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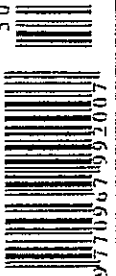
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AN NURSI READER

The Creation of Evil is not Evil:

Nursi's Theological Approach to the Existence of Evil

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The recent tsunami and the devastation that it caused—the deaths of more than 300,000 people and the creation of millions of homeless—have raised the question: How could a loving and benevolent God allow such evil things to happen? In other words, the recent tsunami has raised the question of theodicy. The magnum opus of Nursi, the *Risale-i Nur Collection* (The Treatises of Light), contains many passages and sections concerning the creation of evil. This article has no claim to relate all of what Nursi has to say on this subject, but rather will elaborate Nursi's view of the matter of evil through some quotations from his writings.

In his collection of *Lem'alar* (The Flashes), he dedicates an important section to the story of the prophet Job (Ayyub), who suffered from severe illnesses. Through this story Nursi speaks of the problem of suffering and how it is perceived from a theological perspective. He refers to the Qur'anic verse: "And (remember) Job, when he called upon his Lord saying: 'affliction has touched me and You are the most Merciful of the merciful'" (21:83). In this story, Job's illness cleansed his soul while his body suffered. In this way, Job's suffering served his spiritual heal-

ing. Nursi comments on this, saying that an illness is not only physical, but it can also be spiritual. He says, "If our inner being was to be turned outward and our outer being turned inward, we would appear more wounded and diseased than Job." Nursi continues, "Every sin that we commit, every doubt that comes to our mind, inflicts wounds on our heart and spirit." Job's wounds were threatening his worldly life; our spiritual wounds, often, threaten our eternal lives. Because of this we must say a prayer that is one-thousand greater than that of Job. We, like Job, need this prayer, even if we are healthy in body.

Nursi divides disasters into two types. The true disaster, according to Nursi, is the religious disaster. For example, if a Muslim abandons their faithful performance of their religious obligations this would be a religious disaster, and is graver than any physical disaster. Another example that can be given is the harboring doubts; for example, one may doubt God's existence. This too is a religious disaster if these doubts do not ultimately strengthen one's faith. In such a case, a person should pray to God for His mercy and ask for guidance and deliverance from this affliction.



The second type of disaster is physical, not religious. This type of disaster often acts as a divine reminder. According to Nursi, this type of disaster does not suggest a wrathful God, but rather a merciful God. He gives an example of a shepherd who is concerned about his sheep: If a shepherd throws a stone at his sheep when they trespass on another's pasture, they understand that the stone was intended as a warning to save them from a perilous action; full of gratitude, they turn back. Nursi similarly states that there are many apparent disasters that in fact remind us of God and awaken us. Some disasters, likewise, cleanse us of our sins. Some disasters remove carelessness and remind people of their weaknesses and vulnerabilities; it is through these events that we experience a kind of divine presence. Nursi, with regard to illnesses, refers to the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad stating that sins fall away through the trembling caused by a fever, just as a tree drops ripened fruit when shaken.

Nursi says that there are three reasons that humans have no right to complain about disasters and illnesses. The first one is that God has made human beings a reflection of his art, clothing them with the cloth of existence. God has made people a model for the reflection of His Names. Therefore, the name of God "The All-Healing" is made known through human illness, while the name "The All-Provider" is made known through human hunger. Existence itself is a great bounty from God; that is, it is a great bounty in comparison to non-existence. According to Nursi, through calamity and illness people are purified from their sin and they attain a higher spiritual rank while they leave this world which is in fact a testing ground for human beings. A monotonous and indolent life is closer to non-existence, which is the absolute

evil; existence is the absolute good. Life led monotonously on the couch of ease and comfort resembles not so much the pure good that is being, as the pure evil that is non-being; it tends in fact in that direction.

Nursi goes on to elaborate on the fact "worldly life is a place of testing and an abode of service. It is not a place of wages or rewards. Illnesses and disasters, as long as they do not affect belief and are patiently endured, are beneficial and relevant to worship, strengthening and making every hour of life the equivalent of one day of worship. Instead of complaining, one must be thankful." In Nursi's understanding, worship is divided into two types: positive worship (the common form of worship with which we are familiar) and negative worship (e.g. being patient in unpleasant conditions). He includes disasters and illnesses in the category of negative worship; it is through these that humans can understand their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. They pray to their Merciful Lord to help them in these matters, thinking of Him and sincerely appealing to Him. Nursi suggests that if a person is aware of these things, and if they think of the reward that God has prepared and remains thankful then their limited life will bear the fruit of an unlimited life. If these are done while suffering, then one minute of this worldly life becomes like one day spent at worship.

In another section, Nursi speaks of the creation of evil, especially the creation of Satan, and how this can be compatible with the wisdom of God, Who is the Owner of infinite beauty and mercy. How could such a One have created Satan, who is evil and ugly? Nursi tells us, "In the creation of Satan, there are minor evils set beside major good goals and human progress toward perfection. Yes, in the capacity of human progress, which is found in

the essence of humanity, there are more stages than even those found in the growth of a seed into a tree. One can even say that these stages are as great as the difference between the size of an atom and the Sun. The development of such human capacities requires movement and action. The mechanism for such an action of development is struggle. Such a struggle requires the existence of Satan, demons, and evil things, against which humans must struggle. Otherwise, the stages of humanity would be static, like those of the angels." Thus, Nursi says, abandoning thousands of good things in order to prevent the occurrence of one evil is not an action of wisdom or justice. Responding to the statement of "the creation of evil is evil, and the creation of ugliness is ugly," Nursi says "the creation of evil is not evil, but committing evil is evil. This is because creation—either by creating something out of nothing, or through transformation—is to be evaluated in terms of its results. For example, rain has a thousand results, all of which are beautiful. Some people may suffer because of rain as a result of their neglect to take precautions. Yet, despite the fact that some people have suffered, no one can say that rain is not a mercy, that rain is not good. No one can say that the creation of rain is evil. On the contrary, those who suffer have made rain evil for them through their own neglect." Nursi continues in this vein, using the example of fire. He argues that in the creation of fire there are many benefits. All of them are good. Some people, however, may make fire harmful for themselves and may suffer as a result. Such people cannot say the creation of fire is bad, but rather the way that they employed fire was bad. Fire was not created to harm people, but people often use fire to harm others and themselves. A simple example of this is the person who does not use fire to cook their dinner, but rather puts their hand in the fire, making it harmful. At this point we need to mention that in some acts of God, like the recent tsunami in the Asia, there are many more dimensions involved than just human neglect and any human precaution simply cannot resist Divine Decree.

Nursi elaborates on this subject by raising the problem that there are many people, who under the temptation of evil go astray. Is such

a result still good? With regard to this, Nursi draws our attention to the importance of quality and not quantity. He gives an example of planting one thousand and ten seeds, saying that if a thousand of these seeds whither away and only ten survive to grow into trees one cannot say that planting these seeds was bad, even though a thousand seeds were lost. The ten seeds that became trees will result in thousands more seeds. In humanity, many people go astray because of the creation of Satan, but many others, with great qualities, have benefited humanity in extraordinary ways.

According to Nursi, everything that is created in this world is beautiful because it is a reflection of God's name, "the All-Beautiful." To support this, he refers to Al-Ghazzali's famous statement: "In the world of possibility, there is no better one than the current one." Nursi refers to opposites: There are some evils, yet these are relatively beautiful because they bring to the fore the character of their opposites. "Ugliness that brings out many beauties is relatively beautiful: Ugliness becomes beautiful. If ugliness, through its disappearance, causes the disappearance of many beautiful things, it becomes even uglier. Humans can understand the existence of warmth because there is cold and the existence of light because there is darkness." Therefore, according to Nursi "through minor evil, harm, misfortune, and ugliness, some important good acts, encompassing benefits, great bounties, and important beauties appear."

What we deduce from Nursi's explanations is that Divine Wisdom may allow seemingly evil things, such as catastrophes, to happen. Disasters happen through His knowledge and His natural laws. Even within the greatest disaster, God is there with His mercy and beauty. He bestows His private bounties upon those who suffer through such catastrophes. The believers who die in these catastrophes are considered to be martyrs, and their lost property is considered as having been (donated to) charity. ■

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