Islam and Politics in the Light of Said Nursi’s Writings

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ABSTRACT. This article discusses in its introduction the concept of political Islam as it first developed during the final years of the Ottoman Empire, and Nursi’s reaction to politics. The bulk of the article then focuses on Nursi’s stance concerning politics. As a prolific author, scholar, and activist, Nursi has a unique place among his contemporaries and the article deliberately elaborates on why Nursi coined his famous statement: ‘I take refuge in God from Satan and politics.’ It also presents a limited comparison between Nursi’s interpretation of some qur’anic verses and Sayyid Qutb’s interpretation of these same texts.

Introduction

In the last two centuries, the Islamic world has experienced major changes in its social, political, and religious structures. As they considered the advancement of Europe, certain Muslim intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century looked for an Islamic revival. In the nineteenth century, some of them presented the establishment of an Islamic state as a major objective. Such a state would empower the religion of Islam against European hegemony. This political activism in the name of religion resulted in the emergence of what is today called political Islam.\(^3\)

In response to Western dominance, Muslim intellectuals of the time saw politics as a means for independence and socioeconomic development, through the establishment of an Islamic state ruled by the principles of Shari‘a, Islamic law. This article examines some of the work of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1876–1960),\(^3\) the spiritual leader of the Nur movement, or what will here be called the Nur School in Turkey.\(^4\) This article challenges the position of Nursi’s opponents who accused him of being a religious personality with a hidden political agenda. It will examine Nursi’s response to these accusations and will aim to shed light on his understanding of politics within the intellectual environment of contemporary Islam.\(^5\)

Bediuzzaman (meaning ‘the Wonder of the Age’) Said Nursi became involved in politics, a fashionable trend of his time, early in life. Historical sources do not provide any evidence that he met with prominent Islamic figures of his time such as Jamal al-Din

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al-Afghani (d. 1897) and his student Muhammad `Abduh (d. 1905), who were highly politically oriented and promoted the unity of Muslims (‘Itihad-i Islam) around the world. His biographers do mention Nursi’s meeting in Istanbul with Shaykh Muhammad Bakhit (d. 1935), the famous Grand Mufti of Egypt, who reportedly asked him about his views concerning the future of Europe and the Ottoman Empire. In this conversation, Nursi is said to have told Shaykh Bakhit that the Ottoman Empire was pregnant with a European state, Europe was pregnant with Islam, and that both would give birth sometime in the future. This expression purportedly astonished Shaykh Bakhit with its clarity and vision for the future.

Nursi’s biographers also mention his meeting with disciples of Muhammad ‘Abduh, as well as with students of al-Afghani, in the province of Mardin in the southeast of Anatolia. These individuals were focused on political activism; as a result of his connections with them, Nursi expected that the revival of Islam would take place in the political arena. Despite the fact that Nursi imagined that the revival should serve Islam, in this early period he encouraged people to rely on themselves rather than the government. His parable of the shepherd and wolves illustrates this point: If all rely on one lazy shepherd, wolves and thieves could easily take the sheep, but if everyone became a shepherd, there would be no threat from either (Nursi, 1996a, Mi‘ammarat [Dialogues], p. 1930).

Political approaches to Islam are not monolithic around the globe. In fact, Nursi’s assertion to combine politics with Islam has had such strong influence in Turkey that its political Islamic movements have had far less popular support than in other countries such as Egypt or Pakistan. In these countries, social structure and political environment continue to play a significant role in the development of a variety of politically oriented Islamist movements. It is impossible to say how many of these movements currently exist, as there is no consensus about the definition of a political Islamist movement.

Under the influence of the colonial era in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many Muslim intellectuals encouraged political involvement as an essential path to the independence of Muslims. Themes such as freedom, equality, and unity were addressed by many Ottoman intellectuals, such as Namik Kemal (d. 1888). Like al-Afghani, he upheld the unity of Muslims around the world. This new political involvement was fueled by the social and political circumstances of the Islamic world. For example, the concept of jihād, driven by local nationalistic movements, became very popular in the context of Muslims’ response to colonialism. The center of the Islamic caliphate, Istanbul, witnessed fierce debates, particularly about whether Turkish nationalism, Islamism2 or Ottomanism, which often overlapped, should guide Turkish Muslims.

During this period, another important ongoing debate in Islamic communities centered on the relationship between modernity and tradition. Intellectuals promoted participation in government and the acceptance of modern developments; as a result, politics, especially Islamic politics, became very attractive. The rejection of Western ideas was strongly encouraged by revivalists. Some of these, particularly the defenders of Turkish nationalism, nevertheless adopted some Western ideas in cultural developments. They even borrowed certain terms from the French Revolution, such as liberty, equality, progress, and brotherhood. Some of these terms were later reflected in the name of this group: Ittihād ve Terrakî Cemiyeti (the Community of Unity and Progress, or CUP).

According to another group of intellectuals, the defenders of Islamism, a reinterpretation of the Qur’an was necessary in order to address the demands of modern life. The Qur’an was considered capable of re-energizing Muslims, so a new approach was required. In the words of Mehmed Akif Ersoy (d. 1936), the famous Ottoman intellectual, poet, and author of the Turkish national anthem:

Is it possible to meet our religious needs with books, Written seven hundred years ago?
No, it is impossible.
We have to get our inspiration directly from the Qur’an.
In order to express Islam to the mentality of the modern century.
This cannot be achieved through empty claims, but requires knowledge.9

In another poem, he says, ‘You must be convinced that the Qur’an was not revealed to be recited in graveyards or used to cast spells’, criticizing the traditional recitation of the Qur’an, whose use had become exclusively concentrated on bringing grace and blessings to the dead. Rather, he argued, the Qur’an should be viewed as a book of power, a book of instruction for the living, not the dead. This was an attempt at ‘purism’, Şerif Mardin calls it: an attempt to go back to the original ‘unspoiled’ source of Islam (Mardin, 2000, pp. 81–82).10

**Nursi and Ottoman Politics**

Said Nursi was at the center of these debates when he visited Istanbul and met with the Ottoman Sultan, Abdul Hamid II, in 1907. Nursi himself was hopeful, saying to his students, ‘I see a light in the future’ (Nursi, 1996a, Mektubat, p. 523; ibid., Kastamounu Lahi-kazi, p. 1580). While the Western colonial powers presented an image of Islam as a ‘futuristic and reactionary religion’, Nursi was searching hopefully for light. Initially, he perceived this light as a political power that would accomplish the goals of Islam. For this reason, he was involved in political activities until he realized that politics could not effectively represent the piety that is found at the core of Islam.

One reason for this change in perspective was his observation of political partisanship. After seeing a pious person praise an evil one just because he was in the same political party, while demonizing a pious individual of a different political persuasion, he coined his famous statement, ‘A‘idu bi-lilahi min al-shaytani wa-al-siyasa’ (‘I take refuge in God from Satan and politics’) (Nursi, 1996a, Mektubat, p. 368). This statement marked the turning point in Nursi’s approach to politics and Islam.

It is ironic that some of the ulama, Islamic scholars, accused Nursi of passivity for abandoning politics, while, on the other hand, secular politicians imprisoned him on the charge of seeking political power after the establishment of modern Turkey in the early 1920s. Nursi spent the next 30 years in and out of prison.

Nursi came to understand the ‘light’, not as political power, but as spiritual and intellectual enlightenment coming from the reinterpretation of the Qur’an. In his major works, The Words (Sözler), The Letters (Mektubat), The Flashes (Len’alar), and particularly The Rays (Sualar), he elaborated on his defenses given in court, explaining his reasons for abandoning a politics based on personal advantage and worldly status. Throughout his life, including in personal conversations with his students, he emphasized this principle, abandonment of politics, as a requirement of the devotional aspect of Islam. He reflected on this sentiment in his writings, which are compiled in two major volumes...
entitled *Risale-i Nur* (The Treatise of Light), while some of his students collected his writings on politics in a separate book (see Nuri, 1996a).

The intellectuals who supported Islamism, including Nursi, promoted the unity of all Muslims throughout the world. Those who supported Turkism called for a unified Turkish state, overlapping with Islamism; some scholars find no opposition between the Islamism and Turkism of that time. The promoters of Turkism managed to establish the CUP, which eventually overthrew Abdul Hamid II (r. 1876–1909).

Some roots of modern political Islamic movements can be found in the Islamism of the late Ottoman Empire, represented by the scholars, military officers, and journalists of the empire. Ottoman Islamism promoted the idea of Islamic unity through an organization named after the Prophet of Islam, the İttihat-ı Muhəmməd Cemiyəti, or the Community of Muhammadan Unity (CMU), established on 23 March 1909. Said Nursi was a member of the organization and worked to promote it. Despite the fact that the organization favored a political solution based on enhancing the Ottoman caliphate, Nursi supported a constitutional system and believed that the Ottoman sultanate was no longer sustainable. He famously said, 'The old system is impossible; either a new system or extinction' (Nuri, 1996a, *Mimara*, p. 1940). He described the CMU in his own terms, and not in the terms by which it was publicly understood. Since the organization was named after the Prophet of Islam, Nursi was careful to make sure that the name of the Prophet was not misrepresented and therefore suggested that 'it should not be a rigid organization, but one open to all Muslims' (Nuri, 1996a, *Divan-ı Harbi-i Orfi*, p. 1922).

As a result of his dynamic speeches and writings, many people from the area around Istanbul became members of the CMU. The CMU organized a celebration of the Prophet’s birthday (Mevlid, a common tradition in some Islamic countries such as Turkey and Egypt, even today), and large crowds gathered to celebrate. Soldiers, students of religion, artisans, and laborers talked with increased fervor about the threat of the CUP government to the Shari'a, and the dangers of Western domination (Shaw & Shaw, 1977, p. 279; Hanigolu, 2001; 1995). Eight days after the foundation of the CMU, the uprising of 24 April 1909 took place (known as the uprising of 31 March 1325, according to the Rumi calendar used by the Ottomans). The founders and some members of the organization were executed, including Dervis Vahdeti, the publisher of the well-known newspaper *Volkun Gazetesi*, who was found guilty by a military court.

This event was one of the most significant Muslim uprisings of the early twentieth century. Its method, style, and slogan contained the seeds of modern-day political Islamism: the uprising protested against the policy of the CUP government, which was based on the idea of secular pan-Turkism, and the government was asked instead to implement the Shari'a in full (see Shaw & Shaw, 1977, p. 280). After the uprising failed, many prominent Muslim intellectuals were executed by the CUP government, and many more were arrested, most of them members of the CMU. Said Nursi, despite the fact that he was attempting to calm the tension, was court-martialed but acquitted. Some contemporary writers claim that the uprising was secretly instigated by the CUP government itself in order to remove Abdul Hamid II from power. This claim is not confirmed by any reliable evidence.¹¹

Although Nursi was a member of the CMU, he was not a revolutionary. As is clear in his writings of the time, he was a forceful defender of *Meşrutiyet* (Constitutionalism).¹² He joined the organization only 'to protect the name of Muhammad from bad intentions (ağrac). When he realized what was going on in the street, and heard the shout of 'Şeriat isteriz' (We want Shari'a), he tried to stop it, but could not. As he later said, 'The color was one and the same, but the intentions were different!' (Nuri, 1996a, *Divan-ı Harbi-i Orfi*, p. 1923). He criticized those calling for Shari'a, comparing them to a parrot who repeats words without understanding their meaning. Although he attributed great value to the Shari'a, he felt that this uprising was based on a misunderstanding of it.¹³ This seems to be the first modern Islamic revolutionary action against an established government. Interestingly, despite the fact that this event has commanded the attention of many contemporary historians, it has not received the consideration it deserves from many scholars of Islamic studies.

Said Nursi, being witness to all of these events and wishing to 'extinguish this fire' (Nuri, 1996a, *Divan-ı Harbi-i Orfi*, p. 1923) of anarchy, found a new channel for his ideas. A few years later, in 1912, he went to Damascus where he gave his famous *Hübe-i Ṣaniye* (Damascus Sermon). He defended the compatibility of science and Islam, and emphasized the importance of inter-religious cooperation, particularly between Islam and Christianity.¹⁴

All these events, in addition to his participation in the First World War and his time as a prisoner of war in Kasturma (in modern-day Russia), occurred in the first period of his life, from his adolescence to 1923, a time that he called *Eski Said* (Old Said). During this time, he was actively engaged in social and political life and hoped to use politics as a way to serve the religion of Islam. He recalled the decision he made when he was in Kosturma, when he reflected on his personal life during the 'long nights' of the region. He decided to abandon a normal social life and dedicate himself to an ascetic lifestyle. He said, 'Since I will be alone in my grave, I should get accustomed to loneliness' (Nuri, 1996a, *Len'talar*, p. 708). In 1923, Nursi decided to put this into practice and this decision marks the beginning of the second period of Nursi's life, dubbed by Nursi *Yeni Said* (New Said).

**Nursi and Republican Politics**

At the request of the newly established Turkish government, Nursi addressed the parliament on 19 January 1923. He reminded the members of Parliament of the importance of religion, particularly prayer and a focus on the afterlife, quoting verses from the Qur'an. Nursi said, as surely as they were sent by their constituents to parliament, so a day would come when they would be sent to the afterlife, emphasizing the Qur'an's injunction, 'There is no doubt that prayer is prescribed upon believers to be performed in specific times' (Q 4:103) (Nuri, 1996a, *Mesnevî-i Nuriye*, pp. 1317–1318). He also spoke about social differences between Western and Eastern societies, asking government administrators of the new Turkish Republic to be more respectful towards religion, even if they were not personally religious, because of the religious nature of Eastern societies.

On this point, he disagreed with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), the founder and the hero of the new republic.¹⁵ In a heated discussion with him, in the presence of some parliamentary representatives, Nursi said angrily to Ataturk, 'Pasha, Pasha, the most important truth in the universe is belief in God, and then comes prayer.' Atatürk, hoping to pacify Nursi and harness the power of his influence, offered him positions as a parliamentary representative and a preacher for the entire eastern region of Turkey, an offer accompanied by a high salary and a palace. Nursi refused all of these offers: this refusal was the moment of transformation from 'Old Said' into 'New Said' and the fulfillment of his decision to leave politics and social life and live an ascetic lifestyle.
Nursi left Ankara with the intention of spending the rest of his life in a cave in the province of Van in eastern Anatolia. However, after a Kurdish-Islamic uprising against the government of Ankara in 1925 (the Shaykh Said Firan Incident), the government wanted to reduce Nursi’s influence as a precautionary measure, despite his opposition to the uprising and his rejection of Shaykh Said’s invitation to participate. Nursi, who had witnessed the events of 31 March (in 1909), surely knew that such uprisings would harm Islam as well as Turks and Kurds. As Nursi had anticipated, the 1925 uprising cost the lives of thousands, including Shaykh Said himself. 17 As a result of this tumultuous event, Nursi was removed from his home in eastern Anatolia and sent into exile in western Anatolia in 1926.

Living under an extremely secularist regime, Nursi avoided politics and emphasized the importance of faith. During this period, despite governmental restrictions on his writings, he completed his magnum opus, the Risale-i Nur (The Treatise of Light). 18 His writings started to draw the attention of the local population, at first attracting many peasants, and later, students. According to the Ayfın public prosecutor, the number of Nursi’s followers reached 500,000 in the 1940s (Nursi, 1996a, Emir adığ Lahi kası, p. 1876). In an article on Nursi’s death published in 1960, the New York Times (24 March 1960) estimated their number at one million.

After the emergence of political pluralism in Turkey (in 1948), Nursi supported the Democratic Party, a liberal opposition party, more tolerant towards religion than Atatürk’s Republican People’s Party (RPP, abbreviated in Turkish as CHP). Though only minimally politically active, Nursi demonstrated to his students that it was important to participate in the voting process rather than remain neutral, and encouraged them to do the same. He did not, however, support the establishment of the Islamic Unity Party (IHH), an Islamic party, in 1972 (Nursi, 1989, pp. 178–179).

Nursi continued writing over a period of 23 years. His writings became the driving force of his movement. He emphasized in these writings, and in personal letters to his students, that they were the guardians of social order, and the ‘spiritual police’ protecting young people from anarchism and social disorder. He thought that the destruction in the world was mainly spiritual (ma’nevi) and that such destruction needed to be healed spiritually. Nursi believed that his service, through his writings, would help to strengthen people’s faith against the spiritual destruction inherent in the modern philosophies of naturalism and materialism. Most of his writings comprise logical explanations and justifications for core matters of faith and traditions of Islam. To him, faith was the center of life for any individual. He considered this way of service, which developed into a leading school of thought in Turkey, to be an alternative to politics in the name of Islam. He compared his service to light, which benefits everyone, while he described politics as a hammer, which may benefit, but may also harm. He believed that his writings were collective or spiritual (ma’nevi) miracles of the Qur’an in the twentieth century: ‘They are medicines from the holy pharmacy of the Qur’an put into our hands by the mercy of God’ (Nursi, 1996a, Mektubat, p. 551; ibid., Barla Lahikasi, pp. 1413, 1433; ibid., Emir adığ Lahi kası, p. 1763).

Despite governmental restrictions, his writings became the most widely read religious publications in Turkey, after the Qur’an and the Hadith. Nursi’s followers would copy and deliver his works by hand, since publishing and distributing them openly were prohibited by the government until 1958. Approximately 700,000 copies were handwritten between 1926 and 1960. Osman Yuksel Serding e ti, a well-known Turkish author, described this as an extraordinary effort in which ‘faith challenged technology’ (Serdengecti, 1996).

Despite Nursi and his followers’ support for the Democratic Party as voters, he remained faithful to his refusal to run for a political position himself. In addition, he particularly opposed politics based on personal benefit rather than service, stating that ‘Politics based on personal advantages is a monster’ (Nursi, 1996a, Mektubat, p. 572). One of the reasons for his rejection of partisan politics arose from his own ascetic lifestyle. 19 During most of his personal life, he lived ascetically, having very few possessions, holding piety in high regard, and remaining celibate. When he died, his only possessions were a pocket watch, a teapot, and some clothes.

Nursi’s Views on Islam and Politics

While noting the exception of the four Rightly Guided Caliphs, Nursi believed that it was hard to be a true religious Muslim and a politician at the same time. He believed that one who enters the arena of politics might be compelled to sacrifice some Islamic values. On one occasion, when enumerating the problems of the Islamic world, he considered a major difficulty to be the death of honesty in the social and political life of Muslims. Politics, he believed, by its very nature, inverts reality: ‘Politics shows an angel as Satan and Satan as an angel.’ 20

In accordance with Nursi’s principles, his students remained separated from those religious organizations in the Islamic world that promoted political activism. For example, a comparison between the students of Nursi and the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt 21 was made in an article published in 1946 in the Baghdad-based al-Difa’ (Defense) newspaper. The author of this article, ‘Iṣa’ Abī al-Qādir, remarked, ‘Nur students do not involve themselves in politics and they reject it. They are not a political organization. The Muslim Brothers, because of the special situation of their country, involve themselves in politics and political organizations in order to work for religion’ (Nursi, 1996a, Emir adığ Lahi kası, pp. 1880–1881).

The students of the Nur School are also distinguished by the language they use in their Islamic discourse. For example, Nursi himself addressed not only Muslims in his writings, but all of humanity. He used the phrase ‘Ey insan!’ (O human being!), suggesting that every human being is a potential addressee. There is no reference to destroying a country or nation anywhere in the 6,000 pages of his written works. On the contrary, he always spoke of the duties of believers, particularly his followers, to build rather than destroy. In contrast, in the writings of many politically oriented Islamic movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the language is highly inflammatory and reactionary. These writings only address Muslims; the non-Muslim is an abstract ‘Other’. It is not difficult to see the consequences of this type of language in the media in the modern Islamic world; the media influence by more than thought, however, such as Nursi’s, exhibits a more balanced and reasonable tone.

Nursi believed that Islam did not need to be protected by the power of politics. Islam, in his view, was like the sun; no threat could extinguish its light. Islam was in the hearts and minds of millions and, to Nursi, was alive in the rhythm of the universe. He was confident that Islam could bring bliss to the restless hearts of human beings in modern times. In a letter to his students on the holiest night of Ramadan, Laylat al-Qadr (the Night of Power), he insisted, ‘humanity will seek eternal life’. The world had experienced the inhumanity of the two World Wars and their enormous cost in human lives; this inhumanity demonstrated for many the ugly face of politics when bent to personal advantage and violence. The signs of the search for eternal life, in his view, started in the West, in
America, and in the North. The Qur'an gives good news about this universal search for eternal life and eternal bliss, mentioning and proving its existence through thousands of verses. Humanity, according to Nursi, will find the cure for its sickness in the Qur'an, and the Qur'an can provide this cure if human beings do not bring an early destruction upon themselves before the end of time (Nursi, 1986a, Sözler, p. 60).

For Nursi, the goal of every human being, Muslim or otherwise, should be the attainment of the eternal bliss of the afterlife. Humanity with no hope of eternal life suffers; this goes against Nursi's basic sense of compassion towards all creation.22 The shortest and the safest way to this goal was to show the Light (Nur) to the people. No politics could replace such an essential goal of humanity. He says, for example, 'If one has money equal to the amount of the budget of Germany and England23 to achieve such a goal [eternal bliss] one would spend this amount without hesitation.'24 Nursi believed that political involvement would negatively affect the pursuit of this noble goal. Answering a question on why he avoided politics, Nursi said, 'We [he and his students] each have two hands. If we had one hundred hands, it would still not be enough to achieve this noble goal of serving the Light.' Nursi and his students therefore dedicated themselves to helping people to gain eternal life, believing that people's worldly life would, as a result, also be characterized by bliss.

Nursi was careful not to generalize and demonize his opponents when he was persecuted by the ruling party, the RPP. He sent a letter from prison to the Interior Minister, offering some advice and reminding him of his duty towards the nation from his position of power (Nursi, 1996a, Emirdağ Luhkastı, pp. 1772–1773). He blamed only 5% of the RPP's members for their anti-religious attitudes and his persecution. While many politically oriented Islamic parties would consider secular governments to be disapproved if they denied the sovereignty of God, Nursi rejected this generalization. According to Nursi, verses such as 'In al-hukm illa li-lihî' (Soevereignty belongs only to God) (Q 6:57), common in the parlance of political Islam, are indications of the ontological, not political, sovereignty of God. Nursi would take these verses as the foundation of his reflections on the creation of heaven and earth. The sovereignty of God is everywhere, according to Nursi, from the atom to the sun to the galaxies, and every moment of life bears witness to this sovereignty of God.

While some Islamic political movements find justification in verse 42:38 for the rejection of democracy in the name of Islam, Nursi found in it no suggestion of the incompatibility of Islam with democracy. He believed that legitimate constitutionalism (meşrutiyet-i meşru) was compatible with the teaching of Islam, as long as it was consistent with the basic values, though not necessarily all of the rules, of Shari'a. When Nursi supported the idea of constitutional government, he still believed that sovereignty belonged to God and saw no contradiction between his ideas and the Qur'an text. On the contrary, he supported his ideas by quoting, 'and their [Muslims'] affairs are a matter of counsel among them' (Q 42:38), saying, 'consultation adorned with Islamic ethics would defeat all kinds of tyranny in the Islamic world' (Nursi, 1996a, Hube-i Şamiye [Damascus Sermon], p. 1970). His great concern about the moral foundation of political authority led him to support a system based on consultation, that is to say republicanism, rather than authoritarianism.

Nursi carefully divided politics into two categories: affirmative or positive politics, and utilitarian or negative politics. The positive helps to ease people's daily life, creating better social conditions. Nursi considered the negative to be a sickness: when politics in Istanbul came under the influence of foreign powers between 1918 and 1922, he chanted the words 'İstanbul' and 'İspanyol' (Turkish for 'Spain') and said, 'İstanbul politics is like Spanish influenza.'
of liberty as evidence of the infidelity of the rulers, in reference to the verse. The poor ulama did not know that ‘He who judges not’ [man lam yakhlan] means ‘He who believes not’ [man lam yaşadda]. (Nursi, 1966a, Mınāzarat, p. 1955)

Nursi rejected the interpretation of these ulama, saying that he objected to those who were thinking of oppression as freedom and rejected the constitutional law. Thus the rulers, according to Nursi, were not infidels. Each of these interpretations has had its own consequences in the social and political life of Muslims and they continue to affect present-day Islamic discourse.

As a part of his political philosophy, Nursi never approved of violence as a political tool. Despite his opposition in his early life to the oppression of the rulers, he dedicated himself to peace and non-violence, especially in his years of ‘New Said’. In his farewell letter to his students in 1960, he says,

I have never accepted oppression or humiliation since my childhood, and never obeyed it. This has been proven by many events in my life ... For example, in Russia I did not stand up for the chief of staff of the Russian Army when I was a prisoner of war. It is also not true about the threat of execution at the court martial. However, for thirty years now, I have dedicated myself to positive action and not negative action. In order not to interfere with the duty of God, I have decided to accept all of which is done to me with patience and pleasure (rida), like the martyr prophet Gergis and the sufferers in the Battles of Badr and Uhud ... The most important matter in this time is spiritual jihād. (Nursi, 1966a, Endırağ Lahlıkası, p. 1912)

Because of his understanding of spiritual jihād, he suggested that the physical sword should be sheathed. For nearly a century, no evidence has emerged that Nursi or his students ever supported violence as a legitimate means for social change. In the above-mentioned letter to his students, Nursi coined a new term to describe his understanding of nonviolence: 'positive action' (mustast harekat). He wrote, ‘Our duty is to act positively. It is not to act negatively. It is only to serve belief in accordance with divine pleasure’ (Nursi, 1966a, Endırağ Lahlıkası, p. 1912; cf. Basar, 1997). In Nursi’s understanding, there is no place for violence in the name of Islam on any level, apart from defense against foreign attacks. He said, ‘The duty of a Muslim is merely to convey the message of Islam and not to compel people towards Islam. The rest, acceptance or rejection by the people, is God’s concern’ (Nursi, 1966a, Endırağ Lahlıkası, p. 1912). With this, he was probably mindful of the Qur’ānic text, ‘Had your Lord willed, all who are on the earth would have believed together. Would you compel people to be believers? No one can believe without the will of God’ (Q 10:99–100).

As for dealing with Western civilization, he encouraged Muslims to try peacefully and intellectually to ‘convince’ the Western world, rather than to fight against it. He emphasized that successfully debating or gaining ascendency with civilized people can only be achieved through persuasive argument. Force cannot be used against civilized people. As a vehicle of communication, the power of the word should be employed, instead of the power of sword.

Carefully examining the Qur’ānic verse, ‘No soul shall bear another’s burden’ (Q 6:164), Nursi believed that people could easily be made to violate this principle if they were subjected to any violence. ‘The verse’, Nursi writes, ‘indicates that the brothers and sisters, relatives, spouse and children of a criminal, and even fellow members of the same party, cannot be considered criminal because of his or her actions. For this reason, throughout my life, I have worked with all my strength to preserve public security’ (ibid.). Nursi observes that modern politics ignores this Qur’ānic principle. As a result, human blood is shed and innocents are tortured and assaulted. ‘The politics of the modern world’, Nursi says, ‘sacrifices majorities for the sake of minorities. The oppressive minority sacrifices the common majority. Qur’ānic justice does not justify the shedding of the blood of one innocent person; neither for the sake of the majority, nor for the sake of all humankind’ (Nursi, 1966a, Süzüle, p. 329).

While struggling under severe persecution, Nursi worked hard to dissuade his followers from violent action. For example, one of his prominent students, Zübeyr Güngöz (d. 1971), spoke in his defense in the court at Afyon: ‘If Said Nursi had not prohibited us from violence, we would now have been in the Afyon mountains with our guns, waiting for his return!’ (Nursi, 1966a, Süzüle, p. 1104). Despite the large number of his students and admirers, and despite the widespread torture and persecution they faced, there is no record of violence among his followers, either during his lifetime or after it.

In conclusion, one can argue that Nursi was not opposed to politics in an absolute sense. He believed that politics could serve humanity in a positive manner. However, he had serious reservations about politics in the name of religion, particularly Islam, which made him cautious about political involvement. He found politics to be divisive rather than uniting. According to Nursi, partisanship, in many cases, overcomes the sense of justice. In his statement equating politics with Satan, he refers to politics based on personal advantage, describing such politics as a ‘monster’. Another probable reason for his avoidance of politics is the possibility that it could open the door to violence. Because of his absolute rejection of violence in the name of Islam, Nursi stayed out of politics and dedicated his entire life to the dissemination of Nur. Light. It is clear in many of his writings that he thought that politics could cause the usurping of the rights of the innocent. Furthermore, his avoidance of politics was not based in passivity, for it is known that throughout his life he remained active and concerned about the spiritual and material problems of his society. Nevertheless, he rejected political involvement for both himself and his students because negative politics was to be likened, in his own words, to a kind of ‘Spanish influenza’.

Notes

1. The author wishes to thank Armando Salvatore, Marcia Hermannson, Omid Safi, and Ali Aslan for their suggestions after reading the first draft of this paper.
2. The fact that Islamic ethics can be interpreted in different ways does not affect the unique nature of the religion itself. However, it does affect the nature of the followers of that religion. We may have political and apologetic Muslims, violent and peaceful Muslims, who all adhere to one unique religion, namely, Islam. John Esposito uses the term “politicized Islam” interchangeably with “Islamic fundamentalism.” (For a good discussion on what political Islam is, see Esposito, 2000.) Mohamed Ayubi uses the terms “political Islam” and “Islamism” interchangeably (see Ayubi, 2005). Al-Hudaby, on the ‘deceptive’ term of “political Islam”, says, “It gives the false impression that there is a distinction between Islam as a religion, with its creed, rights, and ethics, and Islam as a political system” (Al-Hudaby, 1997, pp. 3–4). Such terms, used to define Islam, are ideological and one should remember that the majority of Muslims consider Islam to be not an ideology, but a religion. Therefore, I will use the term “political Islam” for the sake of clarity and for lack of better options, to refer to politically oriented Muslims.
3. Hamid Algar considers him among the renewers of Islam (see Algar, 2003).
4. He was born in 1876 in the vicinity of the Iblis Province of eastern Anatolia. Nuri did not receive the traditional long-term training of an iftāni. Although he was able to challenge the most learned madrassa scholars of his time, he obtained his madrassa knowledge within a short period of study. For more details, see Vahide, 1992, p. 21. Recently, the madrasa educational system in Islamic countries such as Pakistan has received widespread criticism. In fact, Nuri called attention to the inadequacy of this system almost a century ago, suggesting that such schools should provide both scientific and religious education.

5. For details on the relationship between religion and politics, see Ferjani, 2005.

6. The Risale-i Nur Külliyat contains all the works of Nuri in two volumes. It is provided with a useful index.

7. For Islam in Turkey, see Kara, 1997.

8. For a good discussion of Muslims’ responses to modernity, see Mitchell, 2000.


10. Also, for analysis of Said Nursi and social change, see Martin, 1990. See also Yavuz, 1999.

11. For the young Turks’ discontent with the Sultan’s policy, see Hismatullah, 1993. For this particular conspiracy, see Stuhler, 1979, p. 43.

12. Nuri’s book, Münazara, contains a fine account of his views on constitutional government. This small book has been printed separately in Turkish (Nuri, 1995) but has unfortunately not been translated into English.


14. Nuri believed that modern science did not contradict Islam. He attempted to reconcile religion and science. He said, “The light of conscience is the sciences of religion, and the light of the mind is the natural sciences. By bringing these together, the truth will emerge as a result. The lack of the modern science causes fanaticism, and skepticism comes as a result of the lack of religious science” (Nuri, 1995, p. 127). Despite his strong arguments, he was opposed by some of the ulama who were against modern science. Nuri called them “externalists” (etkisizçiler), the ulama who knew only the literal aspect of Islam. Nuri once completed about the ulama’s lack of understanding and turned his face to the future and addressed his remarks to a younger generation.

15. For Ataturk’s revolutions, see Inalik, 1995, pp. 153–164. And for other aspects of Turkey, see Karpat, 1982, pp. 399–412.

16. This event is recorded by Nuri himself in an individual letter to the students. For the details of this conversation, see Nuri, 1996a, Emirâmdâr Lahikâsi, p. 1785.

17. This Kurdish uprising had religious motivations. In his letter to Nuri, Shukry Said said that the new Ankara government was going against Islam and he therefore invited Nuri to revolt against it, but Nuri rejected his invitation, telling him that the soldiers of Ataturk were their sons. In order to protect the rights of innocents, he asked Nuri to conduct his struggle through non-violent action, as he himself did.

18. The Risale-i Nur collection consists of more than 6,000 pages. It can be roughly divided into three parts. The first and major part is the Hânekin-i İstâniyye (The Subjects of Faith). The second part is İlahîkal (Asceti), which consists of correspondence with his students. The third is called Mîdefeâlar (Court Defences).

19. Due to their understanding of taqwâ (piety), early Muslim scholars and jurists rejected appointments as governors and judges because of the risk of losing their spiritual standing by accepting a worldly position, despite the fact that their appointments would be under Islamic governments and they would be asked to judge under Islamic principles. Many pious Muslims, regardless, generally prefer to avoid accepting such positions because of the great responsibility that would be placed on their shoulders and the uncertainty of being able to fulfill that responsibility as God would require.

20. The article is cited in Emirâmdâr Lahikâsi, which contains correspondence between Nuri and his students. This is Nuri’s approach to politics. He should be noted that he used the term al-sifâ’în al-sharî’îyya, which can be translated as ‘politics based on Islamic ethics’, or ‘politics based on Shari’a’, but this aspect of politics is very subtly expressed in his writings. Nuri praised this type of politics. He used the term ‘Sharí’ in an encompassing way. Universal values and the good aspects of Western civilization, which took its root from heavenly scriptures, such as the Torah and Gospel, were elements of the Sharí. Even natural laws were considered a type of divine Sharí.

21. For further information on the emergence and growth of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, see Munson, 2001.

References

Book Reviews

Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān
Vol. 3, J–Q
Jane Dammen McAliffee (Ed.)
Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2003
608 pp., hb. €252.00/US$340.00, ISBN 9004123547

Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān
Vol. 4, P–Sh
Jane Dammen McAliffee (Ed.)
Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2004
608 pp., hb. €252.00/US$340.00, ISBN 9004123555

Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān
Vol. 5, Si–Z
Jane Dammen McAliffee (Ed.)
Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2006
576 pp., hb. €252.00/US$340.00, ISBN 9004123563

Jane Dammen McAliffee’s outstanding encyclopedia of the terminology and the Qur’an provides a unique service to the scholarly study of Islam. The more entries allow the reader to identify the specific issues that are dealt with in the structure and to access references to detailed studies of the text from both Islamic and sources. Volumes 3, 4 and 5 of the five-volume collection cover entries from Sh, and Si to Z.

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