Crescent and Dove

Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam

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Among twentieth-century figures of nonviolence, Mohandas Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., are three towering icons. They exemplify exceptional dedication to social change through nonviolent action and are used as textbook cases for students of peacemaking around the world. Even in Muslim countries, they are studied as people who struggled for justice and peace—against colonialism, against apartheid, and for civil rights, respectively. Likewise, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi was known among some of his contemporaries as a “Gandhi of Turks.” But Muslim students rarely have the opportunity to ask the vital question of which Muslim figures are examples of nonviolence.

As a university professor, I presented the same question to my American classroom, composed primarily of middle-class Catholic students. I was sure that my students would generate a tremendous amount of conversation, but there was complete silence and a real sense of confusion. Having attended university and seminaries in Egypt, Turkey, and the United States, I had not realized my own students and colleagues in North America could not identify a single nonviolent Muslim figure. Some could not or would not believe that nonviolence is an essential ethical practice prescribed by Islamic religious teachings. For the first time, I recognized that the Islamic ethics of nonviolence was a foreign concept to American students, educators, and media, as well as to the larger population. Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Confucian, perhaps even Baha'i teachings of
peace were easily cited or promoted on college campuses, but I found myself talking about one of the most widely practiced religions in the world as if it were an unknown phenomenon.

In truth, Muslim nonviolent leaders are not unusual or exceptional; like other nonviolent leaders, they struggled to defeat colonialism, overthrew brutal dictators, raised dissent, and were viewed as authorities who naturally contested injustice. They practiced essential basic ethical practices of love, compassion, and nonviolence toward all. One such figure was Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, a Turkish Islamic scholar who, in the early half of the twentieth century, was the symbol for being deeply committed to tradition, religious ethics, piety, devotion, and loving his religion. He advocated nonviolence, promoted interfaith cooperation, and sought to understand others while not losing himself in materialism. At that time, Turkey's Kemalist secularists were in power and aggressively hostile to tradition and religion, as they believed that both would hinder Turkey's modernization efforts. Thus, Nursi paid dearly for his commitment to nonviolent action and for his teachings of loving all and hating none; the authorities imprisoned and tortured him regularly. Yet his nonviolent teachings live on: Today, there are hundreds of thousands of practitioners of nonviolence because of Said Nursi and his remarkable legacy. His contribution to Islamic nonviolence and peacemaking is studied in many study groups, where students simulate his nonviolent exercises to follow his model.

This essay is intended to inform those who are unaware of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and of the vast field of the Islamic ethics of nonviolence. By focusing on a single Muslim peacemaker, it does not mean to ignore, neglect, or dismiss the hundreds of nonviolent Muslims that were Nursi's contemporaries; rather, this essay aims to illustrate the creative thinking and acting by one of the most influential Muslim peacemakers in the twentieth century and show how his writings still serve as a base for much discussion and emulation.

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi was born in 1876 in the small village of Nure, in the province of Bitlis in Eastern Anatolia in modern-day Turkey. He was one of seven children of a middle-class farmer family known for their piety and generosity. He died a peaceful death on March 23, 1960, in the city of Urfa in southeastern Turkey, believed to be the birthplace of the prophet Abraham. His life since the days of his adolescence was recorded and is well-known in Turkish society, for Nursi experienced a variety of life-changing events in different parts of the world, from Eastern Anatolia to Siberia, from Western Europe to Syria, during war and after conflict, and in economically challenging times.

In his youth, Nursi experienced the variety of the Ottoman school system in Eastern Anatolia studying classical Islamic sciences, but learning modern sciences as well. He complained that the madrasa schooling system of his time was insufficient in emphasizing the study of religious over modern sciences, but in thinking that, he also offered a new approach, promoting studies of both religious and modern sciences. He went to Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire, and met with the Ottoman sultan, Abdulhamid II; there, he asked for the sultan's support for his idea of establishing a university with multiple campuses that would teach both sciences. Abdulhamid himself was sympathetic to this idea, but his aides were not. Nursi later met with the next Ottoman sultan, Reşad, who supported the project financially. Nursi then established the foundations of his university in Eastern Anatolia, teaching religious sciences to his students—and training them to use weapons for defense. Foretelling the onset of World War I, he said, "Be prepared. A big calamity and disaster is approaching." Some Ottoman military officers who visited his school asked, "Is this a military barracks or a madrasa?" The government took Nursi's weapons due to concern about the so-called event of Bitlis, a local revolt. Nursi had not supported the revolt and even tried to minimize its damage. While teaching and educating his students two months after this incident, however, World War I broke out, and Nursi and his students needed to participate to defend Bitlis, his hometown.

Nursi (later the commander of a unit) and his students volunteered as soldiers to protect their city. Being an advocate of nonviolence, Nursi was not at ease with war, but the city, needing defense against foreign occupation, forced him to action. He understood that the war required spiritual as well as physical training, and therefore, he taught his students Islamic sciences even during the fighting. It is believed that he dictated his famous commentary on the Qur'an at the front line while mostly on his horse. At the time, his actions may have appeared out of line, but in the war against the occupying Russian forces, Turkish soldiers testified that their spiritual strength gave them the means to survive the worst conditions.

There is no evidence or anecdote of Nursi killing anyone during the war, though Nursi's biographers recount how Nursi successfully protected Armenian children that were captured during fighting between Armenians and Turks. In response to Nursi's peacemaking behavior toward Armenian children, the Armenians chose not to kill Muslim children. Eventually, Nursi was wounded and taken to a Russian prison in Siberia, where his outspoken nature was also evident. When the chief of staff of the Russian army, Nikolai Nikolayevich Yudenich (1862–1933) approached the prisoners, Nursi refused to stand up because of his faith convictions. Nursi was nearly executed for this stance, but he refused to apologize to the general. When the general saw how Nursi intensely prayed before his sentence was carried out, he pardoned Nursi and apologized to him.
The effect of World War I on Said Nursi is evident in his writings. On one occasion, when he addressed his experience in Siberia, Nursi referred to a Qur’anic verse which says, “A day which makes even children old” (73:17). Nursi would say that even though he was not too old, anyone who experienced the war would be considered old even if they were young. Later in his life he criticized both World War I and World War II; these wars, he said, were not fought for justice, truth, and religion, but for stubbornness, nationalism, and increasing the advantage of certain powerful nations over weaker nations. To Nursi, the oppression caused by these two wars was so horrible that one could not find a comparable moment in all of human history. “In a place that housed one thousand innocent children, women, elders, the ill,” Nursi wrote, “they attacked such a place with the excuse that there were one or two enemy soldiers in hiding and annihilated them with bombs. Also, they ally themselves with many of the most vicious oppressors of bourgeoisie, and the most extreme anarchists of socialists and communists who shed the blood of thousands, perhaps millions, of innocents.” To express the misguidance of the perpetrators of these wars, he refers to a Qur’anic verse—“surely, humans are extreme wrongdoers and ignorant” (14:34)—and uses another verse to call for a response: “Do not incline towards those who oppress, or else fire will touch you” (11:113). In such a tumultuous time, Nursi asked his students not to associate themselves with the oppressors, or else they would share in the oppression. He said, “To be pleased with oppression is oppression.”

He struggled against the British occupation of Istanbul in 1919, and although he carried a pistol and dagger, he never used either of them. On one occasion, according to his biographers, the British army attempted to seize him at a home. Reciting a Qur’anic verse—“We have put a barrier before them and a barrier behind them and covered them over so they cannot see” (36:8)—Nursi mysteriously escaped without the soldiers ever noticing. This occasion would have been the most probable place to use his weapons against his opponents, but his escape allowed him to leave peacefully.

There is no doubt that the Qur’an was the main source for Nursi’s approach to living a nonviolent life. Probably the most frequently used verse in this regard was “no one bears the burden of others” (6:164), which constituted the foundation of Nursi’s understanding of nonviolence. Drawing upon this verse, Nursi accepted what can be called the principle of the individuality of a crime, suggesting that the neighbors and relatives of a criminal could not be punished for the criminal’s action. In other words, the blame for the crime of an individual was limited to the individual only. Thus, he strongly opposed both World War I and World War II because those involved in the wars were not distinguishing between combatants and the innocent. Nursi referred to this Qur’anic verse over and over again to his students and the administrators of the Turkish republic. He called it the absolute justice of Islam, which comes from the Qur’anic verse that says that killing one human being is equated to the killing of all humanity (5:32). Based on this verse, Nursi argued, “In the sight of the mercy of God, right is right. There is no difference between a small right and a big right. A small right cannot be nullified for the big right. Without the consent of an individual, his life and his rights cannot be sacrificed for the entire community.” For Nursi, it would be wrong to incline to relative justice when absolute justice was possible. Moreover, he argued that “the time of hatred and animosity has passed. The two world wars have shown how animosity is ugly, and how it can be destructive and wrong. It is proven that there was not any benefit in hatred.” He added, “The thing which is most deserving of love is love itself; and the thing most deserving of hatred, is hatred itself.” He formulated the philosophy of his teachings in a very simple principle—“love love and hate hatred”—that everyone could understand, yet it captured the philosophy that all human beings make errors, and we should be disgusted by the errors but not by those who commit them.

Another Qur’anic verse that Nursi took to heart states: “Call to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful discourse and debate with them in the best way” (16:124). Nursi considered persuasion to be the most important aspect of his teaching. He believed that this was the way to be followed in a civilized world. On one occasion, he said, “the way to defeat civilized people is the way of persuasion, and not the way of force, which is applied to those people who don’t understand words.” Nursi carefully distinguished between the person and the attributes that that person might manifest. “A person,” he said, “is loved not for his person-hood, but for his character.” Here Nursi elaborated on some negative characteristics of Muslims that are not Islamic and do not deserve to be loved, and some positive characteristics of non-Muslims that deserve to be loved. He said, “It is not necessary that every attribute of every Muslim is Muslim; as it is not necessary that every attribute of every non-Muslim is non-Muslim.”

In addition to arguing generally for tolerance, in focusing on the importance of a person’s characteristics rather than merely religious affiliation, Nursi was significantly criticizing both Muslims’ and non-Muslims’ lack of deep understanding of their traditions and how easily they were being absorbed by the changing times.

Supporting his idea of character, Nursi gives some examples of negative characteristics and how they can be destructive. “Through self-centricty
and egotism,” Nursi wrote, “a person would like to destroy everything he can, even the entire world when seen as an obstacle for his desire and greed.” Islam, however, had proven that it could plant good attributes even in the wildest societies: “Yes, the Arabs whose hardness of heart caused them to bury their female children alive, through Islam their hearts were cleaned and waxed to the extent that they became so sensitive toward creatures that it prevented them from stepping on even ants.”16 According to Nursi, this was a great revolution—and in our modern day, there is a need for a similar purification of character, a heartening to the time that Islamic civilization historically demonstrated tolerance, pluralism, and respect for other traditions.

Nursi insisted to his followers that they absolutely respect others and treat them as if they were their own brothers or sisters in the family. As human beings are created on a higher order than other creatures, so their capacity for both destruction and creativity is greater. “If respect and compassion were taken out from hearts,” Nursi argued, “reason and intellect would make human beings such horrible and cruel monsters to the extent that they would not be able to be ruled by politics anymore.”17 To demonstrate the point, one could refer to the story of the two sons of Adam, Cain and Abel: “When each of them made an offering, and when it was accepted from one and not from the other, the one whose offering was not accepted said to his brother, ‘I will kill you.’ His brother said, ‘God only accepts from those who are pious. If you stretch your hands to kill me, I will never stretch my hand to kill you, because I fear God, the Lord of the universe’” (5:27).

Nursi elaborated on similar Qur’anic verses, particularly in his Treatise on Brotherhood. He draws this entire treatise from similar verses, such as “believers are brothers, make peace between your brothers” (49:10) and “respond with what is the most beautiful, then you will see that the one with whom you have enmity becomes a passionate friend of yours” (41:34).18 Nursi emphasized the importance of brotherhood as one of the five essential principles of Islamic civilization. True brotherhood recognizes the ties of the nation, the religion, and professions, and rejects aspects that divide the community, such as racism and nationalist chauvinism. Nursi believed that Western civilization failed to embrace this universal principle due to its emphasis on individualism, and the two world wars were examples of this: They were fought largely due to the interests of individual states and their aggressive natures. He quoted from the famous fourteenth-century Iranian poet, Hafiz Shirazi, who wrote, “The world is not a possession worthy of quarrelling over”; also, “two phrases explain the comfort and the peace of the two worlds: deal with your friends generously (murra’wali) and deal with your enemies in a peaceful (mudarat) way.”19

Nursi further elaborated on the ugliness of hatred, stating, “In the life of believers, partisanship, stubbornness, jealousy, which cause hypocrisy, and division, ill feelings and hatred . . . are ugly, unacceptable, harmful, wrong, and poison for the life of humanity.”20 His treatise was intended for a Muslim audience, but he focused on creating fellowship among all people. “Your creator is the same,” he argued. “You worship the same God. You receive your subsistence from the same compassionate divine being.” This powerful message of peace, brotherhood, and love relates directly to the senseless sectarian violence occurring in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan between Sunnis and Shi’ites. Nursi’s single treatise on brotherhood is powerful enough that it could be a critical aid in peacemaking in these countries, which would benefit from training in tolerance, respect, and dismantling inner cycles of conflict.

In 1955, Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, Iran, and the United Kingdom adopted the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) to commit to peacebuilding efforts and create coalitions against aggression. Nursi believed this organization could enact the principle of brotherhood on a larger scale. In a letter to the prime minister and president of Turkey, he wrote, “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 and adherents of other religions who are deeply in need of global peace. I wanted to share these feelings because I had a conviction from the depth of my heart.”21 When he spoke of unity among Muslims in a famous article—“The Voice of Truth,” published in the newspaper Polkan on March 27, 1909—he presented love as the foundation of this unity: “Hatred should be only directed to ignorance, poverty, and hypocrisy,” he said. In addition, he addressed the non-Muslim population: “Let non-Muslims be confident that our unity will attack these three vices. Our relationship with non-Muslims will be in the way of persuasion. That is because we know them as civilized people and it is our duty as Muslims to present Islam as a beloved and highly valuable religion. We know them as a people of conscience.”22

Nursi understood nonviolence as an integral part of being a Muslim in the modern period. “Yes, sword and weapons were used to progress Islam and to break and destroy the rigidity and stubbornness of enemies, as well as to stop their attacks,” he acknowledged, but argued further that “human coexistence is the future for civilization; instead of the sword, economic development and spiritual words of truthfulness will defeat enemies.”23 By disconnecting from the use of force of the past he was breaking away from
many of his contemporaries who stressed violence. Regarding the relationship between Turks and Armenians, Nursi warned those who wanted to use force: “To me those who use the sword now will have the same sword turn and touch their orphan. Today, victory is not through the sword. The sword should exist, but it should be in the hands of reason. Also there are reasons for friendship. That is because they are our neighbors and neighbors are friends of neighbors.”

Throughout Nursi’s writings—his magnum opus is the 6,000-page Risale-i Nur, in which he developed the principles of the implementation of nonviolent actions of love, tolerance, and the use of reason—there is a profound focus on responding to evil with kindness, to working for peace regardless of the obstacles and oppressive conditions. He firmly believed that responding to evil with evil would create a vicious cycle and increase the spread of evil. He said, “If you want to defeat your opponents or oppressors, respond to their evil actions with kindness. If you respond to their bad actions with bad responses, this will increase evil. Even if they are apparently defeated, they will keep hatred alive in their hearts toward you. If you respond with good deeds against their bad deeds, they will repent and become your friends.”

Here, Nursi referred to Qur’anic verses that reminded him of several important characteristics of believers. One verse says that believers are those who do not bear false witness and those who do not respond profanely to abuse (25:72). Another verse says, “If you forgive and exonerate their mistakes, surely God is the most forgiving and the most compassionate” (64:4). Clearly the driving impetus for Nursi’s love for others was scripturally based; while this may appear as a fundamentalist reading of religion, actually within the Islamic tradition, Nursi followed the importance of emulating the prophetic model to further his spirituality and love for the divine.

Despite all his negative experiences in war, Nursi’s Damascus Sermon, which was revised in 1950, was very hopeful about the future of peace in the world: “God willing, through the power of Islam, the goodness of civilization will overcome its badness and thus will purify the earth and secure global peace.” In the sermon, Nursi made his famous contribution of positive action (mustet bereket) as the principle of his understanding of nonviolence. He reflected upon years of mistreatment and injustice, yet still advocated peacemaking activities.

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. I also did not care about the threat of execution in the martial law court. However, for thirty years [in 1960], I have dedicated myself to positive action and not negative action. In order not to get involved in the duty of God, I have decided to accept all of what is done to me with patience and pleasure—this is what earlier martyrs had experienced. The most important matter in this time is the spiritual jihad.

Nursi’s understanding of jihad seems to differ greatly from that of many of his contemporaries. He said, “Spiritual jihad is the jihad of this century.” One of the reasons that Nursi focused on spiritual jihad was that any violence in society would violate the rights of innocent people; violence had to be prevented with kindness, generosity, and love. Transgression was not allowed even during war: When nations or individuals retaliated, then they fell into a cycle of violence and hatred. Nursi’s understanding of jihad involved preventive action through communication and open dialogue. Thus, his own greatest jihad was his writings, sermons, and teachings, especially those that brought nonpracticing Muslims back to the faith. According to Nursi, the best way to help people was to strengthen their faith, improving their ethical behavior and also benefiting them in the hereafter. In a letter to his students, he mentioned that he did not listen to the radio or listen to the news during World War II because he was involved in a larger spiritual cause of struggling to reach paradise. In one statement he wrote, “If one had funds equivalent to the budget of Germany and the United Kingdom, he would not hesitate to spend it on gaining his afterlife [the eternal abode of peace].”

Nursi’s method of positive action can be considered a new way of nonviolence. Normally when we speak of nonviolence practice, we speak of hunger strikes, picketing, vigils, sit-ins, blockades, and other types of demonstrations. Nursi’s nonviolent practice does not include any of the above-mentioned methods. He dedicated himself and asked his students to dedicate their time to helping people with their spiritual life as well as their earthly life. On one occasion, when the government asked him not to distribute his work, Nursi responded, “Yes, as it is a duty to provide tickets for travelers for their journey, providing a certificate and light for those traveling toward eternity in such a way that is full of darkness is such a duty that no other duties can be more important than that. To deny such a duty is only possible if one can deny the existence of death.” In other words, Nursi was affirming that as people need tickets to go from one location to another, there is a longer trip than all the worldly trips, and that is the trip to the afterlife. It is his job to provide tickets for those traveling toward the afterlife through strengthening their faith.

According to Nursi, acting in an ethical and positive way—taming anger and revenge—would protect the lives of others. There are several examples of Nursi responding to intolerance without anger, but with love. On one occasion in 1958, Nursi intended to visit Ankara. Government officers
heard of his visit and attempted to prevent his entrance into the city. However, about one thousand people were waiting for Nursi on the road. The slightest provocation would set off riots against security forces. Calling the chief of security, Nursi said, “I thank you for what you have done. It is really torture for me to have people kissing my hand.” He continued to say, “We are protecting the public order and the security of the country by ensuring that every heart is spiritually resilient; this protects them from doing wrong things against society. You intervene after the crimes are committed. That is the difference between you and us.” Following these exchanges, Nursi continued, “I have spent eleven months in Eskişehir Prison, nine months and ten days in Denizli Prison, and twenty months in Afyon Prison. All of the prisoners are reformed. They have abandoned their old criminal lives and they are now moral human beings.” Nursi continued by discussing his experience in Denizli Prison: “There was a man who was charged with the killing of four people. After reading the Risale-i Nur and following my model of nonviolence he was completely reformed. One day he came to me with a small insect in his hand, and he said ‘O teacher, am I allowed to kill this insect? Is it a sin to do so?’” Nursi asked the officer, “Is the country much better off with the man’s reformed life?”

Nursi died in March 1960, but his message continued through his students, followers, and admirers. A Turkish prosecutor in the city of Afyon in 1948 stated that Nursi had approximately 500,000 students around the country. His obituary in The New York Times stated that his teachings had over one million followers by early 1960. Today, the message of Nursi is carried out by many in a powerful, charismatic, organized way, most notably by Fethullah Gülen, who benefited from the writings of Nursi as well as the legacy of the Ottomans. Gülen has inspired millions to work in a variety of social services, including the establishment of schools, educational institutions, charities, media outlets, and youth groups around the world for both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Gülen through these efforts has been contributing in a greater scale to global peace efforts. In the summer of 2004, I visited Macedonia in Eastern Europe. During my visit, I had a chance to visit a school established by admirers of Gülen. I was told that during the civil war between the various peoples of the former Yugoslavia, the school became a haven for peace. Those who were fighting each other sent their children there for safety. While their parents were fighting each other, the students were learning together in peace.

Nursi’s nonviolent model already has made an outstanding contribution to the larger world. One can argue that Nursi’s entire life was based on the Qur’anic verse: “Peace is better” (4:128).
Religion and economics are connected in ways that have profound implications for the current debate about religion, conflict, and peace. Unfortunately, much of the literature on the latter is based on a too-abstract view of the former. Such analyses can lead one to overemphasize the role of religion in conflict and underemphasize its role in peace. The tension between Francis Fukuyama's end of history, with the triumph of Western democratic capitalism, and Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations, in which none is able to triumph over the others, depends fundamentally on competing theories of modernization and the effects of economic industrialization on other aspects of culture. But such theories do not receive serious treatment from either thinker, and Huntington's definition of civilization even fails to “take into account the existence of major differences of substance and quality between pre-modern classic civilizations and modern industrial civilizations.”

This essay clarifies the interconnections among religion, conflict, and peace from an Islamic economic perspective, highlighting their implications for development strategies seeking to change the intellectual and socioeconomic conditions that result in violent forms of extremism. It first examines the interconnections among religion, economics, and civilization from an Islamic point of view. It then draws the implications of this for the interconnections among religion, conflict, and peace, arguing that trade-offs among Schumacher's three objectives of work—to provide necessities,