

Said Nursi on Muslim–Christian Relations Leading to World Peace

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ABSTRACT *This article examines the views of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1876–1960), specifically with regard to Muslim–Christian relations. It elaborates on his view as presented in his commentary on certain qur’anic verses (specifically 2:2 and 5:51), the first of which indicates that the devout are those who believe in both the Islamic and pre-Islamic revelations, while the second prohibits Muslims from taking Christians and Jews as friends. Nursi’s interpretation is unique among all Islamic commentators. The article also discusses qur’anic texts in light of Nursi’s famous Damascus sermon, in which he strongly advocates Muslim–Christian cooperation. Finally, the article gives examples from the life and writings of Nursi as references for his understanding of Muslim–Christian relations and the possibility of the cause of world peace being advanced through such positive relationships.*

Our world today has become a global village. It might be said without exaggeration that humanity has never before in its history experienced such intense interaction. There is no doubt that one of the most demanding subjects in our modern-day global community is the matter of Muslim–Christian relations. The two great religions that have influenced the world for centuries are now attempting to interact with each other more closely than ever before. Particularly since the Second Ecumenical Council in 1962–1964, Christianity has become more involved with world religions in general and with Islam in particular. On the other side, Islam, since the beginning, has been in conversation with Christianity both socially and theologically. Throughout Islamic history, laws and theologies have been developed by Muslim jurists and theologians to deal with various aspects of Muslim–Christian relations.

This article aims to discuss the perspective of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, a contemporary Turkish - Islamic scholar, on Muslim–Christian relations. First, there will be a brief examination of Nursi’s primary sources—the relevant qur’anic verses—and his interpretation of them. Second, the article discusses historical events that are considered early templates for today’s Muslim–Christian relationships. After this preliminary introduction, the essay examines Nursi’s early writings, particularly *Münazarat* (Dialogues) and *Hutbe-i Şamiye* (Damascus Sermon) (both published in Nursi, 2002), in which he elaborates on

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various aspects of Muslim–Christian relations. There will be special emphasis on certain Islamic theological themes as Nursi uniquely interpreted them.

It is significant, as will be indicated later in the article, that when Nursi started examining these issues the world was in social and political decline, leading eventually to one of the most catastrophic events of human history, World War I. To delve into the details of the social and political environment in which Nursi advocated such a civilizational dialogue would be beyond the scope of the current work, so we shall proceed to look into certain verses of the Qur’an from which Nursi drew his understanding of what Muslim–Christian relations should be like.

The best-known qur’anic verse on human relationships seems to be indispensable for any dialogue between two human beings or between the adherents of any religions of the world. The holy book of Islam clearly proposes that human beings are created in different shapes and colors in order that they should *know* each other, not so that they should struggle or fight against one another: ‘O mankind! We have created you male and female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. The noblest of you, in the sight of God, is the best in conduct. God is the Knower and the Aware’ (Q 49:13).

Thus, the Qur’an encourages people to develop positive relationships by knowing each other. There is no doubt that knowing is the first step in any constructive dialogue. As the Arabic proverb says, ‘The human being is the enemy of what he does not know.’ Having this general principle, the Qur’an also strongly commends dialogue between all human beings as a general principle, and between Muslims and Christians in particular. There are a variety of relevant verses, some positive and others that are indicative of the negative characteristics of some Christians or Jews.

To begin, it will be appropriate to draw the reader’s attention to Nursi’s interpretation of Q 2:5. The verse describes ‘the saved’ (*al-muflihūn*) as those who believe in the revelation given to the Prophet Muhammad as well as the revelation given to the prophets before him. This verse clearly states that belief in pre-Islamic scriptures is an essential part of faith and piety in Islam. In order to be a Muslim, one should believe in all the revelations of God, including the revelation of the Qur’an and the revelation of scriptures prior to the Qur’an. In his famous, unfinished commentary on the Qur’an, *Işārāt ul-I’jāz* (The Signs of Miraculousness),¹ Nursi comments that the language of the Qur’an is rather tender towards the followers of pre-Islamic revelations, namely Christians and Jews. According to Nursi, this verse encourages all people to accept the revelation of the Qur’an particularly the ‘People of the Book’ (Christians and Jews) due to the fact that the Qur’an itself is evidence and witness to the truthfulness of the Jewish and Christian scriptures. The verse declares the honorable position, of those People of the Book who have come to believe in the Qur’an, and exhorts others to follow their example. Nursi’s commentary on this verse further elaborates this point:

O People of the Book! As you believe in the past prophets and the divine books, believe in Muhammad and the Qur’an as well. That is because the early prophets and their scriptures give good news of his coming. The proofs that show the truthfulness of those prophets and their books are truthfully and spiritually found in the Qur’an and in the personality of Muhammad. Therefore, the Qur’an is the word of God. The Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings upon him, is the messenger of God. (Nursi, 2002, *Işārāt ul-I’jāz*, p. 1175)

Nursi continues his interpretation of this short verse with respect to Christians and Jews, indicating that the Qur'an shows them tenderness, familiarity, and flexibility. He comments that the verse has the following connotation:

O People of the Book! There is no difficulty for you to embrace Islam, as there should not be. That is because Islam does not ask you to abandon your religion entirely. It allows you to complete your creeds and build on the principles of religion that you already have. This is because the Qur'an contains all the beauties of the previous revelations and the principles of early religious systems. Essentially, the Qur'an balances and completes them. Due to the change of time and space it establishes some new details which contain no illogical or unreasonable elements. (Ibid.)

The second qur'anic verse upon which Nursi elaborates is one directly related to Muslim–Christian relations. In this verse, the Qur'an asks Muslims to debate their differences with the People of the Book in the kindest way. Without doubt, this is a quest for a sincere understanding of differences. The verse says, 'And debate with the People of the Book in the way which is the best' (Q 16:125). It is worth noting that the recent letter from 38 Muslim scholars to the Pope, entitled 'Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI', begins with this qur'anic verse in order to indicate that the relationship between Muslims and Christians, even when they are engaged in debate, should always be somehow beautiful. The verse makes it clear that there will be debates between Muslims and Christians with regard to doctrines and perhaps other issues, but says the discussion should always take place in a positive manner. According to Mahmoud Ayoub, a well-known scholar of Islam in the United States, this can be seen in the Qur'an's use of the term 'do not exaggerate' (*la taghlū*) (4:171) when it speaks of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Ayoub suggests that the Qur'an considers this doctrine as extreme, but not outright *kufir* or unbelief (Ayoub, 2004).

The third qur'anic verse upon which Nursi elaborates is the one that prohibits the taking of Christians or Jews as *awliyā'* (friends of patrons): 'O you who believe, take not the Jews and Christians for friends [*awliyā'*]' (Q 5:51). The verse is probably one of the most debated verses in the study of Muslim–Christian relations. Nursi's interpretation of this verse came at a time when most of the Islamic world was under the colonization of Western powers. In his social environment, there were Armenian Christians of various denominations and Greek Orthodox Christians, as well as Sephardic Jews. Out of great confusion about the introduction of constitutionalism, a new system of governing, into the Ottoman state, many of Nursi's contemporaries presented this verse as a proof text against developing friendship with non-Muslims, particularly Christians and Jews, who would be possibly occupying high positions in the government.

One of the important words used in this verse is the word *awliyā'*, which has a variety of meanings in different qur'anic verses. Before elaborating on Nursi's commentary, it is important to give some etymological background for the term. The famous Arab linguist Ibn Manẓūr, in his well-known lexicon, gives various meanings of the word, such as love, friendship, and alliance. To clarify, he uses two opposite terms: *muwālā*, a derived form that comes from the same root as *walāya* (amity), and *mu^cādā*, a derived form that comes from the same root as *adāwa* (animosity), saying that the essential meaning of the roots makes *muwālā* the opposite of *mu^cādā*. Thus, according to Ibn Manẓūr, *awliyā'* is the plural form of *walī*, which is the opposite of *adūw* (enemy) (Ifriqī, 1986,

vol. 15, p. 405). If the verse is taken literally, as many commentators did in the past, there is an apparent prohibition of Muslims establishing positive relations with Christians and Jews. However, Nursi has an entirely different approach to the interpretation of this verse. There is no doubt that his deep knowledge of Islamic law and the methodology of qur'anic exegesis have contributed to his commentary. Nursi says,

First there should have been a definite implication as it should have definite form. Thus there is a way to interpret this verse with many possible meanings. For the qur'anic prohibition is not *‘āmm* [a general rule applicable to all and not to be contradicted] but *muṭlaq* [the laws that are general but need not be applied in every circumstance]. Unlike *‘āmm*, *muṭlaq* can be restricted. In this instance, time is a prominent interpreter. If it puts a limitation on the verse, nobody would object to it. (Nursi, 1996, p. 70)

Nursi brings to our attention the importance of time and space as interpreters of the Qur'an. He speaks of the environment in which this particular qur'anic verse was revealed and how the modern-day environment is considerably different.

During the time of the Prophet there was a sizable religious revolution. Everyone's ideas at 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 secular revolution. The human mind is occupied by civilizational progress and worldly life. (Nursi, 1996, p.71)

Nursi thus accepts that we, as human beings, are fundamentally historical creatures, living in time and space. He considers time as an interpreter of the Qur'an. He is definitely aware of the realities of current situations and the necessity for positive relationships between Muslims and Christians. This is not to limit the meaning of the Qur'an, but to understand it as an eternal revelation of God, which addresses all ages.

Accordingly, Nursi's interpretation, using a very strong Islamic methodological approach, is that the verse should not be seen as a prohibition of friendship with Christians and Jews.

One can be beloved not because of his essence but because of his attributes and profession. Therefore, it is not necessary that a Muslim's attributes be considered Muslim too. And likewise, it is not necessary that a non-Muslim's attributes are non-Muslim. Thus it is possible that a non-Muslim individual could have a Muslim attribute and a Muslim profession. Why must this necessarily be impermissible? And why would the Muslim attributes of a non-Muslim not be a cause for praise and imitation? (Nursi, 1996, pp. 70–71)

Here Nursi elucidates the importance of characteristics rather than the person's religious affiliation. According to Nursi, good characteristics are good wherever they are and whoever attains them, regardless of people's religious backgrounds, and should be considered praiseworthy. Based on this principle put forward by Nursi, one can argue that Muslims should benefit from the good characteristics of Christians and adherents of other religions and should establish positive relationships based on those attributes, which are

considered Islamic regardless of where they occur. To support his case further, he refers to an Islamic legal principle with regard to marriage, pointing out that this qur’anic prohibition of friendship is limited by the application of the Islamic legal principle that permits a Muslim man to marry a Christian or Jewish woman, which is also supported by texts from the Qur’an and the sayings of the Prophet. He says, ‘If a Muslim man has a Christian or Jewish wife, is he not supposed to love her? On the contrary, certainly he does love her.’ If the prohibition were absolute, there would be no permission for Muslims to marry Christian or Jewish women. Concluding his interpretation of this verse, Nursi says,

Therefore our friendship with them [Christians and Jews] is now from the standpoint of looking positively at their civilization and progress, and borrowing it from them. Also, it is from the standpoint of the protection of social order which is the basis of all happiness in human life. Thus, it is certain that such a friendship is not included in the qur’anic prohibition. (Nursi, 1996, p. 71, my translation)

Although Nursi does not speak directly about the qur’anic verse that invites the People of the Book to common ground, one can see the implications of this verse throughout his writings. In many of his private letters to his students, which have been published separately as appendices (*Lahikalar*), Nursi speaks of cooperation between Muslims and Christians. He suggests that Muslims, particularly his students, should not focus on the points of disagreement; rather they should concentrate on the common ground.² It appears that Nursi is extremely concerned about cooperation with Christians for common goals such as justice, the struggle against poverty, the dissemination of knowledge, and contemporary problems, such as environmental protection. In other words, Muslims and Christians, who constitute more than half of humanity, could bring about a great change in the world through dialogue and cooperation. To open such a dialogue, the Qur’an praises some Christian qualities, such as humility. It says, ‘You will find among people who are the closest to Muslims in love are those who say “Lo, we are Christians.”’ It describes the attributes of their monks as being humble and not arrogant, and their eyes flow with tears when they hear the verses of God (Q 5:82–83).

It is evident that Nursi takes his point of departure from his primary reference, the Qur’an, which has been inviting the People of the Book to common ground since the time of the Prophet: ‘O People of the Book! 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 should take others for Lords beside God’ (Q 3:64). In his Treatise on Brotherhood (*Uhuvvet Risalesi*), addressing the issue of brotherhood between Muslims, Nursi considers ‘belief in the same God’ as the most important tie between believers. Similarly, with regard to Christians and Jews, the Qur’an says, ‘Our God and your God is one’ (Q 29:46). This seems to be the most important common ground that is addressed in the abovementioned verse as well.

Muslims and Christians have been in constant interaction since the beginning of Islam. Islamic sources recall one of the early encounters when they relate the early life of the Prophet. After the first revelation, it is narrated that the Prophet met with Waraqa bin Nawfal bin Asad (d. 611 CE),³ the cousin of his wife, Khadija. Waraqa, who had become a Christian earlier, strongly supported the Prophet and wished to live longer to help him in his message. He even prophesied that the people of Mecca would compel him to migrate from his hometown.

What can be considered the second encounter is when the Prophet went to the city of Taif, seeking refuge for himself and his followers from the persecution of the Meccans. Instead of receiving support, the people of Taif encouraged their children and slaves to throw stones at the Prophet. In this difficult time, a man named ^cAdās of Nineveh, a young servant of Utba bin Rabia, met with the Prophet and embraced Islam. Although Louis Massignon considers Salmān al-Fārisī (d. 656 CE) to be the first Christian who converted to Islam, it seems to me that ^cAdās's⁴ conversion might have been earlier. We do not have much evidence about the identity of this young Christian who converted to Islam, but it seems that the people of Taif wanted to discourage him by saying, 'Why do you accept his religion? Your religion is better than his' (Ibn Kathīr, 1971, vol. 2, pp. 150–151).

The early history of Islam contains several other occasions of Christian–Muslim encounters and they all seem to have been positive. A well-known example is the story of the migration of persecuted Muslims to the land of the Christian King Ashama of Abyssinia, the Najashi. This migration is considered a milestone in the establishment of positive relations between the members of these two great religions. As a matter of fact, this very event was the occasion of the revelation of the qur'anic verse that praises Christians as being the nearest in love to Muslims. As briefly mentioned above, the verse says,

And you shall find that the nearest of all people in love 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 arrogant. When they listen to what is revealed to the messenger you see their eyes overflow with tears as they recognize its truth. They say, 'Lord, we believe. Count us among the witnesses.' (Q 5:82–83)

Eighty-three Muslims, male and female, under the leadership of Ja'far ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 630 CE), the cousin of the Prophet, migrated from Mecca in order to take refuge in King Ashama's territory, modern-day Ethiopia. Despite the insistence of the Meccans on bringing them back by diplomatic means, the King kept them in his country under his protection. This event pleased the Prophet of Islam to the extent that, when King Ashama died, the Prophet said to his Companions, 'Your brother Najashi has died,' and he arranged an Islamic funeral for him in Medina.⁵ Even after his death, the Prophet continued building a positive relationship with the next Najashi. Some Islamic sources contain a record of the Prophet's letter to King Ashama, whose contents constitute a very important historical document for Muslim–Christian relations. In his letter, the Prophet speaks of Jesus as the word of God and a spirit from Him. It is worth noting that he begins with Jesus as the common ground between Muslims and Christians. Today's Muslims could benefit from the Prophet's practices with regard to communication with Christians.

Another early encounter is the Prophet's debate with the Christians of Najrān. This encounter was the occasion for the revelation of the famous qur'anic verse of *mubāhala* (mutual cursing). Despite the fact that the debate was initially heated, at the end the Prophet extended the hand of friendship. He also allowed the Christians to pray in his mosque and signed an agreement with them.⁶

Since the beginning of Islam, Muslims and Christians have been in constant relationships in a myriad of ways, including living together and sharing the same society, for most of the time peacefully, but sometimes in conflict. One can argue that the two major events that had a negative effect on the feelings of Muslims towards Christians

are the Crusades and colonization. It is important to note that Nursi witnessed the era of colonization of many parts of the Islamic world. Despite the fact that the majority of the Islamic world was under the colonization of European powers, Nursi was very hopeful when he gave his famous *Damascus Sermon* in 1911, which is considered a milestone in his discernment of the future of Islam, as well as of Muslims' relations with Christians. The speech was addressed to a group of scholars and worshipers as a Friday sermon at the magnificent Umayyad Mosque in Damascus.⁷ One should remember that, as mentioned above, Nursi delivered his sermon just a couple of years before the beginning of the World War I, when conflicts and struggles were spreading in the world. As a result of the Muslim reaction to colonization, the dominant Muslim view at this time was one of animosity and determination to struggle for independence against Western hegemony. The Ottoman Empire was experiencing its decline and approaching its end.

In such a tumultuous time, one would expect that Said Nursi would have spoken about these conflicts and encouraged Muslims to fight against Western Christian powers in this very important sermon, but instead he focused on the importance of positive relations between Muslims as well as between Muslims and Christians. One should keep in mind that this was nearly a century ago, and almost a half-century before the development of the Second Vatican Council's new policy towards other religions, including Islam, with the declaration of *Nostra Aetate*.

Said Nursi, in this sermon, speaks of enemies that he considers obstacles in the way of cooperation and understanding between Muslims and Christians. The enemies he speaks of are not countries, peoples, or individuals, but are described as certain social, moral, and political diseases. Nursi offers a diagnosis of the six main problems that caused the backwardness of the Islamic world and presents prescriptions to cure the problems. The problems are: the growth of despair among Muslims; the death of truth in the social life of Muslims; love of animosity; ignorance of the important ties between believers; dictatorship; and the emphasis on efforts to gain personal advantages.⁸ Nursi wanted the Islamic world to see first its own faults and weaknesses, and correct them, in order to engage constructively with the modern world. Here, he speaks of positive developments such as the idea of freedom and seeking truth in the world of Christianity, which led him to believe that there would be Muslim–Christian cooperation in the future.

After referring to the cures for these diseases, Nursi speaks about one of the lost values of Islam in our century: love as a cure for the disease of animosity. One can argue that Nursi's idea of love constitutes the foundation for positive relationships with adherents of other religions, particularly Christianity. The concept of love is depicted here as the outcome of his life experience. Nursi says, 'The attribute most deserving of love is love itself. And the attribute most deserving of hatred is hatred itself.' Since this is directly related to Nursi's understanding of Muslim–Christian relations, it is relevant to consider what he says in his examination of this particular cure. He revised his sermon in the 1950s and translated it into Turkish from Arabic when he realized, after the fact, how important it was. In this period, Nursi's writings reflect his dismay of the destruction wrought by both World Wars: as a prisoner of war in World War I, and as a horrified witness to World War II. In the revised version of the sermon, Nursi expresses the importance of love and the danger of hatred as follows:

It is time to end hatred and animosity. The two World Wars have shown how ugly animosity is and how it can be destructive and wrong. It has been proved that there is no

benefit from hatred. Therefore, the mistakes of our enemies, as long as they do not include attacks against us, should not make us hate them. The punishment of God in the Afterlife for those who disobey is enough. (Nursi, 2002, *Hutbe-i Şamiye*, p. 1968)

This eschatological approach, by relying upon the judgment of God in the afterlife, creates a paradigm that is bound to lead to forgiveness and compassion towards all, even one's enemies. Nursi, by way of comparison, likens the reasons for love to a mountain, while the reasons for hatred are only small, cheap stones. Small, cheap stones should not be preferred over mountains. He enumerates some of these reasons for love as 'faith, Islam, and humanity', which he describes as unbreakable chains and collective fortresses that connect people to each other.

Nursi seems to see three levels of positive relations. Without arranging them in any order of importance, they are, at the first level, positive relations and love between all Muslims. On the second level, there should be positive relations between all peoples of faith. On the third level, he presents the importance of positive relations between all human beings. He describes this concept of love as a part of the chemistry of Islam (*mizaj-i Islamiyet*).

Conversely, he compares the people of hatred to a child with a temper, who likes to cry, and actively looks for things to cry about. He also compares those who hate with pessimists, always looking for the negative aspects of life. If there is any possibility of negative feelings towards others, these pessimists will never prefer to have positive thoughts. Nursi says, 'Their attitude is to cover ten positive things with one mistake. This attitude is clearly against the Islamic characteristics of fairness (*insaf*) and judging positively (*husn-i zan*)' (ibid., p. 1969).

Having seen the disasters caused by nationalism and racism during the two World Wars, Nursi was fearful of the negative consequences of nationalism, which generally results in hatred towards an entire nation or ethnic group. He strongly advocates a positive relationship between all Islamic nations, regardless of their nationalities and ethnicities. He says, 'The foundation and the spirit of our nationality is Islam . . . Arabs and Turks are true brothers and they are the guards of the fortress of Islam' (ibid.). Nursi believed that Muslims, if united, would have more positive relationships with Christians and therefore, on many occasions, he suggested that Western countries, such as the United States, should work for the unity of Muslims in order to establish better relationships between Muslims and Christians.

Christians and Jews were minorities in the Ottoman state, which accepted constitutionalism as a system of rule in the beginning of the twentieth century. Nursi's early writings emphasize the need for Muslims to respect the equal legal rights of the People of the Book under this new system of government.⁹ He defended the concept of constitutionalism as an Islamic principle and a bulwark against dictatorship. Some Muslims of his time, particularly the Kurdish tribes of eastern Anatolia, were concerned that constitutionalism would bring more privileges to non-Muslims. He traveled to this region to convince tribal leaders of the importance of the new model of governance and to respond to their various anxieties, including the status of non-Muslims in the empire. In his dialogues, one can see how Nursi faced an uphill struggle to convince his audience.¹⁰

On one occasion, when he was asked how a Muslim and a non-Muslim could be equal in an Islamic society, Nursi responded as follows:

Equality is not in virtue and honor but it is in law. Before the law, a king and a slave are equals. Is it possible for a *Shari'ah* law, which forbids stepping on or tormenting an ant, to allow its followers to ignore the rights of human beings? Never! ... Yes, the leader of Muslims, Ali, may God be pleased with him, was equal to a simple Jew in the court. Similarly Salāhaddin Ayyūbī (Saladin) of whom you are proud [most of his audience were of Kurdish origin] was also equal to a poor Christian in the court. These examples, I assume, serve to correct your mistake. (Nursi, 2002, *Münazarat*, p. 1943)

On another occasion on the same trip, Nursi was asked about non-Muslims being in high positions in the Ottoman Empire as a result of constitutionalism. They asked, 'Are non-Muslim Armenians now becoming governors or senior officials of a district?' Nursi responded very realistically:

Just as they can be 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 of constitutionalism is implemented correctly, the governors and senior officials will not manage the people, but will be paid servants of the people. (Ibid., p. 1945)

Nursi found this as an important Islamic principle, found in a saying of the Prophet: 'The masters of the people are the servants of the people' (ibid., p. 1944).

As seen in the above responses, Nursi was very concerned about the application of justice to minorities—particularly Christians and Jews—under Islamic rule and this same concern is found in sayings of the Prophet when he emphasized the protection of minorities in Islamic society.¹¹ Nursi presents this idea as part of his pietistic understanding of Islamic law and principles and so always promoted peaceful coexistence between Muslims of the Ottoman Empire and minority groups, including Christians of Greek and Armenian backgrounds. One can see this approach reiterated in the *Damascus Sermon*, and with more emphasis on the importance of Muslim–Christian relations in the revised version of the 1950s. He believed that world peace would be possible through cooperation between Islam and Christianity, which would join and form an alliance through the Qur'an (Nursi, 1981, p. 30).

By considering the challenges and questions that Nursi faced, one can discern a steady development in his thought with regard to Muslim–Christian relations. After the 1920s, with the new era of the dominance of worldwide philosophical materialism, he shifted his emphasis from issues of equality to cooperation between Muslims and Christians against this materialistic philosophy. The new spirituality-oriented Nursi asked his students to cooperate with Christian spiritual leaders against the spread of irreligiosity. Nursi believed that cooperation would strengthen both religions. It is interesting that this cooperation was to be only against materialistic philosophy, not against any other religion or nationality. As mentioned above, he believed that Islam and Christianity, united, would lead to the establishment of world peace. In one of his letters to his students, Nursi advises as follows:

Missionaries, Christian spiritual leaders and Nurcus [a term used for Nursi's students which means, 'the followers of light'] must be careful. Sooner or later the northern movement [communism] will try to break down their alliance in order to defend

itself against their joint storm. This movement may deceive some Muslims to join it by its false claims that it allows lay people more freedom, promotes the Islamic principle of Zakat, prohibits interest, and promises equality of wealth, and that it asks the rich not to oppress the poor. (Nursi, 2002, *Emirdağ Lāhikası*, p. 1744)¹²

Nursi was very hopeful that cooperation between Muslims and Christians would develop and spread on a larger scale through inter-religious cooperation and experience. For this reason, he applauded the famous Baghdad Pact, since it represented intra-Muslim cooperation as well as being a Muslim–Christian alliance through the membership of Britain. In commenting on the Baghdad Pact, or CENTO, another name for the Middle East Treaty Organization, a pact jointly signed by Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, Iran, and the United Kingdom in 1955, Nursi seemed to find in the foundation of this organization the realization of his hope for peace and positive relations between Muslims and Christians on a larger scale. He wrote a letter to the Prime Minister and the President of Turkey at that time in this regard:

Your agreement with Iraq and Pakistan, God willing, will prevent the danger of nationalism. Instead of the friendship of four or five million nationalists, this agreement will bring to the country the friendship of four hundred million Muslims around the world [the population of Muslims in the world at the time], and eight hundred million Christians [the population of Christians in the world at that time] and adherents of other religions who are deeply in need of global peace. (Ibid., p. 1904)

In one of his major works, *Mektubat* (The Letters), Nursi elaborates on the symbolic meaning of the famous hadith of the Prophet on the descent of Jesus, from an Islamic theological perspective. Without denying the general interpretation of traditionalist scholars, he speaks of the descent of Jesus as a symbol of Muslim–Christian cooperation. That is because in some versions of the hadith it is said that Jesus and the Mahdi, the Muslim messianic figure, would pray together in the same mosque. Nursi sees this as an indication of future Muslim–Christian cooperation and gives eschatological significance to this alliance because both figures are considered prominent end-time symbols in Islam. In one of his interpretations, he says, ‘A devoted Christian society, rightly deserving the title of Christian Muslims, will attempt to unite the two—Christianity and Islam’ (Nursi, 2002, *Mektubat*, pp. 371–373, 441).¹³

In his unique interpretation of these Islamic theological themes, Nursi understands these sayings of the Prophet as using allegorical rather than literal language. This understanding is evident in his analysis of Europe. When he examines European civilization, he carefully distinguishes between its two aspects. On the one hand, Nursi praises the positive aspect of European civilization, which is inspired by the teaching of heavenly revelation. On the other, he criticizes what he calls the negative aspect of European civilization inspired by materialistic philosophy. He says,

Not to be misunderstood, Europe is two. One is inspired by the true religion of Jesus and has brought beneficial arts, justice, and truthfulness to the social life of humanity by following the sciences. In my critical address, I do not mean this Europe. My address is to the second Europe, which through the darkness of naturalistic philosophy, thinking of the evil aspects of civilization as good, has led humanity to

indulgence and astray. My address is to this corrupt Europe. (Nursi, 2002, *Lem'alar*, p. 643)

In this long address, he criticized this particular Europe for lacking a sense of spirituality, focusing on the materialistic aspect of life, and claiming that people will be happier through materialism. Responding to this claim, Nursi expressed his confidence that human happiness is not possible without a spiritual life. Here, like many devout Christians, Nursi also criticized the materialistic characteristics of Western civilization. This subject was recently addressed by Pope Benedict XVI, but his point was unfortunately overshadowed by his quoting what a Byzantine emperor had said about Islam. Nursi's criticism of Western materialistic civilization could be heard nearly 70 years ago when he asked, 'Is it possible for someone whose body is in paradise and whose spirit is in hell to be happy?' (ibid.). By this Nursi was indicating that, through the entertainment industry, Western civilization puts peoples' bodies in paradise-like conditions while their spirit is tormented in hell-like situations.

Although he was critical of Western civilization, he was hopeful that Europe and America would cooperate with the world of Islam in the future. He quoted the opinions on Islam of many prominent Western figures, such as Thomas Carlyle (d. 1881) and Otto von Bismarck (d. 1898). Furthermore, in his commentary on the Qur'an, *Işārāt ul-I'jāz*, he quoted statements by 40 American and European intellectuals who praised Islam.¹⁴ He found that these intellectuals inspired hope for positive relations between Muslims and Christians. In referring to them, Nursi said that, since the intellectual environment of America and Europe had allowed for the emergence of truthful personalities, such as Carlyle and Bismarck, he was confident that in the future there would be more positive attitudes towards Islam in America and Europe, as well as more such personalities (Nursi, 2002, *Emirdağ Lāhikası*, p. 1869).

Nursi saw this relationship as essential for the future of humanity. That is why he frequently asked his students to promote dialogue, particularly with Christians. Today, this trend towards dialogue is followed extensively by Muslims both inside and outside Turkey. Those who are inspired by the teaching of Nursi are leading the move towards dialogue in the Islamic world and in the West. A prominent figure in the promotion of dialogue in the Muslim world is Fethullah Gülen, who endeavors to strengthen the relationship between Muslims and Christians. Furthermore, two recent ministers of religious affairs in Turkey, Mehmat Nuri Yılmaz and Ali Bardakoglu, have met with two popes, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, to promote Muslim–Christian relations. Thus, the inclination to develop such relations is very alive in the Turkish-Islamic context, including Turkey's ceaseless efforts to join the European Union, which is believed to be a major step in the same direction.

Today this dialogue and strong relationships between Muslims and Christians are more necessary than ever. The tragedies we have witnessed around the world since 9/11 have once again proven the urgent need for dialogue and cooperation which Nursi advocated nearly a century ago. If humanity wants to survive in the twenty-first century, dialogue between religions, particularly positive relations between Muslims and Christians, will remain essential. In other words, world peace will be possible through Muslim–Christian cooperation.

Notes

1. Nursi wrote this book during World War I when he was fighting against the Russian army that had invaded his hometown in the Ottoman province of Bitlis in eastern Anatolia. His plan was to write a

- 60-volume commentary on the Qur'an, but the war prevented him from doing so. It is worth noting that Nursi wrote this commentary during the war, while Turkey was in alliance with a Christian nation, Germany, against another Christian nation, Russia.
2. With regard to innocent and oppressed Christians who were killed by irreligious forces during the two World Wars, Nursi says they can be considered martyrs, which is a very high status in Islamic theology (see Nursi, 2002, *Şuâlar*, p. 1022).
 3. 'He was a wise man of pre-Islamic times, who abandoned idols before the emergence of Islam. He also avoided the slaughter of animals as sacrifices to idols. He used to read books of various religions; he also used to write Arabic in Hebrew letters. He died not long before the Prophet's proclamation of his message (*da'wâ*). Some consider him a companion of the prophet' (Ziriklî, 1997, vol. 8, pp. 114–115).
 4. For a brief biography of ʿAdās and how he converted to Islam see (ʿAsqalānî, 1995, vol. 2, pp. 241–242).
 5. Islamic jurists, such as al-Shāfiʿî (d. 820), found in the Prophet's practice legal precedent for their own decision that the funeral prayer may be performed even when the body of the deceased is not physically present.
 6. For details of this event see Yaʿqūbî, n.d., vol. 1, p. 138.
 7. This mosque is significant in the Islamic tradition because many Muslims believe that Jesus will descend to it at his second coming, and because it contains the tombs of John the Baptist and Saladin.
 8. Said Nursi considered these diseases to be the most challenging problems of the Islamic communities of his time. He was not neutral or passive with regard to them, but presented various solutions and cures through his sermons and publications, as well as in his relations with the community. Nursi referred to six cures for these diseases, which he took from the 'pharmacy of the Qur'an'. The first is hope (*al-amal*). With this cure, Nursi tried to assure his audience that there was no need for despair. He explained that Islam would have a bright future, despite the widespread despair of the people. In this part of his sermon, he encouraged Muslims to show the beauty of Islam through their actions, not their words. In his own words, 'If we show the ethics of Islam and the perfection of the truth of faith through our actions, the followers of other religions will embrace Islam, group by group. Perhaps, some whole continents and states on the face of the earth will embrace Islam' (Nursi, 2002, *Hutbe-i Şamiye*, p. 1962). Again, under the heading of 'hope', Nursi elaborated on several powers that Islam contains and which he believed Muslims were in great need of for their material and spiritual advancement.
- Another cure of which Nursi spoke is the diagnosis of despair as a deadly disease. Here, Nursi criticized this attitude of hopelessness on the part of Muslims and presented it as the main reason why they still remained colonized by European countries, even after hundreds of years. In order to eradicate this disease, Nursi referred to the Qur'an: 'Do not despair of the mercy of God' (Q 39:53). Nursi presented truthfulness (*Şidq*) as the third cure for the diseases of the Islamic world, considering it to be the essence of the foundation of Islam and the combination of the highest spiritual senses in human nature. Thus he said, 'We must revive truth in our social life in order to cure our collective diseases . . . Faith is truthfulness and righteousness. Because of this mystery, the gulf between truth and falsehood is as great as the distance between east and west. They should not be mixed. They are like light and fire.' Nursi turns his attention to the audience and says, 'O my brothers in this Umayyad Mosque, and 400 million brothers in the great mosque of the Islamic world, and those who will be coming in 40 or 50 years time, salvation is only possible through truth and righteousness. The unbreakable rope is truthfulness, so it is the chain which one should grasp' (Nursi, 2002, *Hutbe-i Şamiye*, p. 1968).
9. For further details on Nursi's view of minority rights see Vahide, 2005, pp. 89–91.
 10. His small book, *Münazarat* (1996), as mentioned above, which contains Nursi's answers to tribal leaders' questions, is one of the most important sources of Nursi's thought on this subject.
 11. For some sayings of the Prophet, see Saritoprak, 2000.
 12. One can argue that Said Nursi foresaw the trend towards socialism in many parts of the Islamic world in general and the Arab world in particular. Many Muslim intellectuals have become fascinated with the idea of socialism as a philosophy. Some, such as the Egyptian author Mustafa al-Siba'î, have even coined the term 'Islamic socialism', which has led many Muslims to believe that socialist movements are more akin to Islam than is the Christian West.
 13. A similar voice of cooperation comes from many contemporary Christians as well. For example, Charles Kimball says, 'Many Christians and churches, including some who define themselves as

conservative or evangelical, are seeking understanding of and cooperation with Muslims' (Kimball, 2004).

14. For the list of these Western philosophers and their statements, see Nursi, 2002, pp. 2307–2312.

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