of a child. God’s special concern for the vulnerability of women in precarious situations is beautifully recounted in the story of Hagar, alone in the desert with the infant Isma’il, rushing from Safa to Marwa and back in search of water, and God’s rewarding her fidelity and hope at the spring of Zamzam.

There is a story in the Bible (Genesis 18: 1-14) in which Abraham received three mysterious visitors with great hospitality. He ran to meet them, brought them water to wash, and fed them bread, butter and milk and butchered a calf, while Sarah baked them grain cakes. They did this not knowing that the guests were angels sent by God to bring news of the birth of a son in their old age. Pope John Paul commented on this passage when he met the Pakistani President in 1981, when Pakistan was hosting many Afghan refugees. The Pope stated: “One of the salient characteristics of Abraham - to whose faith Christians, Muslims and Jews alike eagerly link their own - was his great spirit of hospitality, displayed in a particular way when he welcomed three guests at the Oak of Mamre.”

The author of the “Letter to the Hebrews” refers to this event when he says: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Hebrews 13: 2). The Qur’an (51: 24-30) relates the same story, praising the generous hospitality of Abraham and his wife and noting how Abraham offered the strangers a greeting of “Peace.”

5. Abraham, the seeker of eternal truth. Said Nursi, one of the leading Muslim thinkers of the 20th Century and an early proponent of Muslim-Christian dialogue, was deeply impressed by a Qur’anic story of Abraham (Qur’an 6: 75-79). It is the famous tale, not found in the Bible but often recounted in the Jewish midrashim, in which Abraham was gradually led to the worship of the one, eternal, true God. Abraham looked up at the myriads of stars in the sky and saw them as lovely objects of worship, but abandoned the idea when he saw that the stars set. The same occurred with the sun and the moon. Abraham recognized the astral bodies as being unworthy of his worship and said, “I do not love those things that set” (Qur’an 6: 76.)

These words of Abraham reported in the Qur’an greatly occupied Said Nursi’s meditations, for he repeatedly refers to them in the Risale-i Nur. He tells how he wept upon reading them, for he saw in them a reference to the transitory nature of the universe. He sees people as “infinitely weak, poor and needy,” tossed around by the changing, impermanent, inconclusive events of life.
Although the pleasures of life appear attractive and shining as stars, they all eventually set. By contemplating the transient nature of power, wealth, beauty, and ambition, the believer, like Abraham, is invited to devote oneself to “the Eternal Beloved,” the only One who is worthy of worship and service.

Abraham is relevant for Jews, Christians, and Muslims today because we, like him, are invited to devote our energies, talents, and desires to the one unchanging Rock of our existence: “the Eternal One, the Beloved One.” Abraham reminds us of how much we have in common - the importance we give to faith and a personal relationship with God, to human qualities like hospitality, solidarity and respect for others, to the constant search for what is true, permanent, and absolute in life. In a world where the dominant ideology is shaped by a thirst for superficial pleasures, short-term goals, materialist impulses toward greed and acquisition, and destructive principles of civilizational conflict, our common memory of Abraham should move the followers of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to work together in favor of the divine and humane values taught us by the one God of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, and all those who seek to do His will.
We are gathered for this seminar at a particularly tragic moment of modern history. Even as we speak and study about peace, bombs are falling in the neighboring country of Iraq, innocent people are being killed and maimed, their homes destroyed, and their lives shattered. The international rule of law has been violated, and the United Nations, which after the last great World War was created as a structure for the promotion of universal peace and fellowship, has been ignored. The advance of civil society has been dealt a serious blow, and the human family has taken a great step backwards into barbarity. The law of the jungle in which might makes right is at the moment prevailing over the Divinely-revealed values of brotherhood, human dignity, morality, and peace.

For this reason, it is fitting that we come together to study the thoughts of a man who made a positive contribution to the understanding of the implications of war and the path to peace in the 20th Century. Said Nursi did not write about war and peace from an ivory tower. He experienced personally the horrors of two World Wars. The “Old Said” took an active part in the First World War, commanding militia forces in the Caucasus in defending his homeland against the Russian invasion, for which he was awarded a War Medal. He showed courage by remaining on horseback during the shelling and refusing to take refuge in the trenches. He proved his religious faith by dictating Qur’anic commentary to a scribe in the midst of battle. He was taken prisoner and deported to distant regions of Russia.

Thirty years later, Said Nursi lived through the Second World War. In the meantime, the “New Said” had undergone a spiritual pilgrimage, and the worldly events clashing around him hardly penetrated his awareness. He devoted his days and months of confinement to the study of the Qur’an and, as he states, “In these last four years, I have known neither the stages of the war, nor its results, nor whether or not peace has been declared, and I have not asked, I have not knocked on the door of this sacred sura to learn how many allusions it contains to this century and its wars.” Nursi’s transformation from social activist to contemplative student of the Qur’an has been studied by persons far more knowledgeable than I, but I think that no one will deny that his wartime experiences played a great role in that transformation.

It is clear from the Risale-e Nur that Said Nursi’s direct experience of war and the long periods of imprisonment, first as a prisoner-of-war in distant Russia and later confinement in his own homeland, were formative in the development of his character and religious vision. The

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numerous references in the Risale-i Nur to his life as prisoner-of-war and prisoner of conscience show that these periods were for him were what he called the “School of Joseph,” places of solitary confinement far superior to the mountain caves of ascetics and recluses, where his time would not be wasted in vain and selfish pursuits.\textsuperscript{69}

In a beautiful passage from the \textit{Flashes}, Nursi recounts one of the contemplative experiences that brought about his spiritual growth.

In the First World War, as a prisoner, I was in the distant province of Kosturma in northeastern Russia. There was a small mosque there belonging to the Tatars beside the famous River Volga. I used to become wearied among my friends, the other officers. I craved solitude, yet I could not wander about outside without permission. Then they took me on bail to the Tatar quarter, to that small mosque on the banks of the Volga. I used to sleep in the mosque, alone. Spring was close. I used to be very wakeful during the long, long nights of that northern land; the sad plashing of the Volga and the mirthless patter of the rain and the melancholy sighing of the wind of those dark nights in that dark exile had temporarily roused me from a deep sleep of heedlessness. I did not yet consider myself old, but those who had experienced the Great War were old.\textsuperscript{70}

Experiences of death and suffering in war also shaped Said Nursi’s understanding of the truths of religion. Writing about how the martyrs and others benefit from life in the Intermediate Realm, he recounts the death of his nephew Ubeyd. “I myself had a nephew and student called Ubeyd. He was killed at my side and in my place and became a martyr. Later, when I was being held as a prisoner-of-war, in a true dream I entered his grave, which was in the form of a dwelling-place under the earth, although I did not know where he was buried. I saw him living the level of life of martyrs. He evidently thought that I was dead, and said that he had wept much for me. He thought that he was alive, but having retreated from the Russian invasion, had made himself a good home under the ground.” He concludes that this dream, unimportant in itself, convinced him of the reality of life-after-death for true believers.\textsuperscript{71}

Even though believers can learn important lessons from the brutal realities of war, a person who is devoted to God cannot blind himself to war’s evil causes and ugly effects. He perceives that people and governments did not accept the lessons to be learned from the First World War and this heedlessness led them into a second, more terrible war.\textsuperscript{72} Nursi’s views would seem to confirm the old adage that “Those who refuse to learn from the errors of history are condemned to repeat them.” He describes World War II as “having plunged the world into chaos,”\textsuperscript{73} and bringing about “widespread hunger, destruction, and waste.”\textsuperscript{74} Among those responsible for the widespread suffering caused by the war were, in Nursi’s view, were the politicians and the media representatives.

\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Flashes}, “The Twenty-Sixth Flash,” p. 336.
\textsuperscript{70} \textit{The Flashes}, “The Twenty-Sixth Flash,” pp. 299-300.
\textsuperscript{71} \textit{The Letters}, “The First Letter,” p. 23.
\textsuperscript{72} \textit{The Words}, “Gleams,” p. 742.
\textsuperscript{73} \textit{The Rays}, “The Fruits of Belief, Fourth Topic,” p. 223.
\textsuperscript{74} \textit{The Flashes}, “The Nineteenth Flash,” p. 199.
Commenting on the verse in Surat al-Falaq (Qur’an 113:4) on the mischief of those who blow on knots, Nursi relates the passage to the self-serving propaganda of and diplomatic machinations of war-mongering politicians and the news media they control. It was such politicians and media barons, he states, who were responsible for the First World War which set humankind backward and stopped human progress. “Through the political diplomats blowing their evils, material and immaterial and their sorcery and poison into everyone’s heads through the tongue of the radio and inculcating their secret plans into the heart of human destiny, they prepared the evils that would savagely destroy a thousand years of the progress of civilization. This corresponds exactly with the meaning of ‘the blowers on knots.’” Unfortunately, leaders did not learn the lessons of World War I, but responded with egotism, racism, pitiless cruelty, military dictatorships, tyranny, and fanatic nationalism, all of which paved the way, for human treachery in the form of “envy, rivalry and clashes” for the Second World War.

What is the way out of this cycle of the evils of one war producing the pretexts and causes for the next war, a recurrent pattern of destruction, fear, resentment and despair handed on one generation to the next? Said Nursi responds to this perennial question with a reflection which occurred to him on the occasion of Lailat al-Qadr, “the Night of Power.” It is only the Word of God, that cuts like a sharp sword through the chain of wrongdoing, anger and desire for revenge, that can enable humankind to move beyond destructive and self-destructive patterns of behavior to seek for the genuine, eternal life which is humankind’s true goal. As this is Said Nursi’s deepest answer to the human temptation to solve conflicts by means of violence and war, I will quote the passage at length:

Because of the extreme tyranny and despotism of this last World War and its merciless destruction, with hundreds of innocents being scattered and ruined on account of a single enemy, the awesome despair of the defeated, the fearsome alarm of the victors and their ghastly pangs of conscience arising from the supremacy they are unable to maintain and the destruction they are unable to repair, and the utter transitoriness and ephemeral nature of the life of this world and the deceptive, opiate nature of the fantasies of civilization becoming apparent to all, and the exalted abilities lodged in human nature...being wounded in a universal and awesome manner, and heedlessness, misguidance and deaf, lifeless nature being smashed by the diamond sword of the Qur’an, and the exceedingly ugly, exceedingly cruel true face of world politics becoming apparent...man’s true nature will search with all its strength for eternal life, which it truly loves and yearns for.

Because of this conviction that in the depths of his heart, mankind really seeks and desires eternal life which comes from living according to God’s Word, Said Nursi has hope for the future. Wars show the true face of politics, the limitations of military power, and the transient nature of human life. All-powerful God is more powerful than the deceptions with which men surround themselves and is able to enlighten and change the hearts of leaders and rulers.

Like the One Powerful Over All Things sweeps and cleans in a minute the atmosphere filled with clouds and shows the shining sun in clear skies, so He may also dispel these black and merciless clouds and show the truths of the Shari’a like the sun, and give them without expense or trouble. We await it from His mercy that He will not sell them to us.

expensively. May He give intelligence to the minds of those at the top, and belief to their hearts; that would be enough. Then matters would put themselves to rights.”

Said Nursi is not discouraged by the apparent weakness of the people of faith, of those who seek to live according to God’s Word, to affect the changes in human society to overcome humankind’s self-deception. Although it appears that the forces of violence, power, and economic gain are winning out over those who live and promote humane and Divine values, they will not prevail in the long run, because they are acting in a manner contrary to the will of God who is All-Powerful. Said Nursi’s final word on the subject of war is thus an affirmation of the ultimate victory of those who stand for Divine values. He states: “Even if falsehood prevails in this world, it cannot win the war. “The future belongs to the God-conscious.”

Part II: the Risale-i Nur on peace

In September 2002 in Istanbul, I gave a talk at the International Risale-i Nur Symposium on the theme of the ethics of pardon and peace. In that paper I tried to present the understanding of the nature and preconditions of peace as found in the Risale-i Nur and to show its correspondence with the views of Pope John Paul II. I will not repeat here everything that I said in that paper, but will try to reflect with you on several key points of the path to peace as envisioned by the Risale-i Nur in the light of the current world situation.

The first task of those who want to build peace is to have a clear idea of the kind of civilization they want to construct. What are our goals? What are we aiming at? Where do we want our efforts at building society to lead? For Said Nursi, the Divinely-guided civilization proposed by Islam is a society not ruled by the ethics of the jungle where the rich and powerful take what they can and defend what they have obtained by use of force, but rather a civilization based on truth, justice, and harmony.

Instead of the ethics of the jungle where the rich and powerful take what they can and use their superiority in technology and wealth to force others to obey them, or the principle of class struggle by which the poor and oppressed seek to obtain their rights by force, Said Nursi sees the Divinely-guided ethic proposed by Islam as one in which truth, justice and harmony are paramount.

“The civilization the shari’a of Muhammad (PBUH) comprises and commands is this: its point of support is truth instead of force, the marks of which are justice and harmony. Its goal is virtue in place of [selfish] benefit, and its characteristic marks are love and attraction. Its means of unity are the ties of religion, country, and class, in place of racism and nationalism, and the mark of these are sincere brotherhood, peace, and only defense against external aggression. Its life is the principle of mutual assistance instead of that of conflict, and its mark is accord and solidarity.”

Muslims, following Said Nursi, rightly call such a civilization an “Islamic civilization.” However, I must tell you that when I as a Christian read Said Nursi’s description of a Divinely-
guided civilization, I do not find the qualities expressed to be significantly different from the kind of civilization that I and my fellow Christians seek to build. You do not have to take my word for this. All the speeches and leaders of Pope John Paul II, the spiritual leader of Catholic Christians around the world, point toward just such a civilization as that described above in the Risale-i Nur.

There is no clash of civilizations between real Christians and real Muslims. There is nothing surprising in this, because both communities are believers in the one and only God and both seek to construct society on the principles and values taught by that God. If there is a clash, it is between, on the one hand, the civilization envisioned by “people of faith,” or in the words of Said Nursi, “the God-conscious” and, on the other, a civilization that tries to banish God from everyday life, from politics, economics, and social interaction, and to reduce religion to privately-held beliefs, to ineffective ritual, to colorful folklore.

Ethical systems based solely on human reason fail because they do not take into account God as the Maker, Teacher and Guide of human life. Philosophical reasoning presumes that people know what they want and will always work to achieve the desired goal, but the sad reality is that people often act against their best interests due to anger, fear, jealousy and the like, and for reasons of selfishness, ignorance, and laziness, they do not achieve what they desire. However, a religious orientation, such as we are taught in the Bible and the Qur’an, allows for the reality of human failure by urging believers to return to God in repentance, to seek forgiveness, and begin anew. Said Nursi considers “God-given ethics” to be an essential element in the message of the prophets. “Be distinguished by God-given morals,” he states, “and turn towards God Almighty with humility, recognizing your impotence, poverty, and defectiveness, and so be a slave in His presence.”

Thus, the first step towards building a civilization characterized by peace and justice is to realize that we will not succeed if we rely on our own efforts or follow our own ideas. We need the strength and the guidance that only comes from God. True peace can only be achieved if people follow God’s commands and turn to God in humble repentance.

Said Nursi expresses the longing of millions of people around the world in his desire for universal peace. He saw with his own eyes the suffering, anguish, and destruction brought about by the two World Wars and wants to see a time of peace and prosperity for all. Said Nursi saw this as the mission of Islam on earth, the task that Muslims are called to carry out. He said: “God willing, through the strength of Islam, in the future the virtues of civilization will prevail, the face of the earth cleansed of filth, and universal peace be secured.” This is a noble task that he envisions for Muslims, one which, in my opinion, must be shared as well by Christians and all those who worship, love and obey the one God. Universal peace is not only a human desire, but a vocation given to all people of faith by God himself. Said Nursi’s conviction that Islam must play a role of peacemaker in today’s world is paralleled by the declaration of the Catholic

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82 The Words, Thirtieth Word, First Aim, p. 564.
83 The Damascus Sermon, p. 43.
84 The Damascus Sermon, p. 38.
Church’s Second Vatican Council that Christians and Muslims together have a common task of working together for the benefit of all to build “peace, liberty, social justice, and moral values.”

One can object that this goal has often not been followed by Christian peoples and governments in the past. One remembers religious wars, the Crusades, colonialism, and even today, the actions of government and military leaders who bomb and invade and occupy other, weaker nations. However, we must all remember that Christianity must not be judged by the actions of every individual or group or government that identifies itself as “Christian,” any more than Islam should be just by the deeds of every individual or group or government that calls itself “Islamic.” In fact, what people call themselves or what they are called by others is itself often a function of propaganda, an attempt to convince people of something contrary to the reality. Said Nursi states that he himself was often falsely accused of being a trouble-maker and disturber of the peace. He holds that such accusations are rooted in the fears of non-religious people towards those who take their faith seriously. He stated: “‘The worldly’ are excessively suspicious of me. Quite simply, they are frightened of me, imagining non-existent things in me, which even if they existed would not constitute a political crime...Imagining these things in me, they have been carried away by groundless fears.”

This does not mean that Said Nursi ever allowed himself to act against his conscience or to obey commands with which he could not agree. He states: “I support neither intellectually nor on scholarly grounds the arbitrary commands, called laws, of a commander...and for myself I do not act in accordance with them. But although for twenty years I have been severely oppressed during my tortuous captivity, I have not become involved in politics, nor provoked the authorities, nor disturbed public order. And although I have hundreds of thousands of Risale-i Nur friends, not a single incident has been recorded involving the disturbance of the peace.” At this moment in history, when thousands of my fellow Americans are carrying out forms of civil disobedience and passive and non-violent resistance to protest a war which they consider to be both illegal and unjust, the example of Said Nursi is highly relevant. As Said Nursi showed in his own life, peace cannot be achieved simply by obeying every command issued by authorities. Both as religious believers, whose first allegiance is to God’s will, and as thinking citizens, whose allegiance is to the rule of law and civil society, a critical approach to authorities, who are often correct but sometimes deeply in error, is essential is peace is to be achieved.

My final point is one that Said Nursi reiterated over and over. That is the necessity of true reconciliation for any lasting peace. When one has wronged another, when a nation has aggressed against another, the result is fear, anger, anxiety. On the part of the aggressor there is a feeling of guilt and a desire to justify one’s cause. High-minded motivations are brought forward to conceal and deny the real motivations, which are often those of greed, power, and revenge. The media in the form of television, newspapers, scholarly journals is employed to make a government’s policies and actions acceptable and to shape public opinion, but the reality remains that human greed and selfishness are usually at the heart of aggression and violence towards others. “There is only one solution for this,” says Said Nursi, “and that is reconciliation, which

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the Qur’an commands, and which truth, reality, benefit, humanity, and Islam require and encourage.”

This requires honesty, an admission that the misdeeds of persons and nations are often motivated by unworthy factors. Noting that Islam commands that “one believer should not be vexed with another believer for more than three days,” Nursi teaches that so long as there is no reconciliation, both sides perpetually suffer the torments of fear and revenge. His conclusion is that “it is essential to make peace quickly.” Thus, in the thought of Said Nursi, there can be no real peace unless there is genuine reconciliation.

So long as no reconciliation takes place, the wounds to the human relations fester and grow and turn into resentment. Discord produces more discord, violence engenders even greater violence, and the state of conflict is perpetuated. The only way out of a spiraling succession of violent reactions and counter-reactions is for one party to take the initiative to reconcile. Reconciliation heals what force can never heal, the suspicion and resentment caused by wrongdoing one against another. As Said Nursi puts it, “A minor disaster becomes a large one, and continues. But if they make peace, and the murderer repents and prays continuously for the man he killed, then both sides will gain much and become like brothers. In place of one departed brother, he will gain several religious brothers.”

At this moment of great tension in human affairs, let us all who believe in God pray that the wise advice of the Risale-i Nur be heeded, especially by the leaders of nations, as the peoples of our world seek to find just and lasting peace for humankind.

88 The Rays, Fourteenth Ray, p. 484.
FOUR FRONTRUNNERS IN PEACE

People who Have Devoted Their Lives to Peace

Peace has many sides, and peacemakers are not all of one type. What peacemakers have in common is their willingness to put into action the thirst that all good people have for peace: to put their desire for peace into words, and to match their words with deeds. Peacemakers are those who are ready to work for change in society in non-violent ways, who protest injustice without acting unjustly toward those who perpetrate wrongs, who try to reconcile those involved in conflict without themselves becoming part of the conflict.

Peacemakers take risks. They risk losing the life of tranquillity, comfort, and complacency that is often mistaken for peace. They risk losing the esteem of family and friends by taking on unpopular causes and by associating with unwelcome people. They risk their freedom of movement, of speech, of association, especially when their efforts at peace bring them into confrontation with governments and powerful forces in society. They risk their very lives when their message of peace is an obstacle to the plans of the violent.

For religious believers, our faith shapes the way we understand peace. As a Christian, I find the teaching and example of Jesus compelling. “Peace I leave with you,” he said, “My peace I give you. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” Even though our inspiration for peacemaking is formed by our respective religious faiths, honesty and human fellowship demands that we recognize that, just as all religions teach peace, so have all faiths produced outstanding examples of peacemakers.

It would be a good exercise for each of us to make a personal list of frontrunners for peace, simply in order to undertake the discipline of asking ourselves, “Who are my heroes of peace, and why?” In drawing up a list of peacemakers, we engage in a process of defining our own values and asking ourselves what peace means to us. In my short presentation, rather than repeating some of the great names like Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, Albert Einstein, and Pope John XXIII, I would like to mention four people - two Christians and two Muslims, who exemplify for me the spirit of peacemaking.

1. Rosa Parks: an ordinary person who brought about big changes.

The first person I want to mention is a woman from my native country, one whom I have never met but who has greatly influenced the direction of my life. This is Rosa Parks, an African-American, a Christian, member of the Baptist Church, who is still living and 90 years old this year. In 1955, I was 14 years old. To appreciate the achievement of Rosa Parks, you have to understand the racial situation in the United States at that time. In many places, African-Americans could not use the same restaurants, parks, or toilet facilities as other Americans. They could not send their children to the same schools, live in the same neighborhoods, or sit in the same seats in buses or trains.
Dramatic changes have taken place since then, and the catalyst for these changes was an ordinary
42-year-old woman who did not have the benefits of higher education or a position of power in
society. Rosa Parks received her high school diploma by taking classes at night after working as
a seamstress by day, sewing clothes at a large shop in Montgomery, Alabama. On 1 December
1955, when Rosa was returning home from work, seated in the first row of the “colored” section
in the back of the bus, a white man got on. There were no more seats, so the bus driver asked
Rosa and other African-Americans to move farther back so the man could sit down. The others
moved, but Rosa stayed seated. The bus driver said, “I’ll have to arrest you,” she answered
simply, “You may go on and do so,” and Rosa Parks was arrested for her non-violent protest.

The young pastor of a Baptist parish in Montgomery heard about her arrest and organized a
boycott of the bus company, and in this unassuming way the American civil rights movement
started. The movement grew and came to include not only African-American but various
sections of society. There were marches, demonstrations, letter-writing campaigns to politicians,
sit-ins at bus stations, police headquarters, airports, and universities. Some of the civil rights
activists were brutally killed, and usually the killers were not brought to justice.

In 1963, I was in the seminary studying theology. We weren’t much affected by the civil rights
movement. My state had repealed its discriminatory laws, so the issue seemed distant from our
daily lives. The movement was going on and we knew about it, but we weren’t really part of it.

Then in March, 1963, Martin Luther King, the young preacher who organized the bus boycott,
called for a nationwide meeting to protest racial discrimination. Over 250,000 people gathered in
Washington to hear him speak, and on that day Martin Luther King gave his famous, “I have a
dream” speech. He said, “I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the children of
former slaves and the children of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the
table of brotherhood.” The civil rights movement, and Dr. King’s speech in particular, changed
my life by offering me a new set of priorities and a sharpened commitment to social change.

I’ve learned several things from Rosa Parks. I learned that a peacemaker does not have to work
from a position of political or economic power in society. A peacemaker need not belong to the
dominant social, racial or ethnic majority. A peacemaker does not have to be equipped with the
tools of formal higher education. A peacemaker who is convinced of the rightness of her or his
cause and has the courage of his or her convictions can, by seizing the right moment and
responding to it firmly and creatively, accomplish much. For me, Rosa Parks is evidence against
the cynical commonplace that “The problem is too vast. There’s nothing we can do.”

2. Said Nursi: a Muslim thinker who advocated dialogue.

The next peacemaker I want to mention is Said Nursi. I do not think that I need to go into the
details of his life, since many of you know much more about his life and thought than I do.
Although I hope to focus mainly on Said Nursi’s ideas and actions as a peacemaker, it might be
helpful to review a few basic facts of his life in order to situate his thought in its historical
context.

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Said Nursi was born in 1877 in the village of Nurs in the province of Bitlis in eastern Turkey. He studied the religious sciences in various *medreses* in Eastern Turkey, where he claims to have been influenced especially by the Islamic reformers such as Namik Kemal, Jamal al-Din Afghani and Muhammad Abduh. He became interested in politics and favored the views of Afghani concerning the unity or *ittihad* of the international Islamic community.

During the middle years of his life, Nursi’s thought underwent a radical change and he decided to devote his life to a study of the Qur’an in the light of modern sciences. His voluminous writings together form a comprehensive Qur’anic commentary called the Risale-i Nur (the Message of Light). Nursi’s basic intuition was the clash of world views represented by materialism, on the one hand, and by religious faith, on the other. He believed that the natural sciences, if divorced from a moral vision that could hold them together and give them direction, led inevitably to egoism, violence, and destructive behavior. It was the role of revealed truth to form people with a moral vision in which, as he states: “Conscience is illuminated by the religious sciences, and the mind is illuminated by the sciences of civilization. Wisdom occurs through the combination of these two.”

Nursi’s criticism of materialist tendencies in society and politics, and his opposition to Turkey’s engagement in wars and unholy alliances, caused him to be repeatedly put in prison or confined to house arrest. Although he lived in a period when Turkey was being torn apart by civil strife, revolution, war and a clash of world views, Nursi’s message was always of peace. The “Old Said” knew the ravages of war first hand, having taken part as a young man in the First World War, commanding militia forces in the Caucasus in defending his homeland against the Russian invasion. Even then, his religious commitment was foremost, and he dictated Qur’anic commentary to a scribe in the midst of battle. He was taken prisoner and transported to Russia as a prisoner-of-war, where he lived through the Russian revolution.

By the time of the Second World War, the “New Said” had undergone a spiritual pilgrimage, and the worldly events erupting around him hardly penetrated his awareness. He devoted his days and months in prison to the study of the Qur’an and, as he states, “In these last four years, I have known neither the stages of the war, nor its results, nor whether or not peace has been declared, and I have not asked, I have not knocked on the door of this sacred *sura* to learn how many allusions it contains to this century and its wars.” There is no doubt that Nursi’s transformation from activist to contemplative student of the Qur’an was influenced by the horrors of war that he had seen and experienced as a young man.

In his writings about peace, Nursi focuses on three aspects. Firstly, peace is the ultimate goal and reward of those who study and practice the Qur’anic teaching found in the Risale-i Nur. Secondly, peace is the serenity granted by God to faithful believers that enables them to bear hardship, injustice, and opposition with equanimity and forgiveness instead of seeking revenge. Thirdly, peace is a mission, a solemn duty, entrusted by God to the Islamic community. Muslims are to be peacemakers and builders of peace in this world. Nursi sees the task of Islamic civilization as one of striving for truth instead of force, establishing justice and harmony, attracting others by the power of love rather than by selfish ambition, strengthening the bonds of unity across religious, national and class lines rather than falling into divisive racist or nationalist attitudes (cf. *The Damascus Sermon*, p. 106.)
Said Nursi notes (*The Flashes*, Sixteenth Flash, p. 144) that he was often criticized because of his commitment to peace. At the time of the British and Italian invasions of Turkey, Nursi proposed prayers for peace and negotiated settlement and was consequently accused of indirectly supporting the aims of the aggressors. Nursi replied that he too wanted release, but not by using the same methods employed by the assailants. He stated that Islam teaches people to seek truth and uprightness, not to try to achieve their aims by use of force. He was asked whether freely relinquishing one’s rights for the sake of peace should not be considered a kind of compromise with wrongdoing. In response, he drew upon his experience in prison, stating: “A person who is in the right, is fair. He will sacrifice his dirhem’s worth of right for the general peace, which is worth a hundred.”

In his analysis of society in his day, Nursi considered that the dominant challenge to faith to be the secularist ideology promoted by the West. He felt that modern secularism had two faces. On the one hand, communism explicitly denied God’s existence and consciously fought against the place of religion in society. On the other, the modern capitalist systems, in their brand of secularism, did not deny God’s existence, but simply ignored the question of God and promoted a consumerist, materialist way of life, as if there were no God, or as though God had no moral will for humankind. In both types of secular society, some individuals might make a personal, private choice to follow a religious path, but religion should have nothing to say about politics, economics or the organization of society.

In response, Said Nursi held that in the situation of this modern world, religious believers face a similar struggle, that is, the challenge to lead a life of faith in which the purpose of human life is to worship God and to love others in obedience to God’s will, and to lead this life of faith in a world whose political, economic and social spheres are often dominated either by a militant atheism, such as that of communism, or by a practical atheism, where God is simply ignored, forgotten, or considered irrelevant.

Said Nursi does not advocate violence to oppose militant secularism. He says that the most important need today is for the greatest struggle, the *jihad al-akbar* of which the Qur’an speaks. This is the interior effort to bring every aspect of one’s life into submission to God’s will. This involves acknowledging and striving to overcome one’s own weaknesses and those of one’s nation. Too often, he says, believers are tempted to blame their problems on others when the real fault lies in themselves - the dishonesty, corruption, hypocrisy and favoritism that characterize many so-called “religious” societies.

He further advocates the struggle of speech, *kalam*, what might be called a critical dialogue aimed at convincing others of the need to submit one’s life to God’s will. Where Said Nursi is far ahead of his time is that he foresees that, in the struggle to carry on a critical dialogue with modern society, Muslims should not act alone but must work together with those he calls “true Christians,” in other words, Christians not in name only, but those who have interiorized the message which Christ brought, who practice their faith, and who are open and willing to cooperate with Muslims.

In contrast to the popular way in which many Muslims of his day looked at things, Said Nursi holds Muslims must not say that Christians are the enemy. Rather, Muslims and Christians have three common enemies that they have to face together: ignorance, poverty, dissension. In short,
he sees the need for dialogue as arising from the challenges posed by secular society to Muslims and Christians and that dialogue should lead to a common stand favoring education, including ethical and spiritual formation to oppose the evil of ignorance, cooperation in development and welfare projects to oppose the evil of poverty, and efforts to unity and solidarity to oppose the enemy of dissension, factionalism, and polarization.

Said Nursi still hopes that before the end of time true Christianity will eventually be transformed into a form of Islam, but the differences that exist today between Islam and Christianity must not be considered obstacles to Muslim-Christian cooperation in facing the challenges of modern life. In fact, near the end of his life, in 1953, Said Nursi paid a visit in Istanbul to the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Orthodox Church to encourage Muslim-Christian dialogue. A few years earlier, in 1951, he sent a collection of his writings to Pope Pius XII, who acknowledged the gift with a handwritten note.


My third example is a Christian, the former Catholic Archbishop of San Salvador in Central America. To those acquainted with the patterns of Catholic ecclesiastical careers, there was nothing exceptional in the early years of Oscar Romero: born in 1917, worked as a carpenter’s apprentice, entered the seminary, was ordained a priest, studied in Rome, appointed rector of the national seminary, secretary of the bishops conference, assistant bishop and then, in 1977, named archbishop of San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador.

In 1977, the population of El Salvador was highly polarized. The peasants had organized themselves and were striving to overthrow the oligarchic rule that had governed El Salvador for more than a century. The wealthy, powerful families that controlled the politics and economy of the nation had employed the army and paramilitary “death squads” to terrorize the population in order to put an end to the campesinos’ uprising. Geopolitical interests exacerbated the tensions, with the American government involved in training and supporting the Salvadoran military to counter the Marxist ideology proposed by some of the popular leaders.

At first, Romero’s consecration as archbishop of the capital city was welcomed by the ruling elites, as he had been seen as theologically and socially conservative. However, a short time after he became bishop, the murders of two priests brought about a change, or as Romero put it, an evolution in his thinking. He demanded an inquiry into the murders and set up a permanent commission for the defense of human rights. People began flocking to his Masses on Sundays and his sermons were printed and distributed throughout the country. He became the voice of the oppressed people crying for their rights and dignity. His championing the cause of the people also engendered criticism against him on the part of the ruling elite and even some of his fellow bishops. He was accused of “inciting class struggle and revolution” and of being infected with Marxist ideas.

The social situation continued to deteriorate, with mutilated corpses left hanging from trees, bombs detonated in newspaper offices, churches, and government buildings, and massacres of peasants occurring on a weekly basis. In this context, to those who were trying to put down the rebellion with terror tactics, Romero spoke of the qualities of true peace. He said, “Peace is not the product of terror or fear. Peace is not the silence of cemeteries. Peace is not the silent result of
violent repression. Peace is the generous, tranquil contribution of all to the good of all. Peace is
dynamism. Peace is generosity. It is right and it is duty.”

Some accused Romero of meddling in politics and demanded that he confine his preaching to
“spiritual” matters. Romero responded: “A church that suffers no persecution but enjoys the
privileges and support of the things of the earth - beware! - is not the true church of Jesus Christ.
A preaching that does not point out sin is not the preaching of the Gospel. A preaching that
makes sinners feel good, so that they feel secure in their sinful state, betrays the Gospel’s call.”

Romero began to receive death threats and, as time went on, it became more and more clear that
his life was in danger. However, he was not deterred by the threats and, in fact, his own
preaching became sharper and more difficult for those in power to ignore. On 23 March 1980,
Archbishop Romero made the following appeal to the men of the armed forces:
“Brothers, you came from our own people. You are killing your own brothers. Any
human order to kill must be subordinate to the law of God, which says, ‘Thou shalt not
kill’. No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God. No one has to
obey an immoral law. It is time you obeyed your consciences rather than sinful orders.
The church cannot remain silent before such an abomination. ...In the name of God, in the
name of this suffering people whose cry rises to heaven more loudly each day, I implore
you, I beg you, I order you: stop the repression.”

The following day, Romero was shot dead while leading the congregation in worship of God.

From Oscar Romero, I learned, first of all that making peace does not mean a passive
acquiescence to injustice or oppression. It does not demand that one remains silent when some
are suffering at the hands of others. It does not mean that one should become a “doormat” for
others to walk over or put up with wrongs and violence in order to “keep peace at any cost.”

Our religious faith does not teach passivity, but teaches us not to respond to violence in kind.
Romero resolved this seeming paradox by his insistence on the truth. For him, to preach a
comfortable message that did not call upon wrongdoers to confront the true nature of their violent
deeds would be to preach a perversion of the Gospel. Violent situations require peacemakers
speak the truth and call sin by its name. We all know how difficult this is to do, especially when
the violent are people of power, prestige, and influence. We can find in Oscar Romero a martyr
to the truth, one who dared to speak his faith even when he knew it would mean his death.


The final peacemaker I will speak about here is Fethullah Gülen, a contemporary Turkish thinker,
spiritual leader, and creative educator. Living in the next generation after Said Nursi, Gülen took
up Nursi’s call for an effective dialogue between believing Muslims and believing Christians.
What form should such a dialogue take? What are the priorities? How can Said Nursi’s
directives to struggle together against the common enemies of ignorance, poverty and disunity be
put into practice in a world which has continued to evolve in ways that are sometimes
encouraging, but in other ways, quite disturbing? This is the challenge taken up by Fethullah
Gülen, affectionately called “Hoca Effendi” by his associates and students. Gülen never met Said
Nursi and, while he speaks highly of him and claims to have been greatly influenced by his writings, he denies being a follower of Said Nursi in any sectarian sense.

Some scholars consider the movement associated with Gülen to be one of the transformations that have occurred as Said Nursi’s thought continues to be reinterpreted and applied anew in evolving historical and geographical situations. One scholar to study the movement, Professor Hakan Yavuz, notes that “Some Turkish Nurcus, such as Yeni Asya of Mehmet Kutlular and the Fethullah Gülen community, re-imagined the movement as a ‘Turkish Islam’.” Another scholar, Dr. Ihsan Yilmaz concurs: “Nursi’s discourse ‘has already weathered major economic, political, and educational transformations’... Today, the Gülen movement is a manifestation of this phenomenon.”

Where Gülen most clearly answers the call of Said Nursi is by taking up the challenge to combat ignorance. There are now over 300 schools around the world inspired by the convictions of Mr. Gülen, set up, administered, and staffed by his circle of students and associates. The schools try to bring together educational objectives that are too often dispersed among various school systems. They seek to give a strong scientific grounding, together with character formation in non-material values, which includes cultural, ethical, religious and spiritual training. In addition to the formal education carried out in schools, Fethullah Gülen’s movement has pursued non-formal education through television and radio channels, newspapers and magazines, cultural and professional foundations.

Fethullah Gülen and his movement have also been active in the area of interreligious dialogue and peacemaking. Four years ago, Mr. Gülen traveled to Rome where he was met by Pope John Paul II. He has met the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Orthodox Church numerous times. His interreligious activities have gone beyond Muslim-Christian relations to include meetings with Jewish leaders at the national and international level. In connection with the Parliament of the World’s Religions, held in Cape Town, South Africa, Mr. Gülen delivered a major address on the theme: “The Necessity of Interfaith Dialogue: a Muslim Approach.”

Mr. Gülen’s was one of the first Muslim voices heard in condemnation of the terrorist acts committed on 11 September 2001. Within 24 hours of the tragedy, Mr. Gülen wrote an open letter in which he stated: “What lies behind certain Muslim people or institutions that misunderstand Islam getting involved in terrorist attacks that occur throughout the world should be sought not in Islam, but within those people themselves, in their misinterpretations, and in other factors. Just as Islam is not a religion of terrorism, any Muslim who correctly understands Islam cannot be thought of as a terrorist.”
Conclusion

As a Christian involved in working with Muslims and other religious believers for peace through interreligious dialogue, I am grateful for the insights of Said Nursi and for the leadership in this field provided by Fethullah Gülen. What Said Nursi and Fethullah Gülen have in common with Rosa Parks and Oscar Romero is a strong religious faith which has shaped their thinking and their commitments to stand for peace in a violent world. All four have met rejection, not because they had committed or advocated criminal activity, but because they upheld religious values and taught a non-violent activism. Together with many other peacemakers too numerous to mention, they have shown, in the words of the recent World Social Forum, that “another world is possible.”

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**Oscar Romero**


**Fethullah Gülen**


