



Said Nursi's Teachings on the People of the Book: a case study of Islamic social policy in the early twentieth century

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ABSTRACT *Presented in this paper is a concise biography of Said Nursi (1876–1960) with regard to the People of the Book and Muslim–Christian relations, aimed at giving the reader background into the scholar whose works are subsequently presented and analyzed. Nursi's discussion of the People of the Book and the concept of dhimmī (individual and regional religious protectorate) as developed from qur'ānic references and prophetic traditions (Ḥadīth) is then analyzed. Significantly, through this paper, these key concepts as covered by a scholar as important to the field as Nursi, are made available to English-speaking people for the first time as the author references Nursi's book Munazarat, which has yet to be translated into English.*

Introduction

The term 'People of the Book' (*ahl al-kitāb*) has been a very controversial one throughout the history of Islam. The term occurs in the Qur'ān in various contexts with different attributes. The People of the Book are said to be jealous:

Many of the people of the Scripture long to make you disbelievers after your belief, through envy on their own account, after the truth hath become manifest unto them. Forgive and be indulgent (toward them) until Allah give command. Lo! Allah is Able to do all things. (Q. 2:109)

Some of them are said to be *kuffār* (non-believers):

Those who disbelieve among the People of the Scripture and the idolaters could not have left off (erring) till the clear proof came unto them ... Lo! those who disbelieve, among the People of the Scripture and the idolaters, will abide in fire of hell. They are the worst of created beings. (Q. 98:1, 6)

On the other hand, they are held to be a people of knowledge (*ahl al-dhikr*) to be consulted when Muslims 'do not know': 'And We sent not (as Our messengers) before thee other than men, whom We inspired. Ask the followers of the Reminder [*ahl al-dhikr*] if ye know not' (Q. 21:7).

In fact, some of those who call themselves Christians, who are humble, are 'the nearest in love to the Muslims, their eyes overflowing with tears when they listen to the Word of God': '... And thou wilt find the nearest of them in affection to those who believe (to be) those who say: 'Lo! We are Christians. That is because there are among them priests and monks, and because they are not proud' (Q. 5:82).

The Islamic legal system addresses the behavior and rights of the People of the Book in an Islamic society.¹ Said Nursi's teachings on the People of the Book and Islamic social policy are unique in this respect. Nursi was born in 1876 in the Bitlis province,

now in the eastern region of Turkey, but then a part of Ottoman Kurdistan. He died in Urfa, southeast Turkey, in 1960 on 25 Ramadan (23 March).² Said Nursi himself divided his life into two parts, the 'Old Said' (Eski Said) (1897–1926) and the 'New Said' (Yeni Said) (1926–1949). In the first period of his life, Nursi wrote on the rights of the People of the Book, particularly Armenians and Greeks, and how Muslims, specifically Turks and Kurds, should behave toward those people. His book *Munazarat* [Dialogues], which was written as a 'prescription' to the common people, addressed questions on constitutional issues in Eastern Ottoman society, including relations with non-Muslims. In writing the book, Nursi used non-academic and popular language, arranged as a series of questions and answers. His discussions or dialogues were with Kurdish tribes of South-Eastern and Eastern Anatolia. They occurred during one of his trips to that area to explain the benefit and legitimacy of constitutional government (*Mesrutiyet*) and to prevent an imminent revolt of Kurdish tribes against Ottoman central government. Nursi wanted to alleviate the fear among Muslims of non-Muslim governmental power within the Ottoman Empire. His book defended the Ottoman Empire's proclamation of constitutionalism of 1908. It also defended the *Gulhane Hatt-i Humayun* ('Imperial Rescript') of 1856, a measure that gave egalitarian rights to non-Muslim subjects in the Ottoman empire. The *Gulhane Hatt-i Humayun* states that Ottoman citizens, regardless of religion, may be accepted into government service and are free to enroll in both military and civilian state schools.³

Nursi's defense of the rights of non-Muslim subjects focuses on the rights of Christians, because non-Muslim subjects in that time and place were mostly Christians, mainly Armenians and Greeks. Nursi's defense also addresses the rights of Jews, a small part of the non-Muslim citizenry of the empire. In the Ottoman eastern provinces, Muslims under the influence of members of the '*ulamā*' (scholars), were extremely upset that non-Muslims were being given equal, constitutional rights. They claimed that the Ottoman grand vizier Mithat Pasha and his associates were infidels because the constitution in their care would enslave Muslims to non-Muslims.⁴ As a prominent scholar respected by both Kurds and Turks, Nursi could address this issue. Nursi's book *Munazarat* can be read as a prescriptive book in democracy, an attempt to address the issue of Muslim-Christian relations in a pluralistic society.

In the early period of his life, the 'Old Said' period, Nursi was more interested in the rights of the People of the Book. However, in his writings of the second part of his life, the 'New Said' period, he approached the issue as one of close cooperation between Muslims and Christians. A key example of this later approach is found in Nursi's book, *The Damascus Sermon*,⁵ in which he strongly advocates Muslim-Christian cooperation.

Nursi's interest in the People of the Book came at a time when the Ottoman Empire, the major Islamic power, was ending. Political Islamic movements were calling for *jihād* against non-Muslims. This was the critical time for the proverbial 'sick man' (the Ottoman Empire).

As far as I know, Nursi's interpretations of qur'ānic verses about the People of the Book are unique among major exegetes and commentators. This applies to those both past and present, beginning from al-Ṭabarī (d. 922) and extending to Abū al-A'ālā al-Mawdūdī (d. 1979).

The Islamic Background

Before discussing Nursi's approach to the subject, it would be helpful to outline a general Islamic perspective. The people of the Book did not consist only of Christians

and Jews. Christians, Jews, Hindus and Sabeans all were considered Peoples of the Book. My remarks focus on the Christians.

Other terms in the Qur'ān relate to Christians.⁶ The term *Injīl*, the qur'ānic term corresponding to the Gospel, is used twelve times in the Qur'ān; Jesus, *ʿIsā*, is mentioned more than 30 times;⁷ and Mary is mentioned 34 times, more than any other woman.⁸ The term *ahl al-kitāb* occurs 32 times. It was used at the beginning of Islam to refer mainly to Christians and Jews. Later, it came to include the adherents of other religions, such as Zoroastrians, Hindus and Sabeans.⁹ At the time of the 'Abbāssid Caliph al-Ma'mūn (215/830), the star-worshippers in Harran were also considered a People of the Book. They were equated with the Sabeans in the Qur'ān, who were considered *ahl al-kitāb* alongside the Jews and Christians. The People of the Book also were given the title of *dhimmī*. The term from the legal language of Islam is not mentioned in the Qur'ān, yet prophetic traditions define it several times. Eve Borrmans translates the term as 'protected guests'.¹⁰

Ahl al-kitāb itself has a positive meaning. The first part of the term, *ahl* in Arabic, means family and possessor. The Prophet Muhammad's use of the term *ahl* for his family shows that the qur'ānic approach to the Christians and Jews, using the same word, is tender and highly respectful. The Qur'ān, by calling the adherents of Christianity and Judaism *ahl al-kitāb*, points out that they have a scripture and that they read.¹¹ In the very beginning, where it enumerates the attributes of the righteous people, the Qur'ān refers to: 'And who believe in that which is revealed unto thee (Muhammad) and which was revealed before you, and are certain of the hereafter' (Q. 2:3).

This verse delineates the common ground between Muslims and the People of the Book. It also places in the hearts of Muslims a respect for those prophets and scriptures that came before Islam. In some places the Qur'ān mentions Jews and Christians by name, and recognizes the existence of good people among them: 'Those who believe (Muslims), the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabaeans, whosoever believe in God and the last Day and do good deeds, they shall have their reward from their Lord, shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they come to grief' (Q. 2:62, 5:69).

There are several verses of the Qur'ān that invite the People of the Book to a common ground. I will not indulge in the details of the qur'ānic verses about the People of the Book; that would be beyond the scope of this paper. I will cite only some representative examples of them. The qur'ānic invitation is openly mentioned in the following verse:

Say: O people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians)! Let us come to an agreement between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for Lords beside God. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered unto Him. (Q. 3:64)

The Qur'ān, furthermore, distinguishes between the People of the Book themselves and shows that like other nations, they also consist of both good and bad people:

... If the People of the Scripture had believed it had been better for them. Some of them are believers, but most of them are evil-livers. (Q. 3:110) They are not all alike. Of the People of the Scripture there is a staunch community who recite the revelations of Allāh in the night season, falling prostrate before Him. They believe in Allāh and the Last Day, and enjoin right conduct and

forbid indecency and vie one with another in good works. They are of the righteous. (Q. 3:113)

The most interesting qur'ānic verse which praises Christians is as follows: '... And You shall find the nearest of all people in friendship to the believers (Muslims) those who say: "Lo! We are Christians." That is because there are among them priests and monks and because they are not proud' (Q. 5:82).

The Qur'ān remarks that some of the People of the Book had encouraged the Prophet of Islam in his mission. 'Those unto whom we have given the Book (Torah and Gospel) before it, they believe in it [the Qur'ān]' (Q. 28:52). There are two qur'ānic verses in particular which advocate tolerance and goodness toward the People of the Book:

There is no compulsion in religion. (Q. 2:256)

And argue not with the People of the Scripture unless it be in a way that is better, save with such of them as do wrong; and say: We believe in that which hath been revealed unto us and revealed unto you. Our God and your God is one, and unto Him we surrender. (Q. 29:46)

Allāh forbiddeth you not those who warred not against you on account of religion and drove you not out from your homes, that you should show them kindness and deal justly with them. Lo! Allāh loves the just dealers. (Q. 60:8)

This last verse suggests that Muslims have to show kindness and justice in addition to tolerance to the People of the Book.

Under an Islamic government, the People of the Book are required to pay a poll-tax (*jizya*), which, according to Islamic jurists, is a payment in return for the responsibility of protection. It is a term mentioned in the Qur'ān:

Fight against such of those who have been given the Scripture as believe not in Allāh and the Last Day, and forbid not that which Allāh hath forbidden by His messenger, and follow not the religion of truth, until they pay the tribute readily, being brought low (*'an yadin wa-hum ṣāghirūn*). (Q. 9:29)

Although some scholars consider the *jizya* mentioned in the last part of the verse a humiliation tax, referring to the term *ṣāghirūn*, the verse can be interpreted differently. There is for example a prophetic tradition reported by al-Bukhārī, which says that the giver is better than the receiver, and uses the term 'upper hand' and 'lower hand'.¹² Another prominent Ḥadīth scholar al-Nasai has a chapter on the virtue of the 'upper hand'.¹³ The superiority of the giver was known among Arabs both before Islam and in the Islamic period. The Qur'ān, then, by saying *ṣāghirūn*, indicates that the *jizya* which is given by the People of the Book does not stem from the superiority of the givers.

Muslims are responsible for the protection of the People of the Book in their society. Abū Yūsuf (d. 182/798), an early 'Abbāsid jurist, mentioned the story of Abū 'Ubayda, who was governor of Homs, a city in modern-day Syria, during the reign of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the second caliph in Islamic history. Abū 'Ubayda returned the poll-tax of his Christian subjects when he realized that he would not be able to protect them against a huge Byzantine army.¹⁴

Among the rules related to the relationship of a Muslim government with non-Muslim subjects, interestingly, there is no *zakāt* (prescribed charity) chargeable on the wealth and cattle of the non-Muslims, while Muslims have to pay *zakāt* to the state or other specific places as a compulsory religious duty. In addition, the poor, the blind, the old, the recluse workers at the houses of worship, women and children are all exempt

from the poll tax. The maximum punishment for its non-payment is limited to imprisonment. The poor and the crippled are to be supported from the state exchequer.¹⁵

Jizya cannot be considered a debt, according to Muhammad al-Shaybānī (d. 805), the disciple of Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 767). He says, 'If one of them [people of the book] dies, and part of his *jizya* has not been paid, it should not be deducted from any of his estate, nor should it be collected from his heirs'.¹⁶

Al-Qurāfi, a Mālikite scholar, concluded his opinion on the People of the Book by saying that the Islamic tendency toward *dhimmīs* is as follows:

If enemies at war invade our country, aiming at a certain *dhimmī*, it is essential for us that we come out to fight them with all our might and weapons, since he is under the protection of God and His messenger. If we did anything less than this, it would mean that we have failed in our agreement for protection.¹⁷

From the Prophetic traditions, many privileges are given to the People of the Book. The Prophet is quoted as saying: 'Who wrongs a Jew or a Christian will have myself (the Prophet) as his prosecutor on the day of Judgement.'¹⁸

He also says: 'Whoever persecuted a *dhimmī* or usurped his rights, or took work from him beyond his capacity, or took something from him without his permission, I shall be a complainant against him on the Day of Resurrection.'¹⁹

In another tradition, the Prophet is reported as saying: 'One who hurts a *dhimmī*, hurts me. And one who hurts me, hurts Allāh.'

On the basis of these traditions, the People of the Book clearly are under the protection of the Prophet Muhammad himself. In general Islam prescribes mercy towards the people of the Book. There is an incident involving Ḥizām b. Ḥākīm, one of the companions of the Prophet, who was living in Syria. The Governor of Syria-Palestine was 'Umayr b. Sa'īd. One day, Ḥizām saw a group of Christians standing out in the hot sun, and asked the reason why. He was told that they were being punished because they had not paid their land taxes. Ḥizām went to the governor and reproached him, saying, 'I heard the Messenger of God [the Prophet of Islam] says, "He who torments men in this world, God will torment him on the day of resurrection."²⁰ The governor then gave the order that the men be set free.

Nursi's Teaching

The egalitarian reforms, which occurred in 1855 and 1856 in the Ottoman Empire, gave non-Muslim subjects the rights to be governors and officers in the army, and gave them full equality with Muslims. In 1908, with the declaration of the Second Constitutional Government, these principles were further clarified and applied, which caused a serious problem in the Ottoman eastern provinces. These reforms were a significant change in attitude toward the People of the Book. Said Nursi visited the eastern provinces, explaining these changes and answering the tribal leaders' questions. The question and answer format is preserved in Nursi's writings.²¹

A. Nursi and the People of the Book in an Islamic Society

Question: How can a non-Muslim become a member of the constitutional assembly of the Ottoman Empire ... There are Christians and Jews in the Ottoman parliament, but

their votes are worthless in Islamic Sharī'a. [If this is the case,] how can we accept them in parliament?²²

Nursi answered as follows:

First, the judgement in consultation *shūrā* is made in accordance with the opinion of the majority. The majority is Muslim, with more than 60 '*ulamā*' (scholars) in the parliament. Representatives are free. Therefore, they should not be under any influence. And thus, the dominant power in Parliament is Islam. Second, in the making of a watch, or of a machine, the opinion of a Christian or a Jew is acceptable.²³ Furthermore, Sharī'a does *not* refuse it. Political issues and economic advantages in the assembly of Parliament comprise those issues [for which input from experts is encouraged]. Therefore, it must not be refused.²⁴

Question: How can a non-Muslim be equal to a Muslim?

Nursi's response:

Equality is not in honor and virtue, but it is in law and legislation. In Islamic law, the king and slave are equal. Is it possible for a religion like Islam, which prohibits its adherents from tormenting an ant to allow its followers to torment humans and neglect the rights of human kind? The fourth caliph of Islam, 'Alī, the cousin of the Prophet, was equal to a simple Jew in the court. Similarly, the founder of the Ayyūbī dynasty, Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn Ayyūbī, of whom you are proud, was also equal to a poor Christian in the court. These examples serve to show that Muslims and non-Muslims are equal before the qur'anic law.²⁵

Question: The Armenians are *dhimmīs*, meaning we protect them. How can the protected be equal to the protectors?

Nursi's response:

We should not see ourselves in a convex mirror. The blame is on us. We did not protect them thoroughly; we did not show them perfectly the justice of Sharī'a. We could not protect their rights because of the bad path of dictatorship; and later, we wanted to protect them, but we could not. That was all because we lost our power. I now see the Armenians [Christian Armenians] as *dhimmīs* of a treaty.²⁶

Question: Armenians treat us as the enemy, do wrong to us, and are full of tricks and distrust. How can we be amicable toward them?

Nursi's response:

The reason for the enmity, which was dictatorship, has died. Through the death of dictatorship, a friendship will arise. I am telling you with a certainty that the happiness and salvation of this nation [perhaps meaning Kurds and Turks], lies only in a friendly relationship with the Armenians. Relations with them are not to be forged in a despicable way, but by extending the hand of peace. I will say one thing: Is it possible to cleanse all Armenians on the face of the earth? Since it is not, then enmity is completely the wrong approach.²⁷

Here, Nursi mentions the particular case of friendship with the Armenians by saying that:

Beginning from Adam on, the Armenians have lived with us. It is impossible

for a nation completely to disappear, not only a long-lived nation like that of the Armenians, but even a small tribe like the Omer Dilan [the name of a tribe in Eastern Anatolia in the time of Nursi]. None can be erased from the earth. Omer Dilan has for a thousand years lived as Omer Dilan ... We have reasons for friendship, [one of which in particular is] the neighborhood. They [the Armenians] are our neighbors. [Based on the need to live in mutual comfort and security, living in] the neighborhood [alone] necessitates a friendship.²⁸

Nursi's answers to other questions are drawn from his deep reading of the Qur'ān. Question: 'There is a prohibition against friendship with Christians and Jews. For God says: "O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and Christians for friends."' ²⁹

However, Nursi brings out a new interpretation based on his methodology of qur'ānic exegesis. He says:

First, there should have been a definite implication, as it should have definite form. Thus, there is a way for there to be various possible meanings and interpretations. For the qur'ānic prohibition is not *'āmm* [a general rule applicable to all and not to be contradicted], but *muṭlaq* [the laws that are controlled].³⁰ [In this instance], time is a prominent interpreter. If it puts a limitation on the verse, nobody would object to it.

Nursi brings another aspect of his interpretation of the verse, saying:

Also, if the judgement is based on a derivative form of the word, the meaning of the infinitive would show the reason of the judgment. [i.e. if the law is built on an analogy, then what is applied in the analogy constitutes the basis of the law]. Therefore, the qur'ānic prohibition is concerning not Jews and Christians themselves, but it concerns the religion of Christianity and Judaism. One can be beloved, not because of his essence, but because of his attributes and professions. Therefore, it is not necessary that a Muslim's attributes be considered Muslim as well. And likewise, it is not necessary that a non-Muslim's attributes be considered as those belonging [only] to non-Muslims. Therefore, it is possible that a non-Muslim individual could have a *Muslim* attribute or a *Muslim* profession. Why must this [necessarily] be impermissible, and why would the case of Muslim attributes of a non-Muslim not be a cause for praise and imitation? If a Muslim male has a Christian or Jewish wife [which is permissible under Islamic law], is he not supposed to love her? On the contrary, certainly, he will love her.³¹

Nursi espouses another approach to the verse in the second aspect of his interpretation. Here, he touches on a crucial point in a realistic manner, within the historical context:

During the time of the Prophet, there was a sizeable religious revolution. All ideas of the people of that time were inevitably concerned with religion. People hated and loved each other [solely] on the basis of religion. Therefore, a [close relationship with] non-Muslims was considered a form of hypocrisy. Today, there is a civilizational and wordly revolution. The human mind is occupied by civilizational progress and wordly life.

Concluding, Nursi says,

Therefore, our friendship with the Christians and Jews is [now] from the standpoint of their civilization, their progress, and the protection of social order, which [has become] the basis of all happiness in human life. Thus, the qur'ānic prohibition does not encompass this friendship.³²

Question: Should Muslims call Christians and Jews *kāfir* (infidel)? There are verses in the Qur'ān which refer to some of them in fact with the term *kufur* (infidelity) (Q. 98:6). Why should we not call someone who is *kāfir* a *kāfir*?

Nursi's response:

[You don't do this, just] as you don't call someone who is blind, 'O Blind one'! There is torture [and harm] in this term, and torturing a *dhimmī* is prohibited according to the Prophet of Islam, who says: 'Whoever tortures a *dhimmī*, I am his prosecutor on the Day of Judgement ... Secondly, the term *kāfir* has two meanings. The first and most common one [refers to the] irreligious person, who denies the existence of God. In terms of this meaning, we do not have the right to call the People of the Book *kāfir*. The second meaning is one who denies the prophethood of the prophet of Islam. In this case, we can call them *kāfir*, and they are pleased with it in this sense. But, since the first meaning is the most common one, it became a word of torture, hurt and debasement for them. In addition to these reasons, we do not *have* to mix the circle of human relations with the circle of beliefs.³³

Question: How can non-Muslims serve in the military? Is this permissible?

Nursi's response:

Yes. First, the army is for fighting. Yesterday, you [tribesman] fought against a giant bear. Was there shame upon you when you got help from women, children or gypsies? Second, the Prophet concluded a treaty with some of the Arab polytheists of his time, and as a consequence, they fought together [against a common enemy]. [In this case, we are discussing] the People of the Book, [who are not] polytheists [from the standpoint of belief and faith]. They are separated from one another within the army; the Muslims are the majority group in the army. The patriotism of both groups will prevent harm. Third, although it was rare, Muslim authorities [have historically] benefited from non-Muslims in military services. The Janissaries of the Ottoman Empire bears witness to this fact. Also restricting military service to Muslims, had caused and would cause a decrease in the Muslims' wealth and population.³⁴

Question: How can a non-Muslim be a governor or head official of a district?

Nursi's response:

Just as they can be a watchmen, mechanics, or janitors. This is because, in the constitutional government, the ruler is the people, and the government is the servant of the people. If [the system] is implemented correctly, the governors and head officials will not be chiefs of the people, but paid servants of the people.³⁵

B. Nursi and Muslim-Christian Cooperation

Nursi does not focus on the differences between Islam and Christianity. On the contrary, he focuses on the mutual benefits of Muslim-Christian cooperation. In his 1911 *Damascus Sermon*, Said Nursi emphasized the bright future of Islam, listing the factors to help facilitate cooperation between Islam and Christianity. Nursi's sermon was made 50 years before the *Nostra Aetate* of the Second Vatican Council, which stated: 'Upon the Muslims too, the Church looks with esteem.'³⁶

Nursi's *Damascus Sermon* and the *Munazarat* both were addressed to Muslims. The

Damascus Sermon had as its intended audience the Muslim intellectuals of the Ottoman Empire. The *Munazarat* addressed the Muslim masses. Nursi's published writings, talks, and correspondence include much discussion of Muslim-Christian issues. For instance, in one of his letters to his students Nursi says:

Missionaries, Christian spiritual leaders, and Nurcus³⁷ must be very careful. Sooner or later the Northern movement [Communism] will try to break down the alliance of Muslims and missionaries, in order to defend itself from attacks by Islam and Christianity.³⁸

Nursi's use of such tender words towards missionaries clearly shows his feelings towards the spiritual leader of Christianity.

Nursi says: 'World peace will be possible only via Islam and Christianity, which will join and be allied with the Qur'ān.'³⁹ Commenting on a prophetic tradition about the coming of Jesus, Nursi says:

Christianity will be purified and rid of all the superstitions and misbeliefs. It will unite with the Islamic religion ... If Christianity and Islam remain separate, they will be defeated by the atheism movement. But if they are unified, they will be able eventually to defeat and destroy the atheism movement.⁴⁰

In another passage of his writings, Nursi coins the term 'Muslim Christians' to describe the followers of Jesus.

The zealous and devoted Christian society, rightly deserving the title of Muslim Christians, will attempt to unite the two (Christianity and Islam) and will destroy and kill the Anti-Christ committee that tries totally to destroy the holy and sacred things with the aim of denying Almighty God's divinity. This Christian society will eliminate the Anti-Christ and save human beings from atheism, under the leadership of Jesus Christ.⁴¹

Nursi's political worldview also reflected Muslim-Christian cooperation. Nursi was very hopeful about the USA. During one of my meetings with Mustafa Sungur, one of Nursi's distinguished pupils, he related that Nursi advised Adnan Menderes, Turkish Prime Minister in 1952-60, to establish and strengthen Turkey's relation with the USA, instead of England and France.

According to Nursi, the benefit of Europe and the USA is in the Islamic alliance. He says: 'In the past, Christian states were not supporting and were not in favor of the Islamic Alliance. But now, both the USA and European countries have to support the unity of Islam and the Holy Qur'ān due to rising anarchism and communism.'⁴²

He points out the importance of unification: 'These days, the people of religion and truth must unite sincerely not only with their own brothers and fellow believers but also with pious and spiritual ones among the Christians and ignore their various disagreements and disputes, in order to combat their joint enemy-aggressive atheism.'⁴³

On the role of the USA in the widespread struggles throughout the world, Nursi says:

My heart feels very deep anxiety, consolation and comfort in such a way: As a result of these widespread struggles, irreligious terror and fear would oust and cause more damage and harm than was sustained in the previous World War in Europe which is the source and cradle of civilization. But I am consoled and comforted by the fact that the New World (USA) will act in conformity with the true teachings of Christianity and unite with the

world of Islam. Then, the Bible and the Qur'ān will cooperate. So I do hope that this alliance will stand up in a heavenly resistance against atheism and communism, and that it will be victorious.⁴⁴

Despite his severe criticism of Western civilization, Nursi divides Europe into two parts, in his book written in 1933–4. He also distinguishes between Christianity and Europe, saying:

It should not be misunderstood: There are two Europes. I am not criticizing the Europe of scientific works, of justice and equity, of useful and beneficial artwork for humanity and the welfare of people, with all its inspiration and enlightenment learned from true Christianity and Islam.

He rather criticizes the 'depraved and corrupted Europe in the darkness of philosophy of naturalism, which leads people astray and into corruption'.⁴⁵

Said Nursi advocated Muslim–Christian cooperation not only through his writings, but also through meetings with religious leaders. In 1953, Nursi met with Patriarch Athenagoras (1886–1972). He sent some of his books to the Pope Paul VI. Nursi received a thankful reply from the Pope.

Through his writing and other activities, Nursi sowed the seed of dialogue and cooperation between Muslims and Christians. Today, the teaching of Nursi continues. One of the most prominent disseminators of Nursi's teaching, Fethullah Gulen (b. 1938), met with Pope John Paul II in February 1998, to discuss the future of Muslim–Christian relations, and establishing an interfaith dialogue university in Harran, in Southeastern Turkey, known as the birthplace of Abraham.

Conclusion

In his writings, Nursi stands up for Muslim–Christian cooperation. This cooperation is absolutely necessary for the future of Islam and Christianity, and for the future of peace on earth. Nursi's work has begun to bear fruit. One of these fruits is the historic meeting of Fethullah Gulen and Pope John Paul II. Today, millions of Nursi's followers share his opinions and work in this direction with regard to Muslim–Christian relations.

NOTES

1. *Al-Ahkām al-Sultāniyya* (Rules on Government) reserves a chapter for this issue, which is nicely elucidated by Wadi Zeidan Haddad in 'Ahl al-Dhimma in an Islamic State: the teaching of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Mawardī's *Al-Ahkām al-Sultāniyya*, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 7: 2, 1996.
2. Serif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1989), 42.
3. Enver Ziya Kartal, *Non-Muslim Representatives in the First Constitutional Assembly, 1876–1877*. Cited in Benjamin Braude & Bernard Lewis, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire* (London and New York, Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1982), 388.
4. This is elaborated in Kartal, *op. cit.*, 391.
5. The work was originally written in Arabic in 1911 by Said Nursi. He revised and translated it into Turkish by in 1950. An English translation entitled *The Damascus Sermon* was published in Istanbul in 1994.
6. For details about Christians in the Qur'ān see Dawud Fadil, *Uṣūl al-masīhiyya kamā yuṣawwiruha al-qur'ān al-karīm*, (al-Rabaṭ, Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, 1986); Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1991).
7. The Qur'ān gives various titles to Jesus. He is sent with *injil* (Gospel). As it is stated in the Gospel of Mark (8:27) the Qur'ān affirms the messianic character of Jesus, by calling him *al-masīh*.

- (Messiah, Anointed one), *al-nabī* (Prophet), *al-rasūl* (Messenger), *min al-muqarrabīn* (of those close to God), *mubārak* (Sacred one), *qawl al-haqq* (True word), *'abd allāh* (Servant of God), and *ibn Maryam* (Son of Mary). (For details see Zeki Saritoprak, 'The eschatological descent of Jesus: Muslim views', *The Fountain* 29, January-March 2000, 10-19; Edward Hulmes, 'The People of the Book and the question of Jesus', *Theology* 95, 1992, 334-43. Fazlur Rahman argues that the Qur'ān would not necessarily conflict with the notion of Jesus as Logos or even the Logos becoming flesh, but at the same time would not accept the divinity of Jesus and would find unacceptable the Logos identified with God (Fazlur Rahman, 'The People of the Book and the diversity of "religions"', in: Paul J. Griffiths (Ed.), *Christianity Through Non-Christian Eyes* (Maryknoll NY, Orbis Books, 1990), 109.
8. Statistics from Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (London, Faber and Faber, 1965); see also William Cenkler, 'People of the Book: basis for Muslim-Christian dialogue', in: Gerard Sloyan (Ed.), *Religions of the Book* (Lanham NY/London, University Press of America, 1996), 120.
 9. G. Vasda, '*Ahl al-Kitāb*', *EF*, (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1960), vol. I, 264.
 10. Maurice Borrmans, *Guidelines for Dialogue Between Christians and Muslims*, trans. R. Marston Speight (New York, Paulist Press, 1990), 86.
 11. See Mahmoud Ayyoub, 'Islam and Christianity between tolerance and acceptance, cited in Sloyan, *op. cit.* 31.
 12. see al-Bukhārī, *Wasāyā*, 9, *Zakāt* 18; Muslim, *Zakāt*, 94-7.
 13. See al-Nasai, *Zakāt*, 50.
 14. The Byzantine army was preparing to attack Abū 'Ubayda's army. Abū Yūsuf cited the letters written by Abū 'Ubayda to the leader of the non-Muslim subjects. [Cited in Ahmet Davutoglu, *Alternative Paradigms: impact of Islamic and Western Weltanschauungs on political theory* (Lanham, NY/London, University Press of America, 1994), 160.] Lewis & Braude claim that when the Muslim authorities failed to implement the promised protection the consequences of doing so were left less clear (*op. cit.*, 38). Yet, Abū 'Ubayda's example gives a clear understanding of the consequences.
 15. See Davutoglu, *op. cit.*, 160.
 16. Al-Shaybānī, *Siyar*, trans. M. Khadduri (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press) cited in Davutoglu, *op. cit.*, 160.
 17. Al-Qurāfi, *Al-furūq*, (Cairo, 1346), Vol. 3, 14-5. Translation from Abdur Rahman. I. Doi, *Non-Muslims Under Sharia (Islamic Law)*, (Lahore, Kazi, n.d.), 26.
 18. al-Munawi, *Faydh al-qadīr*, Vol. 4, 19, Hadith No. 8270.
 19. Al-Bayhaqī, *Al-sunan al-kubrā*, Vol. 5, 205.
 20. For the traditions see Ibn Hanbal, *Al-musnad*, Vol. 3, 403. The incident cited in Ayyoub.
 21. See Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Munazarat*, (Istanbul, Yeni Asya Yayinlar, 1996); *Risalei Nur Kulliyati*, (Istanbul, Nesil Yayinlari, 1996), Vol. 2, 1939-58. The quotations from *Munazarat* are translated from Turkish into English by the author of this paper and published here for the first time in English.
 22. This question came out as a result of the Ottoman-elected parliament composed of 115 deputies, 67 Muslims and 48 non-Muslims (Karal, *op. cit.*, 394).
 23. Nursi used the names Haco for Christians and Barham for Jews. These names were well-known in the area.
 24. Nursi, *Munazarat*, 41.
 25. *Ibid.*, 66.
 26. *Ibid.*, 67.
 27. *Ibid.*, 68.
 28. *Ibid.*, 68-69.
 29. See Q. 5:51. This was the most controversial verse of the Qur'ān on this topic. Literally, the Qur'ān says not to take Jews and Christians for friends, and almost throughout the history of Islam, the verse was understood in this literal way.
 30. The author wish to thank Dr Amira Sonbol for her help with these technical terms.
 31. Nursi, *Munazarat*, 70-1.
 32. *Ibid.*, 71.
 33. *Ibid.*, 71-2.
 34. *Ibid.*, 76.
 35. *Ibid.*, 79.
 36. Walter M. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York, Herder and Herder, 1966), 660.1.

37. The term Nurcu means the followers of the light, has been used for the followers of Nursi.
38. Nursi, *Risalei Nur Kulliyati* (Istanbul, Nesil Yayinlari, 1996), Vol. 2, 1744.
39. Nursi, *Hutbei Samiye* (Istanbul, Sozler Yayinevi, 1994), 30.
40. Nursi, *Mektubat*, (Istanbul, Sozler Yayinevi, 1981), 57.
41. Nursi, *Risalei Nur Kulliyati*, Vol. 1, 441.
42. Nursi, *Emirdad Lahikasi* (Istanbul, Sinan Matbaasi, 1959), Vol. 2, 54.
43. Nursi, *The Flashes Collection*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Istanbul, Sozler Publication, 1995), 203-4.
44. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, 58. The translation comes from Thomas Michel's paper (with slight changes), 'Muslim-Christian dialogue and cooperation in the thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi' presented in Bediuzzaman Symposium 1998 (Istanbul, 1998).
45. Nursi, *The Flashes*, 160.