

# Guest Editorial

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As one of the greatest contemporary Islamic thinkers and scholars, Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1876–1960) has influenced the thinking of millions in the world through his writings, particularly in Turkey. It is a great honor to present this special issue of *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* on the contributions of Nursi to the social and intellectual life of Muslims.

Why is Nursi important for our contemporary world? I have been considering this question for a long time. First of all, he has brought us a very important intellectual legacy through his magnum opus, *Risale-i Nur* or *The Treatises of Light*. Throughout his entire writings one can see a positive and unique approach to the Islamic themes of our time. Despite the fact that he suffered a certain amount of persecution from the extreme secularist governments of his time, he never attempted a violent response. Instead, he always asked his students to be patient and expect the reward of their patience from God. Instead of responding violently, he dedicated his efforts to his writings, which he believed would help with the faith of the new generations. His struggle was therefore a mature intellectual struggle.

His criticism of the West was not based on slogans, but on philosophical principles. He did criticize the West, but he also found some aspects of the West beautiful, and thought they should be benefited from and imitated. Thus, Nursi was not a man for generalizations; rather, one can argue that he was a man for details and specifics. This approach is very significant and relevant for our time, since we have witnessed many tragedies brought about in the name of religion, particularly in the name of Islam. He never accepted violence as a way of struggle; his way of struggle was the way of persuasion (Arabic: *iqnāʿ*; Turkish: *ikna*). He believed that humanity had reached a certain level of civilization and that in civilized societies the manner of solving disagreements is to convince others, not to force them. If you want others to accept your opinion, Nursi would say, persuade them. For Nursi, the use of force and violence is bestial behavior, and therefore should not be practiced. It seems that his approach in such earlier times is a remedy for the problems of our own time.

In Nursi's teaching, one can see strong criticism of Western materialistic philosophy. For example, in his *Treatises on Nature* (*Tabiat Risalesi*), he severely criticized

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0959-6410 Print/1469-9311 Online/08/010003-2 © 2008 University of Birmingham  
DOI: 10.1080/13510340701770238

philosophical naturalism. These criticisms are intellectual and mature, showing that he preferred a method that was persuasion oriented rather than force oriented. One can observe this approach in Nursi's understanding of Shari'a. Many of his contemporaries understood the term to refer merely to a collection of Islamic laws. However, for Nursi 'Shari'a' was a more encompassing term. He divided Shari'a into two different revelations. The first, the natural world, comes from the divine attribute of *irāda* (will). The second revelation is the world of scriptures, for Islam the Qur'an, which comes from the divine attribute of *kalām* (speech). For Nursi, Shari'a is not narrow, as many other scholars believe, but rather an encompassing way given by God, and not just jurisprudential prescriptions. Even in his time, when Shari'a was understood merely as the practice of Islamic law enforced by the power of the state, Nursi interpreted it as a way of life and supported constitutionalism. He did not find any contradiction between Shari'a and constitutionalism. In fact, for him, constitutionalism was an application of consultation (Arabic: *shūrā*; Turkish: *şura*), one of the principles of Shari'a.

Nursi was against the literalist understanding of religion. He promoted a return to understanding the fundamentals of religion, in other words the pristine nature of Islam. But he was not a fundamentalist in the modern sense. In his view, taking a renewed look at the fundamentals of religion would make people more understanding and more open to other religions, as were the early Sufis in Islam. This approach was evident in Nursi's personal life. He was an ascetic, but his piety encouraged his open-mindedness to other religions—hence his promotion of Muslim-Christian relations. He was pious, as the Qur'an requires of Muslims, and he was also in dialogue with other traditions, as the Qur'an advocated in the early period of Islam. His reading of the religion seems to be a full understanding, not partial, and so it seems to me that Nursi's reading of Islam, the second-largest religion in the world today, is essential for Muslims, and for non-Muslims too.

I hope that this special issue of the journal will contribute greatly to the Islamic understanding that is found in the teaching of Nursi. The authors who have written in this issue on various subjects related to Nursi are well known in their fields. I am very confident that each essay fills a gap in the area of Islamic studies, and particularly Nursian studies, where much remains to be done.