Said Nursi's Approach to Interfaith Dialogue

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Abstract

This article investigates Said Nursi's approach to interfaith dialogue. It commences with an outline of the established trends in dialogue between faiths (exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism), and then identifies major factors that contributed to Nursi's thinking (e.g. his 'shift' from political activism to contemplation). It then explores Nursi's approach—his rationale for promoting interfaith dialogue; what he considered as necessary conditions for dialogue; why he proposed Islamic civilisation as the foundation for such dialogue and, finally, what he perceives to be the objectives of dialogue.

Keywords: Said Nursi, interfaith dialogue, common values, global peace.

Introduction

While the world has witnessed a growth in the number of conflicts ostensibly fuelled by religious motives, there is a growing international trend to encourage interfaith dialogue. Several conflicts in Asia and Africa have been attributed to a clash between the Islamic and 'Western' civilisations[1] or as a religious war between Islam and Christianity. The invasion of Iraq and

[1] In this regard, Samuel Huntington's theory in a *Clash of Civilisations* (1996) which posited a clash between Western civilisation and an Islamic/ Chinese axis has been challenged, both by those who are convinced that such a clash was not imminent as well as by those who believe that future conflicts will be driven by considerations that have little to do with religion or culture (see Fox & Sandler 2004: 119-124).

Afghanistan by US-led forces is viewed by many Muslims as an attack on Islam by Christians. At the beginning of the campaign against Afghanistan Dolan (2001) warned:

> Now that the bombing campaign in Afghanistan is underway, moderate Muslim leaders are expressing renewed concern that many of their people see it as another 'Christian Crusade' against Islam. This perception was already floating around after George W. unfortunately used the dreaded 'C' word twice in announcing that he was going after Osama bin Laden and his terrorist cronies.

The 9/11 attacks have been interpreted by several American religious leaders, including Don Franklin, as an assault by Muslims on Christianity. His response to 9/11, 'This is indeed a clash between two forces on this earth: Islam and Christianity' (Franklin 2001) is self-explanatory.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is perceived as fundamentally a conflict over land, though there is a religious dimension, *viz.* the Israeli claim to a Biblical right to occupy the land previously inhabited by the Palestinians[2], to exercise exclusive control over Jerusalem[3] and to rebuild the temple of Solomon on the current site of *al-Masjid al-Aqsā'* which is considered to be the third most important sacred site in Islam (see Temple Mount).

The Parliament of the World's Religions (first convened 1893) provides people of all faiths a forum for sharing their views about challenges confronting humanity in general and generating strategies and programmes to promote peace. As the PWR claims on its website, it

[2] 'The Jewish people base their claim to the Land of Israel on at least four premises: 1) the Jewish people settled and developed the land; 2) the international community granted political sovereignty in Palestine to the Jewish people; 3) the territory was captured in defensive wars and 4) God promised the land to the patriarch Abraham' (see *Myths & Facts*).

[3] 'For the Jews, Jerusalem and Zion are synonymous, and have come to symbolize the Jewish nation as a whole. Judaism, in fact, recognizes both the Earthly Jerusalem—a symbol of the ingathering of the exiles to their promised land—and its Heavenly counterpart …' (see *History of Jerusalem*).

> brings together the world's religious and spiritual communities, their leaders and their followers to a gathering where peace, diversity and sustainability are discussed and explored in the context of interreligious understanding and cooperation (Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions).

While it has attracted several prominent scholars of Islam, the PWR has to date not succeeded in making a significant impact on Muslim religious or political leaders.

Turning to the church, Pope Paul VI made the following declaration at the Second Vatican Council (1965):

> The Church encourages its children, together with believing and living as Christians, to get to know and support, with precaution, compassion, dialogue and co-operation those who follow other religions and to encourage them to develop their spiritual, moral and socio-cultural values (Gülen 2002: 35f).

This declaration is viewed as a landmark in interfaith dialogue. Since the 1970s, the World Council of Churches has given greater attention to dialogue with other religions (Coward 1985: 23).

At round about the same time, a number of interfaith groups have emerged across the globe. While many focus essentially on Christian-Muslim dialogue, and some on Jewish-Muslim dialogue (as in Palestine, Israel, Europe and the United States), others are more inclusive and cover the entire spectrum of faith groups. One such group is the World Conference of Religions for Peace (founded in 1970) which has dedicated itself to promote mutual respect and cooperation among the world's religions for the attainment of peace, justice and harmony while maintaining respect for the diversity of religious and cultural traditions (WCRP Newsletter 1 1998). The WCRP, like the PWR, is yet to make a significant impact on the majority of Muslim leaders, locally and globally.

Notwithstanding, the past decade has witnessed several initiatives at dialogue by Muslim governments and non-governmental organisations.

British and American Muslims have become increasingly involved in interfaith dialogue. This is without doubt, a response to numerous incidents

of harassment and hate crimes Muslims were subjected to following the 11 September 2001 (9/11) attacks by 19 Muslim hijackers on Washington and New York to signal their objection to American foreign policy and the 7 July 2005 (7/7) bombings in London carried out by British Muslims as a protest against British involvement in the Iraq war.

According to the Hate Crimes Survey on 'Violence against Muslims' carried out in 2008,

> a mixture of Islamophobia and racism is also directed against immigrant Muslims or their children. This tendency has increased considerably after 9/11 and government responses to such terrorist crimes. Muslims have been physically attacked and mosques vandalised or burnt in a number of countries (Hammarberg 2008: 14).

Muslim leaders in Britain and the United States began to promote and participate in interfaith dialogue as a means of developing greater understanding between communities and leading (hopefully) to the elimination of hate crimes against Muslims.

In February 2004, an International Symposium on Dialogue among Cultures and Civilizations was held in Yemen, organized by the Centre for Yemeni Studies and Research in cooperation with The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Among the resolutions adopted by the Symposium were the following:

- a dialogue among cultures and civilisations between the Arab region and other regions that challenges old and new forms of ignorance, prejudice and assumptions about 'Otherness';
- a dialogue that promotes mutual understanding and exchange, tolerance and a culture of peace at the level of political decision-makers, intellectuals, actors of civil society, and individuals;
- a set of values, attitudes, modes of behaviour and ways of life that reject violence and prevent conflicts (Russell & Bovermann 2005: 14).

These resolutions indicate that Muslim leaders (at least 50 personalities from Arab-speaking countries participated) are concerned about the rise in conflict and are committed to inter-cultural and inter-civilisation dialogue. The irony, of course, is that non-Arab Muslims were excluded from a symposium which aimed at promoting cultural dialogue!

Following these developments, coupled with recent appeals by the current pope for dialogue, the International Islamic Conference for Dialogue held in Makkah in June 2008 issued a public statement called 'the Makkah Appeal for Interfaith Dialogue' (see Initiative for Interfaith Dialogue). Subsequently, the World Conference on Dialogue held in Madrid, Spain, in July 2008 under the auspices of the Muslim World League issued the *Madrid Declaration*.

In order to fulfil the objectives of dialogue, participants agreed on adopting, *inter alia*, the following :

- cooperation among religious, cultural, educational, and media establishments to deepen and consolidate ethical values, to encourage noble social practices and confront sexual promiscuity, family disintegration and other vices.
- organizing inter-religious and inter-cultural meetings, conducting research, executing media programs and using the Internet and other media for the dissemination of the culture of peace, understanding and coexistence.
- Promoting the issue of dialogue among the followers of religions, civilizations and cultures in youth, cultural, educational, and media activities)*Madrid Declaration*).

Hosting such a conference in Makkah is a significant development, given the fact that Makkah is the birth-place of the Prophet of Islam and is the location of the most sacred site in Islam—the *ka`bah*—which millions of pilgrims visit each year. The symbolic choice of Makkah as the centre calling for interfaith dialogue is significant. .

One of the most prominent Muslim scholars to promote inter-faith dialogue is the Turkish scholar, Fethullah Gülen, currently resident in the United States. Gülen has dedicated his life to 'establishing a dialogue among factions representing different ideologies, cultures, religions, and nations' in

preparation for what he anticipates to be the 'birth of the century of tolerance and understanding that will lead to cooperation among civilisations and strengthen bonds among all people' (Gülen 2002: 6f). One of the contributors to Gülen's intellectual and spiritual formation was Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1877-1960) of Turkey, a scholar who has had a tremendous impact on the new generation of Turkish Muslims (Űnal & Williams 2000: 15).

Turkish Muslims who arrived in South Africa after 1994 initiated interfaith projects and activities, hosting interfaith conferences ad establishing dialogue centres and schools. My investigation revealed that they had drawn their inspiration from either Said Nursi or Fethullah Gülen. This attracted my interest in the Turkish interfaith initiatives in general, and Said Nursi in particular.

I will begin with a description of the current approaches to interfaith dialogue, then identify the major factors that contributed to shaping Nursi's thinking, and finally explore his concept of interreligious dialogue as set out in his magnum opus, the *Risale-i Nur* (meaning, 'Manifestation of Light').

Approaches to Interfaith Dialogue

Interfaith dialogue is defined as 'dialogue between members of different religions for the goal of reducing conflicts between their religions and to achieve agreed upon mutually desirable goals' (see Religious Pluralism). Let us briefy examine the divergent attitudes of faith communities in respect of the 'other'.

Exclusivism

According to Vlach (2009a: 5), 'Exclusivism is a logical claim based on the law of noncontradiction: where two religions make logically incompatible claims, they cannot both be true'. 'Exclusivism' (or 'Particularism') also means that there is only one way to God and human salvation. Earlier attitudes of religious communities towards the 'other' were characterised mostly by exclusivism. The vast majority of exclusivists consider their own religion as uniquely and supremely true and all other religions as false. While they do affirm that other religions possess elements of truth, they believe that

these do not teach 'the truth' that is able to save their followers. In fact, they regard much of what is taught in other religions as false (Sadri 2006).

Some exclusivists (we could include evangelists and missionaries of all faiths here) are committed to the proselytization of the 'other'. But others isolate themselves in the certainty that they belong to a pure and perfect faith. When exclusivists of one faith engage in debate with representatives of other faiths, their sole purpose is to convince the audience about the superiority or correctness of their own faith tradition.

Several disillusioned exclusivists, however, challenged the dominant discourse and paved the way to interfaith dialogue. The two approaches to interfaith dialogue are discussed below.

Inclusivism

Friedrich Schleirmacher's statement that God is available, to some degree, in all religions, but that Christianity is nevertheless superior to all has led to what is today known as 'Inclusivism' (Sadri 2006: 36).

'Inclusivism' is the position that one religion is uniquely true but salvation is accessible to those outside of that faith. Though inclusivists believe that truth and salvation can be found in other religions, they do not claim that all religions are equal. We know that the Roman Catholic 'Vatican II Council' of the 1960s explicitly declared that people of other faiths—including Islam—could be saved (Michel 2005b : 36).

This non-intrusive approach—also designated the post-liberal approach—to the internally held belief systems of participant groups does not make any attempt to change or syncretise the participants' beliefs. Post-liberals, in fact, view these attempts as intrusive. Some see interfaith engagement as a fruitful step in conflict resolution resulting in new interpretations, mutual influences, etc. Others do not see ideological interaction as necessary and consider it as adverse to the best interests of participants because it undermines their self preservation (Rider 2008: 150).

There is, in this approach, a convergence on common social issues e.g. fighting poverty or drug addiction, but not necessarily on doctrinal issues. If and when adherents do engage in discourse on key components of their respective religions, it is for the purpose of learning about and

understanding each other's beliefs; conflicting claims to truth are, therefore, not debated (see *Interfaith Activities and Interfaith Dialogue*).

This approach is favoured by many interfaith organisations, including the Parliament of the World's Religions and the World Conference on Religion and Peace mentioned above. The following guiding principles of the WCRP bear this out:

- We are committed to our respective faiths and at the same time strive for inter-religious understanding and cooperation.
- We recognise our religious differences and respect one another's convictions and hopes.
- We do not intend to start a new universal religion which replaces all our faiths.
- We want to promote mutual understanding between religious communities.
- We want to foster closer inter-religious cooperation in addressing the ills of society (see World Conference on Religion and Peace).

The approach of the Second Vatican Council is also inclusivist as is evident from the following text:

> The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. However, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim *Christ* 'the way, the truth and the life' (Jn. 14: 6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself (*Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*).

Pluralism

Ernst Troeltsch's view that every culture's claim can only be viewed as its peculiar apprehension of the divine and William James' emphasis on the

centrality of individual experience in diverse religious milieus has ushered in the current school of thought that advocates 'Religious Pluralism'. For Troeltsch,

> absolute validity cannot be claimed for Christianity or any other religion .... each religion is a different cultural manifestation of the struggle of the human spirit from the divine source to the divine goal (Coward 1985: 24).

Religious Pluralism is the view that all major religions are equally valid. Thus, no one religion can be considered better or superior to any other religion. While pluralists concede that there may be differences in rituals and beliefs among diverse faiths, they argue that on the most important issues, there is great similarity. They also point out that there are virtuous people in all the major religions. Religious Pluralism became increasingly popular in the latter half of the twentieth century and its leading proponent in the last few decades has been John Hick (Vlach 2009b).

The following are among the most common features of Pluralism:

- Religions teach multiple truths which are all valid;
- All religions are legitimate and valid;
- All religions are equally valid;
- All religions constitute varying conceptions of the Ultimate Reality; and
- Religious truths are different responses to the divine (see *The Diversity of Meanings of the Term Religious Pluralism*).

Religious pluralists view the breaking down of fences between religions as inevitable. They maintain that no one religion is the sole source of truth, and that all belief systems may contain truths. Pluralists seek to reduce religious conflict through a societal and theological change. They, therefore, apply a cooperative rather than a competitive or hands-off methodology to this change (Rider 2008: 151).

Another branch of pluralists maintain the need to consciously manage the interfaith interaction and see merit in the internal and external

changes this may bring to belief systems. They do not, however, seek an end to this process, understanding that the interaction is itself generative. In this way this methodology combines the syncretic approach to collaborative growth with the premise of the post-liberal approach that seeks to maintain differences between groups (Rider 2008: 152f).

John Hick is one of the foremost proponents of religious pluralism. He rejects both exclusivist and inclusivist responses to religious diversity—the first because he considers it unjust and incoherent, and the second because he believes it is insulting and patronising. He argues that all the major religions in the world are equal and valid responses to the 'Real' (Markham 2004: 8f). In his view, the diverse world faiths embody different perceptions of Ultimate Reality and provide divergent ways of salvation/enlightenment/fulfilment. Hick believes that each individual experiences Reality as it appears to him/her in his/her unique cultural situation (Peterson *et al.* 1996: 513; Hick 1973: 146).

Unlike the case of Inclusivism where the autonomy of religions to adhere to their specific religious doctrine is respected, pluralists believe that convergence on social issues by adherents of various religions should eventually lead to the affirmation of the legitimacy of each other's doctrines—regardless of conflicting claims to truth (see *Interfaith Activities and Interreligious Dialogue*).

Major Influences on Said Nursi

In order to obtain a proper appreciation of Nursi's approach to interfaith dialogue, it is important to examine the major influences on his life.

Exposure to Sufism

Nursi had great affinity with Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir Jilānī whose *Futūh al-Ghayb* had a profound influence on him, and he studied *tasawwuf* under several *shuyūkh* of the Naqshbandī/Khālidī order. Vahide (2005a: 5,27,165) claims that he never joined a *tarīqah* and rejected the denigration of his movement as a *sūfī* order (Vahide 2005a: 294). Despite this, there can be little doubt that his contact with and studies under these *sūfī* masters left an

indelible impression on him. His austere lifestyle is reflective of *zuhd* (abstinence), a principle feature of *sufism*. Hamid Algar (1979: 315) states: '... the influence of Sufism upon him was profound, and can be seen to have permeated the entirety of his writings'.

Experience of War

Nursi lived through the two world wars. In addition, in the First World War, he led the militia forces on the Caucasian Front against the invading Russians for which he was later awarded a War Medal (Vahide 2005a: 111). He was captured and detained as a prisoner of war in Russian camps from 1916 until his escape in 1918 (Vahide 2005a: 122-128).

Mücahit Bilici (2004: 297) describes the 'Old Said' as 'anti-colonial'—identifying with anti-colonial intellectuals from other parts of the Muslim world, resisting the European encroachment on Ottoman land and culture and condemning those of his fellow citizens who embraced colonialism. Şükran Vahide describes the mental and spiritual transformation that Nursi experienced after his return from the prisoner-of-war camp: '... Nursi underwent a radical interior change, `a strange revolution of the spirit'.' He calls this 'the birth of the New Said' (2005a : 163f). However, this birth was preceded by severe emotional and mental turmoil as a consequence of the war, the harsh conditions of his captivity, the atrocities suffered by his own students, the Ottoman defeat and foreign occupation, i.e.,

> Because of the extreme tyranny and despotism of this last World war and its Merciless destruction, and hundreds of innocents being scattered and ruined …. And the awesome despair of the defeated … (Nursi 2001: 167).

Nursi saw with his own eyes the suffering, anguish, and destruction brought about by the two World Wars. He describes World War II as 'having plunged the world into chaos', and bringing about 'widespread hunger, destruction, and waste' (Michel 2005a: 121). What also disturbed Nursi profoundly was the fact that many innocent people get killed in war. To him the loss of a single innocent man or woman was unacceptable and

unjustifiable (Vahide 2006). Nursi's sense of fairness and his compassion toward people of all creeds is evident form his intervention on behalf of Armenian civilians who were to be exterminated by the Ottoman forces in retaliation for the massacre of Muslim civilians by Armenian bands (Bilici 2004: 299; Vahide 2005a: 116f).

Another factor that no doubt weighed heavily on Nursi's mind was that Muslims were no match for the technologically superior Western armies and so were in a sense committing suicide by confronting them. He believed it would be far more prudent for Muslims to divert their attention from physical confrontation to peaceful pursuits like eradication of poverty and ignorance and putting an end to internal conflicts (Vahide 2005a: 61). These Nursi (1909:78) contends are the real enemies of humankind:

> We shall therefore wage *jihād* with the weapons of science and industry on ignorance, poverty and conflicting ideas.

It is against this background that Nursi's notion of *jihād* must be understood. Nursi advocated 'positive action' (*Musbet Hareket),* meaning patient and silent struggle (*jihād*) to strengthen faith by peaceful means. Not only did Nursi advise his students as well as others to refrain from violence, he never sought revenge, even against those who persecuted him (Saritoprak 2005: 413-427). This method of *jihād* Nursi termed *cihād-i mānevī* (moral *jihād* or *jihād* of the word) in the struggle against atheism and irreligion (Vahide 2005a: 323).

Observation of the Progress of Europe

Nursi admired the advances made by European nations, recognising the 'numerous virtues in modern civilisation' (Michel 2005b: 29). However, he decried the materialist philosophy that underpinned Western civilisation which he attributed to the abandonment of the 'fundamental laws of revealed religions' (Nursi 1959,ii: 97f). Nursi therefore cautioned Muslims not to blindly adopt Western civilisation, with all its pitfalls, but only to retain its positive features. He advised them to work towards a new civilisation rooted in Islamic norms and values (Michel 2005a: 91).

Encounter with the System of Education

Said Nursi began his education in the local village *madrasah*. He began teaching at the early age of 19 at the mosque in Mardin. Fearing his growing influence, the Governor expelled him from the town to Bitlis where he had an opportunity to further his studies under several scholars. He went to Van in Eastern Anatolia following an invitation by its governor. Here he studied history, physics, mathematics, geography, geology, chemistry, astronomy and other sciences (Vahide 2005a: 20-28).

Nursi was highly critical of the teaching methods as well as curricula of seminaries and *madrasahs* which he described as being incapable of graduating youth capable of meeting the challenges of the modern era (Vahide 2005a: 142). He proposed an integration of the natural sciences with the religious sciences which he believed would 'strengthen the truths of religion' (Vahide 2005a: 29). One way to do this would be for religious sciences to be taught in secular schools and moderns science in religious schools (Vahide 2005a: 48).

Interaction with Politicians

Initially, Said Nursi was involved intimately with political affairs in Turkey. He even offered advice and guidance to politicians and government officials, including Sultan Abd al-Hamid who considered him to be disrespectful and handed him over to the military court. The court, unable to silence him, sent him to a lunatic asylum where he spent some time. The Young Turks, mostly composed of Western-educated intelligentsia, began to be effective within the Ottoman government by the end of the 19th century. They imposed Western thoughts and theories on the classical model of Ottoman government, and changed the forms of administration. Initially, Nursi was in contact with these new governing elites, and even participated in some of their meetings (Vahide 2005a: 36f).

Nursi paid a visit to Salonica where he met with the leaders of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), but on discovering that they were opposed to Islam, he returned to Istanbul. After the proclamation of the Constitution in 1908, he began to educate people on the Islamic concept of freedom and constitutionalism. Nursi adopted a modern approach—he

wanted to see the involvement of ordinary people in the constitutional order. In his view the principle of mutual consultation (*shūra* or *meşveret*) can only be properly applied in the modern age through a constituent assembly (as was being proposed for Turkey) (Vahide 2005a: 55-58).

The following year, the CUP sent a regiment of soldiers to protect the constitutional regime against a revolt demanding the reinstatement of the Shari'a. The revolt was suppressed, Sultan Abd al-Hamid dethroned and a military administration proclaimed. Among those who were court-martialed for instigating the revolt was Said Nursi (Vahide 2005a: 73-78). Said Nursi opposed the entry of the Ottomans into the First World War.

After the British forces occupied Istanbul in 1920, Said Nursi joined several religious scholars who issued a *fatwa* urging the Muslims to actively resist the occupation. But he devoted his time primarily to his writings which were dedicated to combatting disbelief, atheism and apostacy in Muslim lands (Vahide 2005a: 141).

During this time, said Nursi continued writing the Risale-i Nur. The treatises he wrote were copied out by his students who conveyed them to the farthest corners of Turkey. When the government realized that the Risale-i Nur was spreading to all the towns and villages, they started to treat Nursi and his students as criminals. They raided their houses and carried out searches, but were unable to intimidate them (Vahide 2005a: 204-215).

In the later years of his life, Nursi was in contact with Mustafa Kemal, and he personally participated in the Parliament in Ankara until he fell into disfavor because of his severe criticisms of the policies of Mustafa Kemal and the Parliament. Mustafa Kemal sentenced Nursi to internal exile, and had him closely watched (Vahide 2005a: 169, 171, 182, 186).

When the Arabic *adhan* (call to prayer) was banned in 1932 by the government, Said Nursi persisted in reciting it in the small mosque in Barla which he frequented. The authorities imprisoned some of the villagers, and in 1934 he and 120 of his students were arrested and imprisoned on the charge of 'setting up a secret society' opposed to the state system. Nursi was held in solitary confinement and despite their efforts to break his morale he continued with his writings in prison (Vahide 2005a: 189, 208, 215-217).

Upon his release from prison in 1936, Said Nursi was exiled to Kastamonu, where he was compelled to reside for the next seven years. Not only did he continue writing the *Risale-i Nur*, he also corresponded secretly

with his students. It is through their effforts that the treatises spread everywhere, even to all the villages (Vahide 2005a: 227).

In the summer of 1943 the authorities poisoned Said Nursi, but he recovered. They raided and searched his house on numerous occasions, took him and 126 of his students from all over Turkey to Ankara to face a charge of 'setting up a secret society', then sent him to Denizli where he was imprisoned for nine months. Instead of being released from prison, he was sent to Emirdag in 1944 where he was kept under strict surveillance. In 1948, his house was raided and he was sent to Afyon Prison on a number of false, trumped-up charges (Fedotoff 2004: 255).

When the Democrat Party came to power and restored the freedoms which had been restricted under the Republican Party, Said Nursi—in the phase where he is referred to as the 'Third Said'—again began to offer advice and guidance to politicians and members of government. After the publication of his *Gençlik Rehberi* (A Guide For Youth) some authorities instigated a court case against Said Nursi on a charge of intending to found a state based on religious principles. He was acquitted of this charge. When all Islamic papers and magazines were barred and those involved with them were arrested, it included Said Nursi (Vahide 2005a: 306-315).

Nursi's personal experience of the hypocrisy, corruption, injustice, partisanship and manipulation of religion by politicians as detailed above (Buti 1997), as well as their repression of citizens and denying them their fundamental rights, convinced him that active participation in politics was counter-productive.

It is precisely for this reason that Nursi discouraged his students from active political participation. The following words are illustrative:

> Beware, my brothers! Do not fancy or imagine that I am urging you with these words to busy yourselves with politics. God forbid! The truth of Islam is above all politics. All politics may serve it, but no politics can make Islam a tool for itself (see Vahide 2000: 96-105).

Spread of Atheism and Materialism in Muslim Societies

Nursi was alarmed at the rate at which atheism and materialism had infected Muslim societies. He described the situation he found in Ankara as follows:

> … I saw that an abominable current of atheism was treacherously trying to subvert, poison, and destroy their minds (see Vahide 2005a: 169).

Nursi identifies Dajjal, who correlates to Christian legends about the Antichrist and is described in some detail in Islamic literature, with atheism (Michel 1995b: 40).

> The Dajjal … has forgotten God …. His huge current of atheism … is truly vast (see Michel 2005a: 94).

He was extremely concerned that the Turkish nation would be unable to 'withstand and counter' the forces of unbelief (Vahide 2005a: 278) unless they were checked. It was this over-riding concern with protecting the right to belief that inspired him to seek the co-operation of Muslims and Christians (Vahide 2005a: 317). He is convinced that this collective struggle against atheism will eventually triumph:

> … Although defeated before the atheistic current while separate, Christianity and Islam will have the capacity to defeat and rout it as a result of their union (Michel 2005a: 95).

In Nursi's view, materialism is a direct consequence of the abandonment of the spiritual aspect of life—people become obsessed with acquiring material goods in order to give meaning to their lives.

Impact of Scholars

Nursi's quest for an escape from the 'spiritual darkness' he found himself in after the First World War led him to the *Futūh al-Ghayb* of `Abd al-Qādir al-Jaylāni (d. 1166) and the *Maktūbat* of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624). He attributes his spiritual and intellectual transformation from the 'Old Said' to the 'New Said' to the influence of these two works; the first helping him to eliminate any pride he might have harboured and to identify his faults, and the second bringing him to the realisation that he should rely entirely on the Qur'an to be his guide (Vahide 2005a: 163-166).

Furthermore, `Abd al-Qādir al-Jaylānī is known to have encouraged tolerance and respect for all faith communities (Reed n.d.: 83f). We can safely assume that this influenced Said Nursi's own attitude toward diverse faith communities.

Nursi's disillusionment with politics, concern about the negative impact of materialism, disenchantment with the system of education and realisation of the futility of war inspired him to turn to writing to expound his views. His proposals for a reconstitution of modern civilisation founded on religious values, which are contained in his numerous writings, include interfaith dialogue.

Nursi's Approach to Dialogue

To begin with, it is clear that said Nursi was not an exclusivist in the sense described above. It is known that during his lifetime, he reached out to Christian leaders. Two prominent examples that are cited are (a) Nursi sent a collection of his works to Pope Pius XII in 1950; and (b) he visited the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras in Istanbul in 1953 to request cooperation between Muslims and Christians against atheism (Michel 2005b: 36f).

This raises a question: knowing that Said Nursi was highly critical of Western Civilisation (as discussed above), how do we explain his willingness to have a dialogue with Christians?

In this section, we will examine (a) Said Nursi's rationale for dialogue; (b) what he considered to be the necessary conditions for dialogue; (c) what he proposed as a foundation for dialogue; and (d) what he perceived to be the objectives of dialogue.

Rationale for Dialogue

There are several factors that contributed to Nursi's promotion of dialogue in the contemporary world. I will list what I consider to be the most crucial.

a The Qur'an's Call for Dialogue

In his writings, Said Nursi cites Qur'anic verses which encourage or endorse dialogue between faiths.

In his commentary on the Qur'anic verse, 'O People of the Book! Come to a common term between us and you, that we worship none but

Allah; that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not from among ourselves, lords and patrons other than Allah' (3: 64) he stated:

> Modern civilization, which is the product of the thought of all mankind and perhaps the jinn as well, has taken up a position opposed to the Qur'an, which individuals and communities have failed to dispute.

In this situation, the Qur'anic injunction to come to a 'common term' with the People of the Book implies that Muslims and Christians must come to a mutual awareness that as communities founded on faith in God, they have a common mission to bear witness to Divine values in the midst of modern civilization. Far from being divided by a supposed 'clash of civilizations', they are called to work together to carry on a critical civilizational dialogue with the proponents of modernity (Michel 2005b: 31).

Nursi refutes the contention that Muslims may not befriend or collaborate with Jews and Christians based on the following verse:

> O you who believe! Do not take the Jews and the Christians for your friends and your protectors (Qur'an 5: 15).

He asserts that the proscription on befriending Jews and Christians applies only in a situation where they reflect the qualities of disbelief. He further argues that the fact that Islam permits Muslim men to marry Jewish and Christian women implies that Muslims are permitted to have love and compassion for them (Michel 2005b: 37). The above verse should, therefore, be understood in its proper context.

It is this approach of Nursi's, which stands in sharp contrast to that of many traditionalist scholars who reject any co-operation even with those whom the Qur'an describes as 'People of the Book' that I believe is very relevant in our present context.

b Threat of Atheism, Materialism, Secularism to Religion in General

Said Nursi argued that there is a need for a common struggle against irreligion, atheism, tyranny and evil (Berghout 2004: 29f). In his view the

dominant challenge to faith in the modern age lay in the secular approach to life. He was equally critical of communism and capitalism, the former for denying God's existence and consciously denying religion any role in society and the latter for ignoring the question of God and promoting a consumerist, materialist way of life (Michel 2002).

Nursi wrote a refutation of atheism in Arabic entitled *Zayl al-Zayl* (Vahide 2005a: 169). Apart from atheistic committees that were established to sever Turkey's relationship with the Islamic World, communism had spread rapidly in the country in the 1940s and this development was a matter of great concern to him.

For Said Nursi, the enemy of human happiness and ethical uprightness is unbelief and irreligion. By this he means the tendency by people to ignore Divine Guidance, their unwillingness to give up their own desires and ideas and submit to divine teachings about human nature. In their quest for a Divinely-guided way of life in the modern age, Muslims will find common cause with Christians who are committed to the teachings of Jesus.

The reasons why Nursi was preoccupied with atheism can be found in *Mesnevî-i Nuriye*. They include the following:

- Unbelief renders the universe meaningless;
- Unbelief severs the bonds that connect man [human beings] both to himself and to all other creation; and
- Unbelief extinguishes the soul and heart and leaves them in darkness (Ulosoy 2004: 183f).

As stated earlier, the Second World War marked a turning point in Nursi's life. This is when he began to call on Muslims to unite not only among themselves but also with religious and pious Christians, disregarding questions of dispute and not arguing over them, for absolute disbelief is on the attack (Nursi 1959, i: 202).

Despite his critique of Western Civilisation, the 'other' in Nursi's thought was not Western civilization, as it has been for many recent Islamic movements. On the contrary, a more populist appeal was at work, rather than a fundamentalist construction of otherness. Nursi inspired a reaction against the official local governors as they became the representatives of the alien, of non-Muslim practices, as they were seen to be by provincial people. But

there was no exclusion of Western civilization as a whole; the uniqueness of the Nur movement lay in its quest to appropriate some aspects of this civilization in its own distinctive ways.

How do we see Said Nursi's criticism of Western civilisation? Nursi is highly critical of the modernization methods of the secularist, Western-oriented elites who paved the way for Kemal Ataturk's revolution in 1923. Their critics focused on these secularist elites because according to the Nurcus (followers of the Nur movement), the social theories and projections of the secularists bore no relation to the actual experience of the people of Anatolia; these theories, the Nurcus said, had drifted away from the realm of existing social life (Arisan 1996).

It is evident from the above that Nursi did not harbour an inherent hatred for the West. In fact, he admired the advances made by Europe though he claimed that they could not be attributed to Christianity (Vahide 2005a: 158). However, he was critical of the atheism and agnosticism that had come to characterize Western societies and had begun to influence Muslim youth (Vahide 2005a: 169, 323). But when he found that they had softened their attitude towards Muslims whom they began to view as their allies in their struggle against the communists, he relented (Vahide 2005a: 307).

Nursi is convinced that the Muslim World would be rejuvenated if the youth acquired modern sciences and technology, primarily because Islam contained within itself the requisites of progress (Vahide 2005a: 53). One way to do this was for religious sciences to be taught in secular schools and moderns science in religious schools, while religious scholars should attach themselves to a *sūfī* order (Vahide 2005a: 48).

c Common Values

Said Nursi was deeply cognisant of the fact that the theological differences between Islam and Christianity could not be washed away. However, he acknowledges the commonalities between them.

Nursi argues that there can be no clash of civilizations between real Christians and real Muslims. There is nothing surprising in this, because both communities believe in the one and only God and both seek to construct society on divine principles and values. If there is a clash, it is between, on the one hand, the civilization envisioned by 'people of faith', or in the words of Said Nursi, 'the God-conscious' and, on the other, a civilization that tries

to banish God from everyday life, from politics, economics, and social interaction, and to reduce religion to privately-held beliefs, to ineffective ritual, to colourful folklore (Michel 2005d: 126).

Said Nursi found justification for his rapprochement with Christians in the *hadith* or Prophetic traditions which predict that at the end of time, pious Christians will unite with Muslims to fight their common enemy, atheism (Michel 2005e: 20).

In short, Said Nursi sees the need for dialogue as arising from the challenges posed by secular society to Muslims and Christians.

Conditions for Dialogue

Said Nursi established several ground rules for successful dialogue. These include:

- Taking into account the core principles of all religions and there should be no attempt by any one faith to compel other faiths to accept its teachings or impose its beliefs on all others;
- Placing dialogue above self-interest and/or thoughts of worldly gain;
- Basing dialogue on the responsibility and mission of vicegerents;
- Understanding the complexities of our reality in the global age and finding ways of revitalizing the role of religion in addressing human problems (Berghout 2004: 35).
- Avoiding disputes on questions of belief (Michel 2005e: 18).

Foundation for Dialogue

For Nursi, the foundation for dialogue has to be Islamic civilisation. The reason why Western civilisation could not be considered as the basis is that (a) it relies on force; (b) its goal is self-interest; (c) its principle in life is conflict; (d) it uses racism and negative nationalism to hold the masses together; and (e) its enticement is inciting love and passion and gratifying desires (Michel 2005a : 83).

Western civilization, according to Nursi, became distant and estranged from true Christianity and based its personal and societal views on

the principles of an anthropocentric Greco-Roman philosophy which exalted the human person to the centre of the universe and pushed God to its margins (Michel 2005b: 29f).

Said Nursi held that European societies replaced divinely guided Christian ideals with the philosophical principles of the Enlightenment, focusing on the freedom of the individual, dismissing the formative role and rights of society, and reducing religious faith to a private, personal commitment with no voice in the autonomous spheres of politics, economics, and social relations.

This, however, does not suggest that Nursi saw no value in Western civilisation. To the contrary, he admired the advances made by Western civilisation in the fields of science and technology and urged Muslims to emulate European nations. We know that among the disciplines Nursi taught were chemistry and physics. And he encouraged the integration of Islamic and modern disciplines (Vahide 2005a: 29).

For Nursi, Islamic civilisation is better suited to provide a basis for establishing a just and peaceful world because it has the following characteristics:

- it is truth (not might) which makes right;
- virtue is the motivation for human acts;
- unity is the basis of social relations;
- it encourages mutual assistance; and
- it upholds divine guidance as the norm of ethical behaviour (Michel 2005a: 84).

If any effort at dialogue were to succeed, he holds, Christians and Muslims will have to refrain (at least for some time) from disputes between themselves. In saying this, Said Nursi did not imply that there are no differences between Muslims and Christians or that those differences are not important. His point is that concentrating obsessively on these differences can blind both Muslims and Christians to the even more important common task which they share, that of offering the modern world a vision of human life and society in which God is central and God's will is the norm of moral values (Berghout 2004: 28).

Purpose of Dialogue

What exactly did Said Nursi hope to achieve through interfaith dialogue? In my view, Nursi was desirous of achieving three major objectives.

a Establishment of Divine Values

To Nursi, the threat of atheism far outweighed any other threat. He was hoping that through interfaith dialogue the world would be more accepting of 'divine' values which have been ignored or discarded as a result of the secularisation of societies. In one of his letters which appears in a collection called *Emirdağ Lahikasi* he states:

> Since modern Western civilization acts contrary to the fundamental laws of the revealed religions, its evil has come to outweigh its good aspects, its errors and harmful aspects its benefits (Michel 2005a: 96).

There are two essential points to note here. Nursi does not refer to Islam exclusively, but to all revealed religions. So he could be called a 'universalist' in the sense that he is concerned about the fate of all nations. And he deems the reestablishment of divine laws as crucial to the quest for a just and peaceful world.

b Attainment of Human Dignity, Justice, and Fellowship

Nursi's central thesis is that Muslims and Christians together can build a civilisation in which human dignity, justice, and fellowship will be the norm. This is possible if they seek to ground their mutual relationships on love (Michel 2005b: 41).

Love is an important theme in Sufism. This indicates that Nursi's study of Sufism and his contact with *sūfī* shaykhs had a profound effect on him. In the *Damascus Sermon,* he advocates love as a solution to the disease of enmity (Michel 2005b: 52).

c Commitment to Global Peace and Tranquillity

It was during the later phase of his life, subsequent to the two world wars, that Said Nursi began to focus on world peace (Shuriye 2004: 243). His

disillusionment with war is evident from his contention in his now famous *The Damascus Sermon*:

> The time for enmity and hostility has finished. Two world wars have shown how evil, destructive, and what an awesome wrong (sic.) is enmity (Çengel 2004: 207).

Conclusion

In the final or third phase of his life, Badiuzzaman Said Nursi encouraged interfaith dialogue. It is evident, from his writings, that he is committed to the truth of Islam. The following declarations bear this out:

> Is it at all possible for there to be any doubt concerning the statements of the Qur'an …. And can there be doubt concerning the testimony and witnessings of the Muhammadan Being … (Nursi 2001: 543).

However, due to the fact that Nursi (like Friedrich Schleiermacher) acknowledged that other faiths possess a partial understanding of the truth, he cannot be considered an exclusivist. But he was by no means a pluralist like John Hick who endorsed the validity of all truth claims. He could rightfully be called an inclusivist, a view supported by Ian Markham (2004: 18) who observes:

> …. Said Nursi is properly labelled an 'inclusivist'. He is committed to the truth of Islam …. Yet he acknowledges that other traditions have a partial insight into the truth.

Said Nursi was profoundly influenced by mystics, in particular by the writings of Ibn al-Arabī and `Abd al-Qādir al-Jaylānī and by the Naqshbandiyyah order. It is this influence that can be assumed to have shaped his inner personality and explains his reluctance to resort to violence to challenge the authorities who continued to harass him throughout his life through detention, exile, imprisonment, court marshalling and raids on his residence. He was ever willing to forgive his prison wardens, judges,

government officials, law officers, and civil authorities who had constantly persecuted and harassed him (Michel 2005c: 76).

But more importantly, it made him more open to dialogue, not only with Muslims of all persuasions but also with people of other faiths. Berghout (23) asserts that Nursi's

> call for dialogue and understanding stems not only from the critical situation of the world's alarming problems but initially and basically from the inner call of his human nature as well as from the deep wisdom enshrined in the Qur'anic text ….

Most of Nursi's comments refer to Christianity and Christians. There are few references to Judaism and none to Hinduism, Buddhism or other faiths. This must be attributed to the context in which he found himself. His encounter was with European civilisation which he both admired and criticised.

The impact of Said Nursi on (mainly) Turkish Muslims has been quite phenomenal. According to M. Hakan Yavuz (2003b: 11), the number of Nursi's adherents who constitute the Nursi movement in 2003 varied between five and six million. Nursi's interfaith initiative has been instrumental, in my view, in encouraging Muslim scholars and religious leaders to pursue interfaith dialogue within Turkey, in Muslim majority countries such as Egypt and Malaysia, as well as in Muslim minority communities globally.

The primary means employed by the Nursi movement are establishing dialogue centres, hosting conferences and founding schools. In the past few decades, hundreds of dialogue centres and institutes have been established throughout the world by followers of Nursi or his disciple, Gülen. In South Africa, four such centres have been located in the major cities. Seminars and conferences on Nursi are held regularly in Turkey, in Muslim majority countries and in countries with Muslim minorities. These conferences which focus on various themes emerging from Nursi's writings attract a fair number of non-Muslim (primarily Christian) participants who find resonance in Nursi's views. One of the foremost exponents of Nursi's thoughts is the Jesuit, Thomas Michel SJ.

According to Hakan Yavuz (2003a), Fethullah Gülen, who is recognised widely as the chief Muslim proponent of dialogue among

civilisations today, can be said to have 'reimagined' Nursi. He is well known for the schools which he has been instrumental in founding. There are currently between 250—300 Gülen-inspired schools worldwide, four of which are located in South Africa. These Gülen schools which admit learners of all faiths and follow the standard public school curriculum of the host country, emphasise what is termed 'universal moral values', viz. love, compassion, tolerance, and forgiving (Gülen 2000: 4-9)—values which were propounded by Said Nursi.

Said Nursi did not propose a specific model of interfaith dialogue. His approach falls within the parameters of Inclusivism discussed above. He avoids engaging faith communities on matters of doctrine, preferring to focus on issues that are common, such as belief in God and core moral values. For him, the pursuit of peace and justice, which he was convinced could come about only through the restoration of divine values, was a greater priority than attempting to compel other faiths to accept Islam or imposing its doctrines on all others.

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