GOD AND TAWHID IN CLASSICAL ISLAMIC THEOLOGY AND SAID NURSI'S RISALE-I NUR

Submitted by

Mehmet Ozalp

A thesis submitted in total fulfilment requirements of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Studies in Religion

School of Letters, Art and Media

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

University of Sydney

2016

DEDICATION

To my daughters Humeyra and Meryem

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DECLARATION

This thesis is an original work and contains no material accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution. To the best of my belief and knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

PUBLICATION DURING CANDIDATURE

Mehmet Ozalp, "Transcendence-Imminence of God: How Humans Relate to God in the Theological Discourse of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," in *God, Man and Mortality: The Perspective of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Hasan Horkuc (New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2015).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

Theology is a rational endeavour to understand everything about God, from within a faith tradition and its scriptures, and in response to problems posed by the conditions of a particular time and place. Islamic theology, in particular, has been a reactive discipline. Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1876-1960), as a prominent scholar in the modern era, lived through a tumultuous period witnessing the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the emergence of secular nation states for the first time in Muslim history, two world wars, and the challenges imposed by European modernity on traditional Muslim societies and Islam. Unlike other revivalist leaders, in dealing with the complexity of circumstances and the social and political restrictions around him, Nursi chose to respond following a theological revival method, where he attempted to revive Islam by renewing faith in people through his theological writings. By loading so much significance and revivalist objectives to theology, Nursi produced an original and fresh expression of Islamic theology based on the Qur'an. In this thesis, my original contribution to knowledge is the critical evaluation of Nursi's writings about God and identification of his contributions to Islamic understanding of God and *tawḥīd* as the central doctrine of Islam.

ARABIC ROMANISATION

This thesis uses ALA-LC Transliteration and Romanisation of Arabic Text scheme

for the romanisation of Arabic expressions.

Initial	Medial	Final	Alone	Romanisation
بـ	ـبـ	ـب	ب	b
ا	ـا	ـا	ا	a
تـ	ـتـ	ـت	ت	t
ثـ	ـثـ	ـث	ث	th
جـ	ـجـ	ـج	ج	j
حـ	ـحـ	ـح	ح	ḥ
خـ	ـخـ	ـخ	خ	kh
دـ	ـد	ـد	د	d
ذـ	ـذ	ـذ	ذ	dh
رـ	ـر	ـر	ر	r
زـ	ـز	ـز	ز	z
سـ	ـسـ	ـس	س	s
شـ	ـشـ	ـش	ش	sh
صـ	ـصـ	ـص	ص	ṣ
ضـ	ـضـ	ـض	ض	ḍ
طـ	ـطـ	ـط	ط	ṭ
ظـ	ـظـ	ـظ	ظ	ẓ
عـ	ـعـ	ـع	ع	' (ayn)
غـ	ـغـ	ـغ	غ	gh
فـ	ـفـ	ـف	ف	f (see Note 2)
قـ	ـقـ	ـق	ق	q (see Note 2)
كـ	ـكـ	ـك	ك	k
لـ	ـلـ	ـل	ل	l
مـ	ـمـ	ـم	م	m
نـ	ـنـ	ـن	ن	n
هـ	ـهـ	ـة ، ه	ه ، ة	h (see Note 3)
وـ	ـو	ـو	و	w
يـ	ـيـ	ـي	ي	y

INTRODUCTION

Background

Dr Colin Turner from Durham University narrates a dramatic turning point in his life when he was questioned about the meaning of *lā ilāha illa'llah* at a rally in 1980s Britain where he and a large crowd of Muslim students were protesting the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Slogans shouted included "Russians out," "Death to Brezhnev," "*allahu akbar*" and "*lā ilāha illa'llah*." When a passer-by asked him what *lā ilāha illa'llah* meant, without hesitation he answered "There is no god but Allah." Dr Turner was confounded when the questioner retorted, "I'm not asking you to translate it, I'm asking you to tell me what it really means." Dr Turner realised he did not know the real meaning of *tawḥīd,* the central tenet of Islamic faith encapsulated in the phrase *lā ilāha illa'llah*. Determined to find the answer, he read all the books on Islam he could get his hands on. These books talked about practices, laws, ethics, economy and government, but seemed to miss what mattered the most – an explanation of the meaning of *lā ilāha illa'llah*. The mosque imam at his university equally could offer no help. One fellow student, overhearing Dr Turner's questioning of the imam, said he had the *tafsīr* (exegesis) of *lā ilāha illa'llah* and offered to read it together. Thinking it would be no more than twenty pages he agreed. The answer turned out to be over 6,000 pages of theological writings in a large collection of books.[1] These books were none other than Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's *magnum opus* known as *Risale-i Nur Kulliyat* (Epistles of Light Collection).

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[1] Colin Turner, "The Risale-i Nur: A Revolution of Belief" (paper presented at the First International Symposium on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, Istanbul, March 16, 1991), accessed September 14, 2012, http://bit.ly/1PEOodJ.

Nursi (1876-1960) is one of the most significant Muslim theologians and revivalist leaders of the twentieth century, yet one of the least known and researched.

Theology is important not only to understand the core of a given faith tradition, but also to appreciate its worldview and social manifestations. In the case of Islam, significant knowledge gaps exist in the way Islamic theology is studied and related to the Islamic worldview and contemporary Islamic revivalist movements. Astonishingly, as Montgomery Watt notes no substantially fresh theological work had been produced within the normative Sunni tradition for more than 500 years.[2] In the Muslim world, Islamic scholarship mainly focuses on Islamic law and its related disciplines of legal theory, ethics and social applications. In Western scholarship, study of Islamic theology followed an Orientalist approach covering mainly the classical period with a body of literature destined to gather dust on library shelves. New research generally gravitates towards radicalism, terrorism and the social and political implications of Islamic movements in the post-9/11 world, significantly lacking relationships to Islamic theology.

In our time, research on Islamic theology and its study is largely overshadowed by three main imperatives. First, there is growing recognition that old frames of reference about Islam and Muslims constructed in Western discourse have to be re-examined. After the initial shock of 9/11, it was realised that old narratives no longer accurately describe the real world of Islam. There have also been numerous books published, countless documentaries produced and frequent TV debates conducted with probing questions such as, 'Why do they hate us?' 'Is violence in the nature of Islam?' 'What gave rise to Al-Qaida and ISIS?' The fact we are asking so many

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[2] Montgomery W. Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), 33-36.

questions is an admission that our old paradigms no longer match reality. Jonathan Lyons convincingly argues that a negative image of Islam and Muslims is perpetuated by certain social groups and institutions who stand to benefit from the survival of that image.[3] While this has somewhat improved in recent years, Western paradigms of Islam and Muslims still need to be critically reassessed and reconstructed.

Second, when paradigms of Islam and Muslims are reassessed, a fundamental shift in the nature of the relationship between the Muslim and Western worlds is observed. At the outset of Islam's birth in the Arabian Peninsula, the relationship was marked by the emergence and dominance of the Islamic civilisation. For more than a millennium, from the seventh century to the beginning of the eighteenth century, Islamic civilisation dominated global politics, science, culture and commerce over an area spanning from the shores of the Atlantic Ocean to the Asia-Pacific regions.[4] Although the Crusades made a lasting negative imprint on the psyche of Muslims, large populations of Christians, Jews and people of other faiths lived under Muslim rule in relative peace and tolerance in a time when there were few Muslim minority populations living in countries governed by non-Muslims. Since the late eighteenth century, the baton of world domination passed to European powers. The intellectual, economic and military ascendency of Europe enabled the Western world to almost completely colonise the entire Muslim world. In the post-colonial era of World War II, Western domination continued in the political, economic and cultural space. This relationship of dominance was fundamentally altered since 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq with the key message that military domination and hegemony do not

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[3] Jonathan Lyons, *Islam through Western Eyes: From the Crusades to the War on Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 5.
[4] See Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

work. Although the Western hegemony did not completely end, recent historical developments strongly suggest there is a need to rethink and reshape Islam-West relations.

Third, there is a further element beyond the relationship problem – a clearly observable revival and resurgence of Islam throughout the Muslim world and among expanding Muslim minorities living in Western societies. The fact that millions of Muslims travel for annual pilgrimage (*Hajj*); Muslim women choose to dress in conservative Islamic clothing in increasing numbers; the abundance of Islamic online and printed publications and resources; the emergence of pro-Islamic political governments in some Muslim countries; and Islamic overtones in the Arab Spring revolution would suffice to demonstrate that a global and diverse Islamic revival is taking place. It is important to understand the root causes of this revival and examine where it may lead and how it will affect the rest of the world.

Counterintuitively, a deeper study of Islamic theology would provide a significant contribution to all three imperatives. Going back to Islamic theology with a fresh outlook and methodology would provide a solid basis for the re-examination of old Orientalist paradigms about Islam. Study of Islamic theology would provide a firm foundation in the growing interest in interfaith dialogue as a way Muslims and Christians (and people of other faiths) relate to one another in a world where military domination and solutions have proven ineffective. As Christian scholarship is largely theological, Islamic theological juxtaposition provides a better ground for interfaith dialogue. Since Islamic theology and how it is invoked and expressed in the life of contemporary Muslims is the bedrock of all Islamic revivalist movements, its study

is imperative in understanding the similarities and differences between contemporary Islamic movements.

Significantly, when one brings theology into the backdrop of contemporary imperatives in scholarship three knowledge gaps emerge. First is the insufficient exploration of the relationship between the theological expositions of the large transnational Islamic revivalist movements to their final social and political vision. The question of 'how do revivalist founders express principle beliefs of Islam such that their followers are influenced to create a social vision for change?' is seldom asked. Such a relationship shapes their ultimate form and determines their influence on the immediate social environment. How this influence transforms the host society and then spreads across the Muslim world gains great importance.

The second gap follows on from the first. It is the gap in knowledge on how the theological outlook of the founding Muslim spiritual leader shapes their followers' worldview – the people who read and are influenced by their writings. Such links in transnational Islamic movements are insufficiently explored. This point has paramount importance as the usual assumption is that Muslim masses are politically seduced into following a charismatic leader because of their social and political narrative. This assumption creates a blind spot over the real nature of how a follower attaches to a revivalist leader. Followers develop attachment and spiritual esteem for the leader usually as a result of reading or listening to the leader's Islamic theological and Qur'anic interpretations. The social and political activism comes later with a desire to spread what benefitted them to other people. Even if the attraction is social and political narrative, the follower is inevitably moulded theologically over time. Thereafter, theology motivates their actions. Therefore, closing the gap in knowing

how followers are influenced by a revivalist leader's theological and spiritual writings is a significant area of research.

The third knowledge gap exists with the relative lack of coverage of Islamic revivalist movements and theological works from Turkey. In his otherwise excellent coverage of Islamic theology, Montgomery Watt fails to include Nursi and his works in his coverage of the modern era of Islamic theology even though he mentions far less significant works and scholars.[5] John Esposito in *Islam the Straight Path* covers revivalist movements in just about every major Muslim country, but misses Turkey completely.[6] Other similar studies do no better. Although there is a growing body of literature about the transnational Hizmet Movement[7] as one of the largest socio-religious movement in Turkey associated with M. Fethullah Gülen (b. 1938), theological considerations are deficient. Such research also ignores Nursi, his works and the Nur (Light) Movement, which is ultimately one of the key inspirations and theological foundations for not only the Hizmet Movement,[8] but also to some degree just about all religious movements in Turkey. Turkey's growing influence in the Middle East and world geopolitics should arouse interest in the Islamic revivalist movements emerging from Turkey.

Thus, this dissertation aims to describe, contextualise and critically examine the theological writings of Nursi. Since the knowledge gap is broad and potentially far-reaching, the focus of this thesis is a critical analysis of the Islamic theology of God

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[5] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 162.

[6] John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 115-141.

[7] One of the most comprehensive research works into the Hizmet Movement is Hakan M. Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). See also Martin E. Marty, ed., *Hizmet Means Service: Perspectives on an Alternative Path within Islam* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015).

[8] Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 180.

as articulated by Nursi in his *magnum opus, Risale-i Nur Kulliyat*. This analysis is presented within the context of classical Islamic theology.

Literature on Nursi and Epistles of Light

There are limited but increasing numbers of works published in English on Nursi and his works. They range from biographies to edited publications focusing on Nursi's cosmology, political and ethical themes. Some of these works cover theological topics from Nursi's perspective, yet at the time of writing this thesis, there are no publications with a specific focus on the theology of God as explicated by Nursi.

Attention to Nursi and his works generally started after a series of international symposiums organised in Turkey by the Istanbul Science and Culture Foundation (*İstanbul İlim ve Kültür Vakfı*). Papers from these symposiums were published as conference proceedings and made available online.[9] A total of 195 papers were presented in nine international symposiums conducted between 1991 and 2010, but an analysis of their content show only twelve are strictly theological in scope.

Şükran Vahide is one of the earliest translators of Nursi's works to English. Her translations are known to strictly follow the original text, but are especially difficult to read and understand. She also co-wrote a biography of Nursi, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*.[10] A less scholarly work by Fred Reed, *Anatolia Junction: A Journey into Hidden Turkey*,[11] is a lighter read in a narrative style covering a broad outline of Nursi's life and his contributions

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[9] See http://www.iikv.org/academy/index.php/sympeng/issue/archive.
[10] Şükran Vahide and Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).
[11] Fred A. Reed, *Anatolia Junction: A Journey into Hidden Turkey* (Burnaby, Canada: Talonbooks, 1999).

to Islamic revival. Such biographical works are limited in their coverage of Nursi's writings, especially on theology.

One of the earliest scholarly treatments of Nursi and his significance as a revivalist leader is sociologist Şerif Mardin. His book[12] and journal articles set the scene in academic studies on Nursi. His work not only defines a framework for the analysis of twentieth century Islamic revivalist movements, but also Nursi's Nur Movement. The genre of social treatment of Nursi and his influence in modern Turkey is continued after a fifteen year gap with Hakan Yavuz's study[13]. Although this work is not specific to Nursi, Yavuz gives Nursi a key role in his survey of the religious and socio-political landscape in Turkey for much of the twentieth century. These works are quite useful in their analysis of Nursi's impact on religious thought and revival, yet they do not cover his theological writings in any detail.

There are some publications combining the life and thought of Nursi. These works generally cover Nursi's life followed by a focus on certain themes of his works and thought. A relatively short book authored by Colin Turner and Hasan Horkuc[14] is an example. Apart from a brief coverage of his life, the book examines Nursi's thought and ideas on culture, society and politics. One of Ian Markham's books[15] specifically focuses on Nursi's ideas and contribution to interfaith dialogue with a particular focus on Christian-Muslim relations. Another work with interfaith focus is Thomas Mitchell's *Said Nursi's Views on Muslim-Christian Understanding*[16]. Two-thirds of a

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[12] Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey the Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).
[13] Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*.
[14] Colin Turner and Hasan Horkuc, *Said Nursi* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).
[15] Ian S. Markham, *Engaging with Bediuzzaman Said Nursi a Model of Interfaith Dialogue* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).
[16] Thomas F. Michel, *Reflections on Said Nursî's Views on Muslim-Christian Understanding* (Istanbul, Turkey: Söz Basim Yayin), 2003.

more recent work by Ian Markham, co-authored with Suendam Pirim,[17] consists of direct extracts from Nursi's writings compiled under belief, prophethood, eschatology and worship as the four main themes of the Qur'an. The book has critical analysis of Nursi's explanations on the concept of God, but only on eight pages.

In addition, four edited books have been published with particular themes on Nursi's works: (1) *Globalization, Ethics and Islam*;[18] (2) *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*;[19] (3) *Spiritual Dimensions of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Risale-i Nur*;[20] and (4) *Theodicy and Justice in Modern Islamic Thought: The Case of Said Nursi*.[21] These publications are significant contributions as they bring together academics and experts on Nursi and his thought. Nevertheless, they lack topical cohesion and consistency in theoretical framework. While only the fourth book has a theological focus, its scope is narrowed to the theme of theodicy. Although theodicy is an important philosophical and theological problem, it is a relatively small part of the complete concept of God that Nursi portrays in his works.

Two recent publications are significant. Colin Turner's *The Qur'an Revealed: A Critical Analysis of Said Nursi's Epistles of Light*[22] covers the breadth and depth of Nursi's works with excellent critical analysis. Turner's work is consulted and cited

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[17] Ian S. Markham and Suendam Birinci Pirim, *An Introduction to Said Nursi: Life, Thought and Writings* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011).

[18] Ian S. Markham and İbrahim Özdemir, eds., *Globalization, Ethics, and Islam: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005).

[19] Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabiʿ, ed., *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

[20] Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabiʿ, ed., *Spiritual Dimensions of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Risale-i Nur* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008).

[21] Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabiʿ, ed., *Theodicy and Justice in Modern Islamic Thought: The Case of Said Nursi* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010).

[22] Colin Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed: A Critical Analysis of Said Nursi's Epistles of Light* (Berlin: Gerlach, 2013).

extensively in this dissertation; however, the first three chapters are particularly relevant to this study. Ali Unal's *General Principles in the Risale-i Nur Collection for a True Understanding of Islam*[23] is ambitious in its breadth and depth of covering just about all main ideas and interpretations of Nursi throughout his works. It nevertheless lacks critical analysis as its main aim appears to be a summation and arrangement of Nursi's arguments in a coherent volume.

Although research and publications on Nursi and his works is increasing, just about all of them cover him as a social or political phenomenon.[24] While the social and political impacts of Nursi's activism during his life and beyond are significant, a theological examination of his works remains largely unexplored.

The situation is no better for books published in Turkish. Despite the fact that more than 300 books[25] are published on Nursi and his works in the Turkish language, very few of them deal with theology directly. A survey of these books reveal they focus on his life (about 42 books), social aspects of the movement he inspired, short commentaries on selected books, and various compilations of passages from Nursi's writings. One reason for this could be because Nursi's writings are in Turkish and widely available, and there is not much point repeating the same content in new books. In the introduction to his book *100 Soruda Bediüzzaman Said Nursî* (Bediuzzaman Said Nursi in 100 Questions), Hekimoglu Ismail says he intended to write a book covering the names of God as explained by Nursi, but he abandoned the

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[23] Ali Unal, *General Principles in the Risale-i Nur Collection for a True Understanding of Islam* (Clifton, New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2015).
[24] Some research topics are listed on the Nursi Studies website, http://bit.ly/1UjP21G.
[25] Book titles published in Turkish are listed on the Nursi Studies website, http://bit.ly/1hn9Kku.

idea when he realised that Nursi's works were replete with such explanations and he would have had to repeat the same passages.[26]

Nevertheless, a few Turkish titles related to Nursi's writings on the theology of God are available. Ali Mermer's *Bediüzzaman'da Mârifet ve Tefekkür* (Knowledge of God and Reflection in Bediuzzaman)[27] deals with various topics related to Nursi's contribution to Islamic thought and how he shows a way to reflect on God to attain knowledge of God. Gülşen Gazel's book, *Risale-i Nur Işığında Esma-i Hüsna* (Beautiful Names of God in the Light of Risale-i Nur),[28] provides how Nursi explains certain names of God throughout his works. The book compiles and elaborates on various names of God as explained by Nursi, but it does not present the content in a theological framework. Neither does it explain the significance of the names of God in the way Muslim believers relate to God.

Two publications look at Nursi and his work from the perspectives of theology and philosophy as disciplines. Abdülkadir Harmancı's study *Said Nursi'nin Risalelerinde Kelâm-Felsefe Problemleri* (Theology and Philosophy Problems in Said Nursi's Treatises)[29] pulls together Nursi's main theological arguments within the classical Islamic theology (*kalām*) framework. Although this work is quite useful for this research and a good summary of Nursi's main arguments, it lacks critical analysis and depth in its treatment of the theology of God. Niyazi Beki's analytic study *Kur'an İlimleri ve Tefsir Açısından Said Nursi'nin Eserleri* (Works of Said Nursi

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[26] Hekimoğlu İsmail, *100 Soruda Bediüzzaman Said Nursî: Risale-i Nur Küliyati ve Risale-i Nur Talebeleri* [Bediuzzaman Said Nursi in 100 Questions] (Istanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 1994), 5.
[27] Ali Mermer, *Bediüzzaman'da Mârifet ve Tefekkür* [Knowledge of God and Reflection in Bediuzzaman] (Istanbul: Gelenek, 2004).
[28] Gülşen Gazel, *Risale-i Nur Işığında Esma-i Hüsna* [Beautiful Names of God in the Light of Risale-i Nur] (Istanbul: Gündönümü Yayınları, 2006).
[29] Abdülkadir Harmancı, *Said Nursi'nin Risalelerinde Kelâm-Felsefe Problemleri* [Theology and Philosophy Problems in Said Nursi's Treatises] (Istanbul: Ayışığı Kitapları, 1994).

from the Perspective of Qur'anic Sciences and Exegesis)[30] gives a good investigation of Nursi's contribution to Qur'anic exegesis and its methods. Although it does not explore Nursi's theological contribution, Beki positions Nursi's works as a theological exegesis of the Qur'an.

For the most part, studies on Nursi and his thought in English and Turkish[31] have increased over the last decade, yet none of these works brings together Nursi's theological arguments about God, which constitute the majority of his writings.

Research Question and the Main Argument

The main argument of this dissertation is: *Said Nursi, in response to the spiritual, intellectual, social and political challenges facing Turkey and the Muslim world, followed a theological revival method and produced a fresh expression of Islamic theology based on the Qur'an. In doing so, he made original contributions to normative Islamic theology.*

The logic of this argument rests on the following premises: Theology is a rational endeavour to understand everything about God, from within a faith tradition and its scriptures, in response to problems posed by the conditions of a particular time and place. Nursi lived through a tumultuous period, witnessing the collapse of the Ottoman Empire; emergence of secular nation states for the first time in Muslim history; two world wars; and the challenges imposed by European modernity on traditional Muslim societies and Islam. The conditions and restrictions Nursi faced meant he could only have access to the Qur'an and nothing else. To deal with the

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[30] Niyazi Beki, *Kur'an Ilimleri ve Tefsir Açısından Bediüzzaman Said Nursî'nin Eserleri* [Works of Said Nursi from the Perspective of Qur'anic Sciences and Exegesis] (Istanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 1999).
[31] There are also significant publications on Nursi and his works in Arabic. *Risale-i Nur* is translated to 27 languages. See http://saidnur.com/.

complexity of circumstances and the social and political restrictions around him, Nursi chose a theological revival method, where he attempted to revive Islam by renewing faith in people through his theological writings. Since Nursi loaded so much significance and revivalist objectives to theology, he focused on areas of theology he felt needed most focus and as a result produced an original and fresh expression of Islamic theology based on the Qur'an.

Certain questions essentially emerge out of this argument. In light of the primary texts of Islam and resorting to rational arguments, does Nursi simply restate core Islamic theology about God as expressed by Sunni theologians in proceeding centuries or does he establish an original Islamic theological discourse about God? Unpacking this question further, as a Sunni Muslim scholar, does Nursi follow the Māturīdī or Ash'arī theological schools in his expositions about God, does he seek to reconcile between the two main Sunni theological schools or, intentionally or not, does he embark on an original Sunni theological discourse based on the theological underpinnings of the Qur'an? Furthermore, what are the similarities and differences in content, methodology and expression between Nursi's writings and the two main Sunni theological schools' (Māturīdī and Ash'arī) expressions of mainstream Islamic discourse on God?

Exploring these related questions will deliver a detailed explanation of Nursi's main theological discourse about God and his solutions to theological problems arising from the dialectic arguments of Western Enlightenment philosophy and as they were echoed within the Muslim world in the first half of the twentieth century. This will, in turn, contextualise where Nursi's theological discourse sits within the rubric of classical Islamic theology and critically appreciate his effectiveness in expressing the

normative Sunni Islamic theological concepts on God to the contemporary Muslim and non-Muslim audience.

This dissertation shows, while Nursi strictly followed the normative classical Sunni Islamic theology and stayed within the tenets of Islamic faith as his fundamental theological orientation, he made original contributions to Islamic theological discourse in three ways. First, he responded to and addressed new philosophical arguments against belief in God emerging from the Enlightenment era. Second, he redefined the scope of Islamic theological discourse by circumventing topics no longer relevant for the contemporary era and going deeper in areas of theology skimmed briefly in the classical period, even bringing rational scope to areas previously deemed unprovable with reason. Third, he contributed to the methodology and expression of Islamic theological tenets to make them more relevant and accessible to ordinary believers.

Methodology and Approach

To realise the research objectives, textual analysis was carried out in three layers. The first layer was a rhetorical analysis that set the context for Nursi's writings. Nursi's identity and influence as a Muslim scholar living through a pivotal transition from the classical to the modern period of the Muslim world gives a historic context to his writings. This transition also had a dramatic effect on Nursi as he spiritually transforms, focusing on theology rather than more direct social and political activism. Analysis of Nursi's main aims and audience in producing his works was significant in deciphering the language and style of his texts.

The second layer involved a discourse and thematic analysis to examine the features of Nursi's writings. Nursi's theological writings are spread throughout his works

without a thematic structure, despite each passage having clearly articulated and structured themes. Some arguments are repeated to support related theological interpretations and proofs. Discourse analysis was used to deconstruct his main theological arguments, while thematic analysis was used to reconstruct his arguments within the theological framework. For example, to compile his main arguments on the proofs of God, I have deconstructed his arguments for God's existence throughout his works and thematically reconstructed them in a single chapter. Although the 10th Word deals with proofs of afterlife, it contains arguments for the existence of God and explanations of relevant names and attributes of God. Proofs of God are also discussed in the 22nd Word and 33rd Word. Integrity of his arguments is preserved as the deconstruction focused on the main discourse and themes, and then logically linked them together. While this method helped clarify Nursi's arguments, it removed important theological links Nursi threads in his writings that add to the strength of his style and persuasive power of his arguments.

Third is the contextualisation, critical analysis and evaluation of Nursi's arguments and theological elucidations with the Māturīdī and Ash'arī theologies in a comparative framework. Such juxtaposition has given Nursi's theology a context through which both common elements and distinctive features are revealed. This highlighted the links with classical Islamic theology and expedited finding answers to the main research question.

I have used primary texts and worked with Nursi's original works written in the classical Turkish language. Nursi's writings are collected in thirteen volumes. *Hutbe-i Shamiye* (1911) is the print version of a notable sermon delivered to more than 10,000 people in 1909 at the Umayyad mosque in Damascus. *Muhākamāt* (1911) is a

work of exegetical methodology written as an introduction to his intended exegesis of the Qur'an. *Ishārāt al-ījāz* (1918) is a Qur'anic exegetical work that Nursi started just before World War I (WWI), but could not finish due to war. It only covers the first chapter of the Qur'an and up to the 33rd verse of the second chapter. *Mathnawī Nūriye* (1923) forms the seedbed of Nursi's theological works expressed concisely in short passages. The main core of Nursi's theological writings are *Sözler* (1926-1930), *Mektubat* (1929-1934), *Lem'alar* (1932-1936) and *Şualar* (1936-1949), written in sections across a twenty-four year period. Nursi's correspondence with his students has been compiled in four volumes (*Barla Lahikası* (1926-1935), *Kastamonu Lahikası* (1936-1943), *Emirdağ Lahikası I* (1944-1947) and *Emirdağ Lahikası II* (1949-1960). These works are valuable in understanding Nursi's methodology of religious revival, principles of religious activism and consoling spiritual advice to his students disheartened under political pressure. The last piece of the collection is Nursi's biography, *Tarihçe-i Hayat* (1953),[32] published during his later life by his students. These works form the primary sources of this study.

In spite of the fact that Nursi used a colloquial version of Ottoman Turkish to render his writings more accessible to ordinary readers, the language is hard to understand for the modern Turkish speaker as it is replete with Arabic and Persian words and phrases. Working with original texts not only helped preserve the integrity of Nursi's thought and discourse, it also uncovered important aspects of his style. I have used prints published by Söz Basım Yayın, which have additional features quite useful for researchers: a mini dictionary of more difficult words for each page, a comprehensive index, a separate index of concepts, detailed table of contents, added

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[32] Şükran Vahide, *Bediüzzaman Said Nursi: The Author of the Risale-i Nur* (Cağaloğlu, Istanbul: Sözler Publications, 2000).

footnotes to Qur'anic and hadith references cited but not usually referenced in the original texts, and further information on places and names.

For English, I have used Şükran Vahide's translation as a base. Translations were checked with the original and rendered to make them more accurate and readable if there were rare mistakes or ambiguities. However, I have not translated words indicating key theological concepts. For example, I have used *rubūbiyyah* instead of using the translation 'dominicality'. Although this is literally a correct translation, it does not convey the Islamic theological concept of *rubūbiyyah,* which means God's ownership, governance and related divine actions particularly guiding all beings towards their potential and purpose throughout the universe. The same approach is followed for the names and attributes of God.

Where words and expressions have generic theological significance, I have used the Arabic transliteration rather than the Turkified version used by Nursi. Instead of *rububiyet* as written in the Turkish original text, I have used *rubūbiyyah* so the word is understood by a wider readership and linked to other Islamic theological literature. If the expression was not theologically significant, I have retained the Turkish original and given the English translation in brackets.

Lastly, although the Chicago 16th edition referencing style is used, the style is modified in referencing Nursi's works. It is very difficult to find the right location in Nursi's works because there are many prints of his works and as a result typesetting and pagination are often different. Working with the primary texts may also be difficult for researchers unless they can understand classical Turkish and happen to have the same prints used in this research. Therefore, I have included the additional layers of numbering Nursi uses in his writings to make referencing easier. For

example, instead of 'Nursi, *Words*, 65', the reference is 'Nursi, *Words*, 10th Word, 3rd Truth, 65'.

Chapter Outline

This dissertation is organised in seven chapters. Since the foundation of the dissertation is the normative Islamic scholarly responses to changed conditions of time and place, Chapter 1 examines the development of Islamic theology from the time of Prophet Muhammad to the modern era. It gives a fresh definition of theology and introduces the concept of theologian's tension – an irresistible sense of responsibility to address theological challenges coupled with a distinct aversion in involvement in theology driven by a fear of deviation or accusation of deviation. While this makes Islamic theology essentially a reactive discipline, just about all Islamic theological developments are the product of scholars who overcame the theologian's tension and responded to the conditions and challenges of their time. Chapter 1 underscores a long period of theological drought lasting from late medieval times to the modern era. The modern era introduced dramatic challenges to Islamic theology and the faith of Muslim masses, soliciting a theological response. While there were notable responses, the most significant one came from Nursi.

Chapter 2 explores this response and Nursi's theological revival methodology. Nursi's 84 years of life spans a turbulent time. His struggle parallels the painful transition from a multi-faith and multicultural Ottoman Empire to a nationalist secular republic of Turkey. During the latter part of the Ottoman Empire (1900-1922) he tried to initiate an educational revolution, while in the early republic era (1922-1950) Nursi followed a distinctive and original theological revival approach. The chapter introduces the concept of revivalist dilemma – the impulse to revive Islam

countered by the knowledge that one's scholarly work and activism would inevitably attract charges of treason. The awareness of major theological questions, the negative impact of modernity and materialistic philosophy on the faith of Muslim masses, and the need to avoid political persecution drove Nursi to devise a theological revivalist approach unlike other revivalist leaders of the twentieth century.

The analysis of Nursi's works begins with Chapter 3, which centres on his contribution to Islamic epistemology. Nursi shifts the classical Islamic theological approach to epistemology to revelation and the universe, rather than the classic debate between reason (*'aql*) and revelation (*naql*). In addition to the primary sources of the Qur'an and Sunnah (sayings and actions attributed to Prophet Muhammad), Nursi highlights the universe as the third primary and, crucially, equal source of knowledge. For Nursi, the Qur'an is the book of revelation and the universe is the book of creation, and both originate from God. The role of reason is to examine the correlation between the two. This chapter also constructs a theoretical framework for the study of theism. The framework rests on four fundamental questions about God – does God exist, is God one, how do humans relate to God and what does it mean to believe in God?

Chapters 4 to 6 investigate Nursi's answers to these fundamental theological questions in the backdrop of classical Islamic theology. Chapter 4 deals with the proofs for the existence of God. In approaching these proofs, Nursi intentionally avoids the contingency and temporality arguments within the cosmological argument as he finds them burdensome and abstract for most ordinary people. In his attempt to engage ordinary readers, Nursi overlays his reasoning with literary devices and develops a unique style of analogies, story-telling and personifications. With his

default argument and the overarching governance argument, Nursi makes original contributions to the proofs of God's existence in Islamic theology.

Chapter 5 examines how *tawḥīd,* unity of God, is demonstrated and explained with various proofs within the classical Islamic theology and how Muslim theologians address the immediate theological implications arising from absolute monotheism. The chapter explores and analyses Nursi's contributions to the proofs of God's unity and his answers to key theological and philosophical implications of the absolute monotheism of God. The chapter shows that Nursi made three main contributions to the understanding of *tawḥīd* in Islamic theology. First, he articulated an advanced definition of *tawḥīd* to include not only a broad understanding of the unity of the creator but to witness a stamp of unity in every created object. Second, he expanded on the traditional proofs of *tawḥīd.* He contributed to the discourse on cause and effect, and provided new proofs to argue that causes do not have real effects. Third, he thoroughly explained how the creation of universals and particulars would have no difference to God's power and there is no more difficulty for God to govern a small object than the entire universe. With these contributions Nursi strengthens *tawḥīd,* the most significant doctrine of Islam.

Chapter 6 delves into Nursi's account on how Muslims should relate to God in Islam. This area is one of the most distinctive aspect in Nursi's thought where he combines elements of mysticism with theology. Building on the discourse of classical Islamic scholarship on attributes of God, Nursi primarily focuses on the Qur'anic concept of the Beautiful Names (*asmā al-ḥusnā*) of God. This approach allows Nursi to argue that such a focus instils a profound appreciation of God stemming from knowledge of the world and the universe. The mystical aims of knowing and getting close to

God are realised not only through the traditional spiritual methods of worship (*'ibāda*) and remembrance of God (*dhikr*), but also by reflecting on how God's names manifest over the universe and created artefacts therein. Essentially, Nursi makes a highly original contribution that scientific knowledge can potentially increase one's understanding of God and inculcate spiritual closeness to God.

CHAPTER 1: ISLAMIC THEOLOGY AND THE THEOLOGIAN'S TENSION

1.1   Introduction

In any faith tradition,[1] new theological interpretations have emerged either in response to certain historical and socio-political circumstances or challenging questions posed in encounters with differing intellectual and religious ideas of the era. This impetus is one of the key drivers of theological development. The process of theological development when it involves human reason and alteration is often coupled with a risk of altering the very tradition itself. How can one be sure that a given theological expression is authentic and not an adulteration of the original version expressed at the foundation of the faith tradition? Such a concern is most acutely felt by Muslim scholars to this day, generating a persistent aversion from involvement in theological interpretation and attracting criticism to those with the courage to engage in theology.

This chapter proposes the concept of the *theologian's tension* created by two opposing forces. On one hand, there is imperative to preserve the simplicity and purity of faith by remaining silent on debatable matters of theology and on the other the irresistible need to respond to the emerging theological challenges posed by new historic circumstances and assertions considered deviant. This tension makes Islamic theology essentially a reactive discipline. The drive for Muslim theologians to write on theology was primarily motivated by the desire to preserve the correct beliefs of Islam. Yet, the act of preservation of faith essentials was also instrumental in its

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[1] Since Wilfred Cantwell Smith's seminal work *World Religions* (1961), the word 'religion' has been viewed as problematic and 'faith tradition' became the normal use. The expression 'faith tradition' is equally problematic in that the word 'faith' connotes accepting religions without rational convictions.

development. In early centuries of Islam, theological disputations were viewed as dangerous and heavily criticised. It was accepted and considered the foundations of religion during the medieval era.[2] In the last 600 years, Islamic theology remained relatively constant or even underdeveloped.

Further, this chapter postulates a definition of theology and theologian's tension. They are illustrated through a historic analysis and with the contention that each theologian responded with a plethora of scholarly output to the theological challenges and historical circumstances of their time in order to express what they considered correct Islamic theological positions on matters of debate. This chapter explores the rich history of Islamic theology, its key protagonists, and their works and influence to reveal the interplay of the theologian's tension in the development of Islamic theology.

1.2   Islamic Theology and the Theologian's Tension

Islamic theology traditionally has been expressed in two related disciplines – *'aqāid* and *kalām*. *'Aqāid* is the plural form of *'aqīdah*, which originates from the Arabic root a-q-d philologically meaning 'to tie a knot.'[3] A related word is *'ītiqād*,[4] literally meaning to attach to something wholeheartedly as tightly as a knot would hold two pieces together.[5] In this respect *'aqāid* becomes something that is wholeheartedly attached to and accepted. In Islamic theological lexicon, *'aqāid* refers to a set of creeds a believer has to accept as true.[6]

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[2] W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), 133.
[3] Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, *Islâm Ansiklopedisi* [Islam Encyclopaedia] (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1993), vol. 2, 212.
[4] The word '*ītiqād*' is interchangeably used with the word *iman* (faith).
[5] Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, *Islâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 2, 212.
[6] Ibid, 213.

The second key word *kalām* is the plural form of *kalima* meaning 'word'. In Arabic philology, the word *kalima* comes from the root word k-l-m meaning 'to influence, to injure.'[7] In Islamic theological lexicon, *kalām* refers to rational Islamic theological discourse or simply systematic theology.[8] The most often cited reason for calling theology *kalām* is the way Muslim theologians began their discussion saying '*al-kalām fi …*' (the word on … is).[9] Principally, *kalām* was about discussing ideas, beliefs and doctrines in spoken and written word while others preferred to keep quiet.

Both *kalām* and *'aqāid* cover the fundamental tenets of Islam and are collectively referred to as *uṣūl al-dīn* − foundational principles of religion. Both disciplines are based on the textual sources of Islam and include interpretations of those sources. Nonetheless, there are nuances of difference between *'aqāid* and *kalām.* While *'aqāid* lays out beliefs of Islam in creedal codes, *kalām* explains them in detail.[10] *'Aqāid* is expressed in short statements of creed reflecting theological positions, while *kalām* gives textual and reasoned arguments justifying those creeds.[11] It can also be said that *'aqāid* corrects what is considered as wrong beliefs, whereas *kalām* refutes objections and doubts posed around what is considered as right beliefs.[12] *Kalām*'s scope is also broader and includes epistemological foundations of theology.

While *shahādah* − the statement 'there is no deity but God and Muhammad is His servant and messenger' − is the basic creedal proclamation in Islam, various *'aqāid* formulations were drafted over time and served as creedal statements to underscore

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[7] Ibid, vol. 25, 196.
[8] Hamza Yusuf, introduction to *The Creed of Imam al-Ṭaḥāwī (al-Aqīdah al-Ṭaḥāwiyyah)*, by Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Ṭaḥāwī, trans. Hamza Yusuf (Berkeley: Zaytuna Institute, 2007), 16.
[9] Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, *Islâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 25, 196.
[10] Ibid, 197.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.

the mainstream positions on debatable matters of theology.[13] As Josef Van Ess highlights, they were not used to pressuring "secular authorities to persecute heretics" as happened in other faith traditions.[14] Their function was to clarify, elucidate and educate.

Ilāhiyyāt is the main branch of theology that covers the concept of God in Islamic theology. Strictly speaking, '*ilāhiyyāt*' would be translated as 'divinity' or more specifically the 'study of the divine'. The word 'theology' is closely related as it is derived from the Greek words *logos* (reasoning, discourse) and *theos* (God, divinity); hence, the word 'theology' literally means a rational discourse about God.[15] Although it is safe to use the word *ilāhiyyāt* interchangeably with theology – since theology has been used to include a broader scope than the word *ilāhiyyāt* – this thesis will use 'theology of God' to specifically refer to '*ilāhiyyāt*'.

A lexical definition of theology or *kalām* is in order following this linguistic analysis of key terms. William Chittick gives the broadest and simplest definition of theology as "God-talk in all its forms."[16] For him, theology is concerned with a rational clarification of the reality of God as the "Object of Worship" so people can relate to God in correct ways.[17] Contemporary Muslim scholar Hamza Yusuf makes a further distinction between experiential faith and its intellectual understanding. For him, theology is an intellectual response in the mind of a believer who responds to challenges posed by confronting propositions that contest their understanding of their experiential faith. Therefore, the "true theologian" is one who also experiences the

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[13] Josef van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006), 13.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Sherman A Jackson, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghāzalī's Fayṣal al-Tafriqa* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.
[16] William C. Chittick, "Worship," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim J. Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 221.
[17] Ibid.

faith.[18] Jeffrey Halverson gives a similar definition and further adds the scope for theology: "Theology, in proper usage, is the systematic, rational, defensible articulation of one's belief about God, revelation, the cosmos, and humanity's relationship to the divine."[19]

For John Frame, theology is about expressing the language of revelation conveyed in scriptural texts to another language to facilitate its understanding.[20] Although Frame's definition reflects the Christian theological paradigm, his explanation of the nature of theology highlights the inescapable link of theology to revealed texts. It could be said this is the main distinction between theology and philosophy. Both philosophy and theology are rational in their nature, but theology is always linked to a faith tradition and its scriptural texts in a way that philosophy is not.

Classical Muslim theologians gave a more protective definition and role to theology (*kalām*). Al-Farābī[21] (872-950) consigned theology a protective function for the set of beliefs and extended its scope to providing an intellectual foundation to matters of conduct.[22] Al-Ghazālī[23] (1035-1111) also pointed to the defensive nature of Islamic theology and added that Islamic theology has successfully reconciled the tension between '*aql* (reason) and *naql* (tradition, revelation).[24] 'Adud al-Din al-'Iji (1300-1355) reiterated the classical view and defined theology as a discipline "that gives the ability to prove creeds of religion by providing definitive evidence and

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[18] Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Ṭaḥāwī, *The Creed of Imam al-Ṭaḥāwī (al-Aqīdah al-Ṭaḥāwiyyah)*, trans. Hamza Yusuf (Berkeley: Zaytuna Institute, 2007), 13.
[19] Jeffry R. Halverson, *Theology and Creed in Sunni Islam: The Muslim Brotherhood, Ash'arism, and Political Sunnism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 2.
[20] John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2002), 3.
[21] Full name is *Abū Naṣr Muḥammad bin Muḥammad Farābī*.
[22] Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, *Islâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 25, 196.
[23] Full name is *Abū Hamid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī*.
[24] Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, *Islâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 25, 196.

refutations for counter arguments."[25] Ibn Khaldūn[26] (1345-1405) echoed the defensive nature of Islamic theology in his delineation of the purpose of theology:

> In general, to the theologian, the object of theology is to find out how the articles of faith, which the religious law has laid down as correct, can be proven with the help of rational arguments, so that innovations may be repulsed and doubts and misgivings concerning the articles of faith can be removed.[27]

Importantly, in all these distinctions of theology, the defence is the faith propositions of Islam as articulated by its primary textual sources, the Qur'an and Sunnah.[28] These definitions also presuppose a substantive need to defend those faith propositions. The need, in turn, follows the presence of competing theological assertions and doctrines deemed heretical or unqur'anic, therefore, unislamic. These competing theological assertions will not exist in a historical vacuum and necessarily entail social, political, intellectual, and religious causes and conditions.

With all things considered, I postulate the following definition of theology: Theology is a rational endeavour to understand, explain and preserve everything about God and related to God from within the tenets of a faith tradition and its scriptures, in response to theological challenges posed by the religious, intellectual and experiential conditions of particular time and place.

This definition has four main points of emphasis. First, propositions of faith are either directly about God (such as existence of God, unity and attributes of God) or somehow related to God (such as God's revelation to human beings, God's judgment of human life in the afterlife, God's relation to Creation and humans relating to God). Second, theology is an intellectual endeavour to understand the propositions of faith,

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[25] Ibid.
[26] Full name is *Abū Zayd 'Abdu r-Raḥmān bin Muḥammad bin Khaldūn*.
[27] Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967), 53.
[28] Fethullah Gülen, *Essentials of the Islamic Faith* (Lanham: Tughra Books, 2009), 6.

explain them from a rational perspective and if possible check if they pass through the test of reason. Third, theology is invariably linked to the scriptures and canonical texts from which the propositions of faith are deduced. The consequence of this aspect is that theology of Islam has to be consistent and cogent within its core revealed texts of the Qur'an and hadith for it to be identified as Islamic theology. Without reference to and consistency with revealed texts, theology becomes a mere philosophical discourse. Fourth, theology invariably responds to challenges and problems emerging from the intellectual, social and experiential state of society in a given time and place. A specific historical context provides the conditions that pose significant challenges for theologians in their attempt to provide a coherent theological response. Such response inevitably compels theology to haul out a fresh expression from its sources to preserve its tenets, relevance, universality and timelessness.

In the case of Islam, these four aspects of theology combine to pose great risk and stimulus at the same time, arousing the *theologian's tension* in the inner world of a Muslim scholar. The risk is that theology could become the instrument of transforming the religion into a form the founder may have never intended. The discourse of the theologian may in fact be wrong and as a result cause them and people they influence to deviate from the original faith. The Qur'an is replete with criticism of earlier generations altering the divine message over time.[29] No God-fearing theologian would want to face the charge of deviation in this life or the next. As a result, there is a distinctive aversion within Muslim scholars to be involved in theology. This chapter illustrates this aversion in a survey of the history of Islamic theology. Paradoxically, there is also a sense of duty felt by a Muslim scholar to

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[29] See Qur'an 2:211 as an example.

protect and preserve the original teachings of Islam.[30] Faced with a streak of what they consider wrong interpretations of Islam and its sources, a Muslim scholar may feel compelled to speak and write on matters of theology. The theologian's tension arises as a combined result of the impulse of responsibility and aversion of risk. While this tension alarmed many scholars and caused them to stay clear of theology, the sense of duty outweighed in others. The development of Islamic theology is a consequence of the latter's courage to embark on theological discourse. Fourteen hundred years of development in Islamic theology demonstrates the interplay of the theologian's tension sparking periods of immense originality as well as extended periods of lapses into conservatism. At will be illustrated in the following sections, the theologian's tension is also responsible for the struggle between traditionalism and rationalism seen in Islamic thought.

1.3   Theology in the Qur'an and Sunnah

Montgomery Watt, similar to just about all historians of Islamic theology, begins the journey of Islamic theology with key historic events following the death of Prophet Muhammad (632).[31] Yet, as Tim Winter notes, a closer examination would have to put the beginning of the Islamic theological formation right back to the start of Prophet Muhammad's mission and the emergence of the Qur'an as a book of revelation.[32] It is possible to argue that the Qur'an is largely a theological book responding to the myriad beliefs existent at the time of revelation.

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[30] The criterion for a theological position to be deemed as Islamic is primarily its conformity with the Qur'an. Although the Qur'an is open to interpretation, Muslim scholars have considered an interpretation as a deviation if it is at odds with a clear and definite text of the Qur'an.

[31] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 1.

[32] Tim J. Winter, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim J. Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5.

The fundamental theological teachings of Islam are inescapably based on the Qur'an and to some extent elaborated by Prophet Muhammad in the hadith literature. While the style of the Qur'an intertwines many themes and topics within its chapters (often even in a single verse),[33] it is possible to identify broad themes of the Qur'an. Said Nursi identifies four main themes and aims of the Qur'an – Oneness of God (*tawhid*), prophethood (*risālah*), resurrection and the afterlife (*ḥḥashir*), and justice (*ʿadālah*) and worship (*ʿibādah*)[34] – the fourth referring to spiritual and worldly guidelines for human beings as individuals and society.[35] He also contends these four themes permeate through the entire Qur'an and can be found in all of its parts, chapters, verses and even single words.[36] Farid Esack concurs with a similar categorisation with the distinction that he calls the fourth theme "righteous conduct in the Qur'an" and further sub-divides it into three sub-themes of personal conduct, social and economic conduct, and religious practices.[37] While right conduct is the Qur'an's focus for Esack, Nursi qualifies this aspect as justice. Watt and Richard Bell identify five main Qur'anic themes – the doctrine of God, other spiritual beings, prophethood and other religions, the doctrine of the last judgment, and regulations for the life of the community.[38] Faruq Sharif has undertaken a detailed content analysis to identify the major themes in the Qur'an. He identified eight distinct themes – the Creator and His creatures (16.0%), the Prophet and the Qur'an (11.6%), the previous bearers of the divine message (22.5%), some historical events (3.3%), faith and religion

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[33] Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an Themes and Style* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2010), 10.
[34] He puts justice and worship as one theme.
[35] Said Nursi, *İşārātu'l İ'cāz* (Istanbul: Soz Basim Yayin, 2006), 30. All Turkish sources are translated by the author.
[36] Ibid, 31.
[37] Farid Esack, *The Qur'an: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2002), ix.
[38] W. Montgomery Watt and Richard Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), 148-166.

(12.9%), afterlife (21.5%) and commandments (12.2%).[39] Sharif adds that nearly 28% of the Qur'an describes God and God's attributes and the divine origin of the prophetic mission as a way for God relating to humanity.[40]

So, irrespective of how major themes of the Qur'an are identified and listed, all categorisations show an overwhelming majority of the Qur'an's content deals with matters of theology. While the Qur'an does not establish a systematic theology, as Van Ess contends,[41] it is essentially a theological book in its content and propositions. The Qur'an puts forward arguments for its propositions and responds critically to other theologies that existed at the time. In doing so, the Qur'an did not necessarily raise new theological problems, as Van Ess puts it, "it treated the same problems differently" in original ways.[42]

Interestingly, while the Qur'an is replete with theological verses and passages, hadith literature does not give a systematic and detailed discussion on theology. Yusuf argues the main reason is because Prophet Muhammad was not a theologian in a philosophical sense.[43] Although most would agree with this contention, there is evidence to suggest the Prophet often reasoned with people at a theological level, but he generally relied on the rhetorical and rational persuasiveness of the Qur'an.[44] Most likely, the Prophet felt the Qur'an was sufficient for the people of his time and its revelation was fresh enough to drive home important theological justifications of tenets of faith.

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[39] Faruq Sharif, *A Guide to the Contents of the Qur'an* (Reading UK: Garnet Publishing, 1995), 16-17. Percentages are calculated by counting numbers of verses. Considering that verse lengths vary markedly in the Qur'an, these percentages may have to be adjusted significantly if verse lengths are also considered.
[40] Ibid, 15.
[41] Van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, 14.
[42] Ibid, 15.
[43] Yusuf, introduction, 16.
[44] Fethullah Gülen, *The Messenger of God Muhammad: An Analysis of the Prophet's Life* (Somerset, N.J.: The Light Inc, 2005), 91.

As Muhammad Zubair Siddiqi contends, another reason could be that hadith collections after the Prophet mainly focused on legal, practical, ethical and to some extent spiritual matters.[45] Furthermore, hadith scholars were highly sceptical of anything theological attributed to the Prophet for concern that fabrications would enter the fold due to sectarian biases.[46] At the same time, there are numerous hadith narrated in relation to definition and attributes of belief (*īmān*). In the *Ṣaḥiḥ Muslim*[47] collection, 380 hadith are reported on the subject matter of belief across 200 pages.[48] This could be due to the early debate over the definition and consequence of belief and disbelief. The Companions may have narrated hadith in relation to these matters and they would have rapidly spread due to the significance and scale of the debate at the time.[49] This also shows theologically significant exhortations of the Prophet in other tenets of faith may not have been transmitted as these were not debated within the generation of the Companions.[50] Another important factor is that in theology only hadith transmitted by multiple sources (*mutawātir*) were accepted as evidence, instead of the hadith transmitted through single channels (*khabar al-wāhid*).[51] The number of prophetic traditions on theological issues is not small, but the usable amount is limited because this technical issue dramatically reduces hadith sources

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[45] Muḥammad Zubair Siddiqi and Abdal Hakim Murad, *Ḥadīth Literature: Its Origin, Development and Special Features* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 8.
[46] Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *A Textbook of Ḥadīth Studies: Authenticity, Compilation, Classification and Criticism of Ḥadīth* (Markfield, Leicestershire: Islamic Foundation, 2005), 66-69.
[47] *Sahih Muslim* was compiled by Muslim b. al-Hajjaj (d. 261 AH/875 CE) and later recognised as the second of the *kutub al-sittah* – six canonical hadith collections. The other five are *Sahih Bukhari*, collected by Imam Bukhari (d. 256 AH/870 CE); *Sunan Abu Dawūd*, collected by Abu Dawūd (d. 275 AH/888 CE); *Jami al-Tirmidhi*, collected by al-Tirmidhi (d. 279 AH/892 CE); *Sunan al-Sughra*, collected by al-Nasa'i (d. 303 AH/915 CE); and *Sunan ibn Majah*, collected by Ibn Majah (d. 273 AH/887 CE).
[48] Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, *Islâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 22, 213.
[49] There is also the possibility of hadith forgeries to support the debate on belief. Hadith forgeries are recognised by Muslim scholars as a fact and the whole basis of *uṣūl al-ḥadith* (methodology of prophetic traditions) is to identify forgeries and authenticate reports from Prophet Muhammad. The fact that hadith related to belief are reported in the early period while the Companions of the Prophet were still alive and they appear in the most authentic collections of al-Bukhari and Muslim show that these traditions (ahadith) could be considered authentic.
[50] This point will be discussed in more detail in this chapter.
[51] Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Abu Mansur al-Māturīdī, *Kitâb al-Tawhid*, trans. Bekir Topaloğlu. (Ankara: İSAM, 2003), 9.

applicable to theology. As a result, hadith literature as a secondary source to the Qur'an contains relatively few theologically significant reports and they generally reflect the earliest theological debates.

For the generation of the Companions, the Qur'an and Sunnah were sufficient as commutual sources of Islam. The Qur'an set the theological framework and critiqued disbelief, polytheism, Judaism and Christianity. Prophet Muhammad built a strong community of believers on the Qur'anic theological foundation of pure monotheism as well as other fundamental values and principles of Islam. For the generation of the Companions, the Qur'an and memory of the Prophet were still fresh and alive. The general theological outlook of Muslims in their era was more or less uniform – at least until the murder of the third caliph, 'Uthman (577-656).

1.4   Political Polarisation and Emergence of Creedal Works

After the Prophet, the Rightly-Guided Caliphs expanded the borders of Islam at an astonishing speed. Muslims conquered Syria, Egypt, North Africa, Iraq and Persia, mustering a new Islamic empire and civilisation spanning from Spain to India within a generation after the Prophet's death.[52] Significant political events; encounters with other cultures and faith traditions; and a new generation of Arab and non-Arab converts inevitably posed new theological questions, giving rise to early manifestations of the theologian's tension.

The second caliph, 'Umar (579-644), introduced the distinct social policy of establishing new settlements for Muslim armies and populations in conquered territories rather than settling them in existing cities.[53] Garrison towns like Cairo

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[52] Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 37-39.
[53] Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 43.

along with Kufa and Basra quickly became cosmopolitan urban centres attracting migrants, new converts and citizens from a diversity of ethnic and religious backgrounds.[54] Muslims came in contact with seasoned Christian and Jewish theologians.[55] Islam received to the fold fresh converts from Persian, Byzantine and Jewish backgrounds inevitably bringing with them their prior heritage to the way they absorbed Islam.[56] Such conditions produced intense theological debates especially in Basra between 690 and 730. These theological debates are notably important as the foundations of almost all major Islamic theological schools were laid on the bedrock of these debates and the outcomes they produced.[57]

Twenty years of stability and expansion post-Prophet Muhammad was vitiated by the murder of the third caliph, 'Uthman, in 656 and the resultant civil war between 'Ali (601-661), the fourth rightly-guided caliph, and Mu'āwiya (602-680), the governor of Syria. Kharijites (Seceders), after splintering from the camp of 'Ali and later peeling themselves from the main body of Muslims, became the first significant sect to develop a theological response to early political events. They developed a distinct doctrine linking actions with faith and drawing the conclusion that committing grave sin leads to disbelief and, astonishingly, those sinners could be killed unless they repented.[58] The implication was that grave sinners (*kabāir*) were destined eternally for hell.[59] Armed with the harsh doctrine of *takfīr* (declaring someone as an unbeliever),[60] Kharijites assassinated the fourth caliph 'Ali (and failed in their attempt to assassinate Mu'āwiya), claiming that both 'Ali and Mu'āwiya committed

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[54] Ibid, 45-51.
[55] Michael Cook, *Early Muslim Dogma: A Source-critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 156.
[56] Yusuf, introduction, 16.
[57] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 12.
[58] Ibid, 4.
[59] Ibid, 8.
[60] Van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, 30.

grave sins and became disbelievers by agreeing to arbitrate their disagreement over the caliphate.[61]

Kharijites were generally uneducated, devout and nomadic Arab tribesmen.[62] They often rebelled and deemed those who did not join them in their rebellion as grave sinners.[63] Their puritanical doctrine and sheer violence posed a political threat as well as theological challenge to the early Muslim community. Watt draws the conclusion that Kharijites' lasting influence on Islamic thought was their insistence on the view that all government decisions and laws must be based on the Qur'an.[64] The Qur'an was important for all Muslims, and the Kharijites simply could not be ignored. Interestingly, as Yusuf notes, a group among the Kharijites who opposed the radical factions within their ranks founded *kalām* as a new discipline.[65] The great majority of believers, though, considered Kharijites as religious extremists, thugs and terrorists (*bughāt*).[66] Living Companions of the Prophet and leading scholars vehemently disagreed with Kharijites and forcefully insisted committal of grave sin does not take the sinner out of Islam.[67]

One such leading figure was Hasan al-Basri (642-728),[68] a prominent scholar and spiritual authority in the cosmopolitan city of Basra, located in southern Iraq.[69] Al-Basri's popular teaching circle was often a vibrant stage for theological debate. Fatefully, al-Basri's circle also splintered the most significant theological antagonists

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[61] Barnaby Rogerson, *The Heirs of the Prophet Muhammad and the Roots of the Sunni-Shia Schism* (London: Little Brown, 2006), 314-320.
[62] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 3.
[63] Ibid, 8.
[64] Ibid, 12.
[65] Yusuf, introduction, 19.
[66] Van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, 31. Since modern day radicals also justify killing of innocent Muslims in acts of terrorism by charging them with disbelief, they are often labelled as neo-Kharijites.
[67] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 24.
[68] Cook, *Early Muslim Dogma*, 117.
[69] Yusuf, introduction, 19.

in Islamic history, the Mu'tazilites. Al-Basri's young student, Wasil b. Ata (700-748), broke ranks from his teacher's class over a debate on the eschatological destiny of committing grave sins (*kabāir*).[70] Ibn Ata insisted the grave sinner would be in a state between two states (*al-manzilatu bayn al-manzilatayn*), neither believer nor a disbeliever.[71] He formed his own study circle growing in time to become the influential Mu'tazilite theological school.[72] They were called *mu'tazila*, those who have 'withdrawn' themselves.[73] Emergence of the Mu'tazilites[74] would set the stage for a theological struggle for the next 300 years, concurrently intensifying the theologian's tension and giving scholars the courage to overcome it.

While some scholars gravitated towards responding to theological challenges, the theologian's tension caused many others to precipitate towards quietism. Those who remained quiet (or non-judgmental), first on the political dispute between 'Ali and Mu'āwiya and then on the early theological debates, were called the Murji'ites (postponers),[75] who, for example, held that it was pointless to discuss the fate of a grave sinner and left the matter to God's judgment in the afterlife.[76] Murji'ites were concerned about the propensity of sharp theological positions causing sectarian polarisation and hoped to keep Muslims united by suspending judgment on debatable matters of theology.[77] Even though Murji'ites did not put forward a definitive view on the theological debates at hand, their quietism was in itself a significant theological position. As Watt observed, Murji'ites were part of the early "general

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[70] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 47.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Fakhry, "Philosophy and Theology," 277.
[73] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 47.
[74] For more details on the doctrines of Mu'tazilites, see Richard C. Martin, Mark R. Woodward and Dwi S. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997).
[75] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 22.
[76] Van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, 122.
[77] Tilman Nagel, *The History of Islamic Theology from Muhammad to the Present* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Weiner Publishers, 2000), 62.

religious movement," and the general religious movement eventually coalesced as the mainstream Sunni Islam[78] or, as Khaled Blankinship points out, most Murji'ite doctrines were adopted as part of the Sunni theology.[79]

The debate over the legitimacy of Umayyad caliphs following the 'Ali–Mu'āwiya dispute brought out political polarisations that inevitably had theological overtones.[80] The party (*shi'a*) of 'Ali claimed descendants of the Prophet had a right to the caliphate.[81] Coupled with the Shi'ite assertion of the Umayyad illegitimacy, significant portions of the Muslim masses complained about discriminatory and unjust policies of the Umayyad rulers.[82] Umayyads countered and claimed their rule was sanctioned by God in a similar fashion as Adam was first made caliph on earth[83] and God's decree (*qadar*) came to pass on this matter.[84] The debate over these claims led to the emergence of those who denied human free will (Jabrites) and those who gave humans freedom of choice and creative power over their actions and destiny (Qadarites).[85]

In an attempt to settle the matter, Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Mālik (r. 685-705) requested al-Basri to write on the correct Islamic position on human will and God's will.[86] Al-Basri reluctantly produced the *Epistle on Free Will*, one of the first theological works recorded in Islamic history.[87] Jabrites relied on the Qur'anic verse 13:27, "God leads astray whomever He wills," to support their predestinarian

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[78] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 23.
[79] Khalid Blankinship, "The Early Creed," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim J. Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 45.
[80] Ibid, 35-37.
[81] Nagel, *The History of Islamic Theology*, 28.
[82] Ibid, 37.
[83] Qur'an 2:30.
[84] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 27.
[85] Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, trans. Andras and Ruth Hamori (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 81-82.
[86] Hans Küng, *Islam: Past, Present and Future* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 224.
[87] Cook, *Early Muslim Dogma*, 117.

theology. Al-Basri contested this claim and argued the verse 13:27 should be considered together with 14:27, "God leads the wrongdoers astray." Al-Basri's methodology was to examine the entire Qur'an to arrive at the conclusion that God's determination of human actions takes into account human choices. Yusuf highlights that al-Basri's views on human free will and action represented the mainstream and was later codified into Sunni creedal formulations.[88] Michael Cook contends, if al-Basri's epistle together with other early epistles are authentic, Islamic doctrine must have already been well-established by the reign of 'Abd al-Malik.[89] This in turn shows early scholars had clear theological positions, although only few had the resolution to write on the matter.

One of the earliest extant creedal works, *al-Fiqh al-Akbar*[90] (The Great Understanding), belongs to Abū Hanīfa (699-767) the founder of the Hanafite legal school. The work is more of an elucidation of Islamic creed rather than lengthy theological discourse and was mainly aimed at refuting the theology of the Qadarites, Shi'ites, Jahmites[91] and Kharijites.[92] Although the work is brief, it is, nevertheless, an important text reflecting the mainstream conclusions on matters of theology debated in eight century.[93] An examination of the work reveals the main body of Islamic theology and its branches were already established in skeleton by the first half of the eight century.

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[88] Yusuf, introduction, 19.
[89] Cook, *Early Muslim Dogma*, 154.
[90] A number of commentaries (*sharh*) have been written over the centuries on this work. Two of the most famous belong to Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Maghnīsāwī (d. 1591) and 'Alī ibn Sulṭān Muḥammad Qārī al-Harawī (d. 1605). A recent work by Abdur-Rahman Ibn Yusuf, *Imam Abu Hanifa's al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained*, combines both commentaries with the main text of Abu Hanifa. This work is quite useful as a combination of primary and secondary sources on early classical Islamic theology.
[91] Founded by Jahm ibn Safwan (d. 746) this sect was similar to Mutezalites in their views on attributes of God and *qadar*. See Shahristani's *Muslim Sects and Division* for more on their doctrines.
[92] Blankinship, "The Early Creed," 44.
[93] Ibid.

In his early career, Abū Ḥanīfa was heavily involved in theology, so much so that he is recognised as the first significant scholar of the early period to vigorously debate with heretics on matters of theology.[94] Abū Ḥanīfa had his critics and interestingly not for his theological elucidations but for engaging in theology. Abū Ḥanīfa's response to a critic sums up his motivation for involvement in theology: "To do what the Companions did would be sufficient if we were in their position, but we are confronted by enemies who attack us and declare shedding our blood lawful."[95] Abu Hanifa's response dramatically illustrates the theologian's tension at play and how he overcame the tension by justifying engagement in theology as a necessary endeavour not only to defend Islam, but also to defend Muslims from sectarian (mainly Kharijite) violence. Although Abū Ḥanīfa later shifted and excelled in Islamic law when he could not answer a woman's question on divorce,[96] his influence on theology continued with his most famous work *al-Fiqh al-Akbar*.[97]

Scathing critiques of theology (*kalām*) continued after Abū Ḥanīfa. His prominent student Abū Yūsuf (729-798) famously said "knowledge of *kalām* is ignorance, ignorance of *kalām* is knowledge."[98] Imam Shāfi'i (767-820), leading jurist of his time and founder of the second most significant Islamic legal school, has reportedly said "A servant meeting God with any sin other than *shirk* is better than his meeting God with *kalām*."[99] These scholars were strong but not absolute in their condemnation for Imam Shāfi'i wrote two theological books, *the Validation of*

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[94] Cerić, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, 64.
[95] Ibid, 71.
[96] Abdur-Rahman Ibn Yusuf, ed., *Imam Abu Hanifa's al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained* (California, USA: White Thread Press, 2007), 44.
[97] Muḥammad Akram Nadwī, *Abū Ḥanīfah: His Life, Legal Method and Legacy* (Oxford, UK: Interface Publications, 2010), 86.
[98] Ibn Yusuf, *Imam Abu Hanifa's al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained*, 56.
[99] Ibid.

Prophecy and the *Refutation of Brahmanism*.[100] Rather, they were targeting theological dialectics and views promoted under the guise of *kalām* considered harmful to Islam and Muslims. Famous hadith scholar and jurist Ahmad ibn Hanbal (781-856) condemned ascetic al-Muhāsibi for writing a rebuttal of theological innovators, "Do you not first narrate their views and then rebut them,"[101] implying along with other critics that even with the best intentions, involvement in *kalām* could spell out and then spread wrong beliefs. As Van Ess highlights, these scholars were not intolerant of differing views, rather, they thought the toleration of difference in law was expected and to a degree useful, but difference in theology could be tolerated far less, since theology comprised eternal truths and mistakes within it could lead to eternal damnation.[102] Nevertheless, these scholars' criticisms of *kalām* theology endure to this day.

A dramatic illustration of the theologian's tension is the response of early Muslim scholars' positions on certain Qur'anic descriptions of God that would appear anthropomorphic if taken literally. Non-Arab converts to Islam had trouble reading and understanding the early Kufic scripts, which had no reading aids of diacritical marks leading to disagreements over various ways of reading and, therefore, giving variant meanings to the same Qur'anic text. During the reign of the third caliph 'Uthman, Hudhayfa ibn al-Yaman (d. 656) warned the caliph to do something before the community "turns against itself over scripture," triggering the work on fixing the Qur'anic dialect.[103] While this helped preserve the integrity of the Qur'anic text, the Qur'an still had expressions such as "God sees," "The hand of God" and "God has

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[100] Cerić, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, 63. These works are evidence of Muslim scholars' accost with theological problems raised by their encounter with other faiths as Islam expanded to new geographies and peoples.

[101] Ibn Yusuf, *Imam Abu Hanifa's al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained*, 58.

[102] Van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, 20-21.

[103] Ibid, 18.

sat on the throne," potentially leading to anthropomorphic interpretations and understanding of God. The Qur'an also had expressions of transcendence such as "and comparable to Him there is none"[104] and "there is nothing whatever like Him."[105] While the anthropomorphist Hashawiyya[106] sect believed God had limbs and organs, Muta'zilites argued these expressions should be interpreted to mean God's power, knowledge and grace.

The mainstream Sunni scholars thought it was dangerous to give literal (anthropomorphic) meanings or limit the meanings of these expressions through interpretive fixation. The main position was that of *tafwīd* (consignment): accept these expressions as they are without interpretation and consign their true meaning to God.[107] Even courageous Abū Hanifa went only as far as defining these expressions as "attributes of God" without explaining what those attributes connoted. Discussing the nature of God was the most dangerous field, where the theologian's tension was most acutely felt. Theologians, other than Muta'zilites, in early centuries refrained from saying anything in this regard other than what the Qur'an already expressed.

Discussions on this point illustrate that theological engrossment until the dawn of the ninth century CE was primarily dominated by Mu'tazilites and other groups considered heretical. Within mainstream Islam, involvement in and support of theology was heavily criticised and viewed as tantamount to support of Mu'tazilism and sectarianism. Theological involvement of Sunni scholars was rare and their works of theology were generally limited to short creedal elucidations. Although

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[104] Qur'an 112:3-4.
[105] Qur'an 42:11.
[106] Hashawiyya was a puritanical literalist sect who insisted on understanding God in anthropomorphic ways. For a complete list and description of classical Islamic sects, see A. K. Kazi and J. G. Flynn's translation of Shahristani's (d. 1153) heresiographical work *Kitab al-Milal wa al-Nihal*. Most of the sects mentioned in this work are either a minority within the Muslim world or are extinct.
[107] Ibn Yusuf, *Imam Abu Hanifa's al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained*, 103.

theology as a discipline was still in its formative stage and not among the list of universally accepted Islamic disciplines as yet,[108] main branches and positions on theology were established and they strictly adhered to the scriptural text. Regardless of what scholars thought about theology (*kalām*), their views for and against it demonstrated the theologian's tension at play. There were benefits and dangers of involvement in theological debates. Only those who felt a strong sense of responsibility, such as Abū Hanīfa, dared to sail in the stormy waters of theological disputations.

1.5 The Acceptance of Kalām as a Fundamental Islamic Discipline

A defining moment in the history of Islamic theology is the encounter of Muslims with the Hellenistic philosophy. It is not certain when the first philosophical works to Arabic were translated, but it was sometime towards the second half of the eighth century CE with the ascendance of the Abbasid Empire. In the cosmopolitan city of Baghdad, as Jim Khalili suggests, Muslim theologians felt the need to improve their reasoning and debating skills before Jewish and Christian theologians who seemed to be familiar with Aristotle and Plato.[109] Influenced by the supremacy of reason in the Hellenistic thought and armed with rational tools of philosophy, Mu'tazilism became an intellectually and politically formidable theological school in the early ninth century.[110] The need to refute Mu'tazilites and associated Neoplatonic philosophers on matters of theology become the chief motive and catalyst in the development of mainstream Islamic theology.[111] From the late ninth to mid-tenth centuries, the

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[108] Nadwī. *Abū Ḥanīfah*, 86.
[109] Jim Al-Khalili, *The House of Wisdom: How Arabic Science Saved Ancient Knowledge and gave us the Renaissance* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011), 44.
[110] Küng, *Islam*, 282-283.
[111] Majid Fakhry, "Philosophy and Theology," 281-282.

theologian's tension resulted in the emergence of systematic Islamic theology as the reconciliation between the revealed scriptures (*naql*) and human reason (*'aql*).

A tipping point was reached towards the end of Abbasid caliph al-Maʾmūn's reign (r. 813-833) reign when Mu'tazilites were instrumental in the imposition of the doctrine of the 'createdness' of the Qur'an on Muslim scholars through the political clout of the caliph's office.[112] Al-Ma'mun's great political and scientific achievements with the House of Wisdom[113] were forever tarnished in the Muslim psyche through the initiation of a *mihna* (tribulation or inquisition) lasting sixteen years (827-843).[114]

Although the issue seemed to coalesce over the nature of the Qur'an, the very notion of God was at stake. Mu'tazilites insisted the attributes of God had "no existence distinguishable to His essence, but rather emanated from the essence of God;"[115] God speaks through His essence (*dhāt*) and God's speech only exist at the time of speaking.[116] Their main concern was that recognising attributes separate to God's essence would lead to anthropomorphism and affirming multiplicity in God's essence.[117] Whereas Sunni theologians insisted this position contradicted clear verses of the Qur'an and held a suprarational view that God's attributes are eternal and

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[112] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 48.
[113] House of Wisdom (*Bayt al-Hikmah*) is the renowned library at the court of Abbasid Caliph Ma'mun. From the eighth century onwards, it had become the centre of scientific and intellectual translation movement where major scientific projects were undertaken with the generous funding of the caliph. For more on the House of Wisdom, see Jim Al-Khalili's *The House of Wisdom: How Arabīc Science Saved Ancient Knowledge and Gave us the Renaissance* and Jonathan Lyons's *The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs Transformed Western Civilization.*
[114] Fakhry, "Philosophy and Theology," 278.
[115] Yusuf, introduction, 20.
[116] Nader El-Bizri, "God: Essence and Attributes," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim J. Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 124.
[117] Ibid, 123.

neither completely separate to God's essence nor are they the same as God's essence.[118]

The controversy around the nature of the Qur'an was symptomatic of a deeper epistemological difference between Mu'tazilites and the Sunni majority. Sunni hadith scholars championed the primacy of *naql* (tradition), while Mu'tazilites advocated the supremacy of '*aql* (reason).[119] There were extremists on both sides of the theological spectrum. Rationalists such as Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (854-925) and Ibn al-Rāwandī[120] asserted that reason and revelation were incompatible, especially in ethical matters. In sharp contrast, the anthropomorphist Hashawiyyah sect insisted reason had no place in religion and Muslims have to rely totally on the literal reading of the Qur'an and Sunnah in all matters.[121] Such polarisation strained further the already acute sense of the theologian's tension to breaking point. If Islam was to remain relevant as a world religion and source of a world civilisation, theology had to reconcile the two fundamental sources of '*aql* and *naql*.

Ahmad ibn Hanbal, a strict follower of the *tafwīd* position, emerged as the hero of mainstream Islamic theology in his public defiance of Mu'tazilite doctrine when other major scholars and judges either prevaricated or remained silent in the face of the *mihna*.[122] Ibn Hanbal did not leave any theological writings,[123] but his defiant stand symbolised the triumph of mainstream Qur'an and Sunnah based textual theology over the theological rationalism of Mu'tazilites. In their heyday,

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[118] Yusuf, introduction, 20.
[119] Cerić, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, 25.
[120] Ibn al-Rāwandī is an outspoken heretic. His date of birth and death are not known. *Encyclopaedia of Islam* gives his death as the middle of the tenth century.
[121] M. Umer Chapra, *Muslim Civilization: The Causes of Decline and the Need for Reform* (Markfield, Leicestershire, U.K.: Islamic Foundation, 2008), 107.
[122] Fakhry, "Philosophy and Theology," 278.
[123] The most famous work of Ahmad ibn Hanbal is the hadith collection *Musnad*, which includes close to 30,000 hadith and is the basis of the fourth legal school in Islam, the Hanbalī school.

Mu'tazilites made significant contributions to the defence of Islamic monotheism before other faith traditions, but their influence started to decline after the *mihna*.[124] Revoking of the Abbasid government policy on the 'createdness of the Qur'an' meant a victory for the people of hadith (*ahl al-ḥadith*) over the rational theology of Mu'tazilism.[125] From that moment on, no other government could dare meddle with theology through policy.[126]

It was not the repeal that brought the end for Muta'zilism, but the final intellectual nail on their coffin came primarily through the assimilation of the systematic theology (*kalām*) within mainstream Sunni theology. Chief theologians responsible for this feat were Abū al-Hasan 'Alī ibn Ismā'īl al-Ash'arī (873-933) and Muhammad Abū Mansūr al-Māturīdī (853-944), who solidified and systemised Sunni mainstream theology as established theological schools.[127]

Among the two, usually al-Ash'arī is cited as the main proponent of Sunni theology.[128] Al-Ash'arī was the star pupil of al-Jubba'ī (849-915), the leading Mu'tazilite master in Basra.[129] His transformation is dramatically narrated in the annals of Islamic scholarship in a number of renditions. In one version, al-Ash'arī saw Prophet Muhammad three times in his dreams. In the third dream, the Prophet exhorted him, "By no means should you abandon *kalām*, but you shall support that which was revealed. God will assist you."[130] This is significant as Muslims believe

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[124] Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 107.

[125] Van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, 32.

[126] Ibid, 33.

[127] Richard C. Martin, Mark R. Woodward and Dwi S. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 10.

[128] Fakhry, "Philosophy and Theology," 280.

[129] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 64.

[130] Nagel, *The History of Islamic Theology from Muhammad to the Present*, 149.

seeing Muhammad in dreams is true.[131] Prophet Muhammad's endorsement of *kalām* in defence of textual revealed sources gives *kalām* legitimacy. As long as the theologian is using reason in defence of the text, there should be no charge of sin or innovation. This approach decidedly removes the religious and psychological barrier created by the theologian's tension.

As a result of these dreams, or the decline and irrelevance of Mu'tazilism by the turn of tenth century as Watt argues,[132] al-Ash'arī started to question the doctrines of Mu'tazilism. Famously, he entered in a critical discussion with his master, al-Jubba'ī. Taftazanī (1322-1390) relates a pivotal episode where al-Ash'arī asks al-Jubba'ī:

> "What is your opinion regarding three brothers, one of whom dies obedient, another disobedient and the third as a child?" He replied, "The first will be rewarded. The second punished in Hellfire, and the third will neither be punished nor rewarded." Ash'arī asked, "If the third one says, 'O Lord, why did you give me death at a young age and not leave me to grow up so I could be obedient to you and thus enter in Paradise?'" Jubba'ī replied that Allah would say, "I knew that if you had grown up you would have disobeyed and thus entered the Hellfire, so it was better for you to have died young." So, Ash'arī said, "If the second one says 'My Lord, why did you not let me [too] die young so I would not have disobeyed and entered Hellfire?' What will the Lord say then?" Jubba'ī was confounded.[133]

This story is significant in three ways. First, to Sunni theologians it demonstrated the intellectual invalidity and logical incoherence of Mu'tazilite doctrines. Mu'tazilites were defeated in their own game. Second, it is a demonstration of how *kalām*'s rational tools could be used to defend the validity of the scripture-based Sunni theology and the invalidity of other sects – a key driver for theologians in having the courage to overcome the theologian's tension. Third, the story illustrates to Muslim theologians limitation of human reason in acquiring certain knowledge. As Hans

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[131] According to some hadith narrations, dreams are of three types – true dreams with divine inspiration; dreams that are generated by the brain activity of the person; and dreams influenced by Satan. In a hadith narrated by Bukhari and Muslim, Prophet Muhammad said, "The one who sees me in their dream is like they have seen me in life for Satan cannot impersonate me."
[132] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 65.
[133] Ibn Yusuf, *Imam Abu Hanifa's al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained*, 16-17.

Küng puts it, through al-Ash'arī, "rational argument was utterly at the service of orthodox teaching and *kalām* utterly at the service of Sunnah."[134] Al-Ash'arī's transformation story coupled with his dreams aids in legitimising the use of reason on one hand and setting limits to it on the other.

As Richard Martin and others assert, al-Ash'arī's transformation reflects his ultimate conviction that Mu'tazilite doctrine was not congruent with Islam's textual sources.[135] Watt similarly suggests al-Ash'arī most likely felt revelation explained human existence and guided people in life better than reason.[136] In 912, after a two week retreat, al-Ash'arī produced writings outlining a systematic theology based on the pious predecessors (*salaf*) and prophetic traditions.[137] He distributed these writings in the mosque and declared he had stripped himself from Mu'tazilite theology as he literally took off his outer garment.[138] Significantly, al-Ash'arī named his theology *ahl al-haq wa al-sunnah* (the people of truth and the prophetic tradition).[139] Al-Ash'arī's main theological works *al-ibana 'an usūl al-diyānah* (Elucidations of the Foundations of Religion) and *al-Luma'* (The Flashes) are extant.[140] Over time, the expression *usūl al-dīn* derived from the book title also became the title of Islamic theology as one of the four core Islamic disciplines.[141]

Where al-Ash'arī sits with respect to reason and revelation and to what degree he used *kalām* is debatable. George Makdisi asserts, "The question of whether al-

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[134] Küng, *Islam*, 296.
[135] Martin, Woodward and Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam,* 31.
[136] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 65.
[137] Fakhry, "Philosophy and Theology," 280.
[138] Nagel, *The History of Islamic Theology from Muhammad to the Present*, 149.
[139] Cerić, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, 56.
[140] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 66. A translation of *al-Ibana* by Walter C. Klein is available. An annotated translation of *al-Luma* by Richard J. McCarthy is also available.
[141] The other three are *uṣūl al-fiqh* (principles of jurisprudence), *uṣūl al-tafsīrtafsīr* (methodology of exegesis) and *uṣūl-al-ḥadith* (methodology of prophetic narrations).

Ash'arī adopted *kalām* as a method remains to be seen."[142] Richard Frank contends al-Ash'arī followed *kalām* methods and positioned his theology in the middle of two extremes of Mu'tazilite rationalism and the Hashawiyya literalism.[143] Küng challenges this view maintaining that al-'Ash'arī's attempt was not a reconciliation between reason and revelation, but rather reason was subsumed within revelation.[144] Certainly, al-Ash'arī's theology is heavily scripture-based and he distinctively holds the "without specifying how" (*bi-la kayf*) position of the traditionalists in the way Qur'anic descriptions of God are understood.[145] Nevertheless, as Küng acknowledges, al-Ash'arī justified the use of reason with numerous hadiths and Qur'anic citations.[146] Al-Ash'arī also argued rational theology was essential under circumstances where the faith of people was weak and polluted with doubts.[147] As Watt highlights, while there was rational theological involvement within the Sunni tradition prior to al-Ash'arī, he was nevertheless pivotal for the majority to accept reason to such a degree that the main body of Sunni Muslims in the Islamic heartlands thought themselves as Ash'arite by the eleventh century.[148] So, regardless of where Ash'arite theology sits on the reason–revelation spectrum, al-Ash'arī made a major contribution in the acceptance of *kalām* within Islamic theology among the majority of Muslims, especially within *ahl al-hadith* (traditionalists). He, therefore, removed a major obstacle standing before scholars who elected quietism in the face of the theologian's tension.

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[142] Richard M. Frank, *Early Islamic Theology: The Mu'tazilites and al-Ash'arī* (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2007), 136.
[143] Ibid, 147.
[144] Küng, *Islam*, 296.
[145] Blankinship, "The Early Creed," 53.
[146] Küng, *Islam*, 296.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 64.

The Ash'arī theology was further developed by al-Baqillānī (950-1013) and al-Juwaynī (1028-1085)[149]. Al-Baqillānī wrote a systematic outlay of Ash'arī theology in his *Kitāb al-Tamhīd* (Prolomegana).[150] Al-Juwaynī's work, *Kitāb al-Irshād ilā Qawāṭi' al-Adilla fī Uṣūl al-I'tiqād* (A Guide to the Conclusive Proofs for the Principles of Belief),[151] has been a definitive text in Ash'arī thought. According to Ash'arite historian Ibn Khaldun (1332-1405), al-Juwaynī's work is the best statement of Ash'arī theology in accordance with early Muslim authorities and has been therefore studied in madrasas for centuries.[152] Al-Juwaynī played a crucial role in injecting philosophical methods within theology.[153] The contribution of these scholars helped solidify Ash'arī thought as a primary school of theology in Islamic scholarship.

In comparison to al-Ash'arī, little is known of the life of the second major founder of mainstream Islamic theological school, al-Māturīdī. He is often ignored even though he is the founder of a major theological school within the Sunni tradition.[154] Al-Māturīdī was born in Central Asia two decades earlier than al-Ash'arī and by the time al-Ash'arī reverted from Mu'tazilite theology at age forty (912), al-Māturīdī had already produced his seminal work *Kitab al-Tawhid* (the Book of Unification), which is extant in Arabic original and is available in Arabic[155] and Turkish.[156] Mustafa

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[149] Al-Juwaynī is the teacher of the great theologian al-Ghazālī.
[150] Leaman, "The Developed Kalām Tradition," 84.
[151] Imam al-Haramayn Àbd al-Malik ibn Àbd Allah al-Juwaynī, *Kitāb al-irshād ilā qawāṭi' al-adilla ī uṣūl al-i'tiqād* [A Guide to the Conclusive Proofs for the Principles of Belief], trans. Paul E. Walker. Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2001.
[152] Paula Y. Skreslet and Rebecca Skreslet, *The Literature of Islam: A Guide to the Primary Sources in English Translation* (Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2006), 155.
[153] Osman Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam: A Study in Islamic Philosophies of Science* (Cambridge, U.K.: Islamic Texts Society, 1998), 157.
[154] Cerić, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam,* 12.
[155] See the edited publication with an English introduction by Fathallah Khulayyif; Muhammad ibn Muhammad Abu Mansur Māturīdī, *Kitab al-Tawhid*, ed. Fathallah Khulayyif (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1970).
[156] Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Abu Mansur Māturīdī, *Kitâbü't-Tevhîd Tercümesi*, trans. Bekir Topaloğlu (Ankara: İSAM, 2003).

Cerić[157] argues these two facts alone – two-decade seniority of al-Māturīdī and al-Māturīdī completing his seminal work before al-Ash'arī started his Sunni venture – would position al-Māturīdī as the founder of synthetic theology.[158]

Al-Māturīdī based his theology on Abū Hanīfa[159] largely through his education by a pedigree of scholars with a line of teaching going back to Abū Hanīfa.[160] Cerić contends al-Māturīdī was not a mere follower of Hanafi School, but a master in using the methods of the school in addressing theological problems of his day.[161] Oliver Leaman remarks al-Māturīdī provided a "solid intellectual foundation" to Abū Hanīfa's theology,[162] to such an extent that Māturīdī theological school has become the main theology of the Hanafi legal school.[163]

In the political climate of the tenth century, central governance of the Abbasid caliphs in Bagdad was declining, with local dynasties gaining prominence.[164] Khorosan, Transoxiana and its rich economic and intellectual centres of Samarkand, Bukhara and Tashkent were ruled by Samanids.[165] Transoxiana was the eastern centre of the Muslim world and under stable political climate.[166] As the traveller al-Maqdīsī (946-1000) observed, Central Asia was largely dominated by the Hanafi legal school with the presence of some Kharijites, Mu'tazilites and Karramites.[167] There were also presences of Judaism, Christianity and local dualist faith traditions

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[157] An analysis of Māturīdī's theology was completed by Grandmufti of Bosnia Mustafa Cerić in *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam: A Study of the Theology of Abu Mansur Al-Māturidī (d. 333/944)* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1995).

[158] Cerić, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, 19.

[159] Ibid, 11.

[160] Ibid, 31.

[161] Ibid, 35.

[162] Oliver Leaman, "The Developed Kalām Tradition," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim J. Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 86.

[163] Martin, Woodward and Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam*, 31.

[164] Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 136.

[165] Ibid, 131.

[166] Cerić, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, 28.

[167] Ibid, 29.

such as Persian Manichaism, Daysanism and Marcionism.[168] To gain popular support and stamp their legitimacy, local rulers supported Sunni scholarship. Thus, the religious and political landscape set a fertile substratum for the development, preservation and spread of Sunni mainstream theology in the east.[169] Representing the Sunni tradition, al-Māturīdī had to deal with the dual need to respond to the doctrines of non-Islamic faith traditions[170] on one hand and the dogmatic anthropomorphism of the traditionalism and cut-dry rationalism of Mu'tazilites on the other.[171]

As Yusuf highlights, al-Māturīdī set out to respond to intellectual challenges confronting Muslims by following a middle path between the rationalism of Mu'tazilites and the dogmatism of Hashawiyya literalists[172] – a synthesis between *'aql* and *naql*. Cerić identified that such a synthesis rested on the premise that human reason should be subservient to the boundaries of revelation, but at the same time reason should be allowed to perform its role in interpreting, understanding and explaining revelation.[173] Halverson adds, in doing so, al-Māturīdī gravitated toward reason, as he acknowledged that reason unaided by revelation can also be a source of knowledge.[174] It appears al-Māturīdī was not hindered by the theologian's tension or a history of involvement in Mu'tazilism, as in the case of al-Ash'arī. While Watt underplays al-Māturīdī's influence on Islamic theology,[175] Cerić compellingly disagrees in *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam* and asserts that al-Māturīdī is the

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[168] Ibid.
[169] Cerić, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, 28.
[170] Nagel, *The History of Islamic Theology*, 141
[171] Cerić, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, 35.
[172] Yusuf, introduction, 22.
[173] Cerić, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, 70.
[174] Halverson, *Theology and Creed in Sunni Islam*, 24.
[175] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 67.

greatest of all theologians of his era and beyond, mainly because of his originality and effectiveness in dealing with theological problems and challenges of his time.[176]

Despite the importance of al-Māturīdī in the development of Islamic theology, al-Ash'arī enjoys a greater celebrity status. The famous bibliographer and indexer Ibn al-Nadim (d. 990) did not include al-Māturīdī in his listing.[177] Even Abū Hafs 'Umar al-Nasafi (1067-1142), al-Māturīdī's own follower, did not mention al-Māturīdī and his work *Kitab al-Tawhid* in his seminal work *al-'Aqaid al-Nasafiyyah*.[178] Bekir Topaloglu, as well as Cerić, cites the main reason as the difficulty of *Kitab al-Tawhid*'s grammar and structure, rendering his work hard to read and understand.[179] Hence, the book's main arguments were simplified and elucidated by later Maturidite scholars.[180] Furthermore, al-Ash'arī's story was more powerful and dramatic, making him more popular with theologians[181] who needed such a story to silence their critics to justify involvement in theology. Muhammad Abu Zahra (1898-1974) stressed, since al-Ash'arī lived in the central heartlands of the Muslim world and he intellectually defeated the Mu'tazilite leader al-Jubba'ī, al-Ash'arī received a more prominent mention in the annals of Islamic theology; however, al-Māturīdī undertook a similar struggle in Asia.[182]

Another prominent text, based on Abū Hanīfa's earlier work is *The Creed of Imam al-Ṭaḥāwī*. This work was produced by Abū Ja'far Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Ṭaḥāwī (853-935). Al-Ṭaḥāwī attributed his work to "Jurists of the faith, Abū Hanīfa,

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[176] Ibid, 227.
[177] Cerić, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, 51.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Topaloğlu, *Kitâbü't-Tevhîd Tercümesi*, 7
[180] Cerić, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, 52-53.
[181] Ibid, 54.
[182] Ibn Yusuf, *Imam Abu Hanifa's al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained*, 18.

Abū Yusuf and Muhammad."[183] The creed elucidated by al-Ṭaḥāwī gained widest acceptance because of its simplicity and its aim to provide ordinary Muslims with a basic text where they can quickly learn creedal conclusions of mainstream Islam without the complex theological discourse.[184] Even though the creed of al-Ṭaḥāwī is brief, the creedal statements reflect the conclusions of systematic theology. This work is considered one of the earliest creedal works over which many commentaries were produced.[185] It has even been embraced by the more conservative Hanbalī School.[186] A fresh translation by Yusuf was published in 2010.[187]

It is largely held in Sunni Muslim scholarship that al-Māturīdī in the east, Ash'arī in the centre and al-Ṭaḥāwī in the west of the Muslim world have defended the mainstream Islam and preserved the integrity of its theology.[188] By the end of the tenth century, in the face of a weakening Abbasid caliphate[189] and the proliferation of sectarianism, the theological output of these three scholars became the foundation of mainstream majority. As scholars and Muslims followed the creeds elucidated by al-Māturīdī, al-Ash'arī and al-Ṭaḥāwī, a neologism emerged to describe their theological position – *ahl al-sunnah wa al-jama'ah* (the people of prophetic tradition and majority consensus)[190] from which the compressed 'Sunni' title is acquired. Even though there were differences within their theologies, the differences were recognised as within the interpretive boundaries of the Qur'an[191] and a reflection of the prophetic statement "In my community disagreement is an opportunity for divine

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[183] Ibn Yusuf, *al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained*, 43. Abū Yusuf and Muhammad are two famous students of Abū Ḥanīfah.
[184] Yusuf, introduction, 22-23.
[185] Nadwī. *Abū Ḥanīfah*, 87.
[186] Yusuf, introduction, 22.
[187] Ṭaḥāwī, *The Creed of Imam al-Ṭaḥāwī*.
[188] Cerić, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, 232.
[189] Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 137.
[190] Yusuf, introduction, 22.
[191] Ibn Yusuf, *al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained*, 15.

mercy."[192] Rejection of extremism of any kind and following an inclusive broad middle path became the guiding principle for the mainstream Sunni majority.[193]

Al-Ash'arī and al-Māturīdī's main motive was to defend mainstream Sunni theology against doctrines considered unislamic and unqur'anic.[194] Their work resulted in three significant outcomes with respect to the theologian's tension. First, they founded their theology firmly in the textual sources, thwarting any criticism of religious innovation (*bid'a*) from within the ranks. Second, they used varying degrees of rational argumentation to prove their theology and showed that, in order to deal effectively with rival sects and other faiths, theologians must include reason in their theological arsenal. Third, their work essentially redefined *kalām* as a scripture-based rational systematic theology and succeeded in the acceptance of *kalām* within the list of core Islamic disciplines.[195] In a way, the theologian's tension was captured within the framework, epistemology and methodology of the new *kalām.* For as long as scholars stayed within the boundaries of the new *kalām*, they did not have to worry about the theologian's tension. Conquest of the theologian's tension in favour of elucidation of theology opened the floodgate of theological output. Yet, there still remained a major antagonist challenging Sunni mainstream Islamic theology – the philosophers.

1.6   Maturation of Islamic Theology as a Discipline

Without doubt, one of the most significant of all representatives of mainstream Sunni theology is the great theologian Abū Hamid al-Ghazālī. Most historians of theology

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[192] Van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, 18. Van Ess also notes the quoted saying from the Prophet was generally applied to differences in Islamic law.
[193] Ibid, 42.
[194] Ibn Yusuf, *al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained*, 18.
[195] As a Sunni legal school, the Hanbalī tradition did not accept *kalām*. It is a minority school and almost faced extinction only to be revived by Ibn Taymiyya some four centuries later.

place al-Ghazālī under the rubric of Ash'arī theology.[196] He was a star pupil of the influential Ash'arite theologian Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwaynī.[197] For Oliver Leaman, al-Ghazālī is too distinctly original to be confined to one theological school.[198] As Yusuf contends, al-Ghazālī in his magnum opus *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Revivification of Sciences of Religion) made a unique expression of theology as an awareness of the Divine through inner and outer dimensions of religious practices.[199] A distinct contribution of al-Ghazālī is his synthesis of spiritual insight (*kashf*) within the rubric of theology.[200] As Frank Griffel demonstrated in in his work, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*,[201] al-Ghazālī followed a strictly Ash'arite theology in his early career and his original contributions coalesced later in life.

What is certain is al-Ghazālī represents a genre of Muslim theologians (to which Nursi also belongs) who synthesised multiple Islamic disciplines to develop an original yet islamically self-evident body of thought. In scholars like al-Ghazālī, the theologian's tension manifests as a concern to stay within the boundaries of the Qur'an and Sunnah, and revive Islamic beliefs in the everyday practices and lives of ordinary Muslims through a combination of primary scriptures, reasoned theological expositions and spiritual insight. The need to reach out and meet the needs of ordinary Muslims is the catalyst in their thought.

The eleventh century ushered in pivotal change for the Muslim world. For about a century Shi'ite empires, Fatimids in the west and Buwayhids in the east, dominated

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[196] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 92.
[197] Norman Calder, J. A. Mojaddedi, and Andrew Rippin, *Classical Islam: A Sourcebook of Religious Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 205.
[198] Leaman, "The Developed Kalām Tradition," 84.
[199] Yusuf, introduction, 23.
[200] Cerić, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, 27.
[201] Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

much of the Muslim world.[202] Overthrowing the Buwayhids in 1055, the Seljuk Turks took reign over the central Muslim heartlands, including Baghdad.[203] Ash'arī theology was largely banned in the early eleventh century until the Seljuk rulers, under the administration of great vizier Nizam al-Mulk, instituted Ash'arī theology as the official creed of the land.[204] To unify the Muslim world and preserve mainstream Sunni theology,[205] particularly against Isma'ili propaganda and violence mounted from the forts of Alamut,[206] Seljuks established madrasas as an innovative educational institution,[207] with a set curriculum comprising Arabic, theology, Islamic law, Qur'anic exegesis, hadith traditions, logic, philosophy as well as astronomy and mathematics.[208] It was within the Nizamiyah madrasas that al-Ghazālī rose as a celebrity professor. In his extensive immersion in learning and teaching, al-Ghazālī observed two main problems – the over-influence of philosophy in theology and the lack of spiritual integrity in people's religious practices – that would eventually lead to inner turmoil and distress.

In his early career, al-Ghazālī acknowledged that, while systematic theology (*kalām*) was useful in clarifying and defining creedal positions, as well as revealing a greater understanding of God, with all things considered, it did not enable one to get closer to God and in most cases led to doubts and loss of certainty in one's beliefs.[209] Nevertheless, al-Ghazālī did not take a hostile stance. In his legal work *al-Mustaṣfā*,

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[202] Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 131.
[203] Küng, *Islam*, 347.
[204] Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam*, 157.
[205] Küng, *Islam*, 347.
[206] Majid Fakhry, *A Short Introduction to Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism* (Oxford, England: Oneworld, 1997), 69.
[207] Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam*, 157.
[208] Francis Robinson, "Knowledge, its Transmission and Making of Islamic Societies," in *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the Islamic World*, ed. Francis Robinson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 242.
[209] Ibn Yusuf, *Imam Abu Hanifa's al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained*, 57.

he placed theology (*kalām*) as the foundation of other Islamic disciplines.[210] It was also al-Ghazālī who demonstrated the Qur'anic basis for logic (*mantiq*) in his work *Qisṭas al-Mustakīm* (The Just Balance).[211] Al-Ghazālī's critique of theology reflects his main concern that the ultimate aim of the truth seeker and all Islamic disciplines should be to inculcate a closer relationship with God.

Such concern inevitably led to a defining moment in the history of Islamic thought – al-Ghazālī's critique of philosophy. Prior to al-Ghazālī, Islamic philosophy claimed to have a voice in theological discourse, especially since the work of influential polymath al-Kindi (801-870). While he was praiseworthy of philosophy, al-Kindi stayed within the theological underpinnings of the Qur'anic revelation seen clearly in his objection to the philosophical litmus test, the eternity of the world.[212] Al-Fārābī was not as careful. While not denying revelation's claim for truth, he wedged a line of departure from theology with his acceptance of the eternity of the world and adoption of the Neoplatonic notion of emanation[213] – ideas further developed by the great polymath and philosopher Ibn Sina (980-1037, aka Avicenna).

Armed with a thorough knowledge of philosophy, al-Ghazālī made a damning critique of philosophy in *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* (Incoherence of the Philosophers),[214] where he outlined twenty deviations of philosophers with three (eternity of the universe, God knowing universals but not particulars, and rejection of physical

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[210] Ahmad Zaki Mansur Hammad, "Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's Juristic Doctrine in al-Mustasfa min 'ilm al-Uṣūl" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1987).

[211] Abu Hamid Al-Ghazālī, *The Just Balance: Al-Qistás al-Mustaqim*, trans. David P. Brewster (Kashmiri Bazar, Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1978).

[212] Cerić, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, 26.

[213] Ibid, 27.

[214] Abu Hamid al-Ghazālī, *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Sabih Ahmad Kamali (Lahore: Pakistan Philosophical Congress, 1963). Kenneth Garden in *The First Islamic Reviver: Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and his Revival of Religious Sciences* (2014) notes the correct translation of the word '*tahāfut*' should be 'precipitance'.

resurrection) being tantamount to heresy.[215] Half a century later, Ibn Rushd (1126-1298) published a rejoinder satirically titled *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut* (The Incoherence of the Incoherence).[216] Ibn Rushd conceded extreme rationalists were wrong in some areas, but he argued al-Ghazālī's charge of deviation and heresy (*kufr*) on all philosophers was based on misreading their arguments, and he was throwing the baby (moderate philosophy) out with the bathwater.[217] Trying to find a reconciliatory middle ground, Ibn Rushd argued "every religion is based on revelation (*naql*), but reason (*'aql*) is blended with it,"[218] a position similarly found in the newly accepted *kalām*.

Soon after the completion of *Incoherence of the Philosophers*, al-Ghazālī experienced a profound personal and spiritual crisis to the point of physical breakdown.[219] The main trigger was his scepticism as to whether theoretical knowledge of the jurists and theologians or "realised knowledge" of the Sufis was the surest way of attaining knowledge of God and salvation in afterlife.[220] Ultimately, was it possible to arrive at certain knowledge at all?[221] The answer was critical not only for him, but for all believers. If the ultimate goal was to attain a sound knowledge of and spiritual closeness to God, legal empiricism and theological abstraction were limited in their ability to achieve the main goal. Spiritual insight (*kashf*) at first sight also seemed subjective and lacked certain knowledge. The theologian's tension was most acutely felt by al-Ghazālī at the epistemological level

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[215] Chapra, *Muslim Civilization*, 112.
[216] Ibn Rushd, *Averroes' Tahafut al-Tahafut: The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, trans. Simon van den (Bergh. London: Luzac, 1954).
[217] Chapra, *Muslim Civilization*, 114.
[218] Ibid.
[219] David Buchman, translator's introduction in *The Niche of Lights: Mishkāt al-Anwār*, by Al-Ghazālī, trans. David Buchman (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1998), xxiii.
[220] Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam*, 163.
[221] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 87.

and the cognitive dissidence it caused finally manifested in his loss of speech and appetite.

Al-Ghazālī left his esteemed teaching position in Baghdad and embarked on a ten year retreat to experience spiritual life as a Sufi.[222] He came out of the retreat attesting the idea that sacred law, rational theology and philosophy are only good if they help one attain inward sincerity and closeness to God.[223] He found certainty only through "a light God cast into his heart," a light that enabled him to intuitively know basic truths without proofs.[224] It was the Sufi spiritual insight (*kashf*) and its practices that was the safest and surest way in achieving the ultimate purpose for human existence.[225] For him, Sufism enabled the realisation of Islamic goals in a complete way that no other disciplines could ever achieve. Sufism is an essential part of Islam without which the religious rituals and creedal formulations would be devoid of spiritual substance and inner dimensions of meanings.[226] He crystallised these insights in his monumental work, the *Revival of Religious Sciences* (*Iḥhyā al-ulūm al-dīn*). What makes these insights and *IḥyāIḥyā* significant and authoritative is that al-Ghazālī excelled in all disciplines concerned.[227] His work combined the beneficial features of all Islamic disciplines in a unique blend and a self-evident expression of Islam that earned him the title *hujja al-Islam* (proof of Islam) and *mujaddid* (renewer of Islam).

The impact of al-Ghazālī on philosophy is still debated. John Walbridge maintains al-Ghazālī's critique was projected more towards the "Farabian theory of religion"

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[222] Ibid, 91.
[223] Buchman, translator's introduction, xxiii.
[224] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 87.
[225] Buchman, translator's introduction, xxiii.
[226] Ibid, xxvi.
[227] Ibid, xxiii.

rather than philosophy itself.[228] Umer Chapra contends al-Ghazālī was not against taking truth from philosophers as long as "what they say is sensible in itself, supported by evidence and not in conflict with the Qur'an and Sunnah."[229] This quotation from al-Ghazālī reflects the theologian's tension and function of theology within the great theologian's thought – any idea incorporated must be within the truths inculcated by scriptures and the theologian was the gate keeper. Chapra also quotes al-Ghazālī acknowledging the key role of reason in gaining knowledge and his deeming rejection of natural sciences in protection of Islam as a grave crime against religion, and Chapra concludes that al-Ghazālī advocated the complementary role of reason (*'aql*) and revelation (*naql*) in theology and life.[230] Not everyone agrees. Watt contends the critique of *Thahāfut* irreversibly weakened the philosophical movement in the Muslim world,[231] even though Ibn Rushd made a powerful attempt to salvage philosophy. Watt goes further and acknowledges al-Ghazālī as "the leader in Islam's supreme encounter with Greek philosophy," and from this encounter Islamic theology triumphed at the expense of philosophy, particularly Neoplatonism.[232] For Leeman, al-Ghazālī in effect peeled off theology from pure philosophy (*falsafa*) while at the same time absorbed logical tools of philosophy within the intellectual arsenal of theology.[233]

Al-Ghazālī's critique led to two important outcomes for theology and its relationship with philosophy. First, the charge of philosophy's propensity to lead people to heresy stuck with it to this day. Stripped from its theological grounding, philosophy in effect

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[228] John Walbridge, *God and Logic in Islam: The Caliphate of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 84.
[229] Chapra, *Muslim Civilization*, 111.
[230] Ibid, 112.
[231] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 91.
[232] W. Montgomery Watt, *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazālī* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1953), 13.
[233] Leaman, "The Developed Kalām Tradition," 78.

protruded out of the list of core Islamic disciplines. Brightest minds distanced themselves from philosophy especially when demand for scholars excelling in other disciplines was at their peak. Philosophy did not altogether disappear, but rather, as Watt argues, it was transformed lending its useful parts and critical instruments to Islamic theology.[234] Incidentally, as Neo-platonic philosophy and Mu'tazilite theology declined in Sunni majority circles, they were incorporated and further developed through the Shi'ite theological orientation.[235]

Second, largely through the influence of al-Ghazālī, logic and *kalām* (*uṣūl al-dīn*) have become a central component of Islamic madrasa education in later centuries.[236] Even though the smaller Hanbalī strain continued to oppose it and maintained simple literal position to tenets of faith, the majority consensus have seen systematic theology and logic as essential.[237] They considered their study as *fard al-kifāya* (sufficiently obligatory), and contended it was impossible to talk about Islam without establishing the existence and unity of God, the truth of revelation, prophethood and the afterlife.[238] They disagreed with the charge of theology being an innovation (*bid'a*), since theology explained and proved matters of faith. As the Qur'an shows, prophets have also explained matters of faith to people through rational arguments. Furthermore, if theology is an innovation so would all other Islamic disciplines, as none of these existed at the time of the Prophet and Companions.[239] For the time being, arguments for theology won the debate, and systematic theology and study of logic were accepted in the madrasa curriculum.

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[234] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 91.
[235] Blankinship, "The Early Creed," 51.
[236] Chapra, *Muslim Civilization*, 113.
[237] Winter, introduction, 10.
[238] Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, *Islâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 25, 199.
[239] Ibid.

These outcomes nurtured an environment where theology could further flourish, albeit within the Ash'arī and Māturīdī boundaries. Works produced in the later period (*khalaf*) during and beyond the twelfth century, although prolific, lacked originality[240] and were marked by three distinct theological contributions. First, theological works were mainly characterised by systematic organisation of al-Māturīdī and al-Ash'arī theologies through the extensive use of logical methods.[241] The great theologian and polymath Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzi (1149-1209) could only continue the Ash'arite tradition.[242] A succinct Maturidite creed written by Najm al-Din al-Nasafi (d. 1142) was taught in madrasas for centuries.[243] Second, Ash'arite–Maturidite comparative studies as the mainstream theology of *ahl al-sunnah wa al-jama'ah* (the people of prophetic tradition and consensus) gained prominence.[244] Al-Māturīdī and al-Ash'arī were aligned on many theological positions with four differences,[245] because as Blankenship points out, al-Māturīdī took a more balanced approach between reason (*'aql*) and revelation (*naql*).[246] Theologians particularly noted these differences were sometimes no more than semantic and within the interpretative ambit of the scriptures. Third, theological developments took a vertical line of development within the two broad theological schools. Theological output was notably dominated by extensive commentaries, super-commentaries, glosses and even super-glosses.[247] On the creed of al-Nasafi, for example, a dozen different commentaries were written; and on the commentary written by Ash'arite theologian

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[240] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 134.
[241] Leaman, "The Developed Kalām Tradition," 85.
[242] Skreslet and Skreslet, *The Literature of Islam*, 162.
[243] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 138.
[244] Cerić, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, 54.
[245] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 66.
[246] Blankinship, "The Early Creed," 53.
[247] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 134.

al-Taftazāni[248] about 30 glosses were produced; and on one of these glosses an additional 20 super-glosses were written.[249] Al-Taftazāni's commentary on al-Nasafi was studied in madrasas for centuries as the combined theology of the mainstream Sunni Islam.[250]

It is safe to conclude the theologian's tension was eliminated when theology was kept within the confines of the madrasa curriculum. The chief figure responsible was al-Ghazālī. His critique of philosophy and spiritual transformation resulted in the exclusion of philosophy as a standalone discipline from core Islamic sciences while logical methods of philosophy were incorporated in theology. Scholars reached a consensus on Maturidite and Ash'arite theologies, and developed them further through a process of prolific commentaries. For as long as the theologian remained within the boundaries of revelation and authorised texts, they were free to use reasoning and interpretation to address key theological questions and respond to counter theologies found in heretical sects and other faith traditions. In a way, overcoming the theologian's tension effectively negated it. Without the presence of rival theologies and philosophy though, Islamic theology was in danger of decline and lapse into conservatism.

1.7   Mystical Contribution to Theology and Conservative Reaction

The Muslim world endured a turbulent era from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. In 1099, the crusaders stormed Jerusalem, sacked the city and slaughtered the entire civilian population.[251] For the next 150 years, regional Muslim leaders and crusader

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[248] An annotated translation of the text by Earl E. Elder (1950) is published as *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam: Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani on the Creed of Najm al-Din an-Nasafi.*
[249] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 134.
[250] Skreslet and Skreslet, *The Literature of Islam*, 164.
[251] Thomas S. Asbridge, *The Crusades: The Authoritative History of the War for the Holy Land* (New York: Ecco Press, 2010), 101.

kings interlocked in political and military struggle with civilians usually suffering the consequences. This was not all – the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad was under a looming danger of Mongol invasion. Wreaking havoc in Central Asia, Mongol hordes turned south to Muslim heartlands. Genghis Khan's grandson Hulagu captured and completely destroyed the capital Baghdad in 1258 ending the 500 year Abbasid tenure to caliphate.[252] A third calamity followed in the fourteenth century in the form of a global pandemic decimating millions in North Africa, Middle East and Europe. The great Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) recorded:

> Civilisation decreased with the decrease of mankind. Cities and buildings were laid to waste, roads and way signs were obliterated, settlements and mansions became empty, dynasties and tribes grew weak. The entire inhabited world changed.[253]

Islam is a resilient religion and Muslims are tenacious people who seem to bounce back from the greatest of catastrophes. Much of the social and religious infrastructure remained intact and Islam had spread deep into Asia when the Mongols converted to Islam.[254]

Theological abstraction and painstaking legalism do not bring solace to masses suffering under military invasions and pandemics. People need deep spiritual wisdom to give meaning to their suffering. This need coupled with al-Ghazālī's influential transformation story[255] and his euphemism that purification of the heart is an individual obligation (*fard 'ayn*)[256] provided fertile ground for Sufism to spread throughout the Muslim world. Sufism was institutionalised under Sufi orders

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[252] Robert Irwin, "The Emergence of the Islamic World System," in *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the Islamic World*, ed. Francis Robinson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 48.

[253] Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2005), 30.

[254] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 133.

[255] Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam*, 171.

[256] Toby Mayer, "Theology and Sufism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim J. Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 271.

(*tariqa*)[257] and Sufi centres mushroomed alongside already proliferated madrasas. ‘Abd-al-Qadir Jilānī (1077-1167), Ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240), Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī (1207-1273), Bahā al-Dīn Naqshband al-Bukhārī (1318-1389) and many more towering spiritual figures surfaced across the vast Muslim world. Unlike their theological counterparts, Sufi masters were not restrained by the theologian's tension, leading to a time of rigorous theological originality bolstered by their spiritual appeal and popular following.

The Spanish-born Sufi mystic Ibn ‘Arabī is particularly notable as one of the most prolific writers and for his unique blend of theology, cosmology, metaphysics and spirituality. His vast *magnum opus*, *Futuhat al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan Openings), has not been fully understood let alone properly translated and edited.[258] While Ibn ‘Arabī claimed to base his thought on the Qur'an and Sunnah, he provided audacious linguistic and theological interpretations informed by his spiritual insights.[259] Watt labels Ibn ‘Arabī's work as theosophy and his interpretations having pantheistic tendencies,[260] a charge that was to importune Ibn ‘Arabī for centuries.

Ibn ‘Arabī introduced new interpretations or, to be more correct, dramatically expanded and nurtured the seeds of existing theological ideas to have a lasting influence. For Ibn ‘Arabī, the universe with its ever-renewed creation (*tajdid al-khalq*) is an instantaneous reflection of God's names,[261] the human self has no boundaries in its becoming,[262] the human being has the potential to become the perfect man (*insān al-kāmil*), and the controversial concept of unity of being (*waḥdat*

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[257] Ibid.
[258] William C. Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabī: Heir to the Prophets* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), 1.
[259] Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W. J. Austin (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 22.
[260] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 119.
[261] Mohamed Haj Yousef, *Ibn ‘Arabī: Time and Cosmology* (London: Routledge, 2008), xiii.
[262] William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabī's Cosmology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), xiii.

al-wujūd).[263] 'Unity of being' became immensely popular not only within Sufi literature, but with the Sufi masses as well.[264] Ibn 'Arabī's thought is profound and language highly cryptic, the expression, for example, "It is part of the perfection of 'being' that there is imperfection in it,"[265] is clearly beyond the comprehension of many. As William Chittick, an expert on Ibn 'Arabī, suggests Ibn 'Arabī is remarkably original and without precedent.[266] Chittick adds further that no significant scholar could ignore Ibn 'Arabī as his fundamental ideas and terminology have percolated in the capillaries of the Islamic culture through the proliferation of Sufism, popular poetry, power of his proofs and acceptance by scholars from a range of disciplines.[267] Walbridge further notes that Ibn 'Arabī's system of the primacy of existence could not be ignored by subsequent philosophers, even though he did not use the conventional philosophical argumentation.[268] Somewhat similar to al-Ghazālī but certainly more audacious, Ibn 'Arabī represents an interdisciplinary approach to theology resulting in multiple theological overtones.

In stark contrast, Taqi al-Din Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) emerged in the fourteenth century as a Hanbalī theologian and contested the spread and practices of Sufism, *kalām* and philosophy. For Ibn Taymiyya, the main problem was that scholars worried about their well-paid positions and were not prepared to stand up for what was right and simply conform to blind scholarly tradition.[269] In a way, al-Ghazālī was also critical of the scholarly cadre for having rather worldly inclinations.[270] This observation adds another dimension to the theologian's tension – the concern for

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[263] Yousef, *Ibn 'Arabī*, xv.
[264] Nagel, *The History of Islamic Theology*, 246.
[265] Ibn al-'Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 40.
[266] Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabī*, 2.
[267] Ibid, 3.
[268] Walbridge, *God and Logic in Islam*, 95.
[269] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 142.
[270] Ibid.

one's career yanking a great deal of scholars into conformism. Freed by this concern, Ibn Taymiyya wrote daringly in levelling scathing criticisms against philosophy and particularly Ash'arī theology.

Ibn Taymiyya's thought is characterised by a rejection of foreign elements and adherence to Islam as understood by the pious predecessors (*salaf al-sālihīn*).[271] For him, the creed of pious predecessors is the surest and will be so until the Day of Judgment[272] – a sentiment signalling an intention to bypass the centuries of Islamic scholarship instead of the enormous task of refuting the entire Islamic tradition to preserve the purity of Islamic creed. Nevertheless, Ibn Taymiyya takes on the challenge.

In his *Radd 'ala l-Mantiqiyyīn* (Refutation of Logicians), Ibn Taymiyya's goal was to pull down "the logical foundations of philosophical metaphysics and speculative mysticism."[273] He attempted this by refuting two fundamental notions of logic – no concept can be formed without definitions and categorical syllogism leads to certain knowledge.[274] Ibn Taymiyya argued against the first stating that a definition reflects the statement of the definer who would know the quiddity of the thing defined either through a definition or through other means. But definition here would require another definition leading to infinite regress. Then knowing the quiddity of something through other means becomes the only option, making the definition redundant.[275] He argued against the syllogistic method, stating there were other means to acquiring the same knowledge syllogism tried to obtain through tiresome,

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[271] Ibid, 145.
[272] Fakhry, *A Short Introduction to Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism*, 102.
[273] Wael B. Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya against the Greek Logicians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), xxxix.
[274] Hallaq, *Ibn Taymiyya against the Greek Logicians*, xiv.
[275] Ibid, 7.

tedious processes without any guarantee – why would anyone try to travel to Mecca by testing all possible paths whether they led to Mecca or go around in increasingly larger circles until one crosses Mecca when it is possible to travel to Mecca through a known straightforward path at a moderate pace.[276] Ironically, these are also reasons to argue why reasoning did not lead to certain knowledge, yet it seems reasoning is an inescapable reality of human thought.

Ibn Taymiyya's critique of logic touched the very foundation of theology and madrasa education. He echoed the common criticism put to theology (*kalām*) in that theology gave greater emphasis to reason over revelation; theologians strayed away from the Qur'anic method and overly trusted in reason and syllogism; the majority of times they just repeated philosophers' views rather than develop original Islamic thought; and they neglected the emotional and spiritual needs of humans, hence could not nourish their faith.[277]

Ibn Taymiyya's opponents charged him with the heresy of anthropomorphism.[278] Famous traveller Ibn Battuta narrated listening to one of his sermons where Ibn Taymiyya said "Verily God descends to the sky over our world in the same bodily fashion that I make this descent" and Ibn Taymiyya took one step down from the pulpit. A Mālikī scholar objected to this saying it was blasphemous to say so and was beaten by the congregation as a result.[279] Interestingly, Ibn Taymiyya did not openly deny that God is not a body (*jism*), a notion vehemently opposed by Ahmad Ibn Hanbal.[280]

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[276] Ibid, 132.
[277] Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, *Islâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 25, 197.
[278] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 143.
[279] Halverson, *Theology and Creed in Sunni Islam*, 40.
[280] Ibn Yusuf, *Imam Abu Hanifa's al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained*, 100.

Ibn Taymiyya also heavily criticised Sufism and accused Sufis of holding pantheistic beliefs.[281] He attacked people's veneration of Sufi masters and labelled visiting their tombs as saint-worship.[282] Interestingly, he wrote on Sufism to give new meaning to the key concepts of love of God, fear of God and humility, and even spoke of annihilation (*fanā'*) as the perfect fulfilment of Shari'ah.[283] With this attempt, Ibn Taymiyya implicitly acknowledged the role of spirituality and placed Sufism in the Islamic tradition, albeit in reformed form.

In contemporary times, there is a tendency to view Ibn Taymiyya as an arch-conservative and arch-radical.[284] Ignaz Goldziher asserts that Ibn Taymiyya's writings lay largely dormant for six centuries until 'Abd al-Wahhab revived them in the eighteenth century.[285] Paula Skreslet contends Ibn Taymiyya and his works revived the withering Hanbalī line of theology and served to push the Hanbalī Sunni theology in a new direction of conservatism.[286] Watt goes further to assert that Ibn Taymiyya "profoundly altered the course of theological thought in Islam."[287] James Piscatori contrasts these evaluations as anachronistic readings of Ibn Taymiyya, and insists that he simply responded to the context of his time.[288] It is safe to say that, if Ibn 'Arabī stretched the boundaries of theology, Ibn Taymiyya reminded the limits and provided checks and balances for theology especially with his message of adherence to the original Islam of the pious predecessors (*salaf al-sālihīn*). It is this strain that made Ibn Taymiyya a reference for the notorious Wahhabi movement of Arabia to emerge in the eighteenth century and present day puritanical and

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[281] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 144.
[282] Ibid, 145.
[283] Ibid, 144.
[284] Küng, *Islam*, 600.
[285] Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, 241.
[286] Skreslet and Skreslet, *The Literature of Islam*, 162.
[287] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 145.
[288] Cited in Yahya Michot, *Muslims Under Non-Muslim Rule: Ibn* Taymiyya (Oxford: Interface Publications, 2006), xiv.

conservative Salafi movements.[289] Further, Ibn Taymiyya unwittingly stretched the theologian's tension and reminded scholars of its constant presence.

After the Mongol onslaught, the political fortune of the Muslim world improved in the fifteenth century and beyond with the emergence of three great Turkish dynasties – the Ottoman Empire in the Muslim heartlands and the west, the Safavids in greater Iran and the Mughals in India. The Ottomans spread Islam to the Balkans and to some extent Eastern Europe.[290] The Hanafite legal school and Maturidite theological school were more suitable to the ethnically and religiously diverse Ottoman Empire.[291] As the Ottoman Empire spread, Maturidite theology also proliferated through a large portion of the Muslim world.[292] Sufism was also prolific not only within Ottoman society, but throughout the Muslim world. The Mughals, similar to Ottomans, adopted the Hanafite legal and Maturidite theological schools in its multi-faith society.[293] Contrariwise, the Safavids, territorially wedged between the Ottomans and Mughals, adopted the messianic Shi'ite tradition.[294]

Although *kalām* was still included as a core discipline within the madrasa curriculum, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw a transformation of moderate conservatism gravitated by the theologian's tension into extreme conservatism that suffocated even moderate rationalists.[295] Two figures are notable in this later period – Ahmad al-Sirhindī (1564-1624) and Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792).

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[289] Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 45.
[290] Thomas Walker Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith* (New York: AMS Press, 1974), 125-176.
[291] Leaman, "The Developed Kalām Tradition," 87.
[292] Ibid, 89. Indian Muslims are also Hanafite in law and Māturīdite in theology, but they were never under direct Ottoman rule.
[293] Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 414.
[294] Ibid, 295.
[295] Chapra, *Muslim Civilisation*, 118.

'Abd al-Wahhab was attracted to Ibn Taymiyya's teachings and responded to the deterioration of popular religion in Arabia with a program of radical reform.[296] He gained prominence when he aligned his puritanical theology with the Su'ud tribe to undertake a bloody appropriation of the whole of Arabia, including the religiously significant cities of Mecca and Medina.[297] Henri Laoust maintains 'Abd al-Wahhab initiated a new edition of Hanbalite doctrines rather than extending Ibn Taymiyya's ideas.[298] Watt agrees to insist that 'Abd al-Wahhab did not follow Ibn Taymiyya's methodology, a methodology that was carefully conceived to escape scholastic stringency and adopt Islam to changing conditions.[299] 'Abd al-Wahhab selectively borrowed from Ibn Taymiyya and used his criticism of Sufism, philosophy and theology as well as his idea of returning to the pure and simple Islam of the early generations.[300]

Needless to say, the sectarian violence and puritanical theology of Wahhabism alarmed the Sunni scholarship and rulers.[301] 'Abd al-Wahhab's own brother Sulayman has written a refutation of his brother's ideas and claimed 'Abd al-Wahhab's doctrines were unprecedented in the history of Islam.[302] Despite 'Abd al-Wahhab rejecting these charges during his lifetime,[303] Ottoman Sultan instructed the Egyptian army to put an end to the short lived Wahhabite Saudi rule in 1813 only to have it resurface again as an independent state in 1926.[304]

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[296] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 146.
[297] El Fadl, *The Great Theft*, 46.
[298] Cited in Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 146.
[299] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 146.
[300] El Fadl, *The Great Theft,* 57.
[301] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 146.
[302] El Fadl, *The Great Theft*, 56.
[303] Nagel, *The History of Islamic Theology*, 266.
[304] Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, 243.

India took a different course. On one hand, Ibn 'Arabī's major influence exerted itself in a geography where speculative Sufi theologies such as *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of being) ran the risk of degenerating into pantheism in the backdrop of the Indian religious landscape.[305] On the other, Mughal emperor Akbar's (1542-1605) religiously tolerant policies went a step too far in his attempt to unify all people of India under one *din-e ilāhi* (divine religion).[306] The venture risked an irreversible adulteration of Islam in the subcontinent. The Naqshibandi Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624) rose as a major figure and was given the honorific title "the renewer (*mujaddid*) of the second millennium."[307] Sirhindi was critical of Ibn 'Arabī's *waḥdat al-wujūd* concept (not to the extent of Ibn Taymiyya) saying it removed the creator–creature distinction.[308] Instead, he argued the notion of *waḥdat al-shuhud* (unity of witnessing) to hone the point that what is perceived as unity of being is actually a spiritual experience and testimony to God's unity.[309] In effect this modification recognised the spiritual experiences of the mystics while at the same time averted the risk of falling into pantheism.

In his struggle against Akbar, Sirhindi tried to "set things right" and promote an understanding of Islam that conforms to inward and outward adherence to the example (Sunnah) of the Prophet and Islamic law (Shari'ah).[310] This traditional emphasis could be read as leaning towards conservatism, but it was others who followed Sirhindi who became increasingly conservative. An outstanding figure to continue the Sirhindi influence was Shah Waliullah Dehlawī (1703-1762).[311] As Watt

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[305] Mayer, "Theology and Sufism," 281.
[306] Küng, *Islam*, 400.
[307] Arthur F. Buehler, *Revealed Grace: The Juristic Sufism of Ahmad Sirhindi* (1564-1624) (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), 1.
[308] Mayer, "Theology and Sufism," 275.
[309] Ibid.
[310] Buehler, *Revealed Grace*, 30.
[311] Ibid.

observed, Shah Waliullah maintained strict adherence to the Qur'an and Sunnah, but at the same time adopted his thought to meet the intellectual and social needs of his time and place,[312] especially in the face of growing threat of colonialism in India. Watt attributes the beginning of the conservative strain to Shah Waliullah's son's student Sayyid Ahmad who adopted and preached rigid Wahhabi conservatism in India.[313]

Thus, the long period extending from the thirteenth to nineteenth centuries witnessed a number of developments from a theological perspective. First, as Sufism became more prevalent in Muslim societies, it wielded notable influence on theology especially with the works of Ibn 'Arabī and later by Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi with his more mainstream Shari'ah-conformant Sufi religious thought and Islamic revivalism. Second, as a reaction to encroachments of Sufism and adoption of theology in madrasa curriculum, Hanbalī strain of critics and reformists emerged with their main protagonists being Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. The culmination of these outcomes slowly stagnated theology and ushered a long period of conservatism and theological stagnation even though systematic theology (*kalām*) continued to be taught in madrasas and Maturidite theological school received vitality within the Ottoman Empire. Classical Islamic theology was not prepared for the next major challenge to come, this time from an unexpected place: Europe.

1.8   Challenge of Materialistic Philosophy and the Modern Era

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw waves of major catastrophes befall the Muslim world. Coinciding with the European political and economic at the onset of the Industrial Revolution, the power and prosperity of the Muslim world took a

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[312] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 147.
[313] Ibid.

sharp downturn. Unlike the previous tribulations and challenges, European colonisation and modernity affected the entire political, cultural, economic and religious landscape, resulting in the complete collapse of Islamic civilisation.[314]

Three factors conjoined to accelerate the decline of the Muslim world – social and political fragmentation, economic slowdown and educational regress.[315] The politically fragmented Muslim world fell before the powerful colonial armies of European powers financed with their lucrative monopoly over the Indian Ocean trade. Following the collapse of the Safavid Empire in 1736,[316] the Mughal Empire was abolished in 1857 when Britain declared India as a new addition to its global colonial empire.[317] Africa was devoured by France, Italy and the British, and finally the Ottoman Empire was reduced to an internal portion of Anatolia in 1918, after heavy losses in WWI.[318]

On the economic front, with the discovery of the American continent and European access to Indian Ocean, millennium-old trade routes took a dramatic shift.[319] The Muslim world was no longer on the direct trade route and Muslims could not change fast enough to contend with the rising European competition.[320] With the advent of new manufacturing technology and associated consumerism, European powers surpassed the GDP of the Ottoman Empire through the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.[321]

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[314] Mehmet Özalp, *Islam between Tradition and Modernity* (Canberra: Barton Books, 2012), xix.
[315] Ibid.
[316] Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 300.
[317] Ibid, 463.
[318] Özalp, *Islam between Tradition and Modernity*, xix.
[319] Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 473.
[320] Özalp, *Islam between Tradition and Modernity*, xix.
[321] Chapra, *Muslim Civilization*, 86-90.

Perhaps the most serious setback was the split of knowledge between essential and highly specialised religious sciences, and the optional and declining material sciences.[322] As Bernard Lewis observed, scientific education was reduced to a few slim outdated texts, while religious education comprised more than a decade long study in madrasas.[323] Once the champions of knowledge and science, Muslims lost their original scientific advantage to European developments in science and associated applied technology.[324] As will be explored further in the next chapter, advances in science and philosophy made its way to Muslim territories and posed significant challenges to the core tenets of Islam in a way theologians had not encountered before.

Such dramatic changes importuned a theological response. In a climate of far-reaching consequences, Muslim scholarship and activity gravitated towards social and political reform, and in most cases campaigns for independence and ensuing political struggle. While the basic Islamic creed was strongly reaffirmed, the intellectual debates of the previous centuries were no longer relevant for the challenges brought to fore by European modernity and Enlightenment philosophy.[325] There were only three notable attempts made to address such challenges through theological discourse.

The first notable venture came from Muhammad ʿAbduh (1849-1905) with his *Risālat al-Tawhid* (The Treatise of Unity).[326] This work is elucidations of correct beliefs concerning God and an outline of mainstream Islamic theology. John

[322] Özalp, *Islam between Tradition and Modernity*, xx.

[323] Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Perennial, 2003), 173.

[324] Özalp, *Islam between Tradition and Modernity*, xx.

[325] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 157-161.

[326] Muhammad ʿAbduh, *The Theology of Unity*, trans. Ishaq Musa'ad and Keneth Cragg (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966).

Esposito states 'Abduh saw no contradiction between reason and revelation or science and religion.[327] However, Watt contends, on many important contemporary theological problems, 'Abduh cited the limitation of reason and need for acceptance of revelation. This approach could be interpreted as the effect of the theologian's tension on 'Abduh leaning him back to a conservative stance. It is also probable he was either incapable of addressing these new questions or did not see them worthy of spending significant time on them.

The second attempt is Muhammad Iqbal's (1877-1937) *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam.*[328] While Kenneth Cragg praises this work, claiming it is "the most ambitious and inventive adaptation of dogma attempted by a Muslim,"[329] Watt underscores the heavy influences of Western philosophers such as Bergson, Nietzsche and even Freud on Iqbal's work.[330] An examination of the book supports Watt's view as the work is highly philosophical and often quotes the philosophers mentioned as well as being beyond the comprehension of most ordinary Muslims. Although Iqbal has become an inspiration for Indian Muslims mainly through his poetry, this work did not generate significant interest or influence among twentieth century Muslim scholarship.

The third undertaking is Said Nursi's *Risale-i Nur Kulliyat* (The Treatise of Light Collection), totalling more than 5,000 pages it stands out from the rest in volume and content. It is safe to state at this early stage that, unlike 'Abduh, Nursi addressed just about all classical and contemporary theological problems with textual and rational arguments; and unlike Iqbal, Nursi does not overly philosophise on matters of

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[327] Esposito, *Islam*, 130.
[328] Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934).
[329] Cited in Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 162.
[330] Watt, Islamic Philosophy and Theology, 162.

theology beyond the reach of ordinary Muslims. From a theological perspective, as Ibrahim M. Abū-Rabi' underscores, Nursi is "one of the most brilliant Islamic thinkers of the modern era."[331] Turner and Horkuc agree and further add that Nursi is the most significant and influential Muslim theologian to emerge in the modern era and break more than 500 years of theological drought.[332] These major contentions and their truths will be tested in the forthcoming chapters.

1.9   Conclusion

This chapter defined theology as a rational endeavour to understand everything about God, from within a faith tradition and its scriptures, and in response to problems posed by the conditions of a particular time and place. While the rational aspect of theology makes it understandable and acceptable to humans, its response to the conditions of time and place is an attempt to make it relevant and applicable for each era. At the same time, its faithfulness to revealed texts keeps the integrity of theology within the faith tradition across centuries. These three aspects of theology combine to pose great risk and stimulus at the same time, creating the theologian's tension in the mind of a pious Muslim scholar. The development of Islamic theology is the interplay of how the theologian's tension manifested in each era and how each scholar responded to the forces and challenges at play.

Islamic theology, hence, is largely a reactive discipline. In the beginning, simple theological propositions of the Qur'an and the personality of Prophet Muhammad were sufficient to persuade the first generation of Muslims. As Islam spread to the greater Middle East, the crucible of ancient religions and philosophies, Muslims

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[331] Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', introduction to *Islam in Modern Turkey an Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, by Şükran Vahide and Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), xiii.
[332] Colin Turner and Hasan Horkuc, *Said Nursi* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 2.

encountered numerous theological problems originating from these religions and philosophies. Scholars of the early era not only refrained from delving deep into these problems, they also discouraged their students and ordinary believers from engaging in them. However, the spirit of curiosity, competitive human nature, and natural resistance to blind faith and people's demand for rationally satisfying answers combined to produce the need to preserve the fundamental tenets of Islam and respond to numerous theological questions through the framework of the Qur'an and Sunnah. Scholars who have overcome the theologian's tension and responded to these challenges gave birth to the discipline of Islamic theology.

Three centuries of intellectual struggle chiefly with Mu'tazilites, philosophers and other sects considered heretical, culminated in the Ash'arite and Maturidite Sunni schools of theology, designating the broad mainstream *ahl al sunna wa al-jama'a*. Through the work of subsequent theologians, especially al-Ghazālī, philosophical methods and its logical tools were domesticated within the ambit of Islamic theology. As a consequence, Islamic theology acquired a synthesis between reason (*'aql*) and tradition (*naql*). It has evolved to attain a distinct scope, intellectual rigour and depth, and fresh expositions largely through the work of major Muslim scholars.

From the eleventh century onwards, theology with its core texts became a central part of the madrasa education system. Although this ensured theology's place as a core Islamic discipline, it also stifled its further development, coinciding with the troubled historical period of the Crusades, the Mongol invasion and the Sufi mass movement. Muslim scholars in each century continued to respond to circumstances of their era to preserve mainstream Islamic theology and to a limited degree made original theological contributions.

An important detail is that in pivotal times in Muslim history a different type of theologian, the *mujaddidī* line, emerged and was mainly represented by major figures such as al-Ghazālī and Sirhindi who approached Islamic theology from an interdisciplinary perspective coupled with the need to revive Islam within the Muslim masses.

In comparison to previous centuries, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought with them unprecedented change in all facets of life and human thought. The modern period ushered European colonisation and witnessed the collapse of Muslim empires and classic Islamic civilisation. Enlightenment philosophy, scientific developments and Western modernity spawned new theological challenges for theologians from all faith traditions including Islam. Furthermore, secular modernist governments in Muslim societies persecuted religious activism along with influential Muslim scholars. Since the history of the development of Islamic theology demonstrates that Muslim scholars invariably responded to the circumstances and challenges of their time, the unique circumstances of the modern era also solicited a theological response. While there were notable responses, as will be explored in the next chapter, the most significant theological response came from Bediuzzaman Said Nursi.

CHAPTER 2: THEOLOGICAL REVIVALISM OF NURSI

2.1 Introduction

Before delving into a critical examination of how Said Nursi expounds Islamic theology of God, it is important to give a historical context and rhetorical analysis of Nursi, his writings and nature of his activism. Who is Said Nursi as an Islamic scholar, theologian and modern intellectual? What is his role and position in Islamic scholarship having lived at a pivotal time in Muslim and world history? What were the exigencies that prompted him to write primarily on Islamic theology rather than other disciplines of Islamic scholarship?[1] How were his books written and for which audience? What has been the results and impact of his writings and religious activism? These are the questions that will be explored in this chapter.

Nursi's 84 years of life span one of the most turbulent times in modern history and parallel the painful transition of the Ottoman Empire from a multi-faith and multicultural commonwealth to the nationalist secular Republic of Turkey.[2] During the latter part of the Ottoman Empire (1900-1922), Nursi tried to revive Ottoman institutions, in particular pushing for educational reform.[3] In the era of the early Turkish republic (1922-1950), the new government engaged in an ambitious and Jacobin secularisation program that essentially sidelined Islam from all aspects of life and oppressed religious leaders, including Nursi, in order to perpetuate its reforms and regime.[4] As argued in this chapter, in the face of this new reality Nursi developed a distinctive and original approach to Islamic revivalism and chose a

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[1] Although Nursi's main focus is on theology, he also wrote on other Islamic disciplines including Qur'anic exegesis (*ishārāt al-ījāz* and *muḥākamāt*), hadith and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence).
[2] Abu-Rabi', introduction, xiv.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Küng, *Islam*, 434.

theological revival method rather than legal reinterpretation (*ijtihad*), modern exegesis of the complete Qur'an or political struggle methods expounded by other Islamic revivalist leaders of the same era. Nursi chose this approach to deal with what I call the *Islamic revivalist dilemma*.

Compelled by the intellectual and political circumstances of his time, Nursi's choice of theological revival method in dealing with the revivalist dilemma has yielded two main outcomes. First, it has allowed him to maintain a non-political and non-violent line of religious activism under the nervous scrutiny of a hostile secular establishment and their charges of treason. Second, focusing his activism solely on revival of faith, Nursi has authored a large body of original Islamic theological works titled the *Risale-i Nur* (Treatises of Light) collection.

2.2   Islamic Revivalism and the Revivalist Dilemma

In the twentieth century, a complex web of interrelated factors mushroomed an unprecedented number of Islamic revivalist movements in the Muslim world. While most of these movements were highly localised with interests restricted to a particular country, a number have become transnational through the persuasive power of their appeal and the forces of globalisation.[5] In this section, a theoretical framework for revivalist movements is provided to set an explanatory context to Islamic revivalism and the particular approach taken by Nursi to revive Islam in Muslim societies.

There is a tendency to define Islamic revivalist movements as religious groups with political objectives who are active in the social and political space to inject Islamic

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[5] Özalp, *Islam between Tradition and Modernity*, 209.

values and laws into society.[6] In defining Islamic movements, Hakan Yavuz similarly highlights their role in the reconstitution of social and political space "through participating, influencing and controlling cultural, educational and economic spheres."[7] This is rather limiting as it either leaves out movements that are not political in nature or incorrectly classifies them within the political paradigm. A more generic definition would be: an *Islamic revivalist movement* (*jama'ah*) is a collective amalgam of hearts and minds of large numbers of Muslims with a sense of common purpose and focused on clearly articulated religious change in people and their lives.[8] A *transnational* Islamic revivalist movement is the one that has spread from the country of origin across to other Muslim or non-Muslim societies other than just diaspora of the original country.

Islam has a strong emphasis on community activism and social change. If Muslim believers, as good people, do not "enjoin good and prohibit evil"[9] the society will eventually be corrupted. When corruption spreads unchecked, another equally important duty, *islah*, is placed on the shoulders of conscientious individuals.[10] *Islah* means putting things right, rectifying and amending.[11] *Islah* includes rebuilding a dysfunctional world, society and individuals.[12] Notably, I have not used the word 'reform' as a simile or definition for *islah.* Reform means to form something again,

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[6] Abdulwahhab El-Effendi, "Islamic Movements: Establishment Significants and Contextual Realities," in *Islamic Movements: Impact on Political stability in the Arab World*, ed. Ahmad Mousalli (Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research, 2003), 7.
[7] Hakan M. Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 23-24.
[8] Özalp, *Islam between Tradition and Modernity*, 209-210.
[9] Qur'an 3:104.
[10] Qur'an 7:170; 11:117; 28:19.
[11] Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, *Islâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 28, 79.
[12] Esposito, *Islam*, 116.

sometimes completely deformed, whereas *islah* sets something right from its corrupted form to its original state and on a path toward goodness and perfection.[13]

There is another equally important and related concept in Islam, *tajdid* (renewal or regeneration in religion). In a hadith report, Prophet Muhammad said, 'Certainly, God will send for the community of believers (*ummah*) every hundred years someone who will renew (*yujaddidu*) their religion.'[14] The *mujaddid* (renewer) effectively clears away interpretations that hinder Islam's contemporary relevance and application. They look at the core sources of Islam (the Qur'an and Sunnah) for inspiration when addressing the major challenges affecting the entire Muslim world in their own time.[15] In the process, the *mujaddid* imparts to Islam a fresh expression, yet self-evidently authentic and in a form that can be understood by scholars and non-scholars alike. Most significantly, while *islah* calls for change in societies, *tajdid* renews Islam for contemporary times and modern people. Revival (*iḥyā*) is an attempt to achieve both these functions at the same time. In effect, *revival* seeks a change in society through a *renewal* of Islam.[16]

Over the last century, there has been more than sufficient reason for Muslim revivalist leaders to have acquired a strong desire for change. Major trigger factors include the invasion of Muslim lands by colonial forces;[17] the abolition of the caliphate in 1924;[18] the widespread erosion of Islam's profile and prevalence in everyday life because of modern ideas and irreligious culture;[19] the oppression of

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[13] Özalp, *Islam between Tradition and Modernity*, 210.
[14] Abu Dawud, *Malahim*, 1.
[15] Esposito, *Islam*, 117.
[16] Özalp, *Islam between Tradition and Modernity*, 210.
[17] El-Effendi, *Islamic Movements*, 15.
[18] William L. Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East* (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 2009), 181.
[19] Esposito, *Islam*, 117.

religious Muslims by secular governments in most Muslim countries;[20] the failure of secular and authoritarian regimes to bring progress and prosperity in twentieth century;[21] the creation of Israel in 1948 and the resultant suffering of Palestinian Muslims;[22] the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980; and the first Gulf War of 1991.[23] When compared with a sense of a glorious past and awareness of their current predicament, conscientious Muslim scholars or activist leaders feel a sense of responsibility to do something about their standing in the world. In short, Muslim revivalist leaders want to change the conditions in which individuals live and the circumstances in which societies develop.[24]

The big question a revivalist leader must answer is: something has to change, but what is the most accurate diagnosis of the social plight and spiritual condition of Muslims and the resultant prognosis?[25] This is where what I call the *revivalist dilemma* starts. The dilemma sits between state and religion; between religious activism and religious quietism; and between theology and treason. The dilemma is this: where does one start to revive Islam in the presence of an occupying force or an oppressive secular modernist regime? How does one respond to the inevitable persecution and charges of treason while preserving the moral high ground? At the same time, how does one achieve tangible results in restrictive circumstances in order to develop religious activism into a mass movement? The way revivalist founders dealt with this dilemma shaped not only the nature of respective Islamic

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[20] Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 175-192.
[21] Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 557.
[22] Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 367.
[23] Özalp, *Islam between Tradition and Modernity*, 211.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.

revivalist movements, but also the way Islam–West relations came to pass in the twentieth century.

The movements that originated in Muslim countries during the twentieth century were generally of two types: secular modernist or Islamic religious. The former were established in response to the political struggle against colonisation and ensuing demand for independence.[26] Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938) in Turkey, Mustafa Kamil (1874-1908), Sa'd Zaghul (1860-1928), and Lutfi al-Sayyid (1872-1965) in Egypt, and Reza Khan (1877-1944) in Iran, usually the Western educated elite, all had secular solutions for their respective societies. While they all thought religion made people resist change and progress, it was Mustafa Kemal as the first leader to introduce radically secular paradigm for a Muslim country.[27] Just as Europe progressed when it diminished Christianity's grip on society and politics, the same hope existed for Muslim societies; therefore, Islam needs to be made consistent with European norms of philosophy, state and economy.[28] Hence, secularists chose a political struggle and implemented aggressive secular policies and Westernisation programs when they gained power.[29] Westernisation attempts linked with secular models have generally failed in their promise to bring freedom, progress and prosperity to their respective societies.[30] In some respects, they caused the formation of Islamic movements and their political manifestations when Muslim scholars and activists felt Islam was in danger from the persecution of authoritarian secular governments.[31]

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[26] Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 117.
[27] Küng, *Islam*, 434.
[28] Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 117.
[29] Esposito, *Islam*, 149.
[30] John L. Esposito, "Contemporary Islam: Reformation or Revolution?," in *The Oxford History of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 656.
[31] Ibid.

The Islamic response was led by Muslim scholars or Sufi masters and was generally supported by merchants, farmers, tribal leaders and masses of religious people.[32] Islamic revivalist movements, in turn, are usually one of two types. The first are the movements that essentially have a *top-down* approach; the second are the movements that have a *bottom-up* approach. The *top-down* approach is essentially the political approach to Islamicise society through political power.[33] For these movements, the root problem is corrupt secular governments who persecute their people, waste the resources of the country and collaborate with imperialistic foreign powers to perpetuate their rule while colluding in the suffering of their people.[34] These movements want to bring about change in society through the exercise of political power. The centrepiece of their vision is the creation of an Islamic state.[35] In just about every Muslim country, political parties or movements professing an Islamic vision were established. Some came very close to power, like the Islamic Salvation Front party in Algeria in 1991,[36] while others came to power only to lose it very quickly, such as Erbakan's Refah Party in Turkey, under strong opposition from the incumbent military and bureaucratic elite.[37] There is also the case of Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation), established in 1953, which has become trans-national although it has a relatively small number of active members. Hizb ut-Tahrir argues that, in order to achieve justice and true freedom from colonial powers and Western interference in Muslim countries, there has to be an Islamic balance of power. This could only be achieved if the whole Muslim world was led by a single caliph. For this to be realised, an Islamic state must be created and Shari'ah must be

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[32] Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 117.
[33] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern*, 140.
[34] Esposito, *Islam*, 155.
[35] El-Effendi, *Islamic Movements*, 7.
[36] Peter V. Sivers, "Islamic Salvation Front," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 316.
[37] Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 214.

implemented in every Muslim country.[38] This openly declared agenda invariably makes these groups a prime target for suppression by governments in Muslim countries, while they make the West nervous about the security consequences of such a prospect.[39]

The revivalist movements that have a *bottom-up* approach for change have been far more influential. As Fazlur Rahman points out, their views have the centrality of the human being and the transformation of individuals.[40] Only if individuals are transformed spiritually and socially can the society at large make progress. As people transform society, the changes sought are far more long-lasting than changes brought through political means.[41]

The revivalist movements with a bottom-up approach exist in two main forms. The first are those that, after becoming mass movements, have a tendency to become politicised with the confidence of public success or, alternatively, they flirt with violence under increased political pressure and persecution.[42] Examples are the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) of Egypt established in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949) and its Palestinian offshoot Hamas established in 1988 by Ahmad Yassin (1937-2004). The MB initially started as a spiritual and social movement, but was heavily persecuted by the military and secular governments from the 1940s onwards when it became large and influential.[43] In the twenty-first century, MB held seats in the Egyptian parliament and produced the first elected president, Muhammad Morsi,

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[38] Ahmad Mousalli, "The Views of Islamic Movements on Democracy and Political Pluralism," in *Islamic Movements: Impact on Political Stability in the Arab World*, ed. Ahmad Mousalli (Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research, 2003), 7.
[39] Özalp, *Islam between Tradition and Modernity*, 212-213.
[40] Cited in Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 140.
[41] Özalp, *Islam between Tradition and Modernity*, 213.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Esposito, *Islam*, 153.

after the Arab Spring revolution of 2011.[44] Similarly, Hamas led a successful charity, social services and educational campaign for Palestinian refugees in Gaza and the West Bank.[45] It famously inspired the intifada of stone-throwing youths against Israeli tanks.[46] Under pressure, a powerful armed wing called the 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam Forces[47] engaged in suicide bombings.[48] Hamas later established a political party and won elections in Gaza and the West Bank.[49]

Across the other end of the world, Indonesia's Nahdatul 'Ulama (Union of Scholars, established in 1926) movement entered the first democratic elections in 1998 and its leader Abdurrahman Wahid (1940-2009) became Indonesia's first democratically elected president, even though Sufi practices of spiritual transformation lie at the core of the teachings of the movement.[50] Similarly, the powerful Muhammadiya movement (established in 1912 by Hajji Ahmad Dahlan) in Indonesia promoted education by establishing schools and espoused a personal transformation of an individual by practising Islam. Yet, the movement also entered into the political process by establishing a political party.[51] So, the usual tendency is for large bottom-up revivalist movements to become political at some point in their evolution.

In contrast, there are exceptions and these form the second type of bottom-up movements that remain resolutely spiritual and social despite becoming a mass movement with widespread potential political appeal. The notable transnational examples are the Tabligh Jamaat established in 1927 by Mawlana Muhammad Ilyas

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[44] Tariq Ramadan, *Islam and the Arab Awakening* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 93.
[45] Jean-François Legrain, "Hamas," in *The Oxford History of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 94-95.
[46] Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 500.
[47] 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam was the *shaykh* who was killed at the beginning of the great Palestinian revolt of 1936.
[48] Ibid, 508.
[49] Ibid, 520.
[50] Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 65.
[51] Ibid, 762-763.

in the Indian Subcontinent region[52] and the Nur Movement established by Said Nursi in 1925, with its offshoot the Hizmet Movement of Turkey.[53] At least in their literature and rhetoric, these movements have a politically neutral stance and staunchly stay away from violence, even if their movements are persecuted. They focus on reawakening the spiritual conscience of their followers and direct their energy to the service of Islam and humanity. They view politics as a hindrance in achieving this fundamental objective.[54] Although rare, these examples illustrate that it is possible for Islamic movements to stay out of politics, and therefore violence, and remain a mass movement.

With the definition of the revivalist dilemma and analysis of the types of Islamic revivalist movements in mind, Nursi's theological revival method can now be examined in detail. Such critical exploration will produce two outcomes. First, it will show how difficult it is to deal with the revivalist dilemma while remaining on a high moral ground and resisting temptation for armed struggle even in self-defence. Second, it will enable an understanding of Nursi's original theological approach to Islamic revivalism and how this has produced an original and fresh expression of Islamic theology.

2.3   Old Said: Egressing as a Saintly Scholar

Said Nursi divided his life into two distinct phases[55] – Old Said (1876-1920) and New Said (1920-1960).[56] According to him, Old Said was young, courageous and famous, involved in society and was politically active. Whereas New Said was older

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[52] Ibid, 736.
[53] Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 179.
[54] Özalp, *Islam between Tradition and Modernity*, 214.
[55] Usually the phase of Third Said is added to these two phases (Vahide and Abu-Rabiʿ, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 305-368). Although this period marks a greater freedom and public involvement, Nursi's essential methodology remains unchanged.
[56] Vahide and Abu-Rabiʿ, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, v.

and wiser, more spiritual and reserved, and preferred seclusion instead of public life and acclaim.[57] Biographer Şükran Vahide adds a third period (1950-1960) during which Nursi had limited involvement in politics.[58] Zeki Saritoprak notes this was "at least at the level of voting,"[59] while Mustafa Akyol argues that Nursi's limited involvement in politics did not go beyond his support for democracy introduced to Turkey in 1950.[60] It is safe to assume that Old Said's success as a scholar and disappointment as a social and political activist were preparation for his later life as New Said when his theological approach to Islamic revivalism crystallised. The reputation he earned as an exceptional Muslim scholar, a national hero and a saintly master has been the foundation on which he began his launch of Islamic revival not only in Turkey but for the entire Muslim world.

The pedigree of a Muslim scholar is immensely important. Khaled Abou El Fadl notes that Muslims generally look for proof of knowledge and better than average, almost saintly, piety in their religious scholars and leaders before they put their trust in them and follow their teachings.[61] Sound knowledge and saintly piety sit concomitant to ensure that trusting Muslim masses are not intentionally deceived. Although El Fadl critiques them as insufficient to constitute the dynamics of scholarly inquiry,[62] they were not only important criteria people looked for in Nursi's era, but also they remain as standards Muslims expect from their scholars. Added to knowledge and piety, any family ties to previous great Muslim scholars or Prophet Muhammad would be a major plus. Hence, there is a need to examine the early life

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[57] Ibid, 163-167.
[58] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 305.
[59] Zeki Saritoprak, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," in *The Islamic World*, ed. Andrew Rippin (London: Ruthledge, 2008), 396.
[60] Mustafa Akyol, *Islam without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 213.
[61] Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2001), 59.
[62] Ibid.

of Nursi and look for such a pedigree as these considerations would make him a prime candidate as a revival leader. A second focus at this point is the intellectual, social and political circumstances in which Nursi began his activism in his early life. The period from 1900 to 1922 was turbulent in all considerations. As will be discussed, tumultuous events of the era coupled with his personal sense of calling, inspired in three key dreams, combined to inspire fervent religious activism in Nursi.

Nursi was born in 1876[63] to a peasant family in the village of Nurs, hence his surname Nursi. He was later known by various titles including Said-i Kurdi,[64] which led scholars to put his ethnicity as Kurdish. Nursi's ethnicity has been a source of debate in modern Turkey. Recent research conducted by historian Ahmet Akgunduz in Ottoman archives puts Nursi as a direct descendent of the Prophet Muhammad.[65] Akgunduz has produced archival records[66] putting Said Nursi, on his father Mirza's side, as a direct descendent of Prophet's first grandson Hasan through Abd al-Qadir Jilani (1077-1166)[67] and, on his mother Nuriye's side, as a direct descendent of Husain, the second grandson of the Prophet.[68] This makes Said Nursi ethnically Arab although he may have other ethnicities mixed in his family line over time. This is a significant finding and puts Nursi on a direct prophetic family lineage. This was

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[63] Some books give different dates for his birth date. The difference stems from the method of conversion of 1293 given on the Rumi calendar in use at the time in the Ottoman Empire.

[64] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 138.

[65] Ahmet Akgunduz, "Said Nursi Hz.Muhammed'in torunu çıktı," Internethaber, accessed December 21, 2012, http://www.internethaber.com/said-nursi-hz.muhammedin-torunu-cikti-487150h.htm.

[66] Those who are the descendants of the Prophet's grandson Hasan b. Ali (625-669) are given the title *sharif* and those who are the descendants of Prophet's grandson Husain b. Ali (626-681) are given the title *sayyid*. Ottomans appointed a junior-minister *Naqib al-Ashraf* with the duty of keeping records of the Prophet's descendants and ensuring that those on the record were exempt from military service and some taxes.

[67] Jilani is the founder the *Qadiri* Sufi order, the second of the two major Sufi orders after *Naqshibandi*.

[68] Ibid.

known by the people of eastern Anatolia who have called Nursi *Seyda*,[69] a title used in the region referring to people from the family of the Prophet.

Nursi began his education at the age of nine and from a very early age detested being dominated and displayed independence.[70] His early childhood education is characterised by arguments with fellow students and teachers over unfair institutional practices. Moving between various madrasas due to his independent nature, he did not study more than Arabic grammar and syntax for several years, retreating back to his village in Nurs after every setback.[71]

This pattern of withdrawal continued until one night, at the age of twelve, he saw Prophet Muhammad in a dream: It was the Day of Judgment and as the dead were being resurrected Nursi felt a desire to meet Prophet Muhammad. While wondering how he could do this, it occurred to him to go and sit by the bridge of *sirat*[72], for everyone had to pass over it. So he went and waited by the bridge and there he met and kissed the hands of all the prophets. Finally, Prophet Muhammad arrived. Nursi kissed his hands and pleaded for knowledge. The Prophet said: "Knowledge of the Qur'an will be granted to you on the condition you ask no questions to any of my community (*ummah*)."[73] This was a stipulation he would never violate later in life. This was the first of the three significant dreams geared to shape his life direction and his work on Islamic revival.

Excited and inspired by this dream, the first task for Nursi was to acquire knowledge despite his unsettled personality. The method to follow was to seek answers but

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[69] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 5.
[70] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 65.
[71] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 9.
[72] In Islamic eschatology *sirat* is believed to be the long bridge spanning over hell from the arena of judgement to paradise.
[73] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 9.

never to question people. It was in the small village of Dogubayazit where he met Sheikh Mehmed Jalili and dedicated himself to learning foundational religious sciences and texts studied in madrasas at the time.[74] Owing to his photographic memory and exceptional cognitive skills, Nursi quickly gained his diploma, memorising and learning classic texts in just three months what would normally take average students fifteen years to study.[75] Nursi was fourteen years old when he graduated as a child prodigy.[76] Serif Mardin questioned what this graduation equates to in terms of educational standard, buts adds that "in time he became extremely knowledgeable on religious matters, especially in hadith."[77] While the madrasa education system was the only one available to Nursi, he was frustrated by its slow pace and narrow curriculum.

After graduation, Nursi travelled and spent time with local scholars. Biographers note young Nursi's gifted abilities attracted other scholars' attention and jealousy alike as his growing popularity among ordinary people became noticeable.[78] Nursi answered all questions presented to him by the scholars, defeated his opponents in religious debates (*munāzarāt*), and established himself as a scholar of a high standing at a very young age. It was due to his remarkable intelligence and knowledge that he was given the title 'Bediuzzaman' meaning 'wonder of the age' by the famous scholar of the region Molla Fethullah Efendi as he found him resembling Bediuzzaman Hamadānī (968-1008) in intellect.[79] Although there is some tendency to hyperbole in Islamic biographical writings, when many exceptional episodes in

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[74] Ramazan Balcı, *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: Wonder of the Age* (Clifton, N.J.: Tughra Books, 2011), 12.
[75] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 10.
[76] Balcı, *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi,* 14.
[77] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 69.
[78] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 12.
[79] Ibid, 13.

relation to Nursi are considered together, it is quite plausible to think that he started influencing people around him at a very early age.

Nursi's scholarly debates continued in various towns and subsequently in the city of Mardin.[80] In Mardin, Nursi gained a glimpse of broader issues confronting the Muslim world when he encountered two passing travellers, one of whom was influenced with the ideas of influential nineteenth century reformer Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838-1898)[81] and the other was a member of the Sanūsī Sufi order[82] – which provided a religious framework for the formation of a modern nation state in North Africa.[83] Al-Afghānī was promoting unity under the flag of Islam to energise the masses and Muslim rulers in order to counter colonial forces.[84] Nursi, in his defence speech[85] of 1909, mentions al-Afghānī and Muhammad 'Abduh as his predecessors on the idea of Islamic Unity.[86] Vahide contends that encounter with al-Afghānī's follower was an important trigger for Nursi to be aware of issues related to European imperialism and colonisation, and ideas of Islamic unity or pan-Islamism.[87] Vahide adds that the Islamic Unity concept Nursi proposed was not a political unity but a building of unified consciousness for progress.[88] Serif Mardin notes a point of departure between al-Afghānī and Nursi, Nursi has abandoned the "instrumental stance he had assumed at the beginning." In any case, the encounter in the city of

[80] Balcı, *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, 23.
[81] For more on Jamal ad-Din Afghani, see 'Abd al-Ḥakīm Ṭabībī's *The Political Struggle of Sayid Jamal ad-Din Afghani.*
[82] The Sanusi order struggled against colonisation in Africa in the nineteenth century. For more on the history and significance of the Sunusi order, see E. E. Evans-Pritchard's *The Place of the Sanusiya Order in the History of Islam.*
[83] Colin Turner and Hasan Horkuc, *Said Nursi* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009),10.
[84] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 74.
[85] This defence speech was given at the military hearing of the March 31st Incident that will be explained further in this chapter.
[86] Cited in Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 22.
[87] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 22.
[88] Ibid.

Mardin was a significant step for Nursi to be aware of a world outside of his native eastern Anatolia.

Nursi's mention of al-Afghānī and 'Abduh shows he was at the very least aware of their activism, but there is no premise to suggest he was significantly influenced by their ideas. This is despite the fact that al-Afghāni had a wide influence in Muslim heartlands.[89] 'Abduh, the prime pupil of al-Afghāni, and 'Abduh's student Rashīd Ridā (1865-1935) were to follow a different trajectory for pre-WWI Islamic revivalism compared to Nursi. Esposito suggests the central theme in their reform proposal was opening the gate of *ijtihād*.[90] Hashim Kamali agrees and says, for 'Abduh and Ridā, the solution to the problem of the Muslim world lay in new *ijtihād*.[91] For them, society changed rapidly introducing new problems and issues to deal with which were not in the older legal books. Further, the cultural and social setting also changed, requiring revisiting the legal solutions of older times.[92] In polar contrast, Nursi argued this was not the time for opening the gate of *ijtihad*, putting aside any hope of achieving positive reform, and an attempt at new *ijtihad* would bring a flood of destruction under harsh circumstances.[93] As the subsequent discussion will show, Nursi proposed an educational solution to the deeper problems of ignorance plaguing Muslim societies in the late stages of the Ottoman Empire.

In 1892, Nursi was expelled under armed guard from the city of Mardin on account of his spreading disruptive ideas relating to constitutionalism and freedom.[94] On his journey he asked the guards to unlock his handcuffs in order to have ablution and

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[89] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 75.
[90] Esposito, *Islam*, 129. *Ijtihad* is the endeavour to provide solutions to ethical and legal problem by the independent interpretation of Islamic texts, the Qur'an and Sunnah.
[91] Kamali, Mohammad Hashim, *An Introduction to Sharī'ah* (Selangor, Malaysia: Ilmiah Publishers, 2006), 171.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Said Nursi, *Sözler* (Istanbul: Söz Basim Yayin, 2003), 646.
[94] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 23.

pray. When they refused, as the news spread, the locks opened miraculously and Nursi performed his obligatory prayers. The guards became his students.[95] This incident was seen as wonder-working (*karāma*),[96] quickly spread among people and earned Nursi a reputation as a Muslim saint.[97] Şerif Mardin affirms it was the saintly reputation that became a key part in Nursi's popularity later in life.[98] Oral culture and quick transmission of news among tribes helped spread his reputation. *Karāma* narrative played a significant role at this juncture.

It was on account of his reputation for extraordinary knowledge and now saintly piety that, in Bitlis and subsequently in Van, Nursi received patronage with various governors in return for providing religious education to their children.[99] During his stay in Van, he continued to study Islamic disciplines and memorised additional classical texts to complete the total to 90 key Islamic texts committed to memory, all of which, as he claimed, ascended him to the "truths of the Qur'an."[100]

In Van, through discussions and debates with state officials, Nursi also became aware of the negative influences of Westernisation and secularisation on the educated upper classes and their blaming of the backwardness of the Ottoman Empire on Islam.[101] He also discovered that classical arguments put to refute the doubts of unbelievers were not sufficient for this new breed of modern intellectuals as they

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[95] Ibid.

[96] In Islamic theology, there is a distinction between a miracle attributed to a prophet of God (*mu'jiza*) and a miracle received by a saintly person (*karāma*). In the latter, the saintly person is given the extraordinary event as a blessing from God, whereas prophets would expect and demand miracles from God to support their office.

[97] The concept of a Muslim saint is different to the Catholic idea of sainthood. In Islamic tradition, there is no canonisation. It is a religious prestige that is acquired in a lifelong struggle of worship, piety and sincerity. See Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār's *Muslim Saints and Mystics*. Translation is available by A. J. Arberry.

[98] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 183.

[99] Balcı, *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, 29.

[100] Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 11.

[101] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 33.

seemed to argue through science rather than ignorance.[102] He realised he had to study science and philosophy, similar to al-Ghazālī in the twelfth century, to refute their arguments against faith and religion.[103] During his stay in the residence of Tahir Pasha, he took advantage of the extensive library available to him and broadened his knowledge of disciplines including history, geography, mathematics, geology, physics, chemistry, astronomy and philosophy.[104] Nursi's experience in Van and exposure to science crystallised his thinking that students should be enlightened "by demonstrating the truths of religion in the manner most appropriate to the understanding of that century"[105] – a pivotal approach he would subsequently follow in his theological revival activism.

Dazzled by the scientific, industrial, and military success of Europe, a significant and influential segment in the Ottoman intellectual echelon was increasingly sidelining Islam and blaming it for the decline of the Muslim world.[106] Influential figures such as Baha Tevfik (1881-1916), Tevfik Fikret (1867-1915), Süleyman Sırrı (1874-1925), Abdullah Cevdet (1869-1931) and many other Young Turks[107] were influenced by social Darwinism and positivism[108] and considered Islam as an impediment for social, intellectual and political progress.[109] Baha Tevfik imported the scientific materialism of Ludwig Büchner (1824-1899) to the intellectual circles

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[102] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 76-77.
[103] Ibid, 77.
[104] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 28.
[105] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 77.
[106] M. Sukru Hanioglu, "Blueprints for a Future Society: Late Ottoman Materialists on Science, Religion and Art," in *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy*, ed. Elizabeth Ozdalga, (London: RuthledgeCurzon, 2005), 28.
[107] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 141-142.
[108] M. Sukru Hanioglu, "Young Turks," in *Encyclopaedia of the Ottoman Empire*, eds. Gabor Agoston and Bruce Masters (New York: Fact on File, 2009), 606.
[109] Gencay Şaylan, *İslâmiyet ve Siyaset: Türkiye Örneği* [Islam and Politics: Turkey Example] (Ankara: V Yayınları, 1987), 44.

of Istanbul.[110] Tevfik Fikret would go further and blasphemously declare the Qur'an as an "antiquated book" with its pages akin to "cemeteries of ideas."[111] In their view, the solution was to abandon Islam and embrace Europe and its progressive civilisation. The intellectual and civilisational gravity of Europe was so strong that journalist Hüseyin Cahit (1875-1957) noted the inescapable civilisational event-horizon when he wrote in 1898, "We are bound, whether we like it or not, to Europeanise."[112] In a similar tone, the Western view that science and religion are inherently in conflict was imported to the intellectual coffee table discussions of late Ottoman Istanbul.[113]

Nursi argued the opposite: the decline of the Muslim world was because principles of Islam were already abandoned in the lives of individuals and society, and they had to be brought back. Further, there was no inherent incompatibility between science and religion.[114] The problem was that scientific knowledge and religious sciences were independently studied in separate institutions. So, unless people were educated in both religious and modern sciences, they were destined to oscillate between religious bigotry and arrogant atheism, and never attain the required wisdom.[115] Nursi proposed an educational reform that would combine modern and religious sciences with the view that both would reinforce one another and provide Muslims with the conditioning to reverse the decline of the Ottoman Empire.[116] Nursi wrote:

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[110] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 142.
[111] Ismail Kara, "Turban and Fez: Ulema as Opposition," in *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy,* ed. Elizabeth Ozdalga (London: RuthledgeCurzon, 2005), 179.
[112] Ussama Makdisi, "Ottoman Orientalism," *The American Historical Review* 107.3 (2002): 768-98.
[113] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 10. This influence was not confined to Istanbul but repeated just about all major centres in the Muslim world.
[114] Şerif Mardin, "Reflections on Said Nursi's Life and Thought," in *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabiʿ (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 46.
[115] Vahide and Abu-Rabiʿ, *Intellectual Biography*, 48.
[116] Ibid, 29.

> The religious sciences are the light of the conscience and the modern sciences are the light of the reason; the truth becomes manifest through the combining of the two. The students' endeavour will take flight on these two wings. When they are separated it gives rise to bigotry in the one, and wiles and scepticism in the other.[117]

The first institution that would implement these reforms was Nursi's proposed Islamic university, *Medresetü'z-Zehra*, to be situated strategically in eastern Anatolia (near the city of Van) where Turkish, Arab, Kurdish and Persian populations intersected.[118] In his vision, this university would rival al-Azhar University in reputation and influence, and serve the world of Islam.[119]

Just about this time, Nursi saw the second key dream[120] that was to shape his direction. He saw in the dream Mount Ararat exploding and rocks scattering to every corner of the world. An "important person" commanded him to proclaim the miraculousness of the Qur'an to the world.[121] He interpreted the dream to mean a cataclysmic event would occur and the protective walls around the Qur'an would collapse to expose the truths of the Qur'an to assault and he would be given the duty and responsibility to protect these truths, even though he was not worthy of it.[122] Shortly after the dream, Tahir Pasha showed Nursi a newspaper article that reported a speech delivered by William Gladstone, the British Secretary for Colonies, at the House of Commons. Gladstone reportedly said, "so long as the Muslims have the Qur'an we shall be unable to dominate them. We must either take it from them or make them lose their love of it."[123] Vahide notes that Nursi vowed resolutely, "I will prove and demonstrate to the world that the Qur'an is an undying, inextinguishable

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[117] Cited in Markham and Pirim, *An Introduction to Said Nursi*, 10.
[118] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 30.
[119] Saritoprak, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," 397.
[120] As noted in the previous chapter, such dreams play an important role in Islamic culture. These are understood as realities and signposts for future projects.
[121] Balcı, *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, 32.
[122] Ibid, 33.
[123] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 31.

sun!"[124] Nursi later remarked that this event caused a major shift in his thought, making him realise that all his learning and experience prepared him to "understand the Qur'an and prove its truths."[125]

One way to do this was to embark on a journey to Istanbul to see the Ottoman Sultan in order to gain official support and funding for his proposed university, *Medresetü'z-Zehra*, and a series of reform proposals.[126] His observations in Istanbul confirmed his earlier thoughts. Istanbul had two types of educational institutions: missionary schools and secular state schools under government mandated reforms focusing on European languages and modern sciences on one hand; and madrasas delivering religious education with a narrow curriculum designed to fulfil traditional religious and legal roles on the other.[127] This solidified his resolve to eliminate the duality in education as this was producing a population with diametrically opposing worldviews, socially fragmenting an already politically and ethnically polarised society.

Following the military coup organised by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) against Caliph Abdulhamid in 1908, 31-year-old Nursi delivered his 'Address of Freedom' in Istanbul and Salonika, calling for constitutionalism and freedom.[128] Subsequently, Nursi became very active in political and social life, addressing gatherings, publishing numerous articles and delivering speeches. He also became an active member of various religious societies, including the Society of Muhammad whose members, including Nursi, were accused of inciting a counter CUP revolt

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[124] Ibid.
[125] Said Nursi, *Sikke-i Tasdîk-ı Gaybî* (Istanbul: Söz Basım Yayın, 2005), 76.
[126] Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 13.
[127] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 35-36.
[128] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 82.

known as the 'March 31st Incident'.[129] Surprisingly, Nursi was acquitted after his defiant defence speech and on account of his attempts at quelling the revolt.[130]

Unable to find support for his project in Istanbul, Said travelled throughout the eastern provinces explaining that the principles underlying constitutionalism and freedom were not contrary to the teachings of Islam.[131] The questions that were put to him were collated and published in two volumes: *Muḥākamāt* (The Analyses/ Reasoning) and *Munāẓarāt* (The Dialogues/Discussions), published in 1911 and 1913 respectively.[132] The *Muḥākamat* is an important original work outlining the principles of Qur'anic exegesis.[133] Just like Muhammad 'Abduh before him, Nursi saw a need to reinterpret the entire Qur'an; however, unlike 'Abduh, he wanted to prove the "truths of belief" by a blended method of science and religion that would address the needs and thinking of modern humans.[134] His plan was to write 60 volumes of Qur'anic exegesis.[135]

In 1911, Said visited Damascus where he was asked to deliver a Friday sermon at the famous Umayyad Mosque to a congregation of more than 10,000 people and close to 100 scholars.[136] In this sermon, Said diagnosed despair as the greatest ailment of Muslims and discussed in detail the imminent rise of Islam.[137] He identified ignorance, poverty, and political and social fragmentation as the enemies of Islam and three root causes for the decline of the Islamic civilisation.[138] In addition, he had identified six dire sicknesses in the Muslim community. First, the rise of despair and

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[129] Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 15.
[130] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 80.
[131] Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 15.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 92.
[134] Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 18.
[135] Saritoprak, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," 399.
[136] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 94.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 87.

hopelessness in social life; second, the death of truthfulness in social and political life; third, love of enmity; fourth, not knowing the luminous bonds that bind the believers to one another; fifth, despotism, which spreads like contagious diseases; and sixth, restricting work and endeavour to only what is personally beneficial.[139] The cures for these diseases were "taken from the pharmacy of the Qur'an."[140] Explaining each in detail he offered hope, solidarity, honesty, mutual love, brotherhood and Islamic unity achieved through the principle of consultation. He believed Muslims have hope because Islam has the capacity to progress in material and non-material areas at the same time. He reminded the audience that Muslims are students of proof, and therefore belief should be approached through reason and conviction over blind faith.[141] Nursi's diagnosis and prognosis at this sermon was published immediately as the Damascus Sermon.[142] This sermon showed Said's fame and reputation in the Arab world in addition to Ottoman heartlands.

Following the Damascus trip, an opportunity came up to achieve his dream of establishing a model institution of higher learning. When Sultan and Caliph Mehmed Rashad (1844-1918) set out on his journey to Balkans, Said was invited along with representatives of the eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire.[143] During this journey, he persuaded the caliph to approve his university project and was granted large sum of money.[144]

Unfortunately for Nursi, WWI broke out as the foundations of the university were being laid.[145] He became an adjunct lieutenant colonel of a volunteer force[146] on the

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[139] Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, cited in Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 16.
[140] Cited in Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 16.
[141] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 95-99.
[142] Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 15.
[143] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 101.
[144] Ibid, 102.
[145] Ibid.

eastern front composed of four to five thousand men, mostly volunteers and his students.[147] As the war with the Russians continued, Nursi started to write his Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) work. He could only, however, manage to write exegesis of the first short chapter and up to the sixteenth verse of the second chapter.[148] This work was to be printed after the war as a volume, *ishārāt al-ījāz* (The Signs of Miraculousness). During the defence of the city Bitlis, Said Nursi was wounded, captured by the Russian army, and taken to a war camp in Kostroma about 300km north-east of Moscow.[149]

Up until this point in his life, Nursi had been involved in religious, social and political activism to effect change in the late Ottoman society building on his reputation as a saintly scholar linked to the lineage of Prophet Muhammad with exceptional knowledge and personal piety. His analysis of the circumstances of the Muslim world and the problems it faced resulted in an educational reform solution where science and religion would be taught in tandem. This was rather a unique solution to ones advocated by reformers like 'Abduh and Ridā. Events rapidly unfolded as the Ottoman Empire collapsed to give birth to a European nation in the form of a new secular Turkish Republic, just as Nursi famously predicted in 1908,[150] and it marked a new turning point for him.

2.4   Transition from Old Said to New Said

Said's reflections as a prisoner of war and the Ottoman Empire's loss in WWI were pivotal for him to examine everything about his life, the state of the Muslim world, and what has to be done to change its seemingly irreversible decline. This was a

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[146] Saritoprak, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," 397.
[147] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 109.
[148] Saritoprak, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," 399.
[149] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 125.
[150] Ibid, 42.

defining moment for him and many other Muslim revivalist leaders of the era. Almost all modern Islamic revivalist movements influential in Muslim world today emerged at this time, especially after the abolishment of the caliphate in 1924. Between 1917 and 1925, Said underwent a spiritual transformation and crystallised his method of theological revival of Islam instead of a political vision and solution.

Nursi began his spiritual transformation while in the war camp in Kostroma. He received permission to attend a small mosque on the banks of River Volga.[151] As he narrated in *Flashes* later,[152] one night at the mosque he experienced the inevitability of his mortality and intense feelings of powerlessness and weakness. He said the experiences and sense of loss of WWI made him feel as old as 80 even though he was only 40 years old.[153] He makes a resolution that for the rest of his life he will stay out of social and political life, and prefer a life of spiritual solitude in a cave. Sometime after this resolution, taking advantage of the 1917 Communist Revolution in Russia, Nursi escaped and travelled alone through Eastern Europe to Germany and from there to Istanbul.[154]

He was received in Istanbul as a war hero. Enver Pasha (1881-1922), the Minister of War and one of the leaders of the Young Turks movement, appointed Nursi to work as an Islamic expert at the highest religious institution in the Ottoman Empire, *Dār al-Hikma al-Islāmiyya* (Islamic House of Wisdom),[155] which was charged with the provision of solutions to legal, ethical and theological problems of the Muslim world.[156] Nursi reluctantly took up the position.[157] Enver Pasha also published the

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[151] Ibid, 128.
[152] Said Nursi, *Lemālar* (Flashes) (Istanbul: Soz Basim Yayin, 2003), 299-301.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Vahide and Abu-Rabiʻ, *Intellectual Biography*, 131.
[155] Saritoprak, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," 398.
[156] Markham, *An Introduction to Said Nursi*, 13.
[157] Vahide and Abu-Rabiʻ, *Intellectual Biography*, 142

first volume of Said's Qur'anic commentary, *ishārāt al-ījāz*, written during WWI.[158] Said's scholarly contributions continued with the books *Sunuhāt* (Thoughts, 1920), *Hakikat Çekirdekleri* (Flowers of Truths, 1920), *Nokta* (Point, 1921), *Rumuz* (Indication, 1922), and *Ishārāt* (Signs, 1923). These works critically analysed reasons for the Ottoman loss and the failure of Young Turks to integrate Islam in their policies.[159]

This was a time of soul searching for the entire Muslim world and people demanded answers. At this pivotal time, Nursi saw the third key dream that gave him a sense of responsibility in facing the current challenge. In the dream, he was summoned to a great council made up of representatives of leading figures of Islam from each century. He is asked to take a seat as the "representative of the century of destruction."[160] He is questioned on the reasons why the Ottoman Empire lost WWI and what was to happen now. Interestingly, Nursi gives positive explanations for the defeat and does a critique of capitalism and imperialism, and exhorts the superiority of Qur'anic values and principles under the nods of approval from the council members.[161] An expert on Nursi's work Abdullah Aymaz in his commentary to *Sunuhāt* asserts the expression "representative of the century of destruction" is an indication that Nursi is the *Mujaddid* (Renewer) for the twentieth century.[162] This contention is important as Nursi's followers have accepted him as the Renewer of Islam and the Muslim world in the twentieth century.[163] Vahide maintains there were independent scholars – she gives three prominent examples – who conceded that

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[158] Ibid, 132.
[159] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 89.
[160] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 157.
[161] Ibid.
[162] Said Nursi and Abdullah Aymaz, *Sünuhat: Metin, Sadeleştirme ve Açıklama* [Sünuhat: Text, Simplification and Commentary] (Istanbul: Şahdamar Yayınları, 2006), 67.
[163] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 236.

Nursi was the *Mujaddid* of the twentieth century after they marvelled his works and acknowledged the sacrificial struggle he led in the name of Islam in the post-1925 period.[164]

With the final collapse of the Ottoman Empire and occupation of Istanbul, the very seat of the caliphate, almost the entire Muslim world was either colonised or under occupation of seven European powers – Britain, Russia, France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands or Italy.[165] Only some parts of Anatolia, Turkey, and mountainous areas of Afghanistan were spared from colonial forces. Iran was not colonised but caught between the competing interests of Russia and Britain, and eventually was carved into their northern and southern mandate respectively.[166] The impact of European colonisation on the Muslim world cannot be overstated. The entire Islamic civilisation, with its geography, social and political relations, educational, economic and cultural institutions, were permanently altered under colonial forces.[167]

However, there was a greater calamity that attacked the very core of religion. Materialistic and positivistic philosophy and its challenging assertions about faith were now threatening Islam after they delivered a devastating blow to Christianity in Europe.[168] Charles Lyell's (1797-1875) discovery of the geological age of the earth as billions of years old exposed the falsity of the traditional 7000-year-old explanation pervasive in the churches.[169] Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) theory of evolution explained the origins and forms of biological life on earth.[170] Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) extended the evolutionary concepts of natural selection to

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[164] Ibid, 236-237.
[165] Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 549.
[166] Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 114.
[167] Esposito, *Contemporary Islam*, 645.
[168] Ian S. Markham, *Engaging with Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: A Model of Interfaith Dialogue* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 95-96.
[169] Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 234.
[170] Anthony Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010), 774.

social life and society,[171] while Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) maintained that religion was an "illusion" in a sense that it was a product of human wishes.[172] Freud also tied human behaviour to sexual impulses.[173] The rather ironic proclamation of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) that "God is dead" was taken literally and accepted as fact by intellectuals.[174] In the West, everything was now explained by science and nothing was deemed to be beyond its explanatory power.[175] As discussed earlier, materialistic thought and positivistic philosophy, and the resultant religious indifference, spread to the upper echelon of Muslim intellectuals and bureaucracy. The cream of the Muslim intellectual class and its elite were in a state of cognitive dissidence of being infatuated with European success and the humiliation of military defeats delivered under the crushing military might of the same Europe.

In this historic backdrop and dramatic intellectual conditions, the inner transformation of Nursi, already commenced in Kostroma, continued during his stay in Istanbul under British occupation. Nursi's inner struggles would take him to places of solitude in the high hills of Bosphorous in search of a spiritual remedy for himself and the Muslim world.[176] Vahide suggests that Nursi's transformation occurred in three stages: first, he realised the deficiency of philosophy and reason alone in attaining enlightenment; second, he overcame the limiting forces of the ego; and third, he understood that he should take the Qur'an as his sole master.[177] My analysis shows he first undergoes self-transformation through a process of self-criticism.

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[171] Özalp, *Islam between Tradition and Modernity*, xx.
[172] Kenny, *Western Philosophy*, 993.
[173] Ibid, 812.
[174] Armstrong, *The Case for God*, 246.
[175] Özalp, *Islam between Tradition and Modernity*, xx.
[176] Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 23.
[177] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 166.

Second, he looks for a way to address the spiritual and intellectual challenge facing Muslims at the time; and third, he resolves to follow a Qur'anic theological method.

The first phase was triggered when he was in a state of reflection in solitude on a hilltop and working intermittently as a member of the *Dār al-Hikma al-Islāmiyya* where he was expected to find solutions to the debilitating problems facing the Muslim world. Nursi fortuitously came across 'Abd al-Qadir Jilānī's *Futuh al-Ghayb* (Opening the Unseen) and started to read it.[178] He was struck by the introductory line *anta fī dār al-hikma fa utlub tabība yudāwī qalbak* (You are in *dār al-hikma*,[179] so search for a doctor to cure your heart).[180] Nursi later wrote in *Lemālar* (Flashes) that he took these words as more than coincidence and assumed they addressed him directly. He felt he was more diseased spiritually inside than the world outside he desperately tried to fix.[181] He added that reading the book was extremely painful for his pride and he had to stop half-way through it.[182] When the initial wounds healed, he fully read the book. Nursi remarked that Jilani performed a spiritual operation on him, curing him of his inner spiritual diseases.[183]

In the second phase, having somewhat cured his spiritual crisis, Nursi turned his attention to the pertinent way to reach *haqīqa* (reality) not just for himself but for all Muslims in the modern era.[184] Put differently, he was looking for the shortest way to

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[178] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 165.
[179] Here *dār al-hikma* refers to earth as the abode of wisdom. Jilani means the world as the place where God is hidden behind the veils of wisdom.
[180] Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 24.
[181] Nursi, Lemalar, 418-419.
[182] Ibid.
[183] Ibid.
[184] Cited in Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 167.

facilitate conviction in faith and a thorough understanding of Islam that could stand firm against intellectual currents and ideologies.[185]

He first turned to philosophy. While previously he thought philosophy and sciences could be an instrument of spiritual enlightenment and spiritual progress, and therefore strengthen Islam, he now discovered that "their spiritually conducive benefits were few and harms were many."[186] In his view, philosophy darkened his mind and muddied his soul, and only a flash of light emerging from the sun of *lā ilāha illallah* (there is no god but Allah) illuminated his inner world and cleared away the obstacles to spiritual enlightenment.[187] Importantly, Nursi contended that philosophy was for the elite, not for the ordinary people. Even the geniuses could only go half-way in the discovery of truth by reason alone.[188] Nursi was not necessarily against reason, as will be discussed in the next chapter, rather he thought philosophy could not help ordinary Muslim masses.

He next turned to Sufism and reviewed it in detail. Although it was a "luminous way," in Nursi's assessment, it required great caution and only very few and the elite could go all the way.[189] He reasoned that a person cannot enter paradise without belief, but many have achieved salvation without Sufism, after all "man cannot live without bread but he can live without fruit. Sufism is the fruit, truths of Islam the basic sustenance."[190] To further drive home his point, Nursi claimed that cultivating a revival of belief was the most important duty. Even if the great Sufi masters of the past, ʿAbd al-Qadir Jilānī, Baha al-Dīn Naqshband or Ahmad Sirhindīī, were alive

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[185] Ibid.
[186] Ibid, 164.
[187] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 92.
[188] Nursi, *Sözler*, 24th Word, 3rd Branch, 452.
[189] Cited in Vahide and Abu-Rabiʿ, *Intellectual Biography*, 167.
[190] Nursi, *Mektubat*, 56.

today they would exert all their effort to "strengthening the truths of belief."[191] The implication of this contention is that, in Nursi's view, these great Sufi masters would not practice and promote Sufism but rather work to revive faith (theological revival) as a necessity of the era. Vahide notes that Nursi never joined a Sufi order or formally followed a specific Sufi master.[192] Mardin argues that rather than Sufism "unicity of God" formed the centrality in Nursi's thought at this time and later became a guiding principle in his Islamic revivalism.[193]

So, if philosophy (reason alone) and Sufism (heart alone) cannot help most people, what will? While pondering this question, Nursi came across a letter in the *Mektūbāt* (The Letters) of Ahmad Sirhindī.[194] The letter begins with the address, "Letter to Mirza Bediuzzaman." Nursi is astonished for his father's name is Mirza and his epithet is Bediuzzaman. The letter insisted to "take only one *qiblah* (direction)," that is, only one teacher.[195] Once again Nursi took the advice as if directed to himself and sought someone to follow.[196] He said, after long search and inability to find a perfect guide, he realised all great reformers and scholars received inspiration directly from the Qur'an, so if he followed only the Qur'an he would find the "source of all rivers."[197] Nursi concluded, "So I sought help from the Qur'an, and praise be to God, the *Risale-i Nur* was bestowed on me, which is a safe, short way inspired by the Qur'an for the believers of the present time."[198] This is a strong indication that Nursi thought none of the scholars or major figures of the past provided a complete solution to the challenge facing his era. Since, in his view, the *Risale-i Nur* as an

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[191] Ibid.
[192] Vahide and Abu-Rabiʻ, *Intellectual Biography*, 5.
[193] Mardin, Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey, 93-94.
[194] Ibid, 165.
[195] Saritoprak, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," 399.
[196] Ibid, 166.
[197] Ibid.
[198] Cited in Vahide and Abu-Rabiʻ, *Intellectual Biography*, 167.

inspiration from the Qur'an has met the spiritual need and challenge of the time, and since the *Risale-i Nur* is largely a theological work, the solution Nursi proposed and implemented was a theological revival approach.

This completed the third and final stage of Nursi's enlightenment and transformation in becoming the New Said. He was spiritually cured; he discovered the futility of philosophy and shortcomings of Sufism in helping the greatest numbers of people attaining salvation; and the Qur'an and its theological *haqīqāt* (truths) were the only way to follow to bring people out of the spiritual and intellectual furrow they were in.

Vahide maintains the new way discovered by the New Said constituted access to the "essence of reality" by the adjuvant use of the mind and heart, and illuminated by the Qur'an. Mardin argues that the hallmark of the New Said was that he appealed directly to the faith of the people rather than working through political structures like the Old Said had done.[199] So, perhaps unintentionally, Nursi applied the utilitarian principle of 'happiness for the greatest number of people' to theology as 'access to conviction in faith and salvation for the greatest number of people.' Since philosophy and Sufism were elitist by their nature, only an approach synthesising both reason and faith (for Nursi, the Qur'anic approach) could provide the greatest spiritual and intellectual benefit for most people.

As Nursi endured his spiritual and intellectual transformation, the Turkish nation was also fighting its war of independence under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal (1881-1938) that would ultimately transform the frail Ottoman Empire into the new Turkish Republic. In 1922, Mustafa Kemal personally invited Nursi to Ankara, the new

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[199] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 88.

capital, to join the independence movement. On arrival, Nursi quickly realised the new leadership had no interest in Islam, they were lax in their religious practices, and there was an undercurrent of materialistic and positivistic ideologies.[200]

In response, Nursi released a persuasive article addressing the members of parliament urging them to be firm on their daily prayers as the leaders of the nation and protectors of the caliphate. As a result, more members started to pray, forcing the enlargement of the parliament prayer room. Furious at this development, Mustafa Kemal confronted Nursi in the presence of other members, "Hoja Hoja! We called you here in order to benefit from your elevated ideas, but you come here and immediately started writing things about the prayers and have caused differences amongst us."[201] Nursi retorted "Pasha, Pasha! After belief, the most elevated truth in Islam is the obligatory prayers (*salat*). Those who do not perform the prayers are traitors and the opinions of the traitors are to be rejected."[202] After this confrontation, Nursi decided to leave Ankara even though Mustafa Kemal later apologised and offered him a high profile government post of the religious head of the eastern provinces, a high salary, a mansion and a seat in parliament.[203] However, it was clear Mustafa Kemal and Nursi were on different wavelengths and it would be impossible for them to work together. Vahide contends that change in Nursi and his inner resolutions were the main contributors to him leaving Ankara.[204] Nursi later explained:

> So, I was compelled to leave those most important posts. Saying that nothing can be gained from working with or responding to those people, I abandoned

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[200] Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 21.
[201] Vahide and Abu-Rabiʻ, *Intellectual Biography*, 171.
[202] Ibid.
[203] Ibid, 172.
[204] Ibid.

the world and politics and social life and spent all my time on the way of saving belief (of people).[205]

Significantly, this illustrates that Nursi genuinely did not want to engage in politics or social life; rather, he resolved to devote himself to an ascetic life and engage only in theology for the purpose of providing answers to the doubts and questions of ordinary Muslims on matters of faith. He had already begun this in Ankara by publishing *Zaylu l-Zayl* (Addendum to Addendum) and *Hubab* (Seeds), works in Arabic that provided responses to atheism.[206]

Having refused Mustafa Kemal's offer, Said went back to the eastern city of Van where he stayed for two years, residing in Nurşin Mosque.[207] In the summer months, he would seclude himself on the mountain slopes of Mount Erek, where he would reflect and contemplate rather than write or teach.[208] In his Friday sermons, he would focus on the fundamentals of belief, rather than social or political developments, according to Turner and Horkuc, signalling the clear change in his approach of staying out of social and political life.[209]

Meanwhile in Ankara, Mustafa Kemal was implementing his secular agenda. He started with the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. He abolished the Ottoman monarchy and became the first president of Turkey.[210] A more religiously significant move was the termination of the caliphate in 1924,[211] an unprecedented move in the long history of the Muslim world. A suite of sweeping reforms covering all aspects of life followed the change in political regime. The alphabet was changed

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[205] Cited in Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 172.
[206] Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 21.
[207] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 177.
[208] Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 21.
[209] Ibid, 22.
[210] Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 180.
[211] Ibid, 181.

from Arabic to Roman characters.[212] The comprehensive adoption of Swiss law replaced Islamic law and swept aside Islamic jurisprudence.[213] Covering the hair for women and traditional clothing for men were outlawed in state departments and government schools.[214] Religious education in madrasas was banned; Sufi orders and lodges were closed.[215] The degree of change and extent of the transformation were so far-reaching that even the wearing of a European hat was made compulsory by law in 1927 and, in 1932,[216] the Arabic call to prayer in mosques was replaced by a Turkish rendition.[217] Cinemas, theatres, and Western-style music and dance parties were organised and encouraged by the state with the aim of modernising the lifestyle of the people.[218] Interestingly, Mustafa Kemal's secular program or reforms included the establishment of the Department of Religious Affairs (*Diyānet*), most likely to control mosques and regulate their affairs.[219] This department still exists today and reports to the government.

Mustafa Kemal, now with the surname Ataturk (Father of Turks), wanted to make Turkey a modern, Western, secular country so it could stand unashamed among the modern civilisations of Europe.[220] Although Ataturk's objective appeared to be sound, the implementation geared by the single party regime[221] was fast and aggressive. Any opposition to the Kemalist regime, religious activism and public displays of religiosity were labelled as reactionary (*irtija*) − an intent to take Turkey

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[212] Feroz Ahmad, "Turkey," in *The Oxford History of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), vol. 4, 242.
[213] Ibid.
[214] Ibid.
[215] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 96.
[216] Akyol, *Islam without Extremes*, 17.
[217] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 96.
[218] Ahmad, *Turkey*, 242.
[219] Ibid.
[220] Özalp, *Islam between Tradition and Modernity*, 281.
[221] The first opposition to Mustafa Kemal Ataturk emerged from the parliament. In 1925, a rival opposition party to Ataturk's *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (People's Republic Party – CHP) was closed and representatives with religious orientations were ejected from the parliament.

back to the Ottoman era.[222] As a consequence, the treatment of religion and lack of respect for religious values within an intensely religious society caused deep resentment.[223] Vahide emphasises that changing the alphabet, banning the Qur'anic script, closing the madrasas and prohibiting independent educational institutions made conditions for religious education almost impossible.[224] So, Nursi had to negotiate his way under these circumstances and find a way to educate people about Islam without establishing an educational institution.

In 1925, Nursi's non-political activism attained a clear non-violence struggle just before the Shaykh Said Piran[225] revolt broke out in eastern Turkey. On being invited to join this rebellion, Nursi declined, stating that military *jihad* is forbidden within the same society as it would cause anarchy. Civilised people should only be persuaded through an intellectual *jihad* rather than a violent use of force.[226] The rebellion was not only put down fiercely, influential tribal and religious leaders in eastern Turkey, including Nursi, irrespective of their involvement were exiled to remote parts of the country.[227] The scale of the displacement, although it appears to have been precautionary, illustrates the intolerance of the new secular regime to any form of political opposition, especially when it came with ethnic and religious overtones. For Nursi, unfair persecution by the secular government added another layer of difficulty to already harsh circumstances.

The eight years from 1917 to 1925 marked a significant turning point in Nursi's life. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and classic Islamic civilisation made him

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[222] Umut Azak, *Islam and Secularism in Turkey: Kemalism, Religion and the Nation State* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 21.
[223] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 202.
[224] Ibid.
[225] Sometimes Sheikh Said Piran is confused with Said Nursi. The name 'Said' was popular in the eastern provinces.
[226] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 67.
[227] Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 22.

question his deeply held beliefs and ideas as well as the paths to human enlightenment. He underwent a spiritual transformation and came to realise that neither philosophy nor Sufism could provide access to reality for most people. Any talk about a new *ijtihad* or legal interpretation was out of the question under the circumstances. The only path open to follow was a theological line. So, the ultimate solution for Nursi was to return to the Qur'an. It was to be a return not to a distant past, but to seek new inspiration from the Qur'an in order to save the faith of people. His encounter with the new Turkish leadership in Ankara towards the end of the war of independence solidified his conviction that the root problem facing the Muslim world was the deep penetration of atheistic assertions and materialistic ideologies. The solution, therefore, was a theological revival. Furthermore, the extreme secular policies of the new Turkish Republic made it extremely difficult to engage in any religious activism without the risk of arrest and persecution. So, the revivalist dilemma was felt the sharpest in new Turkey. Nursi's theological revival approach was perhaps the safest one could follow under such circumstances.

2.5   New Said: Facing the Revivalist Dilemma

The circumstances of the new Turkish Republic triggered a 25-year life in exile, house arrest and imprisonment for Nursi. This period constituted the most productive years in terms of Nursi's writings and religious influence. The challenges facing Nursi were enormous. On one hand, the Ottoman caliphate with all of its religious and educational institutions had collapsed, many religious leaders and scholars perished during WWI and the Turkish War of Independence, and the war-torn country and its largely ignorant population[228] needed rebuilding and spiritual solace. On the other, there was a government who was applying authoritarian secular

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[228] Vahide and Abu-Rabiʿ, *Intellectual Biography*, 202. The literacy rate in Turkey in 1927 was 9%.

policies and was determined not to go back to the Ottoman era where religion influenced society.[229] How does one negotiate their way through this maze of circumstances without being charged with treason and achieve outstanding results in the revival of Islam? This question is at the heart of the Islamic revivalist dilemma. Nursi addressed the revivalist dilemma by following his blueprint for Islamic revival by producing and disseminating extensive theological writings and managing to keep his followers out of politics and violent retaliation in the face of persecution.

Despite being deported to the south-west city of Burdur, now 48 years old, Nursi continued to teach and write. His early teachings were later compiled into a book entitled *Nur'un İlk Kapısı* (The First Door to Light).[230] Mardin contends that Nursi was embraced by the people of western Turkey for the saintly reputation he acquired in his early life.[231] He was transferred to Isparta in 1926 where he continued to attract students and large numbers of participants in his classes. Mardin adds that Isparta was a region where Islamic education concentrated during the Ottoman era, so the authorities inadvertently sent Nursi to a fertile ground for religious instruction.[232] Frustrated, the authorities decided to move him to a remote village of Barla with no road access and a handful of houses, where they were certain he would have no opportunity to recruit students and fade away over time.[233]

In the eight and a half years spent in Barla, Nursi began writing his *Risale-i Nur* treatises, answering hundreds of questions and providing arguments for the existence of God, miraculousness of the Qur'an, resurrection of the dead and the existence of afterlife among other theological subjects. The core of his theological writings,

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229 Akyol, *Islam without Extremes*, 36-37.
230 Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 197.
231 Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 6.
232 Ibid, 151.
233 Markham, *An Introduction to Said Nursi*, 15.

Sözler (The Words) and *Mektūbāt* (The Letters), was completed in this early exile period.[234] With these writings Nursi's audience was ordinary Muslims who had doubts about faith or those who had already lost their faith succumbing to the new positivistic education and secular way of life. These writings were written with a style that was easy for people to understand.[235] This marks a clear shift from his earlier works, such as *Muḥākamāt* and *Munāẓarāt*, where his language is far more detailed and sophisticated addressing the learned of the madrasa rather than the masses of ordinary Muslims. Nursi often used parables and analogies to bring abstract concepts closer to ordinary people's comprehension.

Reading of his texts reveals that his writings also combined rational proofs and arguments explaining the theological verses of the Qur'an interpreting empirical facts and observations from the natural world and cosmos, and relating them to the propositions of faith. In his method, he did not outline in detail the opposing views, nor did he preach, preferring to speak directly to his own soul.[236] In one instance, when a group of students complained to Nursi about the lack of their teachers' teaching them about God, he retorted, "don't listen to your teachers, listen to the sciences they teach, they tell you all about God" and then proceeded to show how this could be done.[237] This advice to students is significant as it shows the natural theology of Nursi and how he sees no difference between science and religion, reason or faith. In doing so, as Mardin explains, Nursi wanted to provide "the widest

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[234] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 197-200.
[235] As the Turkish language has evolved since Nursi's era, his writings are difficult to understand to the point that contemporary Turkish readers need a dictionary to understand them.
[236] Saritoprak, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," 400.
[237] Said Nursi, *Şuālar* (Rays) (Istanbul: Soz Basim Yayin, 2004), 272.

access to the correct methodology of right religion" to the greatest number of people.[238]

In contrast to Nursi and his Nur movement, the MB in Egypt followed a different trajectory. The social and political circumstances, although not entirely the same, were nevertheless similar in Egypt as it underwent an ambitious modernising phase in the nineteenth century only to be colonised by the British in 1882.[239] In 1926, a semi-independent secular monarchy led Egypt through a fast reform program in parallel with Turkey.[240] Hasan al-Banna (1906-1948) founded the MB in 1928 as a social and religious movement about the same time as Nursi started his revival initiative in Turkey.[241] As Esposito argues, al-Banna's diagnosis was that Islam was not just personal faith and piety, it was a comprehensive system covering social and political life as well.[242] While there is no reason to assume Nursi disagreed, he never articulated political ideas in his post-1925 writings. This is a distinctive difference between the Nur movement and the MB, and it has lead the MB to bypass the faith problems of masses that Nursi has identified and addressed in his writings and activism.

Despite initial distancing to politics, the MB's successful establishment of social and educational institutions, and their popularity, inescapably attracted political attention.[243] Hasan al-Banna was assassinated in 1948, spiralling Egypt into turmoil and resulting in the military coup of Free Officer led by Jamal Abdul Nasr (1918-1970). Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), one of the most influential leaders of the MB,

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[238] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 229.
[239] Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 103.
[240] Ibid, 195-198.
[241] Ibid, 199.
[242] Esposito, *Islam*, 149.
[243] Cleveland and Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 200.

continued a more confronting approach to the authorities in his publications especially *Milestones*,[244] a highly critical book on Egyptian society comparing it to *Jahiliyya* (era-of-ignorance-before-Islam) society, which led to his arrest and execution in 1966. Qutb is often cited as an ideologue of the jihadist movements in the contemporary era.[245] Jeffrey Burke asserts that Qutb, along with Mawdūdi (1903-1979) and al-Banna, have more of a mixed legacy, as "on the one hand they have fuelled the ideologies of al-Qaeda and other extremist groups, on the other hand, they have also inspired moderate Islamic factions."[246] It appears the MB and its leaders could not appreciate the subtlety of the revivalist dilemma and succumbed to the provocation of persecution and gave enough material for secular authorities to intensify persecution and charge them with treason.[247]

Another key difference between Nursi and other revivalist leaders is their approach to the Qur'an, although just about all leaders called for a return to the Qur'an. For Muhammad 'Abduh, Muslims had to immerse themselves in the study of the Qur'an to appreciate the supremacy of God's unity.[248] 'Abduh started to write a detailed Qur'anic exegesis and publish these writings in the *al-Manar* journal. After his death in 1905, his disciple Rashid Ridā continued the project until his death in 1935.[249] The idea of a full Qur'anic exegesis was also followed by Sayyid Qutb with his completed exegesis, *Fi Zilāl al-Qur'an* (Under the Shadow of the Qur'an). This

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[244] Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (Indianapolis: American Trust, 1990).

[245] Richard Bonney, *Jihad: From Qur'an to bin Laden* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 4.

[246] Jeffrey C. Burke, "Education," in *The Islamic World*, ed. Andrew Rippin (London: Ruthledge, 2008), 315.

[247] This does not mean the charge of treason and their execution is justified. Nevertheless, court cases staged by authoritarian governments are dubious especially in response to political opposition and dissent. So, they usually look for circumstantial evidence to use in courts and sway public opinion in their charge of treason and resultant executions. A successful negotiation of the revivalist dilemma means no such material is given to authoritarian governments to be used in staged courts.

[248] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 141.

[249] Esposito, *Islam*, 132-133.

commentary brought forward a Qur'anic social and political vision for society.[250] Abul 'Ala Mawdūdi (1903-1979), the founder of the transnational movement *Jamaat-e Islami* in the Indian subcontinent, also took to the same task of writing a complete Qur'anic exegesis. Influenced by the debate over the separation of India and Pakistan, Mawdūdi's exegetical work, as argued by Esposito, attempted to give a Qur'anic blueprint for a comprehensive Islamic system covering all aspects of life, including government, society and economics.[251] While Nursi echoed the idea of immersion in the Qur'an,[252] he focused mostly on theological verses and a thematic and theological commentary of the Qur'an rather than a full exegetical work.[253] This is even more telling considering Nursi had also started to write a complete commentary of the Qur'an (*Ishārāt al-ījāz* The Signs of Miraculousness)[254] during WWI. The fact he abandoned this project in favour of the theological writings of *Risale-i Nur* shows the theological orientation of Nursi and his distinctive reading of the circumstances of his time and his prognosis to the challenge they posed. Judging by his target audience of ordinary Muslims, it is also possible Nursi would have thought people would not read a conventional multi-volume exegetical work; hence, he chose the unusual theological approach to the Qur'an and wrote relatively short epistles.[255]

With this approach Nursi attracted numerous eager students. Nursi advised his students to establish study circles in homes, and read and discuss the books.[256] Students would get together and rent a house, called *dershane*, with the aim of

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[250] Ibid, 150.
[251] Esposito, *Contemporary Islam*, 652-653.
[252] Ibid.
[253] Markham, *An Introduction to Said Nursi*, 18.
[254] Even though this work is not a complete exegesis of the Qur'an, it is still sizable to fill a volume and in itself highly original in its methodology. Nursi has included this work in his *Risale-i Nur* collection.
[255] These booklets were later compiled in volumes to make up the *Risale-i Nur* collection.
[256] Markham, *An Introduction to Said Nursi*, 17.

holding regular informal study circles.[257] Those students who could write well would volunteer to manually reproduce the books at a time when writing and teaching the Qur'an and religious books were prohibited by law.[258] In some villages, like Sav, the whole village population took part in secret manual reproduction at nights, while they worked in the fields during the day.[259] As a result of these activities, it is claimed that more than 600,000 copies of Nursi's books were reproduced by hand and distributed throughout Turkey.[260]

This intense activity had not gone unnoticed by the government. In 1935, Nursi was taken back to Isparta where he was sentenced to a year in prison for writing his treatise on Islamic dress, interestingly written before the adoption of the Civil Code banning Islamic dress.[261] During his time in prison, Said wrote *Lemālar* (The Flashes)[262] and began writing *Şuālar* (The Rays),[263] the third and fourth main volumes of the *Risale-i Nur* collection.[264]

In 1936, Nursi was released from prison and deported again, this time to the city of Kastamonu, located in the central region of Anatolia.[265] He stayed there for the next seven years and wrote more key chapters, including the *ayat al-kubra* (The Supreme Sign).[266] He continued to attract new students and corresponded though post with his student base throughout the country. All correspondence with his students in Kastamonu and other places of exile was compiled into books as *Lahikalar* (Appendices) and included in the *Risale-i Nur* collection. These letters are good

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[257] Ibid.
[258] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 203.
[259] Ibid, 204.
[260] Ibid.
[261] Ibid, 225.
[262] Nursi, *Lemālar*.
[263] Nursi, *Şuālar*.
[264] Saritoprak, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," 399.
[265] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 227.
[266] Saritoprak, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," 399.

sources revealing how Nursi managed to keep his students out of politics and violence – a key distinction of Nursi in contrast to other revivalist leaders of his era.

In August 1943, Nursi and his students were arrested and put on trial yet again for writing and distributing the treatise on the signs of the end of times.[267] The accusation levelled against him was the same as before and tantamount to treason – creating a secret society to overthrow the secular government by establishing a new Sufi order and exploiting the religious sentiments of the public to this end.[268] A committee made up of professors of law thoroughly examined *Risale-i Nur* to see if it contained any evidence to charges laid.[269] The committee reported that Nursi's works comprised primarily theological writings and no Sufi or political exhortations; he and his students were released in 1944 after nine months in custody.[270]

The court cases attracted significant media interest. Although the stories were always negative, they counter-intuitively drew more popular attention, increasing the readership of the *Risale-i Nur*.[271] With access to a crude printing machine, Nursi's students were able to duplicate the *Risale-i Nur* faster and in larger quantities in the new Latin alphabet, disseminating Nursi's theological messages and ideas to the younger generation.[272] At this time, Nursi's writings began to spread to other Muslim countries through pilgrimage and visiting scholars to Turkey.[273]

Being cleared of accusations was not the end of Said's struggles against authorities. His fame and growing influence posed an enormous threat to the secular government who placed Nursi once again under house arrest with severe restrictions for a man in

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[267] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 251.
[268] Ibid, 260.
[269] Azak, *Islam and Secularism in Turkey*, 118.
[270] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 97.
[271] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 257.
[272] Ibid, 275.
[273] Ibid, 276.

his seventies.[274] Worried about future generations, Said Nursi published *A Guide for the Youth* in 1947, this time in the Latin alphabet.[275] This book resulted in Nursi's third arrest and trial along with his students. They were sent to Afyon prison where Nursi reportedly survived a poisoning attempt.[276] Although the expert report cleared Nursi's writings,[277] the court sentenced Nursi to twenty months' imprisonment.[278] Despite an acquittal by the Supreme Court on appeal,[279] delays in the legal system meant Nursi ended up serving twenty months in custody.[280]

At his defence of the 1947 court hearings, and consistently in others, Nursi made two main arguments. First, on the allegation he was against the secularist regime, he argued that in every system there are dissidents and, on the condition they do not corrupt the law and order through violence, they should be tolerated under the principle of freedom of religion and speech.[281] Second, on the allegation that Nursi and his students were a security threat, Nursi responded to say not a single example could be shown that he or any one of his 500,000[282] students was involved in any crime or violence.[283] Mardin asserts Nursi was making two main points with these arguments.[284] First, his teachings were a good influence for law and order inside Turkey; and second, they educed sympathy from other Asian nations[285] because in

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[274] Ibid, 277.
[275] Ibid, 283.
[276] Ibid, 286.
[277] Ibid, 296.
[278] Ibid, 300.
[279] Azak, *Islam and Secularism in Turkey*, 118.
[280] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 300.
[281] Necmettin Sahiner, *Gençlik Rehberi Nasıl Yazıldı Nasıl Karşılandi* (How was a Guide to Youth Written and Received?) (Istanbul: Şahdamar Yayinlari, 2008), 95.
[282] Nursi gives this as the number of his followers possibly based on the number of books that had been produced and spread throughout Turkey. The public prosecutor at the time gave a figure of 600,000 followers. Umut Azak in *Islam and Secularism in Turkey* (2010) says the number given by the prosecutor was possibly exaggerated to heighten the alleged risk Nursi posed to the Kemalist regime.
[283] Sahiner, *Gençlik Rehberi Nasıl Yazıldı*, 96.
[284] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 97.
[285] Ibid.

the east religion was a force that has glued people together. Vahide notes that Nursi in his defence speeches was unapologetic about his work in promoting faith and the study of the Qur'an through his writings, but he argued this was not against the law nor was it concerned with politics.[286] Nursi retorts in one of his defence speeches that he would keep silent if the imprisonment concerned him only:

> but since it concerns the eternal life of many others, and the *Risale-i Nur,* which reveals and explains the mighty talisman of creation, if I had hundred heads and each day one were to be cut off, I would not give up this mighty mystery. Even if I am delivered from your hands, I cannot be saved from the clutches of the appointed hour. I am old and I am at the gateway to grave.[287]

This argument shows Nursi believed he was contributing to the spiritual salvation of people rather than engaging in politics.

The arrival of democracy in the post-WWII Cold War era and the victory of the Democratic Party (DP) in the 1950 elections[288] resulted in relatively favourable democratic rights and freedom of religion in Turkey. The Kemalist regime was still strong and the number of charges levelled against Nursi's followers increased with 37 cases launched in 1950s.[289] All cases were acquitted in court.[290] Upon printing of *A Guide for the Youth* in Latin alphabet, Istanbul court filed charges against Nursi.[291] For the fourth time, Nursi appeared in court, only this time acquittal came rather promptly.[292] Despite continuation of the legal onslaught, conditions improved for Nursi and his followers in the 1950s, growing the movement noticeably.[293] By 1956, the courts had lifted all legal restrictions on the *Risale-i Nur* and it could be freely

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[286] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 220.
[287] Cited in Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 221.
[288] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 305.
[289] Azak, *Islam and Secularism in Turkey*, 119.
[290] Ibid.
[291] Sahiner, *Gençlik Rehberi Nasıl Yazıldı*, 39.
[292] Ibid.
[293] Azak, *Islam and Secularism in Turkey*, 119.

printed in large quantities and sold in bookstores.[294] *Risale-i Nur* study centres (*dershane*) were established throughout the country.[295] Nursi's fame and popularity had grown so much that he found himself surrounded by large crowds each time he appeared in public.[296] After a long struggle under persecution, Nursi and his revivalist approach was vindicated.[297]

The 1950s are also marked by Nursi's increased prominence in public life and relationship with the DP. A member of parliament from the DP ranks, Tahsin Tola, was a follower of Nursi and was instrumental in lifting the ban on the *Risale-i Nur*.[298] Umut Azak highlights that Nursi's political involvement was nothing more than sending letters to the government acknowledging the DP's policies on religious freedom and supporting the government in taking steps to increase relations with Muslim countries, signalled by the signing of the Baghdad Pact in 1955.[299] In the 1957 elections, Nursi found himself in the middle of the campaign firing line of opposing political parties. While the opposition accused the DP government of collaborating with Nursi and his followers, DP government officials defended themselves saying they were simply working for freedom of religion and speech.[300] In 1959, Nursi, now 84 years of age, travelled freely to a number of cities in western Turkey. His every step was covered by journalists. Nursi's reluctance to speak to the

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[294] Vahide and Abu-Rabi', *Intellectual Biography*, 305.
[295] Ibid, 330.
[296] Ibid, 337.
[297] Turkey's democracy rode a rollercoaster from 1950 to the 2000s. For more on the development of democracy in Turkey see David Shankland's *Islam and Society in Turkey* (1999), Marvine Howe's *Turkey Today: A Nation Divided over Islam's Revival* (2000), and Findley Carter's *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, and Modernity: A History, 1789-2007* (2010).
[298] Azak, *Islam and Secularism in Turkey*, 120.
[299] Ibid. The Baghdad Pact was signed in 1955 between Turkey, Iraq, Great Britain, Pakistan and Iran and aimed to facilitate collaboration on political, economic and military initiatives. Iraq left the pact in 1959; thereafter, it was called Central Treaty Organization (CENTO).
[300] Azak, *Islam and Secularism in Turkey*, 121.

media was interpreted as an attempt to create a myth about himself.[301] Azak suggests the intense media interest was responsible for the creation of the myth it reported.[302] The images and coverage of Nursi in the media depicted him "as an eponym for Islamic reactionism."[303] To quell the media frenzy and political fallout, Nursi wrote a public letter clarifying that he has not been involved in politics for the last 40 years and does not intend to do so now, and he was merely travelling upon invitations of his students for teaching purposes.[304]

Said Nursi's last journey was from Isparta to Urfa, a historic city in eastern Turkey, for the first time in 35 years of exile, house arrests and imprisonment.[305] In 1960, Said Nursi died in Urfa at the age of 85, leaving behind nothing more than a cloak, a teapot, a watch, glasses and a prayer mat, total monetary value of which were only 551 Turkish liras.[306] Three months later, there was a military coup in Turkey and the junta ordered Nursi's body to be exhumed and taken to an undisclosed location.[307] His burial site is unknown to this day.

2.6   Earmarks of Nursi's Theological Revivalism

Vahide asserts that Nursi was a distinctive figure and an original thinker.[308] For Turner and Horkuc, Nursi was not only "one of the most brilliant Islamic thinkers of the modern era"[309] but also "the most important and influential Muslim scholar to

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[301] Ibid, 123.
[302] Ibid.
[303] Ibid, 125.
[304] Ibid.
[305] Vahide and Abu-Rabiʿ, *Intellectual Biography*, 342.
[306] Ibid, 344.
[307] Ibid, 345-346.
[308] Şükran Vahide, "Towards an Intellectual Biography of Said Nursi," in *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabiʿ (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 1.
[309] Abu-Rabiʿ, introduction, xiii.

emerge from Turkey in the last five hundred years."[310] Turner and Horkuc also add that for Nursi the key emphasis was the renewal of faith, not the revival of Islam as a social or political system that other revivalist leaders underscored.[311]

While a great majority of thinkers and scholars acclaim Said Nursi as a revivalist leader, noting particularly his aversion of violence, there are those in Turkey like Neda Armaner who polemically argue the other way. Armaner asserted that *Risale-i Nur* "let alone giving real and trustworthy religious information, worse still it carries a potential to completely break the national will and lead people to anarchy."[312] Armaner claims further that the Nur Movement deviated from the Islamic norms and became a deviant sect within Islam.[313] Mardin disagrees and says "it does not operate on the model of a traditional Islamic sect" and it is more like a movement to disseminate "truths of the Qur'an."[314] Mardin adds that Nursi's main focus was ultimately theological and he enriched it in his attempt to revive it.[315] Although the authorities tried hard to prosecute Nursi and his followers, they provided no evidence for the authorities to use against them in court.

Said Nursi's legacy can be conceptualised in two main outcomes. First, Nursi left behind his theological *magnum opus*, the *Risale-i Nur*. Second, Nursi demonstrated the efficacy of a theological, non-political and non-violent Islamic revivalist methodology in addressing the revivalist dilemma, with significant results that defined the character of the Turkish religious activism in the modern era.

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[310] Colin Turner and Hasan Horkuc, *Said Nursi* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 2.
[311] Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 3.
[312] Neda Armaner, *Islam Dininden Ayrilan Cereyanlar: Nurculuk* [Movements that Deviated from Islam: The Nur Movement] (Ankara: Millî Egitim Basimevi, 1964), 38.
[313] Ibid, 21.
[314] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 26.
[315] Ibid, 217-224.

With respect to his theological writings, the *Risale-i Nur* is still the most read religious work in Turkey[316] after the Qur'an and hadith. The treatises have also been translated to more than twenty-seven languages.[317] Nursi confessed that the university he wanted to establish during the Ottoman era materialised in the form of the *Risale-i Nur*, which in his view provided the blueprint for a whole new Qur'anic worldview.[318] In a way, he reconciled his activism in the first part of his life with his new theological orientation that followed in the later part. According to Turner and Horkuc, the *Risale-i Nur* is "one of the most remarkable feats of Muslim scholarship to emerge in the last five-hundred years."[319] They add that academic research should not overlook Nursi and his seminal contribution to revelation based Islamic theology.

Nursi explained that the strength of his works was due to their effectiveness in addressing two main issues unique to modern times.[320] First, *Risale-i Nur* responded to disbelief in a way previous Islamic works had not. In the past, disbelief was minimal, it came from ignorance and was relatively easy to address through discussions about God's attributes and admonishments by quoting verses from the Qur'an and hadith.[321] However, in the modern era, disbelief mainly came with the guise of science and philosophy; therefore, based on knowledge rather than ignorance. The number of disbelievers has also increased considerably. Hence, the *Risale-i Nur*, as a theological exegesis of the Qur'an, was able to provide powerful arguments defending the "truths of the Qur'an" to address the doubts of people in the modern era.[322] Second, Nursi argued that, rather than focusing on a future

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[316] Saritoprak, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," 401.
[317] See www.saidnur.com.
[318] Said Nursi, *Kastamonu Lahikâsı* [Letters of Kastamonu] (Istanbul: Söz Basım Yayın, 2004), 101-102.
[319] Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 112.
[320] Nursi, *Şuālar*, 826.
[321] Ibid, 830.
[322] Ibid, 831.

punishment in afterlife, the *Risale-i Nur* showed a spiritual hell in sin and vice, and a spiritual paradise in belief during this earthly life.[323] What he meant by this assertion is that the *Risale-i Nur* provided a worldview that enabled a person to experience spiritual delights in faith and prefer them over materialism and physical pleasure. Mardin supports this assessment saying Nursi's main aim was to stop the penetration of materialism into Muslim culture and to large extent it has been successful for its readership.[324]

Analysis of letters from Nursi's students shows what they thought about his writings and their influence. For Hulusi Yahyagil, an army office captain and one of Nursi's first student, the primary contribution of Nursi's writings was in their theological values as they helped him resolve key theological questions about God, life, existence and the cosmos.[325] For an *imam* in the village of Bedre, it was the message of hope that was present in Nursi's writings that cured his pessimism and offered him knowledge about Islam that was not available anywhere else.[326] For Hafiz Ali,[327] the *Risale-i Nur* was a nullifier of doubts that philosophy conjured up in the mind and answered fundamental questions of existence.[328] According to Refet, it was the intellectual confidence that *Risale-i Nur* provided to Muslims and empowered them from "becoming beggars of Europe for science and enlightenment."[329] Mardin adds the common elements in these sentiments were dissatisfaction with the existing literature on Islam and the ability of Nursi's writings to give a holistic picture of Islam and the theological underpinnings of the Qur'an.[330] So, Nursi's choice of

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[323] Ibid, 826.
[324] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 8.
[325] Ibid, 156.
[326] Ibid, 157.
[327] *Hafiz* is a title given to a person who has memorised the entire Qur'an in its Arabic original.
[328] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 157.
[329] Ibid.
[330] Ibid.

theological revivalism was not just a tactical accommodation under political pressure. He genuinely believed lack of belief and doubts lay at the heart of contemporary Muslim challenge.

Nursi's *Risale-i Nur* is also an instrument of an important shift that took place with respect to the spiritual leadership and perpetuation of a movement. Nursi's student Şamli Hafız highlighted a key difference between Nursi and previous revivalist leaders in that, while others relied on their charisma and spiritual prowess and authority, Nursi dismissed any attention to himself and transferred people's focus to the *Risale-i Nur*.[331] Mardin agrees and explains that Nursi changed the traditional perpetuation of a movement through one charismatic leader to the next and he transferred the attraction of charisma to the *Risale-i Nur*[332] and therefore to the theology. So, Nursi "shifted the central role of the leader to the message itself, thus enabling a new form of integration into Islam."[333] For Mardin, this is a much more universalistic way of engaging and integrating Muslims directly with Islam.[334] In a way, Nursi democratised the revivalist movements by leaving them to their own resources to develop his message of theology and deep belief in God.

In terms of the second outcome of Nursi's legacy, religious activism and Islamic revival, Nursi managed to attract a mass following in spite of government persecution and media sensationalism. Mardin says it is difficult to determine the number of people in the Nur movement as it does not have any formal organisational structure or membership records. Nevertheless, he points out that Nursi achieved a

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[331] Cited in Vahide and Abu-Rabiʿ, Intellectual Biography, 238.
[332] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 181.
[333] Ibid, 182.
[334] Ibid.

large following since the 1920s.[335] He adds that the movement gained universal appeal from 1950 to 1975.[336] However, how does Nursi's theological revival methodology fare in dealing with the Islamic revivalist dilemma?

A key premise in negotiating the revivalist dilemma is to keep the high moral ground under difficult circumstances and allegation of treason. When a movement attains a large following it becomes exceedingly difficult to contain followers' emotions and impulses for retaliation under unfair treatment and oppression. This is the greatest weakness of Islamic revivalist movements, which their opponents exploit with great success even to this day. Nursi skilfully manoeuvred his way out of such quagmires in five key ways that defined the nature of his activism – (1) define revival of faith and theology as the most important duty; (2) do not get involved with politics; (3) follow a clear non-violent struggle; (4) give meaning to suffering; and (5) emphasise positive action as a fundamental aspect of prophetic activism.

Nursi emphasised that saving people's faith and facilitating their salvation in the afterlife was the most important duty. He remarked in Afyon court, "Yes, we are a community, and our aim and program is to save ourselves and then our nation from eternal damnation" in the afterlife, and the key function of *Risale-i Nur* is "to serve the Qur'an through the truths of belief and through extremely powerful and decisive proofs."[337] As long as this was done sincerely, a gram of work on this path would be far more valuable in the court of God than insincere works that mixed personal interest and political aims.[338] During WWII, Nursi's bewildered students asked him about his lack of interest in the war. Nursi explained that world powers were fighting

[335] Ibid, 26.
[336] Ibid.
[337] Cited in Vahide and Abu-Rabi', Intellectual Biography, 293-294.
[338] Nursi, *Lemālar*, 268.

for control of the world in this transient life, whereas he and every other human being was faced with winning and losing an eternal abode worth at least four times[339] the earth.[340] Stressing the importance of facilitating salvation, Nursi hoped to achieve two results: first, address the adverse impact of materialistic philosophy on the very foundations of religion (hence Islam) and consequently on the faith of individuals; second, theology had the least possibility of attracting authoritarian secular regimes' allegations of treason.

As a key element of his theological revival method, Nursi also followed a deliberate non-political strategy. He realised that political activism would attract severe persecution from the government, as shown by the 1925 deportation that the government was looking for any excuse to diminish centres of political influence. However, for Nursi, non-political strategy was more than tactical accommodation. He argued that Islam is concerned with belief (*īmān*), life and Shari'ah (law and society), yet belief, therefore theology, is the most important of these and the *Risale-i Nur* has chosen to strengthen belief alone.[341] Further, mixing religious activism with a political message would create doubt in people over the motivations of religious activists, "so reduce to pieces of glass in the view of the heedless the diamond-like truths of the Qur'an."[342] Nursi added a footnote in the 1950s to the Damascus Sermon. He witnessed a real life scenario where a Muslim scholar vehemently opposed another highly righteous and pious scholar because he was on the opposite political persuasion, whereas the same person praised another immoral person because he was in his political camp. At this point, Nursi uttered his famous remark

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[339] Based on a hadith, the last person to come out of hell and enter paradise will get an abode four times the size of the earth. Islamically, this is considered the smallest of reward in afterlife.
[340] Nursi, *Sözler*, 219.
[341] Cited in Vahide and Abu-Rabi', Intellectual Biography, 242.
[342] Cited in Vahide and Abu-Rabi', Intellectual Biography, 294.

"I seek refuge in God from Satan and politics."[343] So, Nursi thought that engagement in politics would ultimately damage Islam and political ideology invariably leads to biases and breaches of Islamic ethical boundaries. Importantly, Nursi was not against Muslims engaging in politics. The key distinction here is that those who choose to enter politics should not pretend to represent religion and those who choose to follow the Islamic revival path should not practice politics.[344] Since Nursi and his followers chose the latter, they would not engage in politics.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Nursi's methodology relevant for contemporary times is his aversion of violence in the name of religion. To ethically justify his non-violence position, Nursi contended the Qur'anic ethical teachings[345] meant a ship with ten criminals but one innocent person cannot be sunk on account of the single innocent person. Whereas, in acts of violence, ten innocents would be killed in order to target a single enemy. Therefore, people claiming to represent the teachings of the Qur'an not only cannot commit acts of violence in the name of religion, they must also be the guardians of law and order in the name of religion.[346] Nursi also claimed the era of armed *jihad* was over – "jihad of the sword" is now replaced by the "jihad of the word"[347] for contemporary civilised human society was to be convinced through persuasion rather than coercion.[348] He argued that *Risale-i Nur* advocated spiritual and intellectual struggle (*jihād-ı mānevī*) as opposed to an armed struggle. For Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, this meant an undertaking to develop a

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[343] Said Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon: From the Risale-i Nur Collection* (Cağaloğlu, Istanbul, Turkey: Sözler Neşriyat, 1996), 35.
[344] In a way, Nursi leaves the door ajar to secularism at the individual level.
[345] See Qur'an 6:164; 5:32.
[346] Sahiner, *Gençlik Rehberi Nasıl Yazıldı*, 98.
[347] Angel Rabasa and F. Stephen Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 2008), 15.
[348] Şükran Vahide, "Said Nursi's Interpretations of Jihad," in *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabiʿ (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 97.

reasoned argument "to reconcile science and rationalism with Islam."[349] Vahide interprets this position as a theological struggle "in the face of moral and spiritual depredations of atheism and to instil certain belief in the hearts."[350] The weapon to use in this *jihad* was *imān al-tahqiqi*, a firm conviction based on reason and evidence rather than blind faith. Vahide highlights that her study of Nursi on *jihad* showed his consistency in maintaining this interpretation of *jihad* throughout his life.[351] The lack of involvement in violence formed the bedrock of Nursi's court defences. One could also conclude that the courts' inability to find him and his followers guilty of charges rested on a lack of evidence to link Nursi and his followers to violence (and politics).

Nevertheless, even though Nursi and his followers were careful, they could not escape allegations of treason – establishing a secret organisation to overthrow the government and mixing religion with politics. Naturally, Nursi and his followers felt persecuted and treated unfairly. This is when people could be enraged and provoked into violent retaliation in the face of a powerful state apparatus. So, it was necessary to deal with persecution in a way that would control the emotions of anger and curtail impulses for violence. Nursi achieved this in two ways.

First, Nursi gave positive and beneficial meaning to the persecution, enabling him and his students to be resilient under intense pressure and suffering. He called prison *madrasa al-yusufiyya* (school of Prophet Joseph).[352] According to the Biblical narrative, Prophet Joseph was imprisoned unjustly, but through his patience was eventually freed and vindicated. Because they were also imprisoned unjustly they would receive the same vindication with patience. More importantly, Prophet Joseph

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[349] Angel, Larrabee, *The Rise of Political Islam in Turkey*, 15.
[350] Vahide and Abu-Rabiʿ, *Intellectual Biography*, 308.
[351] Vahide, *Said Nursi's Interpretations of Jihad*, 96.
[352] Vahide and Abu-Rabiʿ, *Intellectual Biography*, 217.

gave theological lessons to his fellow inmates while in prison.[353] So, Nursi explained, time in prison enabled them to get together in a way they could not congregate outside and enabled them to study theology and strengthen their faith.[354] Finally, Nursi argued that endurance and time in prison would bring multiple spiritual rewards that would be harder to achieve outside.[355] In this way, Nursi and his students were able to transcend injustice and withstand trying circumstances of long incarcerations during extended trial processes. More importantly, they did not harbour feelings of revenge and retaliation.

Second, Nursi insisted on the practice of what he called *müsbet hareket* (positive action), "Our duty is positive action not negative action. It is solely to serve belief (*īmān*) in accordance with divine pleasure (*riḍa*) and not to interfere in God's concerns," and such a stance would lead to public safety and order.[356] Ian Markham highlights the importance of Nursi's insistence on *müsbet hareket* (Turk.), which essentially is to act constructively and non-violently in the face of persecution.[357] A second important dimension of positive action in Nursi's own words is to "act with the love of your way not to act with the animosity or devaluation of the ways of others."[358] While the first dimension keeps Muslims out of violence, the second helps them develop good relations with people from other movements, sects and religions.

Once again, this position is not a mere tactical accommodation. In Nursi's theology, positive action is at the core of religion. According to Nursi, Islam and belief are ultimately a constructive endeavour whereas destruction is Satanic by its nature. This

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[353] See Qur'an 12:35-41. This passage of the Qur'an is quite distinct and unique in comparison to the Biblical narrative.
[354] Nursi, *Sözler*, 219.
[355] Ibid, 215.
[356] Said Nursi, *Emirdağ Lahikâsı* [Letters of Emirdağ] (Istanbul: Söz Basım Yayın, 2004), 214.
[357] Markham, *An Introduction to Said Nursi*, 19.
[358] Nursi, *Lemālar*, 256.

is why Muslims are encouraged to repeat the phrase 'I seek refuge in God from accursed Satan' often, even though Satan has no creative powers. Since the Satanic path is a path of destruction and that destruction is easy and quick, with little action devastatingly far-reaching destruction could be inflicted. [359] Whereas Prophet Muhammad's way was a constructive endeavour relying on patience, forbearance in the face of oppression and at the same time building a society founded on virtue and good deeds.[360] So, in his interpretation, the prophetic way requires Muslims to act similarly no matter what the circumstances. Although the way Nursi expressed these ideas was fresh, they represent a well-established Sunni theological position on the support for law and order, and prohibition of violent rebellion and political opposition.[361] For theologians and jurists in the classical period, even an unjust ruler and government was far better than social strife and anarchy.[362]

Thus, the aforementioned five distinct aspects of Nursi's revivalist methodology were critical in dealing with the revivalist dilemma in his time. They solidified Nursi's theological revivalist methodology. Markham, in *Engaging with Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: A Model of Interfaith Dialogue*, contends that Nursi's writings and activism hold lessons even for Christians.[363] He mentions four specific lessons: First, "remain rooted in tradition;" second, "change in ways that are true to the tradition;" third, "witness to the truth of your tradition in non-violent ways;" and

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[359] Ibid, 135.
[360] Ibid, 148-149.
[361] Ṭaḥāwī, *The Creed of Imam al-Ṭaḥāwī*, 70. The exact wording as articulated by Ṭaḥāwī (d. 933) is, "We do not accept any rebellion against our leaders or the administrators of our public affairs, even if they are oppressive. We also do not pray for evil to befall any one of them or withdraw our allegiance from them. We consider our civic duty to them concordant with our duty to God, the Sublime and Exalted, and legally binding on us, unless they command us to the immortal. We pray for their probity, success and welfare."
[362] Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 232.
[363] Markham, *Engaging with Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, 95.

fourth, "continue to connect faith with life."[364] This summation marks the cornerstone of Nursi's methodology in religious activism and the premises for its success that contemporary Muslims and people from other faith traditions can emulate in an increasingly secular world.

Significantly, Said Nursi explained to his close students that the Islamic revival would not be complete in Turkey during his lifetime, but the *Risale-i Nur* has fulfilled the most significant portion – combating atheism and irreligion spread under the veil of science and philosophy – and it would be used as a blueprint for a whole new reflection of Islam in the lives of individuals and society.[365] Shahram Akbarzadeh agrees with Yavuz on the contention that Nursi espoused a spiritual and intellectual transformation of the individual "followed by the implementation of faith in everyday life and finally the establishment of an Islamic state based on the *shari'a*."[366] This contention, however, does not change the fact that Nursi's activism during his lifetime was essentially theological and his writings do not include any political exhortations or a political vision for society unlike other revivalist leaders of his time. Rather, the fair conclusion is that, while Nursi distinctly confined the role of his activism to the realm of theological (and intellectual) struggle with atheism,[367] he foresaw a natural progression and continuity of his theology and revivalist methodology eventually producing social and political outcomes beyond his lifetime. Key elements of this natural progression, according to Akyol, are the "support for

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[364] Ibid, 95-100.
[365] Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 99-100.
[366] Shahram Akbarzade, *Routledge Handbook of Political Islam* (London: Routledge, 2012), 133.
[367] Said Nursi, *Sikke-i Tasdîk-ı Gaybî* [Seal of Unseen Confirmation] (Istanbul: Söz Basım Yayın, 2005), 19-20.

democracy, sympathy for the free world and interest in interfaith cooperation," values kept alive by millions of his followers after his death.[368]

Has Nursi's activism produce large scale outcomes? After Nursi's death in 1960, the movement branched into separate independent Nur communities (*Jama'at*). The largest of these is the Hizmet (Service) Movement founded by Fethullah Gülen (b. 1938) in the late 1960s. Akyol contends that Gülen extended Nursi's legacy as a global movement of education and dialogue.[369] Saritoprak asserts that, while Nursi's teachings provided Gülen with a theological paradigm and a theoretical foundation, Gülen advanced it further to develop a theology of social responsibility.[370] Although other Nur communities are critical of Gülen for such a development, David Shankland refers to Gülen as "the most prominent of his (Said Nursi's) followers"[371] and explains their mutual influence on Turkish people saying that "Sunnis in Turkey find the Nursi (and later Gülen) formula of expanding belief to embrace technological innovation convincing… It thus becomes possible both to be a citizen of the modern world and to be a pious believer." So, Nursi and Gülen, as well as other similar Islamic movements, with their focus on theology and distancing themselves and their followers from violence and politics provided Turkey with a model that integrated Islam and contemporary society.

Essentially, Nursi has been an important Islamic influence in shaping contemporary Turkish society. His thought and impact provided an Islamic paradigm that prevailed in tandem and sometimes in competition with the secular vision for society the

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[368] Akyol, *Islam without Extremes*, 214.
[369] Ibid.
[370] Zeki Saritoprak, "Fethullah Gülen and his Theology of Social Responsibility," in *Mastering Knowledge in Modern Times: Fethullah Gülen as an Islamic Scholar*, ed. Ismail Albayrak (New York: Blue Dome Press, 2011), 91.
[371] David Shankland, *Islam and Society in Turkey* (Huntingdon, England: Eothen, 1999), 81.

founders of Turkish republic pushed so hard. Nursi is likely to wield significant influence in the world largely through the transnational movements his writings and theological revivalist approach inspired.

2.7 Conclusion

Said Nursi lived during a tumultuous period of time spanning the collapse of the Ottoman Empire; emergence of secular nation states for the first time in Muslim history; two world wars; and the challenges imposed by the European modernity on traditional Muslim societies and Islam. In addition, secular modernist governments in Muslim lands persecuted religious activism invariably posing before Muslim scholars the revivalist dilemma – how does one carry out the responsibility, as they felt, of reviving Islam while at the same time avoiding confrontation with a nervous government?

Under these conditions and faced with the dilemma, most Muslim scholars attempted to base their revivalism on a complete exegesis and reinterpretation of the Qur'an and saw Islam as a holistic system to be implemented at all levels of society. Consequently, rather than focusing on theology, they concentrated on religiosity, social and political application of Islam. Secular authoritarian governments responded with persecution resulting in a spiral of social and political turmoil (even violence) that characterised Muslim societies in the twentieth century.

In dealing with the revivalist dilemma, as felt more acutely in Turkey, Nursi followed a different trajectory and methodology. Nursi's theological revivalism rested on identifying the revival of faith and theology as the most important duty for Muslims in modern era; not getting involved in politics; following a deliberate non-violent struggle; attributing spiritual meaning to suffering and persecution; and

emphasising positive action as a fundamental aspect of the prophetic way. With this approach, Nursi was able to achieve his revival objectives, survive persecution and maintain a high moral ground for himself and his followers. Nursi left a legacy of a theological revival methodology where Islam and modern society can peacefully coexist.

The most important instrument in Nursi's theological revivalism was his writings. While Nursi also saw Islam as a holistic religion, he deliberately restricted his writings to theological matters and his activism to the realm of reviving people's faith. His activism comprised writing and disseminating theological exegesis of the Qur'an compiled as the *Risale-i Nur* collection. These works became very popular with the people of Turkey and were instrumental in the revival of Islam in Turkey through a period of Jacobin secularisation policies implemented from 1923 to 1950.

So, how original are these theological writings? Since the conditions under which Nursi operated were unique to his time and extremely challenging, and he concentrated his writing activities solely to theology leaving behind an enormous body of theological writings, the expectation is that he produced a new expression of Islamic theology. This is investigated next.

CHAPTER 3: ISLAMIC EPISTEMOLOGY AND NURSI'S THOUGHT

3.1   Introduction

In an introductory passage to the 15th Ray, Nursi outlines two fundamental motives for him to write his *magnum opus*, *Risale-i Nur* – first, the spread of disbelief had proliferated to modern society through science and materialistic philosophy; and, second, Muslims indulging in the pleasures of the world to the point of being oblivious to God and an impending afterlife.[1] While the first leads Muslims to doubt religion and lose faith, the second steers them towards deviation from the "straight path of virtue and spiritual perfection."[2] In addition to the Qur'an and Sunnah as primary sources, the universe and natural world play crucial roles in his attempt to find an empirical foundation to belief and demonstrate there is an "immediate spiritual hell" within a life led oblivious to the reality of God, human mortality and an inevitable everlasting life in an afterlife.[3]

Examining Nursi's epistemology is crucial in revealing not only how he achieves his stated aims, but also what his contributions are to the field. The way the universe and natural world are conceived and expressed in Nursi's works has critical importance for laying the foundations of a contemporary exposition of Islamic theology and fresh expressions of its worldview. In Nursi's theological epistemology, the universe as the book of creation and the Qur'an as the book of revelation have equal standing for they ultimately originate from the same divine source. Any claim for truth must

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[1] Said Nursi, *Şualar* (Rays) (Istanbul: Söz Basım Yayın, 2004), 15th Ray, Second Station, 825-831; also introduction to Damascus Sermon.
[2] Said Nursi, *Şualar*, 15th Ray, Second Station, 827.
[3] Ibid, 826.

be confirmed by both the Qur'an and universe for it to hold an objective foundation. Human reason is an essential instrument in identifying the vital correlation between the two. If there is a direct correlation mutually entailed by the use of reason, then the truth claim can be deemed as certain truth.

This chapter will begin with an outline of a theoretical framework for theology, which will assist in placing Nursi's discourse about God within a coherent structure. It then proceeds to divulge classical Islamic epistemology setting the scene to analyse Nursi's approach to Islamic epistemology critically and probe his evaluation of sources of religion with the aim of determining his contribution to the field.

3.2   Theoretical Framework for Islamic Theology

Islamic theology as a distinct discipline is generally framed into three broad fields – *ilāhiyyāt* (divinity), *nubuwwāt* (prophethood) and *sam'iyyāt* (transmitted beliefs including eschatology).[4] A review of theological texts shows these three core elements are always present in theological works from the leading theologian Abū Hanīfa (699-767) in the eighth century to modern works, although not always clearly structured as so. Around the kernel of these three fields, introductory sections on epistemology, the nature of belief (*īmān*) and various doctrinal positions on *imamate* (leadership) are also included within the scope of Islamic theology.[5]

The scope of classical theology is best explained by al-Ghazālī in the introduction to his work *al-mustaşfā min 'ilm al-uṣūl* (The Selection from Legal Theory). Although this work is an introduction to Islamic jurisprudence, al-Ghazālī makes an influential

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[4] Marcia Hermansen, "Eschatology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim J. Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 309.
[5] Al-Juwaynī, *A Guide to the Conclusive Proofs*, 1-5.

categorisations of Islamic disciplines including theology.[6] Influenced by his teacher al-Juwaynī,[7] he lays out the basic framework for systematic theology and its scope. He argues, the theologian, using a rational methodology, proves God's existence, eternity and essential attributes of knowledge, will and power (*ilāhiyyāt*). The theologian then proceeds to deal with proofs of prophethood and revelation (*nubuwwāt*). Once this is satisfactorily accomplished, the scope of theology ends and human reason abdicates to the truths expressed in revelation – the Qur'an and Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad. Al-Ghazālī concludes on these premises that what is authentically transmitted (*sam'iyyāt*) through revelation and the Prophet would be accepted as true.[8] So, according to al-Ghazālī, the key themes with respect to God in classical Islamic theology are about proving God's existence and eternity; discussing attributes of God leading to God's relationship to humanity through revelation-bearing prophets; and, hence, providing a rational foundation to the teachings of Islam on worship and human conduct.

Nursi's writings comprise all matters of classical themes of theology, although they are not limited to these themes nor structured within a classical framework. Two main reasons explain this observation. First, as was examined in Chapter 2, Nursi's main audience is ordinary Muslims and non-Muslims who may have doubts or questions about God, the afterlife and other essentials of belief. Placing his discussion in a restrictive framework would have made his writings abstract and less interesting for the general reader. Second, analysis of Nursi's works shows he deliberately avoids compartmentalising subject matters of theology and often covers various theological themes within the same argument for he sees them as closely

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[6] Hammad, "Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's Juristic Doctrine."
[7] The order of treatment of theological matters as described by al-Ghazālī is the same in al-Juwaynī's theological work, *A Guide to the Conclusive Proofs for the Principles of Belief*.
[8] Hammad, "Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's Juristic Doctrine."

linked and supported by one another. Such links could not have been demonstrated if his arguments were placed within a rigid framework, reducing their effectiveness for the intended purpose and audience. Thus, Nursi's works should not be reduced to the level of ordinary theological treatise.

In spite of these reasons, it is possible to place Nursi's writings within a theoretical framework. I therefore propose a new theological framework that would comprise not only Islamic theology, but also assist in the study of God in other faith traditions. The framework is constructed of responses to three interconnected questions: (1) Does God exist? (2) If God exists, is God one? (3) How do humans relate to God? In dealing with each question, a corresponding theological problem will also be addressed.

The first question 'does God exist?' relates to the associated theological problem of whether one believes in God using rational arguments and concrete evidence or belief in God is a matter of faith only. Just about all faith traditions, including Islam, claim the existence of God. Although classic theologians and philosophers were often believers, to place religion on firm objective grounds, they produced rational arguments for the existence of God starting on the premise of the impossibility of God's nonexistence.[9] In a sense, they wanted to show that God's existence is entailed as a logical necessity from the universe whose existence cannot be denied. Any discussion on the existence of God inevitably raises epistemological questions on the role of reason, the universe and revealed scriptures.

The second question 'if God exists, is God one?' necessarily emerges from the first one. The answer to this question invariably determines the way God relates to the

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[9] Al-Juwaynī, *A Guide to the Conclusive Proofs*, 32.

universe and to what extent God is involved in the world. An associated theological problem is whether God is involved with universals only or is God involved with particulars as well. The answer has significant implications in the way God's attributes of will, knowledge and power are understood. This, in turn, has consequences for human freedom of choice and the way theodicy is addressed. Polytheism or associating partnership with God (*shirk*) could also emerge in the way some may respond to this question.

The third question follows naturally: 'how do humans relate to God?' The theological response to this question determines the way humans get to know and experience God in their spiritual and everyday lives. If God exists and since God is not discernible through human sense experiences, God is deemed transcendent. Concurrently, there is a human need to feel an immanent presence of God in their inner spiritual world and personal lives. This raises an associated theological problem, whether God is transcendent, immanent or both. If God is transcendent, above and beyond space and time, then relating to God becomes exceedingly difficult. If God is immanent, this leads to tendencies of anthropomorphism.

Theological differences between faith traditions largely stem from their responses to these three fundamental theological questions. The level of difference tends to increase as progression is made from the first to the third question. Responses define their respective concept of God and shape their worldview, which has further extensions to other aspects of theology, including revelation, salvation, prophecy and eschatology. This is observed especially within the Abrahamic faith traditions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. As a key feature, this theoretical framework sets a

platform to facilitate and develop comparative theological studies, especially between Abrahamic faith traditions.

In the case of Islamic theology of God, this framework enables a thorough expression of the fundamental meaning of *tawḥīd* (unification of God) as the core tenet of Islam. It incorporates the classical theological discourse, while at the same time encapsulating just about all Nursi has written about God. The framework assists in sieving through Nursi's voluminous writings to identify his key arguments, elucidations and interpretations in a theoretically coherent structure.

A limitation of the theoretical framework is that it does not include prophethood or eschatology, where Nursi makes significant original contributions. In eschatology, for example, what al-Ghazālī and Ibn Sina said would be beyond the scope of rational proofs,[10] Nursi provides rational arguments for bodily resurrection building on his theological conclusions about God.[11] The theological originality of Nursi could have been more thoroughly tested if these major areas of theology were also critically evaluated. Their inclusion, however, would have made the scope of this thesis too broad. Hence, this research primarily focuses on Islamic theology.

3.3 Epistemology in Classical Islamic Theology

The Qur'an and Sunnah have been widely accepted by Muslim scholars across all disciplines as the primary sources of knowledge in Islam.[12] They are the essential constituting texts linked to the divine revelation (*wahy*) offering knowledge of the metaphysical realm usually inaccessible to human speculation and providing

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[10] Majid Fakhry, "Philosophy and Theology: From the Eight Century to the Present," in *The Oxford History of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 283-284.
[11] Said Nursi, *Sözler* (Istanbul: Soz Basim Yayin, 2003), 10th Word, Conclusion, 138-142.
[12] Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2003), 1.

knowledge of the world humans may have disputes about.[13] In the sphere of Islamic scholarship, any doctrine or legal opinion not firmly based on unequivocal verses of the Qur'an and on sound Sunnah narrations (*hadith*) can be summarily dismissed as unislamic.

While the Qur'an and Sunnah have always been the supreme sources of Islamic scholarship, their usage as legitimate sources hinges on their historical authenticity. The Qur'an's historical authenticity is widely accepted within Islamic scholarship and to a large extent within Western scholarship.[14] The Sunnah transmitted through hadith reports is more ambivalent. A tight transmission of hadith reports from master to student in the early centuries of Islam could not entirely prevent eventual hadith forgery attempts to support political disputes and sectarian biases.[15] Sifting through the large body of hadith narrations in circulation, Muslim scholars developed an elaborate methodology of hadith criticism. Forgeries were largely identified and relinquished, and the remaining hadith were classified in their level of soundness, culminating in the assembly of authentic hadith collections by the third century of Islam.[16] So, Muslim scholarship unconditionally rested on the Qur'an and Sunnah as they toiled to ensure these sources were the very words and actions transmitted or committed by Prophet Muhammad.

Yet, there were three imperatives compelling scholars to consider sources outside the Qur'an and Sunnah. The first is the fact the Qur'an and Sunnah do not explicitly contain everything. This is particularly sharp in the case of Islamic law. Even

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[13] Buchman, translator's introduction, xxiii.

[14] Muḥammad Muṣṭafa A'ẓamī, *The History of the Qur'ānic Text: From Revelation to Compilation: A Comparative Study with the Old and New Testaments* (Leicester: UK Islamic Academy, 2003), 202.

[15] Siddiqi, *Ḥadīth Literature*, 31-36.

[16] Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 38-41.

Prophet Muhammad recognised Muslims would inevitably encounter situations that would not be directly addressed by the Qur'an or Sunnah. In this respect, the famous Mu'adh hadith is often cited. When the Prophet sent Mu'adh Ibn Jabal as a judge to Yemen, he inquired as to how he would pass his judgment. Mu'adh responded 'according to the book of God (Qur'an)'. 'And if you find nothing?' the Prophet asked. 'According to the traditions (Sunnah) of God's Messenger,' 'And if you find nothing?' 'Then I shall exert (*ajtahidu*) to my utmost to formulate my own judgement,' Mu'adh answered. The Prophet then exclaimed, 'Praise be to God who guided His Messenger's messenger to what pleases His Messenger'.[17] Muslim intellectual Tariq Ramadan highlights the last response of Mu'adh as particularly significant because the Prophet acknowledged that, in Yemen, a few hundred kilometres from Medina, there would be new cultural and legal situations that would require the critical analysis and intelligence of an insightful and sensitive judge. Certainly, there would be new issues in geographies and epochs that are far more distant to Yemen at the time of the Prophet.[18] Interpretation and responding to the nuances of evolving cultures are tasks that Muslim scholars cannot avoid even when the primary sources are silent.

Although not as acutely felt, this imperative is also apperceived in the case of theology. As discussed in the first chapter, the Qur'an is largely a book of theology clearly outlining its faith propositions and providing exhaustive coverage of God and other related essentials of faith. The history of Islamic theology illustrates a plethora of interpretation of verses, giving way to endorsed theological schools and outcast

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[17] Hadith reported by Abu Dawud, cited in Ramadan, *Radical Reform*, 24.
[18] Ramadan, *Radical Reform*, 24-25.

divergent sects.[19] In time, deeper epistemological debate arose during medieval times over the literal meaning (*haqīqa*) and figurative meaning (*majāz*) of the text. For al-Ghazālī, access to the meaning of the Qur'an depends on the comprehension of literal truth and meaning of the divine word; hence, there is an inseparable link between the cognition of literal meaning and the perception of figurative meaning.[20] For Ibn Taymiyya, the main question is not of epistemic ingress to figurative meaning, but knowing the divine intent expressed through God's illocutionary habit of speech.[21] In the modern era, attention shifted from textual analysis of the Qur'an to emerging theological challenges (existence of God[22], theodicy and evolution theory as important examples), requiring fresh Islamic theological responses. Despite the fact there is relevant content within the Qur'an and Sunnah, new theological questions required wading through unfamiliar philosophical and scientific marshlands.

The second imperative is that revelatory texts are expressed as a compendiary and inevitably their exegesis and elucidation require confabulation with sources outside the core texts of Islam. During the early classic period (7th to 9th centuries), the main sources outside the core revealed texts available were rudimentary science within natural philosophy and Jewish and Christian theological sources. The Jewish and Christian sources, collectively termed as *isrāīliyyāt*, is evident in Qur'anic exegetical

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[19] A classic book on Islamic heresiography is Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Karīm Shahrastānī's (1086-1153) *kitāb al-milal wa 'l-niḥal*. An English print is available with the title *Muslim Sects and Divisions: The Section on Muslim Sects in Kitāb al-Milal wa 'l-Niḥal*, trans. A. K. Kazi and J. G. Flynn (New York: Routledge, 2009).
[20] Paul A. Hardy, "Epistemology in Divine Discourse," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim J. Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 289.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Existence of God in the classical period was also part of the theological discourse; however, the main motive was to base theology on proofs rather than blind faith in the inherent subjectivity of text. In the classical era of Islamic theology, there were no noteworthy philosophical arguments against God. The Enlightenment era ushered in significant counterarguments against belief in God.

works in the way they expanded prophetic stories covered concisely in the Qur'an.[23]

Although the rich and detailed *isrāīliyyāt* sources[24] have been the staple of Qur'anic

exegetes from the beginning, they have also attracted staunch critics. Their

authenticity was questionable; the reported stories often defied common sense and

appeared more like fairy tales than carefully preserved historical reports.[25] In the

fairest and most charitable assessment of *isrāīliyyāt*, there was no way of knowing

what was authentic and what was not. The use of science as a supplementary source

of knowledge in the classical period was scarce and also seen as problematic.

Science was still in its developmental stage and it seemed to change with time; thus,

for exegetes, it did not fit well with the immutable truths of the revealed texts.

Interestingly, modern times clinched a complete reversal where *isrāīliyyāt* has been

completely abandoned and the use of science to explain certain Qur'anic verses has

become prevalent.[26]

The third imperative comes in the form of the need to supply objective proofs to the

arguments posed by Muslim sceptics and non-Muslim critics. While the Qur'an's

and Sunnah's epistemological roles reign supreme for faithful Muslim scholars, for

non-Muslim scholarship they are subjective sources of knowledge and texts whose

authority is open for critique. Muslim scholars' rationale is that God and the Prophet

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[23] Muhsin Demirci, *Tefsir Usûlü ve Tarihi* [Principles and History of Exegesis] (Istanbul: Marmara Universitesi Ilahiyat Fakultesi Vakfı Yayınları, 2001), 132-133.

[24] There are contrasting reports from Prophet Muhammad in relation to using Christian and Jewish sources. In one hadith reported by Ahmad ibn Hanbal, he admonishes Muslims from consulting Christian and Jewish sources, "… Do not ask anything to people of the Book. Those who are deviated can never be able to guide you to right path…" However, there is a more affirmative narration reported by four canonical hadith collections, "…Narrate from the Israelites, there is no concerns in this." (Al-Bukhari, *Anbiya*, 30; Muslim, *Zuhd*, 72; al-Tirmithi, *Ilm*, 13; Ibn Maja, *Muqaddima*, 5).

[25] Demirci, *Tefsir Usûlü*, 133-138.

[26] There are numerous works on the topic of the Qur'an and science. Two noteworthy examples are Maurice Bucaille, *The Bible, the Qur'an and Science: The Holy Scriptures Examined in the Light of Modern Knowledge* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1978) and Haluk Nurbaki, *Verses from the Glorious Koran and the Facts of Science* (Ankara: Turkish Foundation for Religion, 1989).

are authoritative.[27] Since God revealed the Qur'an, it contains nothing but the truth. Since Prophet Muhammad was guided by God, and at times corrected through revelation, everything authentically attributed to him is also nothing but the truth.[28] Humans (scholars) are merely agents who determine the meaning and application of the commands and truths expressed through the Qur'an and Sunnah.[29] Since the Qur'an is a text received on the authority of the Prophet and hadith are traditions attributed to the Prophet, they could be seen as sources beyond the test of critical reason.[30] Yet, as al-Ghazālī argues in *al-iqtīṣād fi al-i'tiqād* (Moderation in Belief), there are Muslims who are intellectually gifted. When they are confronted with difficult theological questions or their faith is shaken by sceptical opinions, they require assuaging answers to quell incessant doubts.[31] So, rational proofs are needed to confirm the truth claims extruding through the scriptures.

Unsurprisingly, the tension between reason (*'aql*) and revelation (*naql*) has been the main theatre for epistemological debate in classical Islamic theology and two major schools of Islamic theology approached it in slightly different ways. As Binyamin Abrahamov concludes in *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism*, "pure rationalism is absent from Islamic theology" in that reason independent of revelation is not viewed as a foolproof instrument in attaining knowledge of God.[32] In contrast, pure traditionalism, in terms of literalist understanding and application of revealed sources, survives as a legitimate but marginal school.[33] The majority, Ash'arī and Māturīdī schools, have a vacillating line of equilibrium between reason and

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[27] Abu El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name*, 23.
[28] Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 58-64.
[29] El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name*, 25.
[30] Ibid, 23-29.
[31] Abu Hamid Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Ghazali's Moderation in Belief: al-Iqtiṣād fī al-I'tiqād*, trans. Aladdin Mahmud Yaqub (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 11.
[32] Binyamin Abrahamov, *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 52.
[33] Ibid.

revelation, with the Māturīdī school gravitating slightly more towards the reason end of the spectrum in comparison to the Ash'arī school.

Classical Māturīdī theological works generally start with an analysis of three different ways of attaining knowledge – through sensory perception (*idrak*), rational syllogism (*istidlāl*) and transmission (*khabar*).[34] According to al-Māturīdī, knowledge attained through the five senses – sight, smell, touch, taste and hearing – provides a sensory experience that does not necessarily require additional evidence for support. The knowledge of the sun's existence and fire burning, for example, can be attained through sensory perception.[35] Certain knowledge attained through narrations include *mutawātir* narrations – transmission of knowledge by a large group of people whose agreement over a forgery is impossible – and narrations from the Prophet whose truthfulness is proven by miracles.[36] In this sense, the Qur'an's content is certain and true as it is transmitted through *mutawātir* channels.[37] A portion of the Sunnah is also transmitted through *mutawātir*; therefore, it has to be accepted as certain and true. The remainder of the Sunnah is largely transmitted through single channels (*khabar al-wāhid*) and if their authenticity is proven they are accepted, if not they are abandoned.[38] Knowledge attained through rational means includes inductive, deductive and analogous syllogisms.[39] According to al-Māturīdī, appeals to reason as a source of knowledge are a necessity as there are things too small or without volume that cannot be known through the senses alone.[40] Judging the authenticity of narrations is also done through the application of reason.[41]

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[34] Al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawhid*, 12.
[35] Serafetin Golcuk and Suleyman Toprak, *Kelam* (Konya: Tekin Kitabevi Yayinlari, 1996), 89.
[36] Golcuk and Toprak, *Kelam*, 95.
[37] Al-Māturīdī, *Kitāb al-Tawhid*, 12.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Golcuk and Toprak, *Kelam*, 92.
[40] Al-Māturīdī, *Kitâb al-Tawhid*, 13.
[41] Ibid.

Distinguishing between prophetic miracle and skilled magic or the difference between ordinary men and extraordinary attributes of true prophets can only be discerned through reason.[42] Further, al-Māturīdī argues reasoning is a Qur'anic commandment sanctioned by many verses where God hinged the discovery of the truths of the Qur'an on the essential faculty of reason.[43] Al-Māturīdī was the first theologian who postulated a theory of knowledge in this way such that all subsequent theological works had introductory chapters on epistemological discussion.[44]

In the Ash'arī school, the main enterprise is finding a rational basis for the Qur'an and Sunnah. In his work, *risāla ilā ahl al-taghr bi-bāb al-abwāb* (Epistle to the People of Frontier), al-Ash'arī argues Prophet Muhammad took people through a four-staged sequential order of teachings.[45] The first stage involved a demonstration of the contingency of the world and human beings; second, to recognise that the world and human beings are subject to the absolute will of the all-powerful and all-provident God; third, to acknowledge that Prophet Muhammad is an authentic messenger of God; and finally, as an entailment of the third, to accept without question whatever the Prophet brought as revelation.[46] Despite Richard M. Frank's conclusion that this sequence forms al-Ash'arī's conceptualisation of "rational order of the progress to faith,"[47] al-Ash'arī is actually constructing the rational foundation to epistemological legitimacy of the revealed sources of Islam: the Qur'an and Sunnah.

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[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid, 13-14. Al-Māturīdī quotes many verses from the Qur'an including 41:53-54, 88:17-20, 2:164, 51:20-21.
[44] Al-Māturīdī, *Kitab al-Tawhid*, xx.
[45] Richard M. Frank, *Early Islamic Theology: The Mu'tazilites and al-Ash'arī* (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2007), VII, 138.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

The Ash'arite epistemological framework is further augmented by al-Ghazālī who argues that the theologian, using a rational methodology, starts dealing with the notion of existence and classifies it as eternal and contingent.[48] Contingent existence includes all living and non-living things that have a beginning in time, while eternal existence only applies to God. After dealing with questions of existence and proving God's eternity, the theologian examines issues related to attributes of God. In this respect, the theologian explains what is necessary, possible and impossible about God. One of the possible actions of God is sending Prophets to humanity. Hence, the theologian proceeds to deal with the proofs of prophethood and revelation. Once this is satisfactorily accomplished, human reason abdicates to knowledge expressed in the Qur'an and Sunnah as true revelation transmitted through Prophet Muhammad.[49] In this epistemological framework, reason fulfils two important functions. First, it gives revealed texts a wholesale status of being true and being used as true premises to any theological (in fact any disciplinary) argument; and second, reason eventually takes a subservient role as an elucidative and interpretive tool for the revealed texts.

Epistemological differences between the Ash'arī and Māturīdī schools with respect to the adoption of reason can be illustrated in their respective views on good and evil. In the Ash'arī school, good and evil and their consequences in the afterlife can only be known through divine revelation (*wahy*).[50] Since God is absolutely sovereign in His will, if something is prohibited by revelation, it is deemed as evil and if something is condoned by revelation, it is deemed as good.[51] Put differently, things and actions are not in themselves good or evil; rather, divine commandment and

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[48] Hammad, "Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's Juristic Doctrine."
[49] Ibid.
[50] Umar F. Abd-Allah, "Theological Dimensions of Islamic Law," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim J. Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 250.
[51] Ibid.

prohibition deem them so. For the Māturīdī School, there is a complementary relationship between reason, revelation and empirical knowledge of the world; hence, knowledge of good and evil is discernible through all three sources.[52] Divine wisdom dominates this universe and enlightens the human mind of the true nature of things and events.[53] This example illustrates the greater harmony of reason and revelation found within the Māturīdī School. In particular, appeals to divine wisdom (*hikma*) as a dominant characteristic of the divine scheme in the universe is an important distinction of the Māturīdī School. As will be seen in chapters to follow, emphasis on wisdom (*hikma*) in the universe bears even greater prominence in Nursi's works.

A final epistemological consideration in classical Islamic theology is the place of spiritual experience and insight. Al-Ghazālī introduces spiritual insight (*kashf*) as an independent source about religious knowledge, especially in terms of knowledge of God (*ma'rifatullah*). Al-Ghazālī is original in his introduction, or more correctly the legitimisation of spiritual insight (*kashf*), as a fundamental source of knowledge. In *mishkāt al-anwār* (The Niche of Lights) he argues that deeper knowledge of God could be attained through spiritual insight, but not necessarily discernible through human reason.[54] This is only possible through the light of *īmān* (faith) that God casts into the heart of a believer[55] and through the gift of spiritual closeness to God attained as a result of purification of the heart.[56] Spiritual insight of a purified heart intuitively knows basic truths without proofs[57] and attains a true understanding of the

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[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Buchman, translator's introduction, xx.
[55] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 87.
[56] Buchman, translator's introduction, xx.
[57] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 87.

cosmos, human nature and God.[58] As a gift of God, it remains latent in human nature (*fitra*) either by the influence of wrong beliefs and sins or through the veil of negative attributes[59] or the lack of sufficient stimulation by the individual. Just like latent water in a well is only accessible through digging into the earth, spiritual insight is discernible through purification of the heart.[60]

Although *kashf* as a source of knowledge has not gained prominence within the Ash'arī and Māturīdī theological schools, it has taken root as part of the Qur'anic concept of natural human disposition (*fitra*). Māturīdī theologian 'Ali al-Qāri (d. 1607)[61] affirms that human natural disposition is intrinsically equipped for the knowledge of God.[62] Significantly, spiritual insight wields strong influence within the popular metaphysics and theology of Sufism. Given that Sufism penetrated the entire Muslim world from the thirteenth century onwards, *kashf* has to be considered an important aspect of Islamic epistemology.

So, classical Islamic epistemology mainly hinges around the divine revelation encapsulated in the Qur'an and Sunnah. Necessity and certain imperatives have compelled Muslim theologians to include other complementary sources of knowledge. Chief among these is human reason (*'aql*), but only as a subservient instrument to support propositions of faith. Although al-Ghazālī and al-Māturīdī pointed out the universe as a source of knowledge, they have not fully built this in their epistemology. Through his spiritual transformation, al-Ghazālī, and with him much of the Muslim world, turned towards spiritual insight (*kashf*) as a fundamentally superior source of knowing God.

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[58] Buchman, translator's introduction, xxxiii.
[59] Ibid, xxxiv.
[60] Abd-Allah, "Theological Dimensions of Islamic Law," 251.
[61] Sources do not give a date of birth.
[62] Abd-Allah, "Theological Dimensions of Islamic Law," 251.

3.4 Qur'an, Sunnah and Reason in Nursi's Epistemology

In his introduction to the 19th Word, Nursi outlines his epistemological foundations for theology:

> There are three great and universal describers which make known to us our Lord. First is the Book of the Universe ... Second is the Seal of the Prophets, upon whom be peace and blessings, the supreme sign of the Book of the Universe. Third is the Great Noble Qur'an.[63]

'Abd al-'Aziz Barghuth highlights that, with this listing, Nursi points to the reciprocal dependence of the three sources in constructing a theory of knowledge – a construction based solely on the universe will not lead to the truth about human existence; conversely, a focus on revelation alone will lead to missing an essential dimension and prevent a correct reading of the reality of human existence.[64] Hence, the universe and revelation as represented by the Qur'an and Sunnah are complementary sources. Inclusion of the universe as one of the key sources of knowledge about God consigns the universe equally as a primary source.

What is equally significant in this passage is the linking of Prophet Muhammad, as the seal of prophets, to the universe as its supreme sign. This notion is repeated in many places throughout Nursi's works where Prophet Muhammad is described as "the final and finest fruit of the tree of universe."[65] Since the universe has a beginning and it has evolved over time to produce branches of galaxies and flowers of stars and planets, the universe can be contemplated analogous to a tree.[66] Life is the most important outcome and ultimately human life is the finest fruit of the tree of the universe. Nursi argues further to conclude that, since friend and foe recognise his

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[63] Nursi, *Sözler*, 319.
[64] 'Abd al-'Aziz Barghuth, "The Place of the Theory of Knowledge in the Vicegerency and Civilisational Process in the Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi" (paper presented at the 4th International Nursi Symposium on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, Istanbul, September 20-22, 1998).
[65] Nursi, *Sözler*, 31st Word, 3rd Fundamental, 783.
[66] Ibid, 788.

high moral standards and his interactions with others testify the high moral and spiritual principles he brought and displayed by example, Prophet Muhammad is, therefore, the finest fruit of the tree of universe.[67] The evidence for this is the night journey (*isra'*) and the ascension (*mi'raj*) of the Prophet to the heavens thoroughly discussed in the 31st Word as an exegesis of verses 17:1 and 53:4-18.[68] Notwithstanding the mystical tone of these arguments and even though Turner contends that "prophethood can never be discussed outside the context of revelation,"[69] linking Prophet Muhammad to the cosmic purpose puts the Prophet's life, words and actions (Sunnah) as an independent source of knowledge about God. For Nursi, Prophet Muhammad is the quintessential embodiment of what God wants in human beings, an essential aspect of his role as a revelation-bearing prophet.

The Qur'an has no less significance in Nursi's epistemology. One of the longest passages in Words, the 25th Word, is reserved to prove the divine origin of the Qur'an through an analysis of its content, eloquence and linguistic marvel. At the beginning of this passage, Nursi gives as many as 42 descriptions of the Qur'an.[70] Significantly, he links the Qur'an to the universe. The Qur'an is described as "the pre-eternal translator of the great Book of the Universe, and the post-eternal interpreter of the various tongues reciting the verses of creation."[71] As the uncreated word of God, the Qur'an explains the universe and gives an exegesis of the signs embedded in the universe by the Creator. So, the Qur'an is not just a source of knowledge for believers, but also a source to explain the universe and natural world. This is an interesting flipping of the epistemological ranking between science and the

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[67] Ibid, 784.

[68] These verses allude to the night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and the ascension of Prophet Muhammad to the heavens in cryptic language.

[69] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 191.

[70] Nursi, *Sözler*, 25th Word, Introduction, 490-493.

[71] Ibid, 490.

Qur'an to Qur'an's favour when the Qur'an is elevated to the role of interpreting the universe. As will be discussed further in this chapter, this relationship is reciprocal where Nursi cites the universe as an exegete of the Qur'an.

The epistemological primacy of the Qur'an is seen throughout Nursi's works as he almost always cites Qur'anic verses at the beginning of key passages and then provides explanation, interpretation and exegesis of those verses. Where appropriate, he supports his arguments with additional references to Qur'anic verses. As discussed in Chapter 2, his works are generally considered a theological exegesis of the Qur'an.[72] Use of Sunnah references (hadith) as sources is less frequent, except in the 19th Letter where his gives hadith references to more than 300 reported miracles of Prophet Muhammad. Nursi makes original contributions to hadith interpretation in his introductory treatment at the beginning of the 19th Letter and 5th Ray.[73]

Where does this leave reason in Nursi's epistemology and why does he closely link the Qur'an and Sunnah to the universe and not to reason? Nursi admits all essentials of faith require conclusive proofs (*burhan al-qat'ī*),[74] which inevitably necessitates reasoning. Similar to the approach of classical theologians, he goes to considerable lengths to provide rational proofs for the authenticity and divine origin of the Qur'an[75] as well as outlining arguments and factual evidence in support of the authenticity of Prophet Muhammad's prophethood.[76] Unsurprisingly, Nursi aims to set a rational basis for the two fundamental sources of Islam. At the same time, he appears to relegate reason to a secondary status to revealed sources.

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[72] As noted in Chapter 2, Nursi outlined his exegetical methodology in his early work *Muhākamāt*. He applied this methodology in the exegetical work *Ishārāt al-I'jāz.*

[73] Notwithstanding the significance of these contributions, it is beyond the scope of this study to examine them.

[74] Nursi, *Sözler*, 24th Word, 3rd Branch, 457.

[75] Ibid, 25th Word, 488-622.

[76] Ibid, 19th Word, 319-332.

Through a long analogy in the 24th Word, Nursi compares the respective capacities of revelation (*wahy* or sometimes termed *naql*), reason ('*aql*) and religious insight (*kashf*) in attaining religious truths.[77] He compares and contrasts light refracted on a flower (representing religious insight through the human heart) and light reflecting from the moon (representing philosophical reasoning) to receiving light directly from the sun (representing revelatory truth of the Qur'an). Just as refracted light is a filtered version of sunlight showing only certain colours and moonlight is a miniscule portion of reflected sunlight, in comparison, direct exposure to sunlight is consummate access to the sun. Similarly, revelation (*wahy*) is far more complete in gaining access to religious truth in stark contrast to inherent limitations of reason and subjectivity of spiritual experience and insight.[78] While this may seem to position revelation to a higher locus than reason, Nursi's aim with this analogy is to explain the root causes of why there seems to be three different paths to human perfection (*kamālāt*),[79] why there are significant differences between faith traditions and why influential religious figures seem to point to different paths to God.[80] Hence, in Nursi's epistemology, reason and religious insight are acceptable and will lead to the truth, but on their own they always fall short in reaching human perfection and the guidance of revelation is essential and more complete.

In the 30th Word, Nursi hones a closer scrutiny of the relationship between reason and revelation. He contentiously argues that, whenever the line of philosophy (reason) is combined with, and in a way subservient to, the line of prophethood (revelation), humanity finds peace and happiness. Whenever they separated, all virtue and goodness primarily coalesces on the flank of religion and all evil and

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[77] Ibid, 24th Word, 2nd Branch, 449-456.
[78] Ibid, 456.
[79] Ibid, 455.
[80] Ibid, 449-450.

destruction predominantly coalesces on the flank of philosophy.[81] Notwithstanding the sweeping assessment of philosophy and religion, Nursi's argument reflects the Qur'anic narrative of religion and human condition. Crucially though, this claim does not negate reason, but locates it in a subservient and complementary role to revelation to educe the best in humans and humanity.

Colin Turner clarifies that Nursi's use and discussion of philosophy does not always mean the same thing and, in general, comparative discourse on philosophy denotes certain philosophical approaches leading to materialistic interpretations of science and reasoning at the service of human ego.[82] A thorough examination of the 30th Word reveals Nursi's explanation of the role of self-awareness (*anā*) within the natural human disposition (*fitra*) and human ego (*nafs*). He identifies *anā* as the essential key to understanding God and how the human ego manifests differently throughout human history.[83] His main argument is that revelation (and authentic religion) supported by reason guides the majority of humanity towards goodness, virtue and happiness in this world and the next, whereas reason (materialistic philosophy) alone is susceptible to the influence of ego and only achieves happiness for a small portion of humanity in a finite worldly life.[84] Clearly, in reaching ultimate truth and attaining human perfection and happiness, Nursi does not rely on human reason alone.

Yet, Nursi's works are replete with applications of critical reasoning and logical argumentation to the point that, as Egyptian scholar of Islamic philosophy 'Adil

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[81] Ibid, 30th Word, 1st Aim, 729.
[82] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 186.
[83] Nursi, *Sözler*, 30th Word, 1st Aim, 724-741. This idea will be analysed in more detail in Chapter 6.
[84] See also 12th Word where Nursi compares and contrasts the wisdom of the Qur'an and wisdom of philosophy.

Mahmud Badr identifies, Nursi's thought and discourse is highly philosophical.[85] Is this a methodological inconsistency for Nursi? Most significantly, in Nursi's epistemology, reason is not the counterpart of revelation, but more pertinently the counterpart of revelation is the universe (*kā'ināt*). Put differently, the universe, and therefore the natural world, is commensurate with revelation (the Qur'an), not necessarily reason. The universe has the capacity to confirm the truths of revelation, just as revelation has the capacity to confirm the truths reflected in the universe. This insight is the most significant aspect in Nursi's epistemology and cosmology and warrants a deeper treatment.

3.5   The Role of Universe in Nursi's Epistemology

Nursi places the universe as a concomitant epistemological source together with the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad for two main reasons. First, for Nursi, this approach is the Qur'anic method.[86] The concern here is not just to legitimise the universe as a source by linking it to the Qur'an; rather, the emphasis is on the audience. Just as modern Muslims are confronted by people who question the authority of the revelation, Prophet Muhammad faced a similar audience in his time. Unbelievers in his time did not readily accept him as a true messenger of God or the Qur'an as an authoritative source from the divine. The only objective source of knowledge accessible to both believers and disbelievers was the natural world and the universe. The universe is the only objective source of knowledge accessible to every person to test propositions of faith encapsulated within the revelation. Consequently, the

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[85] 'Adil Mahmud Badr, "Said Nursi View of the Age of Progress and the Science of Kalam" (paper presented at the 6th International Nursi Symposium on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, Istanbul, September 22-24, 2002).
[86] Nursi, *Sözler*, 25th Word, 488.

Qur'an requests its readers to look for verses or signs (*āyāt*) in the natural world, urging them to reflect using their critical reasoning.[87]

In the Qur'anic vision and Nursi's method, the universe should be read like a grand book;[88] thus, the universe will reveal and confirm all truths of belief proposed by the Qur'an. Just as the Qur'an is a commentator of the "verses of creation" (*āyāt al-takwiniyya*) embedded in the universe,[89] the universe is an exegete of the "verses of revelation" (*āyāt al-qur'āniyya*) encapsulated in the Qur'an.[90] Previous to Nursi, al-Ghazālī articulated a similar metaphor when he depicted the universe as *al-kitāb al-manshūr* (the outspread book), the theological and physical mirror to the Qur'an, which is *al-kitāb al-mastūr* (the written book).[91] Nursi resurrected this key Qur'anic idea centuries after and developed it further as a key theological approach. As Turner highlights, this is one of the most distinctive features of Nursi's theology in that, for Nursi, "every creative act of God is an act of revelation, and that the created realm as a whole is from all aspects revelatory in nature."[92] Ali Mermer agrees, contending that Nursi goes further than any other theologian by inseparably linking the Qur'an and the universe in a mutual relationship.[93] The key remark where Nursi makes this linkage is in the 7th Ray:

> Just as the attribute of Speech (*kalām*) makes the Most-Sacred-Divine-Essence (*Dhāt al-Aqdas*) known through revelation and inspiration, so too the attribute of Power (*qudra*) makes the Most Sacred Divine Essence known through masterly works – each of which act as an embodied word – describing and

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[87] See for example, Qur'an 3:190-191. Ali Ünal, *The Qur'an with Annotated Interpretation in Modern English*. (Clifton, N.J.: Tughra Books, 2012).

[88] Nursi, *Sözler*, 13th Word, 2nd Station, 6th Matter, 224.

[89] Ibid, 25th Word, Introduction, 490.

[90] Ibid, 19th Word, 1st Droplet, 319.

[91] Ramadan, *Radical reform*, 88.

[92] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 191.

[93] Ali Mermer, "Divine Speech in the *Risale-i Nur*" (paper presented at the 5th International Nursi Symposium on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, Istanbul, September 24-26, 2000).

ascribing a Powerful-Possessor-of-Glory (*Qadir Dhu'l-Jalal*) by presenting the entire universe as a materialised form of the Qur'an.[94]

This insight from Nursi is original and most significant. As a summary of his theological approach, the statement firmly intertwines revelation, universe and their key function of making God known and understood to the human audience.

The second reason why Nursi sets the universe as a source of knowledge for propositions of belief is that this approach gives his rational arguments an empirical foundation and almost scientific certainty. Especially when philosophical developments since the European Enlightenment and scientific discoveries about the natural world and the universe challenged the truth claims of all religions,[95] the empirical method becomes a necessity if religion (Islam) is to have any relevance in the modern world. Furthermore, science offers a detailed and thorough knowledge of the world and universe, and this knowledge is increasing exponentially. Instead of posing science as an adversary of God and religion, incorporating its content as an epistemological source in support of belief in God wins a powerful ally. As Şükran Vahide suggests, this allows Nursi to end the seeming conflicts between science and Qur'anic propositions and provide proofs based on reason and reflective thought on the universe.[96]

Nursi's friendly treatment of science is not just a tactical accommodation. He takes scientific knowledge right to the core of theology. Citing part of verse 17:44, "...and there is not a thing but extols His glory and praise..." and contending that many window-like facets open to God through everything, Nursi remarks:

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[94] Nursi, *Şualar*, 7th Ray, 1st Chapter, 18th Level, 200.

[95] W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology* (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 1985), 158.

[96] Şükran Vahide, "The Book of the Universe: Its Place in Bediuzzaman's Thought" (paper presented at the 4th International Nursi Symposium on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, Istanbul, September 20-22, 1998).

The essence of the creation and the reality of the universe is founded upon the Divine Names. The reality of everything depends upon one or many names. Even the qualities and art displayed over the creation rely upon a Name. In fact, the true science of philosophy is based on the name *Hakīm* (All-Wise); true science of medicine depends on the Name *Shāfī* (Healer), and the science of geometry relies on the name *Muqaddir* (Determiner), and so on. Just as each branch of science is based on a Name and eventually ends in a Name, the realities of all scientific disciplines, human perfections and all levels of human virtues are also founded on the Divine Names… In fact, manifestations and the impresses of as many as twenty Divine Names may be plainly observed on a single living creature.[97]

With this important proclamation, Nursi places science, as the revealer of knowledge of the world and the universe, at the epistemological epicentre for knowing God. This depiction is not new as Ibn 'Arabī also gives the similitude of the universe as a kind of a book of divine names in his seminal work *futūhāt al-makkiyya* (The Meccan Revelations).[98] Notwithstanding his critique of Ibn 'Arabī,[99] Nursi seems to have embraced this theology. Nevertheless, the crucial difference is that Nursi links science, hence empirical knowledge of the world, within the theological equation. As Mermer suggests, this link is such that the distinction between theology based on the Qur'an and science based on undisputed knowledge of the universe is rendered meaningless.[100]

The 10th Word[101] can be given as an illustration of how Nursi applies his empirical methodology (see Figure 1). The starting point is the Qur'anic verse 30:50, "Look, then, at the imprints of God's Mercy (*rahma*), how He revives the dead earth after its death. Certainly then it is He Who will revive the dead. He has full power over everything." Nursi uses observations from the natural world to demonstrate God's mercy and compassion (*rahma*). All living species are clothed and fed according to

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[97] Nursi, *Sözler*, 32nd Word, 3rd Stopping Place, 1st Topic, 853. For direct quotations from Nursi, I have used Şükran Vahide's translation as a base and modified it by crosschecking the translation with the original text.
[98] Mermer, "Divine Speech in the *Risale-i Nur.*"
[99] This critique is discussed in detail in Chapter 6.
[100] Mermer, "Divine Speech in the *Risale-i Nur.*"
[101] Nursi, *Sözler*, 10th Word, 82-176.

their needs where the most powerless are provided the best of sustenance.[102] Animal, human, even plant mothers are compelled to serve their young with an irresistible impulse of compassion.[103] These facts can only be manifestations of a single source of love and compassion that can only be derived from the infinite mercy and compassion of God, as there are no other identifiable sources for infinite compassion. Human life is short and transient. If there was to be only non-existence after a brief joyous earthly life, this would constitute a great act of cruelty.[104] Since this is inconsistent with infinite compassion, humans will be resurrected for an everlasting life out of God's infinite compassion.[105] Throughout the 10th Word, Nursi follows the same theo-empirical method and reasoning to provide more than ten separate arguments for the existence of God and resurrection after death.

Figure 1: Nursi's empirical methodology

This example also illustrates the role of reason within Nursi's epistemology and methodology. The claims of revelation are confirmed by empirical observations of

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[102] Ibid, 10th Word, 2nd Truth, 101.
[103] Ibid, 102.
[104] Ibid, 103.
[105] Özalp, *Islam between Tradition and Modernity*, 33.

the natural world through the use of reasoning. It is safe to conclude that, in Nursi's epistemology, the universe (book of creation) and the Qur'an (book of revelation) have equal divine origin and hence importance. Any claim for religious truth must be confirmed by both the Qur'an and the universe. Human reason is an essential instrument to find this correlation. If there is a direct correlation between the Qur'an and the universe mutually entailed by the use of reason, then that truth claim can be deemed as absolute truth. Throughout his writings, Nursi follows this methodology and brings forward original arguments for God's existence, divine names and attributes, the reality of life after death and other Qur'anic propositions of faith.

3.6 Significance of Intellectual Perspective in Nursi's Epistemology

Crucially, materialistic philosophy – a source of disbelief for Nursi – also uses empirical data from the natural world and the universe to support its claims for truth. Nursi and theologians following the same methodology, and atheist philosophers and scientists argue the complete opposite with a similar claim for certainty. Interestingly, the Qur'an seems to recognise people can arrive at opposing conclusions using the same body of evidence from the natural world.[106] How is this possible and who is right?

According to Nursi, the answer lies in the inherent deceptive nature of human perception. Deceptiveness of the perspective is not exactly same as al-Ghazālī's deceptiveness of sensory perception; rather, it is deception effectuated through a differing focus in one's outlook in interpreting empirical data obtained from the natural world. Depending on one's perspective, it is possible to perceive the natural world differently and process what is observed with distinct cognition, leading to

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[106] See for examples verses 2:26; 10:101.

opposing conclusions. Nursi calls these two perspectives *ma'nā al-ism* (indicative of the *name*) and *ma'nā al-ḥarf* (indicative of the *letter*).[107] He makes this distinction when he explains the difference between how the Qur'an and positivistic science and philosophy talk about the natural world and the universe:

> The Wise Qur'an (*Qur'an al-Hakīm*) is the most elevated commentator and the most eloquent translator of the Grand Qur'an (book) of universe. It is the *furqan*[108] that instructs humanity … in the verses of creation inscribed by the pen of Power on the pages of the universe and the tablets of time. It looks at creatures--each acting like a meaningful letter--from the perspective of *ma'nā al-ḥarf*[109] (meaning indicative of the letter). That is, it looks at them in the name of their Artistic Maker (*Sānī'*). It says, 'how marvellously they have been made; how beautifully they point to the beauty of their Artistic Maker! (*Sānī'*)' and through this, it exposes the true beauty of the universe. Whereas, the philosophy, called natural philosophy or science … instead of looking at the epistles in the grand book of creation from the perspective of *ma'nā al-ḥarf,* (meaning indicative of the letter), that is in the name of God, it looks at the creation *ma'nā al-ism* (meaning indicative of the name), that is in the name of creation itself. Instead of saying, 'how beautifully they have been made,' it says 'how beautiful they are.'[110]

This distinction between perspectives is one of the hardest notions to comprehend for the ordinary readers of the *Risale-i Nur.* In a letter, Nursi further clarifies the difference in two perspectives to one of his confused students.[111] He gives the analogy of an image in a mirror and the difference in what is seen depending on if one is focusing *on the mirror* or *the image in the mirror*. If one's attention is focused on the mirror, all one sees is the glass. The image in the mirror blurs and remains in the background as fuzzy detail. In this perspective, the mirror acts in the role of *ma'nā al-ism* and has as much value as the material worth of the glass. Conversely, if one focuses attention on the reflected image in the mirror, one will see the image

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[107] Nursi, *Sözler*, 12th Word, 1st Fundamental, 193.
[108] *Furqan* is a title of the Qur'an meaning the 'criterion'. This attribute is given to the Qur'an in the verse 2:185 as it claims to set the criteria of what is right and what is wrong, especially in terms of theological disputes previous generations fell into.
[109] In the Turkish original, the phrase is written in Ottoman style, *mana-yı harf.* I have used the Arabic equivalent to make it more understandable to scholars and readers not familiar with Ottoman Turkish.
[110] Nursi, *Sözler*, 12th Word, 1st Fundamental, 193-194.
[111] Ibid, 1126.

clearly and the glass becomes secondary. In this perspective, the mirror acts in the role of *ma'nā al-ḥarf*. The physical significance of the glass remains in the background and the mirror gains greater value and significance. Since the true function of a mirror is to reflect images, *ma'nā al-ḥarf* is the right perspective to have. Similarly, the universe should be viewed as a mirror to see images of meanings conveyed through constituting parts.[112]

For Nursi, the *ma'nā al-ism* perspective stops at the physicality of things and renders the entire universe meaningless, which invariably leads to disbelief and rejection of God.[113] The *ma'nā al-ism* perspective would be akin to looking at the Statue of Liberty[114] without considering its artist, historical context and priceless symbolic value for the American people. Consequently, the worth and significance of the statue would reduce to its material properties and value. Conversely, in the *ma'nā al-ḥarf* perspective, every entity is perceived as part of a greater meaning, just like a *letter* has no independent meaning, but, as part of a word, points to a greater meaning. The letter 'r,' for example,[115] has no meaning by itself. When used to construct meaningful words, 'r' gains meaning, and hence value, beyond itself. In the *ma'nā al-ḥarf* perspective, creation is viewed as part of a greater meaning where every entity is arranged like letters in a word to convey meaning beyond themselves. If viewed this way, creation will evidently be seen as the purposeful work of God and hence gain profound meaning and value. One will be able to see the testimony of

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[112] Ibid, 31st Word, 3rd Fundamental, 789-790.
[113] Ibid, 23rd Word, First Chapter, 1st Point, 417-418.
[114] Example is mine.
[115] Example is mine.

creation to the Creator and the names of God glittering on the mirror of the universe.[116]

Nursi contends that, when viewed through the lens of positivistic philosophy (through *ma'nā al-ism*), science simply describes the sun in and of itself.[117] Although the scientific perspective gives knowledge about the sun's physical properties, it gives no meaningful spiritual knowledge and wisdom. The Qur'an, on the other hand, looks at the sun as indicative of a greater meaning (*ma'nā al-ḥarf*). It focuses on the sun's role in the cosmic order when it says, "the sun revolves"[118] and brings to mind the orderly behaviour of the solar system resulting in the night–day and summer–winter cycles as indicative of God's cosmic order, for it is beyond the capacity of the sun to create this system. The Qur'an also says, "He has set up the sun as a lamp,"[119] highlighting one of the key purposes of the sun – to illuminate the earth and make it hospitable. It is clearly beyond the sun to think compassionately about creatures and assist in their survival.[120] Hence, Nursi argues the fact that everything in the universe and natural world serves a purpose greater than itself is one of the clearest teleological evidences for the existence of God.[121]

One could critique Nursi's argument and suggest that science identifies the night–day or summer–winter cycles as well as how the sun is critical for the survival of life on earth. Importantly, Nursi is not entirely inferring that positivistic science discounts the sun's significance in the cosmic order; rather, his central argument is that positivistic science's main focus is not the sun's role, but the sun itself. The sun's

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[116] Nursi, *Sözler*, 30th Word, 1st Aim, 730.
[117] Ibid, 19th Word, 14th Droplet, 331.
[118] Qur'an 36:38.
[119] Qur'an 71:16.
[120] Nursi, *Sözler*, 19th Word, 14th Droplet, 331.
[121] Ibid, 33rd Word, 16th Window, 906.

role is worth mentioning only in passing. Positivistic science examines and produces theories on how seasons change, but seldom mentions the significance this has on cosmic order and life on earth. Even if it does, positivistic science attributes them to random chance and causes. In defence of science, it could be argued that giving meaning to the natural world and universe is beyond science's scope. This is precisely Nursi's main point: positivistic science is empirical and narrow in scope; hence, it will not be able to discover the reality of existence. In his view, the Qur'anic approach is empirical but holistic; hence, rightly focused on leading to the truth. Therefore, in Nursi's cosmology, the universe should be canvassed as a mirror reflecting greater meaning and read like a book conveying a grand mystical story beyond its mere physical composition.[122] It is only possible to read the universe correctly when it is viewed from the perspective of *ma'nā al-ḥarf*. This perspective inevitably leads to discovery of God. In the alternative perspective, *ma'nā al-ism*, the meaning conveyed in the book of the universe is masked. The universe appears chaotic, haphazard and unintelligible.

How can one be so sure that the meaning Nursi insistently suggests is really there; could it be that Nursi is forcing meaning on the universe to simply provide an empirical basis for his theology? Nursi does not pose such a question, but he provides an answer.[123] If someone says they cannot decipher any meaning conveyed through the universe, it does not mean the meaning is not there. But if multiple people can decipher the same meaning from the same set of empirical data, the meaning must be there. If a beautifully written Qur'anic text is shown to a person who cannot read or understand Arabic, the text will be seen intelligible and meaningless. The best they can do is describe the properties of the book and explain

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[122] Ibid, 12th Word, 2nd Fundamental, 194.
[123] Ibid, 1st Fundamental, 191.

how beautifully it is put together. But, if the same Qur'anic text is shown to Arabic speaking Qur'an experts, they will immediately recognise it as the Qur'an and be able to read the text and explain its meanings in more or less the same manner. This demonstrates the text conveys a meaning beyond its letters. Similarly, since people with discerning eyes and reflecting minds can translate more or less the same meaning conveyed through the book of the universe, this proves the meaning is there in reality.[124]

In an early book, *Katre* (Drop), Nursi says his entire education and learning can be coalesced in just four terms – *ma'nā al-ḥarf*, *ma'nā al-ism*, *niyyah* (intention) and *naẓar* (perspective).[125] The critical focus of these four concepts is the universe and the suggestion of the universe analogous to a book (*kitāb*). As Vahide notes, Nursi makes this point to argue the 'book of the universe' must then have an author (God) and inform the human reader about God's attributes.[126] The book metaphor also infers reading must take place with an intention to understand it. Furthermore, as a creation of God, the book of the universe becomes a type of revelation in a complementary way to the Qur'an as a book (*kitāb*) of revelation. Just as the Qur'an is a divine source of knowledge, knowledge obtained from the universe through *ma'nā al-ḥarf* is also a divine source of knowledge. Nevertheless, as Turner suggests, Nursi says the testimony of the universe would be insufficient and self-disclosure of God is required as revealed text from the Qur'an. Yet, linking with his earlier definitions of the Qur'an, the call for reading and understanding the universe gives it an epistemological role in theology.

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[124] Ibid, 192-193.
[125] Vahide, "The Book of the Universe."
[126] Ibid.

3.7 Conclusion

The classical Islamic discourse on theology and its epistemology originated within the Qur'an and Sunnah as primary sources of knowledge. For classical theologians, knowledge offered by the Qur'an is definitive as the authentic word of God. Since God would not deceive people and reveal wrong information, the entire content of the Qur'an is accepted as true knowledge. Since Prophet Muhammad was guided by God, what he said and did are also infallible and revealed certain knowledge. This epistemological foundation was a major leap forward for the early Muslim community as they were migrating from a Bedouin and tribal society – collectively identified as the era of *jahiliyyah* (ignorance) – with no previous sources of knowledge other than tribal stories and practical wisdom.

As the Muslim community studied the Qur'an and Sunnah, and advanced in civilisation, they were exposed to new issues, ideas and theologies as well as sources of knowledge. It became necessary to consider additional sources, chief among them being the *isrāīliyyāt* (Jewish and Christian sources), science and human reason (*'aql*). With *isrāīliyyāt* receiving heavy criticism and science being rudimentary, reason was the main contender as an independent source of knowledge alongside revelation.

Two centuries of tension between revelation and reason culminated in the Ash'arī and Māturīdī Sunni theological schools where a relative balance was achieved or, more correctly, reason was incorporated as an epistemological source only with the condition of subservience to revelation. While the majority of the Muslim world followed these two theological schools, traditionalists, who gave no place to reason, and Mu'tazalites, who gave primacy to reason, precipitated at either end of the theological spectrum. Al-Ghazālī's spiritual insight (*kashf*) became the fourth source

of knowledge and was even considered superior to reason within Sufism as it became a mass movement from the twelfth century onwards. So, classical Islamic epistemology for theology consisted of the Qur'an and Sunnah as revelation (*naql*), human reason (*'aql*) and spiritual insight (*kashf*).

The modern era brought major changes and developments in epistemology. A dramatic increase in human knowledge of the world and the universe, and major developments in science and technology, propelled empiricism and science to the epistemological centre stage.[127] Epistemological tension shifted to interplay between science and religion. In the Western world, authenticity of scriptures was challenged and their epistemological value was negated outside the church and its theological discourse.[128] In the case of Islamic scholarship, the primacy of the Qur'an and Sunnah persisted, but not without encroachment of science and philosophy without proper epistemological considerations.

Nursi attempts to address the modern imperative and influences by incorporating the universe and natural world within the bounds of Islamic epistemology as a primary source along with the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad (Sunnah). Nursi argues that the universe is a divine book of creation, a rich source of knowledge on the existence, unity and names and attributes of God. The universe holds an exegetical role to the Qur'an, while at the same time the Qur'an is defined as an interpreter of the universe. The Qur'an directs humanity to the right perspective and reveals the codes to decipher the language of the universe. In this respect, the Qur'an and the universe are an inseparable whole as both are equal revelations from God in different forms. Human reason is an important instrument that discovers the correlation

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[127] Anthony, *A New History of Western Philosophy*, 865-872.
[128] Armstrong, *The Case for God*, 95.

between the Qur'an and the universe. If reason can confirm Qur'anic faith propositions with empirical evidence from the universe, than that faith proposition is certain truth. Prophet Muhammad is the sign of the book of universe, the finest culmination of the Qur'anic vision for human beings and the teacher of the true purpose of the Qur'an, universe and human beings. Thus, Nursi's epistemology is a holistic system linking the Qur'an, Prophet Muhammad, the universe and human reason.

Nursi's major contribution to Islamic epistemology is the incorporation of the universe and natural world, hence science, as primary sources of theological knowledge. Importantly, this is not done at the expense of the Qur'an and Sunnah. In his epistemology, the Qur'an and Sunnah not only retain their role as primary sources of knowledge, but also their positions are strengthened by their reciprocal linking to the universe. At the same time, science is not imported to Islamic epistemology wholesale. Nursi makes the significant distinction that its positivistic perspective has to change. Effectively, Nursi repositions science and its findings within the realm of theology.

The implications of Nursi's epistemological contribution are far reaching. First and foremost, it offers a firm intellectual and empirical basis for faith propositions of the Qur'an. Second, if the universe is God's revelation and should be read like a book, studying the universe, hence science, if done in the name of God, becomes an act of worship in reflection (*tafakkur*). Third, it achieves reconciliation between science and religion (Islam), clearing the way for Muslims to more effectively deal with the fact that modern science and technology has a Western origin. Lastly, Nursi's

approach opens the door for a far more concrete educational reform than those proposed by other prominent twentieth century Muslim reformers.[129]

A key distinction of Nursi is that he does not just give a new epistemological theory. He puts it to full use in developing his exposition of Islamic theology. This will be tackled next in the chapters to follow.

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[129] Muhammed Yusuf, "Integration of Knowledge in Theory and Practice: The Contribution of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi" (paper presented at the 9th International Nursi Symposium on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, Istanbul, October 3-5, 2010).

CHAPTER 4: EXISTENCE OF GOD

4.1   Introduction

Whether God exists is the first and central question in theology. The answer makes enormous difference not only in the worldview of the individuals, but also the truth claims of all faith traditions. Since God is not directly accessible to human perception, accepting His existence relies on faith, spiritual experience or persuasion of rational argument. Historians trace the oldest rational arguments for the existence of God to ancient Greek philosopher Xenophanes (570–475 BCE) who was highly critical of Homer's mythology and anthropomorphism. Xenophanes argued for a monotheistic notion of God expressed in a natural theology.[1] Contributions of Egyptian monotheistic pharaoh Akhenaten (d. 1336 BCE) and Biblical prophets were classified as oracular revelation rather than rational theology.[2] Later Christian theologians, especially the highly influential Augustine of Hippo (354-430), articulated a clear set of proofs for God. Basing his argument on the independent existence of rules of virtue and the truth of arithmetic, Augustine argued there had to be a higher being (God).[3]

Muslim scholars of the classical period entwined the Greek and Christian arguments for God in unique ways making original contributions. For Muslim theologians, such proofs firmly grounded religion in knowledge and reason instead of blind faith or a faith despoiled in doubts. Interestingly, al-Ghazālī emphatically contended that Abraham and other Qur'anic (also Biblical) prophets were the forbearers of reasoning for the existence of God long before the Egyptians and Greeks. Citing

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[1] Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy*, 228-229.
[2] Ibid, 229.
[3] Ibid, 468.

examples from the reasoning of prophets, especially Abraham, he claimed the Greeks learned rhetorical syllogism from the prophets, not the other way around.[4]

There is a line of departure for atheistic and theistic arguments since David Hume's (1711-1776) critique of the classic proofs of God and the role of miracles in providing a foundation for the authority of revelation.[5] Hume's critiques, and Western philosophers to follow him, instigated a significant puncture in traditional arguments for God. Yet, as Richard Swinburne contends, such critiques did not produce substantial proofs of God's non-existence, with the exception of rejecting God on the basis of the existence of evil and suffering in the world.[6] Karen Armstrong adds that Enlightenment philosophy only rejected doctrines and interpretations execrable to reason, while "their belief in a Supreme Being remained intact."[7] Regardless, Enlightenment philosophy coupled with advancements in science compelled modern theologians to develop fresh approaches to questions concerning God. Many theologians, including Nursi, responded to this imperative.

This chapter identifies arguments for the existence of God in classical Islamic theology and investigates Nursi's contributions. The chapter highlights Nursi's position on the proofs of God expounded by classical theologians and how he used them, especially the design and teleological proofs. With respect to proofs of God, Nursi is original in two ways. First, Nursi reverses the burden of proof and provides a new argument for the existence of God that this study calls the default proof. Second, Nursi employs literary devices and houses his arguments in language more conducive to the understanding of ordinary readers. In doing so, he combines

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[4] Al-Ghazālī, *The Just Balance*, 12-31.
[5] Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy*, 738.
[6] Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 9.
[7] Armstrong, *A History of God*, 394.

cosmological, design and teleological arguments under a grander argument for God, called the governance argument.

4.2 Proofs of God in Classical Islamic Theology

Outstanding theologian and polymath Fahkr al-Din al-Rāzī (1135-1210) classified arguments for God into four distinct categories: arguments from features and attributes of things; arguments from the way things are created; arguments from the contingency of features and attributes of things; and arguments from the contingency of creation.[8] In the Western tradition, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) made an influential categorisation of proofs for God that persists till today. He divided the proofs into three main categories – cosmological, physio-theological (design) and ontological.[9] In the cosmological argument, the starting point is existence in general and the need for existence and the universe to have a cause. The design argument begins with the constituting parts of the world and relies on empirical considerations. The ontological argument starts from a conceptual truth ultimately leading to God rather than the universe and constituting parts of the world. As Swinburne points out, there are other types of proofs and variants within each of the categories that may constitute separate arguments.[10] Nevertheless, Kant's classification gives a good framework for the proofs of God in classical and modern Islamic theology.

The first clear articulation of the cosmological argument was made in the last and longest dialogue found in Plato's (428-348 BCE) *Laws*.[11] The argument starts by observing that some things are in motion and there are two kinds of motion:

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[8] Ayman Shihadeh, "The Existence of God," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim J. Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 198.
[9] Cited in Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 11.
[10] Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 11.
[11] Yujin Nagasawa, *The Existence of God: A Philosophical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2011), 116.

transmitted and self-generated. The ultimate source of all motion must be self-generated, for if a motion is transmitted it cannot be the cause. Plato continues to argue that self-generated motion must be a special alive soul as it cares for the entire universe and directs everything to their perfection and this can only be God.[12] Plato's argument influenced Christian and Muslim theologians.

The version of the cosmological argument developed by Muslim theologians – the *kalām* cosmological argument – constitutes one of the most important proofs of God in classical Islamic theology. Although Van Ess highlights the Mu'tazalite theologian Abu 'l-Hudhayl (752-850) was the first Muslim theologian to formulate proofs for God within Islamic theology,[13] the *kalām* cosmological argument was first argued in detail by polymath al-Kindi (801-873), the director of Baghdad's House of Wisdom.[14] The cosmological argument is strikingly simple: (1) Anything that has a beginning in its existence has a cause; (2) The universe began to exist; therefore, (3) The universe's existence is caused.[15] It then follows that, since only God is beyond space and time, He must have been the cause of the universe's existence. Logically, this argument is valid – if the two premises are true, the conclusion necessarily follows.

The first premise was accepted as an observable truth. The main challenge was to prove the universe had a beginning. The difficulty al-Kindi and other theologians faced was the dominant Aristotelian notion of the eternity of the universe, as it was considered the universe was unchanging, hence eternal. Without the knowledge and

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[12] Ibid, 117.
[13] Van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, 87.
[14] William L. Craig, *The Kalām Cosmological Argument* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 19.
[15] Nagasawa, *The Existence of God*, 129.

acceptance of the Big Bang Theory,[16] it was always going to be logically burdensome to argue the opposite. Greatly advancing the *ex nihilo* creation theory of the universe argued by Alexandrian theologian John Philoponus (470-580),[17] al-Kindi went to great lengths to compose a complex logical argument to prove space and time are finite; therefore, the universe must have a beginning.[18]

In support of the *ex nihilo* theory, Muslim theologians adduced the temporality (*hudūth*) argument as a key proof. Al-Ghazālī's version of the *hudūth* argument proceeds as follows: (1) All phenomena in the world are temporal; (2) These temporal phenomena are caused by other temporal phenomena; (3) This cycle can go on *ad infinitum*; (4) But the series of temporality and causation cannot regress infinitely; so, (5) There must be a beginning point when causation of existence started; therefore, (6) The universe must have had a beginning.[19] The key conclusion of the cosmological argument was, if the universe was created out of nothing, a cause must have preceded the beginning of the universe. This cause must have the necessary knowledge, will and power to bring the vast universe into existence. Hence, the cause can only be God who is uncaused and is the ultimate cause of all causes (*musabbab al-asbab*).

The *hudūth* argument was not the only one put forward to prove the *ex nihilo* creation theory for the universe. Harry Wolfson gives a detailed description and

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[16] The Aristotelian and Greek doctrine for an eternal universe persisted until the twentieth century when astronomical discoveries made by Hubble and other astronomers proved the origin of the universe in time. Although this is now challenged with the multiverse theory, the problem of attributing eternity to matter and infinite regress remains a key problem for science and materialistic philosophy.

[17] Craig, *The Kalām Cosmological Argument*, 19-36.

[18] Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy*, 469.

[19] Craig, *The Kalām Cosmological Argument*, 45-46.

analysis of eight such proofs,[20] which had a significant influence on medieval Christian and Jewish theology. Wolfson particularly notes their influence on Jewish theologian Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), who acknowledged his use of the works of Muslim theologians (*mutakallimūn*) in his seven proofs.[21] Wolfson also observes that Christian theologians, such as Albertus Magnus (1193-1280), Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and St Bonaventura (1221-1274), adopted proofs developed by Muslim theologians and philosophers through Latin translations of Ibn Rushd and Maimonides.[22] Robert Hamond compares these in tables to illustrate Aquinas' direct borrowing of texts from al-Farābi.[23]

An important proof for the existence of God, as formulated by Muslim polymath and philosopher Ibn Sina, is the contingency (*imkān*) argument.[24] Ibn Sina's argument hinges on the 'being' (*mahiya*) categorised as *contingent* and *necessary*, a key distinction postulated by al-Farabi. A necessary being is one whose non-existence is impossible; a contingent being is one that needs another being to bring it into existence and therefore its existence is possible.[25] In al-Farābi's argument, all beings start at the lowest and transform to higher orders ultimately terminating in the necessary being that nothing more perfect can be conceived.[26] According to Majid Fakhry, this is the first formulation of the ontological argument for God.[27]

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[20] Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1976), 335-455.
[21] Ibid, 373.
[22] Ibid, 456.
[23] Robert Hammond, *The Philosophy of Alfarabi and its Influence on Medieval Thought* (New York: Hobson Book Press, 1947).
[24] Cafer S. Yaran, *Islamic Thought on the Existence of God: With Contributions from Contemporary Western Philosophy of Religion* (Washington: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2003) 166-179.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Fahkry, *Islamic Philosophy*, *Theology and Mysticism*, 40.
[27] Ibid.

Ibn Sina's articulation of the contingency argument proceeds as follows: (1) The existence of something is either possible or necessary; (2) If its existence is necessary, then that is what we are looking for, namely God; (3) If its existence is possible, then its existence and non-existence is equally probable, i.e. it requires an external cause to necessitate its existence; (4) The cause is necessarily existent – God; therefore, (5) In either case God exists.[28] A key result of the contingency argument is the designation of 'necessary being' (*wājib al-wujūd*) for God. This designation appears repeatedly in the writings of Muslim theologians, including Nursi.

There is a debate whether Ibn Sina's contingency argument can be classified as a cosmological or ontological argument. The ontological argument was articulated as clearly separate by St Anselm (1033-1098), who argued for God from the idea that God can be conceived in the mind.[29] The ontological argument was revived and made famous in Western philosophy centuries later by Descartes (1596-1650).[30] Notwithstanding Cafer Yaran and Herbert Davidson including Ibn Sina's contingency argument as a variant of the cosmological argument,[31] scholars such as Fazlur Rahman and Parwiz Morowedge define it as ontological.[32] Ayman Shihadeh agrees and sets Ibn Sina's argument as distinct from the design and cosmological arguments.[33] Even though Ibn Sina's contingency argument seems to focus on the existence of the universe, it acuminates the idea of *being* (existence) and then moves directly to God's existence without involving the universe or any design aspect of the

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[28] Yaran, *Islamic Thought on the Existence of God*, 182.
[29] Yujin. *The Existence of God*, 3.
[30] Ibid, 12.
[31] Yaran, *Islamic Thought on the Existence of God*, 166-167.
[32] Ibid, 191-192.
[33] Shihadeh, "The Existence of God," 212.

Creation. In this respect, it is more appropriate to classify it as ontological. This sets Ibn Sina as the independent originator of the ontological argument.

The *imkān* argument has been popular with Muslim theologians. Leading theologians al-Māturīdī and al-Ash'arī used a version of the argument in their proofs for God.[34] Al-Ghazālī used a variant to prove the truth of the first premise of the cosmological argument that every contingent thing that exists has a cause: (1) The existence of something is either impossible or possible; (2) Impossible things will never exist; (3) If it exists, then its existence was possible; (4) The possibility of existence means its existence and non-existence are equally probable; so, (5) For it to come into existence, there must be a preponderance to the side of existence to bring that thing into existence; therefore, (6) Every contingent thing that exists must have a cause.[35]

Attested by the *imkān* and *hudūth* arguments, the *kalām* cosmological argument became the standard proof for God in Islamic theology. Although such a complete array of proofs provided a logically sound greater argument for God's existence, ordinary believers did not have the philosophical training and logical acumen to fully grasp and appreciate the cosmological argument other than the simple reasoning that this majestic universe must have a creator. Hence, variants of the teleological (design) argument feature far more prominently in classical Islamic theology and popular belief.[36]

Yaran gives three categories for teleological arguments within classical Islamic theology – from wisdom (*hikmah*), from providence (*'inayah*) and from creation (*ikhtira'*). The argument from wisdom hinges on the order and marvel of the natural

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[34] Al-Māturīdī and Fathalla Kholeif, *Kitab al-Tawhid* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1970), xxiii.
[35] Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Ghazālī's Moderation in Belief*, 28-30.
[36] Yaran, *Islamic Thought on the Existence of God*, 166-167.

world: (1) The world shows a marvellous and well-ordered system; (2) This system cannot exist without a creator; therefore, (3) There must be a creator of the system and the world. Al-Māturīdī is one of the earliest theologians to postulate this argument. He highlights a "wondrous wisdom" displayed in every process (orbits of cosmic objects, seasons and lifecycles of living beings) that flows in a wise and deliberate course throughout the universe.[37] Ibn Hazm (994-1064) discusses the design and wisdom manifested in two planes – on the scale of cosmic objects and on biological life on earth. On the cosmic plane, the way the orbits of cosmic objects fit together while remaining unchanged points to the ordering of a "mover."[38] In a similar tone, al-Ghazālī quotes Qur'anic verses, such as 2:164, as indicating the design and order in the universe and concludes, "This marvellous, well-ordered system cannot exist without a maker who conducts it and a creator who plans and perfects it."[39] Yaran places arguments from wisdom under the contemporary argument of fine-tuning the universe.[40]

Arguments from providence and creation are postulated by Ibn Rushd as logically more sound and having a firm basis in the Qur'an. The argument from providence is: (1) Everything in the natural world and the bodies of human beings are adapted to sustain human life; (2) This providence cannot be achieved by chance; therefore, (3) The providence is the result of an agent with the will to do so.[41] Yaran insists Ibn Rushd did not mean the universe was created merely for human beings; rather, there is a perfect suitability to meet the needs of human life in the way the universe and

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[37] Ibid, 34.
[38] Ibid, 35.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid, 89.

earth are designed.[42] To support his argument, Ibn Rushd used the Qur'anic passage 78:6-16,[43] which describes how the cosmos and earth are prepared to sustain life.[44] Ibn Rush's argument from creation is: (1) All life is created from entities devoid of life; (2) The cause of this creation cannot be lifeless entities; therefore, (3) Life is created by a living agent (God).[45] His main textual support is verses 86:4-7 that describe the creation of human beings.[46] His evidence to support the first premise is the fact that higher order features of perception and consciousness cannot come from things that do not possess those qualities.[47] For Ibn Rushd, all arguments for God are either arguments from providence or creation or a combination of both.[48]

An important feature of the design argument is that it is open to analogical reasoning. For most ordinary believers, this feature made the design argument attractive, as it was easily understood through analogies and basic reasoning. Al-Ash'arī gives a few examples: It would be irrational to assume a piece of cotton will become a spun thread and then a woven garment by itself. A person is required to purposely spin the cotton and weave the garment. Further, it would be insane to think earthly clay would become mud bricks by itself and then the bricks move into position to build a house without a builder. Similarly, every being and the universe needs a maker and that maker is God.[49] In *The Wisdom in God's Creation*,[50] al-Ghazālī compares the world to a large house and human beings as its owners. He then explains how the

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[42] Ibid.

[43] Importantly, Muslim theologians quote Qur'anic verses to illustrate their proof is supported by revealed texts. Reasoning and evidence from the world are also put forward to support the premises of their argument.

[44] Rosalind Ward Gwynne, *Logic, Rhetoric and Legal Reasoning in the Qur'ān: God's Arguments* (London: Routledge, 2004), 26.

[45] Yaran, *Islamic Thought on the Existence of God*, 119.

[46] Gwynne, *God's Arguments*, 26.

[47] Yaran, *Islamic Thought on the Existence of God*, 119.

[48] Gwynne, *God's Arguments*, 26.

[49] Cited in al-Māturīdī and Kholeif, *Kitab al-Tawhid*, xxiv.

[50] Yaran notes this work may have been written by an unknown author and attributed to al-Ghazālī.

house and everything in it cannot have been the product of chance and needs the purposeful and wise design of a maker.[51] As will be discussed, these analogies are put to full use and further expanded by Nursi in his proofs of God.

A notable argument from design is given by Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī. Shihadeh notes al-Rāzī considered the design argument far superior to other arguments, as it addressed the reason, imagination and other human faculties for maximum effect.[52] For example:

> Whoever contemplates the various parts of the higher and lower worlds will find that this world is constructed in the most advantageous and best manner, and the most-superlative and perfect order (*tartīb*). The mind unambiguously testifies that this state of affairs cannot but be by the governance (*tadbīr*) of a wise and knowledgeable [being].[53]

In this argument, al-Rāzī distinctly follows a method previous theologians have not. First, he builds in his argument attributes of God, not just a conceptualisation of God as the necessary being or uncaused cause.[54] Without such attribution, God would simply be a transcendent deity unreachable to human knowledge and spiritual connection.[55] Second, al-Rāzī gives an overarching argument of governance (*rubūbiyyah*) that combines the arguments of providence, order and design in one. With this argument, al-Rāzī brought into familiarity the first version of the governance argument. As will be covered later in this chapter, both aspects feature prominently in Nursi's arguments for God.

As a significant contrast, not all Muslim theologians thought it was necessary or even useful to prove God's existence. God did not need proof, as belief in God was

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[51] Yaran, *Islamic Thought on the Existence of God*, 33.
[52] Shihadeh, "The Existence of God," 204.
[53] Cited in Shihadeh, "The Existence of God," 202.
[54] Shihadeh, "The Existence of God," 202.
[55] This will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

engrained as part of human natural disposition (*fitra*). In support, these scholars usually cited[56] the Qur'anic verse, "So set your whole being upon the Religion as one of pure faith. This is the original pattern (*fitra*) belonging to God on which He has originated humankind. No change can there be in God's creation."[57] As long as people did not corrupt their natural disposition, faith in God arose naturally. Even al-Ghazālī said "whoever supposes that faith is realized through speculative theology, abstract proofs, or academic divisions is an innovator" and stressed that faith in God is a creation of God in a person's heart through various means rather than reasoning alone.[58] Al-Ghazālī insisted, while all humans could know God intuitively through their natural disposition, proofs were only necessary for those who were confused about God through philosophical ideas.[59] Ibn Taymiyya agreed and limited proofs of God to contemplation on 'signs' displayed in the universe for those whose natural disposition was corrupted by "heretical doctrines and methods."[60]

In all, Muslim philosophers and theologians have made significant contributions to rational proofs put forward for the existence of God. Using their knowledge of the world and carefully adopting philosophical and theological discourse circulating in their time, they excogitated elaborate cosmological, teleological and ontological arguments. A key emphasis was to prove the *ex nihilo* creation theory of the world. Most of these proofs were beyond the reach of ordinary believers who had no prior training in logic and philosophy. Hence, design arguments feature prominently in Islamic theology and were more popular with laypeople,[61] for they could easily be cohered with the Qur'an and related to the natural world. Since the time of al-Rāzī in

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[56] Yaran, *Islamic Thought on the Existence of God*, 16.
[57] Qur'an 30:30.
[58] Al-Ṭaḥāwī, *The Creed of Imam al-Ṭaḥāwī*, 2
[59] Shihadeh, "The Existence of God," 198.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid, 201.

the twelfth century to the modern era, Muslim theologians essentially repeated the same proofs of God articulated by former theologians without making significant contributions. In the meantime, Enlightenment philosophers such as David Hume and Emmanuel Kant rigorously critiqued and challenged classical proofs of God.[62] Such critiques laid the foundations of materialistic philosophy that strongly challenged the core of all faith traditions – the existence of God.

4.3   Nursi on the Notion of Proof and Classical Proofs of God

Colin Turner identifies Nursi's proofs as "not really proofs at all, at least not in the philosophically and scientifically accepted senses of the term."[63] Turner contends the starting point of Nursi's arguments is not "creation uninterpreted," rather it is faith (*imān*) resulting in a faith-based interpretation of Creation designed to "strengthen and consolidate belief."[64] While this appears to be the case with respect to the way his arguments are articulated, as discussed in Chapter 2, Nursi was aware of the classical philosophical methods of proof, but deliberately avoided them.

This avoidance is clearest in the way Nursi eschews the *imkān* and *hudūth* arguments. Throughout the *Risale-i Nur* collection, he mentions the *imkān* and *hudūth* arguments only twice and briefly, even though he called it one of the two major truths the universe witnesses about God.[65] Nursi is critical of the complex and intertwined logical proofs of theologians (*mutakallimūn*). He highlights the *mutakallimūn* generally take this approach to demonstrate the impossibility of infinite regress in causality first and then to prove the necessary existence (*wājib al-wujūd*). In his view, such a pure logical approach is like bringing water from a distant

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[62] Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy*, 738.
[63] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 10.
[64] Ibid, 11.
[65] Nursi, *Sözler*, 33rd Word, 30th Window, 933; Nursi, *Şualar*, 7th Ray, 192.

source by arduously laying a pipeline when the Qur'anic approach, as he calls it, digs a hole and finds water directly underneath.[66] He briefly gives the arguments in abstract form and then refers the details to the works of *sharh al-mawaqif* (Commentary on al-Mawaqif) by al-Sayyid al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī (1339-1413) and *Sharh al-Maqāsid* (Commentary al-Maqasid) by al-Taftazānī.[67]

Nursi's aversion is mainly driven by his concern for his primary audience – the disbeliever and ordinary believer with an imitative faith (*taqlīd al-imān*) and prone to doubts in the face of rational arguments introduced by modern science and philosophy. Nursi realised the long chain of logical proofs was too abstract and missed the interest and intellectual level of most people. Similar to Fakhr al-Dīn Razī, he stressed that belief is more than just reasoning; it also engulfs the totality of the human being, including spiritual and emotional faculties.[68] This does not mean Nursi neglected his more intellectually astute readers, rather he positioned his logical proofs and arguments in innovative and engaging ways so his words would be interesting to read, easy to understand and hence persuasive.

With respect to proving the existence of God, Nursi attempted to prevail in this task in four main passages. The first is the 22nd Word, which is split into two main sections.[69] The first shorter section addresses ordinary readers with an analogical story of two men who are rendered unconscious as they were bathing and taken to a bizarre realm, which in some respects is like a world and in other aspects like a country, city and palace – similar analogies for the world as seen with al-Ghazālī. One of the men sets out to demonstrate in twelve proofs (*burhan*) to his unbelieving

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[66] Nursi, *Mektubat*, 26th Letter, 4th Part, 2nd Matter, 463. See also Nursi, *Sözler*, 33rd Word, Warning, 940.
[67] Nursi, *Sözler*, 33rd Word, 30th Window, 931.
[68] Nursi, *Mektubat*, 26th Letter, 4th Part, 2nd Matter, 461-463.
[69] Nursi, *Sözler*, 22nd Word, 375-417.

friend that the realm and everything in it shows its owner and artistic maker.[70] The longer section delves into the theological and rational proofs of God's existence and unity.[71] At the beginning of the second section, Nursi makes his intent clear – to provide a deeper, more investigative faith (*tahqīq al-imān*), by distinguishing an ordinary appreciation of God's unity and a far deeper appreciation.[72]

The second major passage dealing with the existence of God is the 7th Ray, the epistle titled *ayah al-kubra* (the greatest sign or verse).[73] Inspired by verse 17:44,[74] particularly with the part, "There is nothing that does not glorify Him with His praise," Nursi narrates an imaginary journey of a person who travels throughout the universe and asks everything about his creator. He makes the entire existence from cosmos to particles speak and testify to the existence of God with nineteen steps of composite arguments.[75]

The third and fourth major passages on God's existence are the 33rd Word and 23rd Flash. The 23rd Flash gives an original argument that can be called the *default proof* for God.[76] This proof will be analysed in detail later in this chapter. The 33rd Word gives thirty-three separate arguments for God's existence as "windows that open directly to God."[77] Nursi gives a short explanation that, while his primary audience is disbelievers, everyone will benefit from the passage:

> Thirty-three Windows will bring to belief those without belief, strengthen the belief of those whose belief is weak, make certain (*tahqīq*) the belief of those whose belief is strong but imitative (*taqlīd*), expand the belief of those whose

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[70] Ibid, 22nd Word, 1st Station, 375-388.
[71] Ibid, 2nd Station, 388-417.
[72] Ibid, 1st Flash, 390. These definitions are analysed in the next chapter.
[73] Nursi, *Şualar*, 7th Ray, 147.
[74] "The seven heavens and the earth, and whoever is therein, glorify Him. There is nothing that does not glorify Him with His praise, but you cannot comprehend their glorification. Surely He is All-Clement, All-Forgiving."
[75] Nursi, *Şualar*, 7th Ray, 147-203.
[76] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 23rd Flash, 291-317.
[77] Nursi, *Sözler*, 33nd Word, 890-941.

belief is certain, and progress those with expansive belief to the knowledge of God (*ma'rifatuallah*) - the basis and means of all true human perfections - opening up more brilliant vistas for them.[78]

The literary devices of dialogue, story-telling and analogies achieve three main objectives. First, arguments for God are easier to follow and more interesting for ordinary readers. Packaging in stories and using familiar images of a city, building or observations from the natural world make Nursi's arguments more understandable. Second, it allows Nursi to combine a number of arguments creating an aggrandised effect, increasing their persuasive potential. Third, as Turner also observes, Nursi links his style with the Qur'an's approach.[79] The approach of making the entire cosmos speak clones his argument within the style and meaning of Qur'anic passages. In replicating the Qur'anic method of argumentation, Nursi gives exegesis of verses such as, "there is nothing that does not glorify Him with His praise, but you cannot comprehend their glorification."[80] Thus, Nursi is more concerned with the readability and persuasive effect of his arguments, rather than following philosophically acceptable proofs. As will be illustrated in this chapter, Nursi's arguments hold rational and logical ground, notwithstanding the need to peel them from his rhetoric and express them in well-crafted forms.

Before these proofs are analysed in detail, I will discuss Nursi's views on where the burden of proof lies with respect to proving/disproving God's existence. For Nursi, there is an incommensurate distinction between proof of existence and proof of non-existence, for proof of existence is more powerful and each proof supports one another to build a consensus. However, disproof and negation stand in their own

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[78] Ibid, 33rd Word, Warning, 940.
[79] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 10.
[80] Qur'an 17:44.

right without building a similar consensus.[81] Nursi gives examples to illustrate his point: If two ordinary men sight a crescent moon, their testimony is far more powerful than that of hundreds of scholars saying the crescent is not sighted. So, to prove the existence of something, the testimony of two reliable but ordinary witnesses is sufficient. If one claims a specific object exists, it would be sufficient to prove its existence only by the display of one actual sample. But, if someone else claims the same object does not exist, they have to travel and search all corners of the world and demonstrate the object does not exist anywhere. Additionally, they will have to show the object did not exist in the past and will not exist in the future.[82] In the case of God, the person attempting to prove non-existence has to even gain access beyond the universe to prove there is no God in dimensions beyond the visible.[83] So, for Nursi, the burden of disproof and negation is far more onerous and even impossible. Hence, all a disproving person can do is say, "I don't see it. In my perspective and belief, God does not exist." They cannot claim nor prove the non-existence of God in actuality.[84] Nursi also makes the point that, even if the non-existence of something superficially seems like a proof, its nature is always negation and rejection, and previous arguments apply to its impossibility.[85]

Nursi maintains this position throughout his works to drive home two primary points. First, he warns his readers to question and evaluate critically the writings of famous scientists and philosophers who may reject God.[86] By the argument that disproof is difficult, even impossible, he aims to have a psychological advantage and transfer the burden of proof to the disproving camp. Second, he increases the persuasiveness of

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[81] Nursi, *Şualar*, 7th Ray, Introduction, 141.
[82] Ibid, 142.
[83] Ibid, 144.
[84] Ibid, 142.
[85] Ibid, 143.
[86] Ibid, 142.

his arguments in that, while sometimes a single proof may not look conclusive, many rational arguments proving the same thing can come together and build a greater consensus. For this reason, Nursi often combines numerous arguments for God in one passage.

4.4   Default Proof – Impossibility of God's Non-existence God

The default argument put forward by Nursi is original, although he does not use this term. Yaran gives a brief outline of Nursi's default argument, as detailed in the 23rd Flash, in a sub-section covering counterarguments to evolution theory.[87] Yaran also does not label it the 'default argument' nor does he classify it as a separate argument for God.[88] Interestingly, Nursi does not mention evolution theory in the 23rd Flash or anywhere else in his writings. It nevertheless gives the impression he is providing a counterargument to all other postulations to explain not only Creation, but the very existence of everything, including the universe. Turner recognises the distinction of the argument and says "Nursi's exposition of 'necessary existence' (*wujūb al-wujūd*) and his attempt to furnish evidence for the existence of one who is, by default, 'necessary existence' (*wujūb al-wujūd*)," and adds this is an exception where Nursi displays logical rigour.[89] Nursi's approach with the default argument is not just to support the necessary existence of God, but to argue His non-existence is impossible and creation by God is the best and only possible explanation for existence.

Simply put, Nursi's default argument first demands an explanation for the universe and proceeds to prove the impossibility of each explanation that does not involve God. The remaining option that God is the originator of everything becomes true by

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[87] Yaran, *Islamic Thought on the Existence of God*, 134-136.
[88] Ibid, 134.
[89] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 11. Turner treats the 23rd Flash in a separate chapter dealing with cause and effect. Nevertheless, his critical analysis deals with various arguments for God provided by Nursi in this epistle.

default. Nursi lays out the argument at the beginning of the 23rd Flash: (1) The Creation exists and its existence cannot be denied; (2) Each being comes into existence in a purposeful and artistic fashion; (3) Each being has a beginning and they are replicated;[90] therefore, (3) The entire Creation requires an explanation; (4) Only four explanations have been produced by reason – all beings come into existence through the assembly of causes, they form by themselves, they naturally come into existence by the effect of nature or they are created through the power of God; (5) The first three explanations are impossible; therefore, (6) God is the creator of all things by necessity and default.[91]

The argument is logically valid. The crux of the argument is the fifth premise and requires the proof of the impossibility of all three alternative explanations. If this premise can be shown to be true, than the whole argument becomes sound. Nursi embarks on the difficult task of proving the fifth premise by providing three arguments for the impossibility of each explanation put forward for Creation.

In proving the impossibility of causes creating beings, Nursi begins by posing the analogy of a pharmacy with shelves full of carefully prepared medicines. In addition to their medicinal traits, each medication also has a special quality of life. Close examination shows these *living* medicines are made from specific ingredients in precise amounts according to an exact formula. If they were made haphazardly, they would be poisonous rather than medicinal. It is impossible for coincidental acts or natural forces to gather together these precise amounts according to a definite formula without an experienced pharmacist. Similarly, it would be "hundred times more unreasonable and impossible" for living beings to be created as an outcome of

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[90] Meaning the rebirth of another member of the same species for the perpetuation of the species.
[91] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 23rd Flash, Introduction, 293.

haphazard mixing of particles randomly directed by causes when each living being is made up of "multiple parts and many differing materials put together in precise measure of elements." So, living beings in this "enormous pharmacy of earth" can only be the product of a "limitless wisdom, boundless knowledge and all-pervasive will."[92]

Nursi makes a second point that, if the creation of living organisms is attributed to physical causes (*asbāb*), then those causes must be in close contact with the effect (*musabbib*) or be present within the effect. He proceeds to give the example of a fly. If it is said that causes produce a fly, then it must be accepted that numerous powerful forces and opposing causes must combine in perfect agreement and care to produce the fly. They all must be near or within the fly to exert their effect for the fly is linked to most of the elements and causes of the universe. This is impossible.[93]

As a third point, Nursi puts forward the argument that the most physical causes can do to exert their effect is be in contact with the outer body of a living organism. Yet, the inside of the organism is "ten times more orderly, subtle and artistically perfect." Furthermore, "the hands of causes and their instruments" could not even touch the outer body of miniscule animals and microscopic organisms, which are equally as complex and artistic as larger organisms. So, it is impossible to attribute such outcomes of life to "lifeless, unknowledgeable, vulgar, distant, opposing causes."[94]

Nursi does not clearly define what causes he is referring to. While this aspect will be investigated further in the next chapter, it is reasonable to assume at this point that he refers to forces of nature, physical elements and matter as causes external to living

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[92] Ibid, 23rd Flash, 1st Impossibility, 293-294.
[93] Ibid, 2nd Impossibility, 294-295.
[94] Ibid, 3rd Impossibility, 295-296.

beings. Certain criticisms could be made to Nursi's first impossibility. Hume's perennial objection that making an analogy of natural beings to human artefacts is fundamentally fallacious is one such criticism.[95] However, as Turner observes, the key point Nursi makes is not that medicinal concoctions and living beings are similar in every way, but the relevant analogous feature is that they are both products of design.[96] The second impossibility focuses not only on the necessity of causes to be in contact with each being but also infinite succession of causes must be present within each cell of a fly a clear impossibility.[97] Obviously, science can describe how a fly comes to existence from an egg, grows and sustains its life through internal chemical processes and reproduces offspring in a cycle of life. Although the examples Nursi gives can be explained in other ways, his point that numerous elements coming together in precise compositions are at impossible odds remains a cogent argument. Scientists such as Paul Davies and Michael Behe discuss the impossible odds of life being produced from basic elements on earth to argue the divine origination of life.[98]

In dealing with the notion that things may come into being by themselves, Nursi takes the human body as a case in point. He argues the human body is not only complex and living, but "particles are at constant work" to renew every element of the "wonderful palace" of the human body.[99] Making the matter more complex, the human body is in constant relationship and equilibrium with the universe with respect to sustenance and survival of its species. Despite the constant exchange and

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[95] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed,* 103.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid, 107.
[98] For notable works discussing the extreme odds of life see Paul Davies, *Cosmic Jackpot: Why Our Universe is Just Right for Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007) and Michael Behe, *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* (New York: Free Press, 1996).
[99] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 23rd Flash, 2nd Matter, 1st Impossibility, 296.

flux of particles, the particles in the body seem to know the body and its relationships to keep in functioning order.[100] Nursi puts forward a conditional: if it is not accepted that the trillions of particles of the body are acting in accordance with "the laws of All-Powerful Eternal God" or "they are the tips of pen of divine power," then every particle has to have the vision to see not only every part of the body, but also the entire universe it is connected with. Additionally, each particle has to have intelligence so it can know and recognise the body, the sources of sustenance as well as past, present and future states of the body.[101]

In an approach akin to al-Ash'arī, Nursi gives another nuance to the example of the human body. He says the human body is structured like a fantastic palace where stones on the domes are standing in suspended animation. The stones and bricks on the walls are being replaced at all times. Particles seem to know exactly where to go. A particle required for a position in the eye ends up in that location after journeying through the whole body.[102] If these particles are not attributed to one source and said to move on their own accord, then for the body to be built, every particle must be all-knowing, all-powerful and all-seeing – attributes normally associated with God. This then entails that every particle must be "absolutely-dominating" (*hākim al-mutlaq*) over all particles and "absolutely-dominated" (*mahkūm al-mutlaq*) by all other particles at the same time – a clear impossibility.[103]

In a third example to prove the impossibility of the created by itself theory, Nursi gives the example of a book: it is written by an author or the product of a printing

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[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid, 297.
[102] Ibid, 2nd Impossibility, 297.
[103] Ibid.

machine. For printing to occur, a typesetting of separate metal letters[104] must be assembled as printing templates, hence impossible to occur by itself.[105] Similarly, if it is claimed the human body is assembled by itself, then there must be templates to produce every cell in the body. Since such replicating templates do not exist, the body must be the product of one creative source.[106]

As Turner identifies, what Nursi means by things creating themselves is the purposeful assembly of particles and their constituting parts by chance rather than the idea that something forms itself to existence from non-existence.[107] One could argue that forming of living bodies by themselves occur through the replicating templates of the DNA. Does this established knowledge negate Nursi's argument? While it does seem to negate it at the outset, the substance of his argument remains. Since DNA is composed of billions of codes of information describing in detail how cells are built and function, can it be coded by itself? Nursi would argue that this is where the impossibility lies. The mystery of how basic atoms come together to produce complex life remains unanswered through science.

Nursi devoted considerable time to deal with the 'created by nature' argument, perhaps because it is a more commonly held notion with laypeople. It also combines all other alternative theories in one including the idea that laws of nature direct all events in the universe, living beings can be explained with the theory of evolution[108] without the need for a creator and eventually science will discover and explain all mysteries of life and the universe.

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[104] In older technology, separate metal letters were used to make up a text template. Templates are still needed in printing, although the technology has changed.
[105] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 23rd Flash, 2nd Matter, 3rd Impossibility, 298.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed,* 111.
[108] Nursi does not talk about evolution theory in any meaningful way, although it was quite prevalent in his time. One reason could be that he saw other philosophical assumptions and ideas behind it and chose to respond to those rather than the theory.

Nursi begins observing that there is wisdom and artistic creation in everything, especially living beings. If one does not attribute creatures to an Eternal God, then it must be accepted that, in every being, there must be infinite power, will and knowledge.[109] This is analogous to an image of the sun appearing in every transparent object. If these reflections are not sourced to a single sun, then a sun small in size but with the same essence and attributes must be present in every object.[110] Similarly, if one insists 'nature is the creator,' then nature must be in everything with immense power, knowledge and will. In a way, there must be a god in every living object, a notion not detected and clearly impossible.[111]

As the second impossibility of nature, Nursi highlights that, whenever various seeds are planted together, different plants sprout. If the production of these plants is not attributed to one God, then one must accept the presence of a separate machine in the pot to produce each plant.[112] Anticipating the objection that seeds are responsible for the uniqueness of plants, Nursi argues the material composition of every cell is the same, a collection of hydrogen, oxygen, carbon and nitrogen atoms. Water, light and air are also no more than passive ingredients. So, for Nursi, the existence of countless plant life cannot be explained by matter and processes found in nature alone, for it is impossible for atoms to assemble from dead earth to produce life.[113]

To illustrate the impossibility and, as he puts it, absurdity of the created by nature idea, Nursi presents two hypothetical scenarios. In the first scenario, a primitive man enters a majestic palace in the middle of an empty desert. The palace is built with state-of-the-art technology and decorated with embellished furniture and works of

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[109] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 23rd Flash, 3rd Matter, 1st Impossibility, 299.
[110] Nursi uses this sun analogy and its variants to solve many abstract theological problems.
[111] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 23rd Flash, 3rd Matter, 1st Impossibility, 299.
[112] Ibid, 2nd Impossibility, 299.
[113] Ibid.

art. As he wanders around, he thinks about how the palace might have come into existence in such a desert. Since he rules out an outside builder, he looks at everything in the palace as the source. Even his simple mind can see that none of those things could have made the palace. Then he comes across a large book that comprises construction blueprints, materials lists and rules of administration. Since he can find no other agent, by virtue of the fact the book is related to the whole palace, he concludes it is the originator and builder of the palace and everything in it.[114] In this scenario, the book is analogous to natural laws.

In the second scenario, another primitive man enters a grand army barracks. He is amazed at the simultaneous movements of soldiers in training on hearing the sound of a trumpet or command of an officer. Because he does not understand the laws and rules of an army or the power of a commander, he imagines soldiers move in unison because of unseen ropes tied to their feet. He later goes to a mosque and witnesses the worship of thousands of Muslims in Friday prayer. He observes in amazement the simultaneous bowing and prostration of the whole congregation on the sound of the *imam*. Since he does not know Islam and the rituals of prayer, he again assumes people are moving in unison because of ropes tied to their feet.[115] In this scenario, the ropes represent causal relationships imagined but not necessarily proven to exist.

For Nursi, the situation of a materialist believing that nature, together with its laws, is the creator of every living being is similar to the man who:

> In the realm of existence, he sees a collection of the laws of Divine practice and an index of the creative art of Divine Lordship (*rabbaniyyah*), which is like a page for writing and erasing of Divine Will, and like a constantly changing

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[114] Ibid, 3rd Impossibility, 302.
[115] Ibid, 303-304.

notebook for the effective laws of Divine Power, and is mistakenly and erroneously called 'nature'.[116]

This passage is significant as it highlights how Nursi sees nature and its laws – nature is nothing more than a book containing the laws, or patterns of action, of God's operation in the universe.[117] The laws of nature have no material existence; they only exist as information,[118] hence cannot be attributed to cosmic phenomena.[119] Natural laws originate from God's attributes of Knowledge and Speech. They become the principles and laws on which God's power manifests to constantly shape the world and universe.[120] They are "a collective body of the laws of creation, they cannot be the Lawgiver."[121] At the very most, nature can be "a work of art, it cannot be the Artist … It is a passive receiver, it cannot be the Active Originator."[122]

Nursi makes the final conclusion that, since he has shown all alternative theories explaining the origin and present state of the universe fall short in giving satisfactory explanation and are impossible, God's existence is a palpable reality and proven by default.[123]

Nursi's approach with the default argument is original in two ways. First, assuming that one of the main reasons for people to reject God is that they find it impossible for an all-powerful being to exist beyond space and time, he argues there are greater impossibilities associated with explanations discounting God. It, then, becomes far

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[116] Ibid, 303.
[117] It is important to note how Nursi links nature and natural laws to God's activity in the universe. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.
[118] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 23rd Flash, 3rd Matter, 3rd Impossibility, 304.
[119] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed,* 118.
[120] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 23rd Flash, 3rd Matter, 3rd Impossibility, 304.
[121] Ibid, 305.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid. At the conclusion to this passage Nursi quotes the Qur'anic verse 14:10, "… can there be any doubt about God, the Originator of the heavens and the earth?"

more probable and therefore reasonable to accept God.[124] Second, Nursi continually puts forward the argument, if one does not accept one true God, consciously or unconsciously, one ends up accepting innumerable gods. For Nursi, attributes such as omniscience, omnipotence and all-pervasiveness are required for the universe to function in an orderly manner and living organisms to come to existence perfectly as they do. If these are not attributed to one God, then every particle in the universe must have divine attributes. Therefore, for Nursi, disbelief in God is not necessarily a doctrine of believing in no god, but it inevitably leads to the doctrine of belief in innumerable gods. Nursi effectively reverses arguments put forward to reject God and transfers the problem of impossibility to the camp of disbelief. Nursi's approach is also unique in his conclusion that the existence of God is a not only a necessity (*wājib al-wujūd*) to explain the Creation, but God's non-existence is impossible.

4.5   Argument from Universal Governance – Rubūbiyyah

Nursi's universal governance (*rubūbiyyah*) argument is a combination of cosmological, design and teleological arguments. The key concept of *rubūbiyyah* could be defined as God's system of governance of the universe and natural world. In this system, through every observable action, God prepares the universe as a place where creatures are equipped with everything they need to sustain their lives and protect themselves so they are guided to their potential and purpose of creation.[125] In his illustration of *rubūbiyyah*, Nursi uses analogies for the universe as a country, city or palace, places that conjure images that need to be ordered and governed, similar to

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[124] Ibid, 23rd Flash, 297.
[125] Nursi, *Şualar*, 1186. This definition is based on philological and theological explanation given by the publishing editors in the print used.

al-Ghazālī's analogy of the world like a house and humans being dwellers in the house.[126]

Unlike the default argument, Nursi does not express the argument in clear terms. Despite it not being easily discernible at first glance, there is a consistent pattern when Nursi invokes *rubūbiyyah* in his argument for God. He first illustrates there is a purposeful *rubūbiyyah* observable in the universe and natural world. He then argues that undertaking these functions and actions requires infinite attributes. Since there is no entity known to possess attributes of knowledge, will and power to govern the entire universe, the source must be a God who holds those personal attributes. Hence, it is possible to deduce the argument in a logical form as: (1) There is a purposeful *rubūbiyyah* observable in the universe; (2) This *rubūbiyyah* requires certain attributes (such as knowledge, will and power); (3) None of the known entities in the universe has the required attributes to govern the universe; therefore, (4) There must be a God who has the necessary attributes to effectively govern the universe. The argument expressed in this form is valid and its soundness depends on the truth of the three premises. In supporting these premises, Nursi deploys similar evidence put forward by classical theologians when they back arguments from wisdom (*hikmah*), providence (*'inayah*) and creation (*ikhtira'*). This is best illustrated in the 7th Ray, the epistle titled *ayah al-kubra* (the greatest sign or verse). This title is telling in that Nursi considers the governance argument as the greatest argument for God since it invokes the entire universe and earth together with the entire set of functions and beings in it.

In the 7th Ray, Nursi uses the story of a traveller journeying through the cosmos and natural world to examine in detail how all things collaborate with one another in a

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[126] Yaran, *Islamic Thought on the Existence of God*, 33.

purposeful way to sustain and order life. The traveller stops across multiple levels: rivers, oceans, plains, mountains, trees, plants, birds, animals, the earth, atmosphere, cosmic space and the entire universe.[127] Importantly, in going to such great lengths, Nursi underscores the point that the one who controls the rain, for example, must be the one who governs the entire universe.[128] More importantly, at the end of each demonstration of an aspect of *rubūbiyyah*, he gives a summary of his argument in Arabic,[129] but all these summaries start with: *lā ilāha illa-llahu 'l-wājibu 'l-wujūdi 'l-wāhidu 'l-ahadu alladhī dalla alā wujūbi wujūdihi fī waḥdati* (There is no deity but God, the One and Unique Necessary Existent, to whose Necessary Existence in Unity illustrates…). This key expression not only articulates Nursi's intention to prove the existence of God, but also forms a key link of God's existence to the unity of God.

To appreciate Nursi's argument, I present three of his demonstrations of *rubūbiyyah* in some detail. When the traveller in the 7th Ray descends to the immediate sky, he notices the atmosphere is used and administered to sustain life on earth. While air enables countless living beings to breathe, the wind assists in the germination of plants.[130] Air transmits numerous soundwaves simultaneously traversing the same narrow medium without any mixture of sounds.[131] The clouds water numerous gardens with enough intensity for life to be sustained as though a merciful hand directs the clouds where they are needed.[132] Water, made by the combination of two simple elements of hydrogen and oxygen, is sent down in the right droplet size and at

[127] Nursi, *Şualar*, 7th Ray, 1st Chapter, 148-202.
[128] Ibid, 1st Level, 148.
[129] This style is unique to the 7th Ray. It should also be noted the 29th Flash was written entirely in Arabic.
[130] Nursi, *Şualar*, 7th Ray, 1st Chapter, 2nd Level, 149.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid, 150.

a speed to shower plants instead of destroying them. Water is employed in numerous varying functions that appear wise and driven by a conscious purpose.[133] Surely, air, wind, clouds and water are not capable of knowing the needs of the creatures and lack the compassion necessary to meet them. Therefore, their numerous well-observed functions and subtle activities can only be part of the governance and lordship of a merciful and compassionate God.[134]

When the traveller descends to the earth, a whole new realm opens before him. The earth glides through space like a divine ship (*sefine-i rabbaniye*) carrying hundreds of thousands of species together with their sustenance and essential needs for survival.[135] As the traveller does not have time to read the numerous "chapters" from the book of the earth, he looks at the "single page of origination and administration of living being in spring."[136] From the basic ingredients of soil, seeds, roots and water, all plant life is created in the right amounts, at the right time and with the right variety "loaded and sent like a train" to meet the needs of all living creatures.[137] In particular, all newborns are compassionately looked after with the inclusion of "canned milk in those food packages, and pumps of sugared milk" delivered through their mothers.[138] All of these actions of governing life on earth are beyond these species or the earth, and hence show the existence, wisdom and mercy of the Merciful and Compassionate God.[139]

Nursi's observations reflect the scientific knowledge of the early twentieth century. They appear slight and not rigorous enough to support his points when viewed by

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[133] Ibid, 151.
[134] Ibid, 152.
[135] Ibid, 3rd Level, 153.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid.

scientific knowledge of the current era. Thomas Michel acknowledges this and asserts that dramatic increases in human knowledge of cosmology, natural processes on earth and physiology of biological life only strengthen Nursi's arguments.[140] It is possible to bring in updated scientific knowledge to support the same premises.

On the eightieth level in the reflective journey, Nursi makes the traveller consider the entire universe. This section is interesting in that it combines the cosmological and teleological arguments for God in one section. Nursi begins in his usual style to draw similarities between the universe and other familiar objects and places that also require governing:

> This universe is so meaningful and well-ordered that it appears in the form of an embodied book of the Glorious One (*kitab-ı Sübhāni*), as a physical form of dominical Qur'an (*Kur'an-ı Rabbāni)*, an adorned palace of the Eternally Besought One (*saray-ı Samedāni*), an orderly city of the Most Merciful (*şehr-i Rahmāni*).[141]

He continues to argue the entire book of universe relays "two major truths" demonstrating the existence and unity of God. In the first "major truth," Nursi puts forward the *imkān* and *hudūth* arguments, which are central arguments within the *kalām* cosmological argument.

Nursi gives a brief outline of these arguments in a single paragraph. He then says the reality of contingency and temporality is diffused across the universe and "the majority is visible to the eye and some are seen through the reason."[142] This statement is a transition from the brief abstract logical form of the arguments to one that fits within Nursi's epistemology. Over three pages, he explains examples of change, transformation and contingency from the natural world visible to all

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[140] Thomas Michel, *Insights from the Risale-I Nur: Said Nursi's Advice for Modern Believers* (New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2013), 242-247.
[141] Nursi, *Şualar*, 7th Ray, 1st Chapter, 18th Level, 191.
[142] Ibid, 192.

observers.[143] There is constant activity of change taking place on earth through a complex web of seasons and cycle of life and death, yet the constancy of life through seeds, eggs and young points to the necessary existence and eternity of the Artistic Maker (*Sāni*) and the Glorious Being (*Dhāt Dhu'l-Jalal*).[144] Considering contingency, Nursi argues that every living being is created with "specific attributes, purposeful qualities and beneficial tools" among countless possibilities, illustrating the exercise of deliberate choice and selection. When the entire existence is considered, infinite numbers of choices are made at every instant while maintaining a cosmic order showing the universal governance and "existence of a Necessarily Existent God who is infinitely Wise and boundlessly Powerful."[145] Interestingly, with this approach, Nursi combines the design and teleological arguments within the parameters of the cosmological argument.

What Nursi calls the "second major truth" is similar to Ibn Rushd's argument for providence (*'inayah*) with one significant difference – Nursi uses the word *ta'awun* (mutual assistance) instead. He contends that all beings receive assistance beyond their means and power in sustaining their existence, purpose they serve and their lives in the case of living beings. While it appears every being is struggling with others to survive, in reality they are all directed to assist one another by the governance of God "who is Merciful and Wise."[146] For instance, clouds, rain and vegetation are made to sustain animal life and, when they die, they assist plant life to survive. Animal mothers are made to assist young with mercy and the production of milk beyond their design and control. Particles of food "run to the assistance of cells

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[143] Ibid, 192-194.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid, 193-194.
[146] Ibid, 195.

in the body."[147] Nursi uses the *ta'awun* argument in multiple places in his works, including the confutation of the dominant notion of the survival of the fittest perspective on earth's biological life.[148]

While discussing six names of God in the 30th Flash, Nursi gives deeper and more erudite support for the governance argument in the way he identifies actions visible across the universe, indicating a purposeful governance beyond the power and design of anything else in the universe. Two examples illustrate Nursi's argument. The first is the manifestation of the name *al-Quddūs* (The Holy) that drives the earth and universe to remain pure and clean. Nursi gives the analogy of a factory where there is constant processing and materials, production of goods and, as a result, waste. The factory would quickly become derelict unless it is constantly and deliberately cleaned.[149] Similarly, the earth and universe operate like a factory with constant activity and the cycle of life and death producing waste. Creative activity in a space leads to unwanted debris, which is swept away over time to render the space clean. If the waste produced by countless living beings and inevitably dead animals and plants are not cleaned from its face, the earth would rapidly turn into a wasteland. Yet, the earth and oceans always appear clean and unblemished. The atmosphere is cleaned from harmful substances. Plants and animals are given tools and mechanisms to clean themselves. In the body, red blood cells clean the body of carbon dioxide and there are processes and systems in place to clean the body of waste and impurities.

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[147] Ibid.

[148] Nursi, *Sözler*, 30th Word, 1st Purpose, 734. For more discussion by Nursi on the *ta'awun* principle see also Nursi, *Sözler*, 381, 404, 547-548, 901, 949; Nursi, *Mektubat*, 453, 671.

[149] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 30th Flash, 1st Point, 556.

Nowhere on earth and space can be observed any large accumulation of untreated debris and dirt.[150] So, an act of cleansing takes place on a universal scale.[151]

The second example is the manifestation of the name *al-Adl* (The Just). Nursi notes that, similar to a large city, there are transformations, income and expenditure taking place on earth and in the universe at immense scale. The relationship of the earth to the solar system, its position, speed and gravity require careful balancing. The ecological balance is kept with careful measure in the numbers of young born and individuals dying within each species to improve chances for survival and prevent a few species from dominating the planet. Within the bodies of each individual animal and human, processes of osmosis keep everything in balance. These and many other similar observations show the balancing act permeates the entire earth and universe.[152]

Nursi makes the key conclusion that these actions cannot be attributed to matter, things or natural laws. The acts of cleansing and balancing are so pervasive and complex that they cannot be explained by particular causes and effects; they pertain to the universal governance of God. For cleansing and balancing to take place, every entity in the universe either has to have infinite knowledge to consider their active part or there needs to be a galactic council made up of representatives from every species and types of things where they discuss these complex functions and delegate tasks appropriately. Since both options are impossible, these acts are only possible if they are ascribed to a Creator.[153] From this angle, Nursi's argument is compelling.

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[150] There is the exception of waste caused by human activity. Even this type of waste accumulation would be cleaned by natural processes given enough time and if the waste production was less than what the earth can handle.
[151] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 30th Flash, 1st Point, 556-557.
[152] Ibid, 2nd Point, 561-563.
[153] Ibid, 1st Point, 559.

Rather than focusing on design or teleology, he presents identifiable patterns of action with the best explanation being a single source with the required knowledge, power and will to undertake functions responsible for the governance of the universe. Nursi follows similar lines of reasoning to identify more actions that relate to the governance of the universe.

In the concluding paragraph to the 7th Ray, Nursi braces his extensive demonstration of a universal *rubūbiyyah* to necessary attributes and existence of God:

> So, the truth of governance (*rubūbiyyah*) manifesting within the reality of activity reveals and makes itself known in qualities (*shu'ūnāt*) and acts (*tasarrufāt*) such as creating, originating, aesthetically fashioning and bringing into being with knowledge and wisdom; determining, forming, administering and converting with order and balance; transforming, changing, reducing and elevating with purpose and will; and feeding, nurturing, and granting and gifting with compassion and mercy. The truth of a clear divinity (*ulūhiyyah*) manifesting within the reality of *rubūbiyyah* is recognized and known through the compassionate and generous reflections of the Beautiful Divine Names (*asmā al-ḥusnā*) and through the glorious (*jalālī*) and beauteous (*jamālī*) manifestations of the seven affirmative attributes of Life, Knowledge, Power, Will, Hearing, Sight, and Speech.[154]

This paragraph is significant in revealing Nursi's understanding of *rubūbiyyah* to include all creative, administrative and transformative actions that lead to the creation and maintenance of the universe in the way it is – a most suitable place to sustain life and allow them to reach their ultimate potential (*kamālāt*). For Nursi, the actions pertaining to the governance of the universe entail not only the existence of God, as will be discussed in the remaining chapters, they also demonstrate the unity of God and make God known through His names and attributes. The scale of operation in the universe is such that it cannot be satisfactorily explained unless God is accepted. Most crucially, within all activities in the universe, attributes such as wisdom, mercy, compassion and generosity are apparently visible and cannot be

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[154] Nursi, *Şualar*, 7th Ray, 1st Chapter, 212.

ascribed to unconscious matter or objects. Those attributes can only be associated with a personal God. As discussed earlier in this chapter, this link is quite similar to al-Razi's argument for God with certain attributes identified in actions observed in the universe. Nursi brings to it creative use of literary devices, uses of analogous images and incorporation of twentieth century science to engage the ordinary reader and make them comfortable on familiar terrain.

4.6 Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad as Proofs of God's Existence

A key distinction in Nursi's approach is the way he entreats the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad as evidence whenever he uses the universe as a focal point to discuss the existence of God.[155] With this emphasis, he ensures the primary position of the revealed sources in his epistemology. While he repeatedly invokes observations from the universe, he is careful not to tip the balance towards the universe and science. He highlights the interdependent relationship between the universe and revelation in affirming the reality of God.[156] Nursi also genuinely believes the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad are evidence for God in and of themselves. He ventures to achieve this task in two ways.

First, Nursi links verses of the Qur'an to his discourse. This approach is illustrated by the samples of *rubūbiyyah* covered in the previous section. After discussing how winds and clouds are employed within the governance of God, he quotes, "… and His disposal of the winds, and the clouds subservient between sky and earth, surely there are signs for a people who reason and understand."[157] After discussion on the vital functions of rain, Nursi underscores the discussion as an exegesis of the verse,

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[155] See 16th and 17th levels in 7th Ray, last two indications of the 22nd Word, and 32nd and 33rd Windows of the 33rd Word as samples of passages where Nursi gives the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad as evidence for the existence of God.
[156] Nursi, *Şualar*, 7th Ray, 1st Chapter, 18th Level, 200.
[157] Qur'an 2:164.

"He it is Who sends down the rain useful in all ways to rescue (them) after they have lost all hope, and spreads out His mercy far and wide (to every being). He it is Who is the Guardian, and the All-Praiseworthy."[158] Similarly, following the discussion on how earth is brought back to life in spring, he quotes, "Look, then, at the imprints of God's Mercy – how He revives the dead earth after its death: certainly then it is He Who will revive the dead. He has full power over everything."[159] Nursi then makes the significant comment, "Just as the page of spring makes an exegesis of this verse, this verse also miraculously expresses the meanings of the page of spring."[160] This remark is significant in that it reveals how Nursi sees revelation and the universe as interdependent sources explaining one another.

Citing revealed sources as evidence for their propositions of faith is usually considered a circular argument and logical fallacy. Nursi gets around this problem by arguing the divine origin of the Qur'an and the truthfulness of Prophet Muhammad. This marks his second approach. His argument could be expressed in logical form as: (1) If the Qur'an cannot be the product of human handiwork and Prophet Muhammad is not lying about his claim of messengership, then the Qur'an is the word of God and Prophet Muhammad is a true messenger of God; (2) The Qur'an cannot be the product of human handiwork and Prophet Muhammad did not lie; therefore, (3) The Qur'an is the word of God and Prophet Muhammad is a true messenger of God; (4) Since the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad attest to God's existence, God exists. It is possible to craft this argument in different ways; regardless, the key premise is the second one that Nursi exerts considerable effort to prove.

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[158] Qur'an 42:28.
[159] Qur'an 30:50
[160] Nursi, *Şualar*, 7th Ray, 1st Chapter, 3rd Level, 154.

In the 25th Word, Nursi provides a lengthy content analysis of the Qur'an to prove it cannot be the product of human handiwork. For Nursi, the Qur'an's literary composition; its most eloquent selection and composition of words; deliberate symmetry of sound and balance involved in the number of letters deployed in a verse; and its future predictions and scientific composition impossible for humans to know at the time of Prophet Muhammad are all proofs for the Qur'an being beyond the best possible human capability and therefore show the Qur'an can only be the word of God.[161] Nursi gives numerous examples to illustrate each of these statements. While many contemporaries of Nursi use theology for the service of a new Qur'anic exegesis, Nursi uses Qur'anic exegesis for the service of theology and proof of creed. This difference is important and distinquishes Nursi to his contemporaries in twentieth century.

In the 19th Word and 19th Letter, Nursi outlines arguments for the authenticity of Prophet Muhammad's claim to be true messenger of God. In doing so, he focuses on the Prophet's character to argue he was one of the most truthful and trustworthy of all people in history;[162] if he never lied about insignificant things, why would he lie about the significant claim to receive revelation from God;[163] while Prophet Muhammad's opponents attempted to discredit him by branding him with many derogatory names, they never accused him of being a liar as no one would have believed it;[164] he was unlettered, yet he transmitted a book (the Qur'an) transforming humanity and world history;[165] and in the 19th Letter, Nursi narrates close to 300 miracles attributed to the Prophet in authentic hadith collections as well as numerous

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[161] Nursi, *Sözler*, 25th Word, 488-623. Nursi gives many examples to back up these assertions.
[162] Ibid, 19th Word, 321.
[163] Nursi, *Mektubat*, 19th Letter, 1st Indication, 131.
[164] Ibid, 2nd Indication, 132.
[165] Ibid, 3rd Indication, 134.

instances of his future predictions and previous scriptures predicting his impending arrival.[166] Nursi emphasises these as facts and poses them as evidence to provide a strong basis to argue that Prophet Muhammad is a genuine messenger of God and the Qur'an is not the product of human authorship but a composition of divine source. Therefore, everything the Qur'an claims becomes true, including the existence and unity of God. Similarly, since Prophet Muhammad is not a liar and he claimed to speak to God, there must be a God.

It is possible to provide counterarguments to this line of reasoning; however, it cannot be completely discounted as a weak argument. In fact, in Muslim thought, the argument for God from the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad cleverly achieves proof for three fundamental tenets of Islamic faith – existence of God, belief in scriptures and the messengers of God – in a single line of reasoning. Hence, considerable numbers of Muslims are persuaded with these arguments and popular online Muslim preachers often invoke them in their talks.[167]

4.7   Other Proofs of God's Existence

In a short passage, Nursi asserts that everything witnesses the existence of God in two ways. First, they serve purposes beyond themselves and power. Second, everything obeys a set of natural laws they are unable to set for themselves.[168] Once again, Nursi gives evidence from the natural world to support these arguments. In a similar tone, Nursi poses life and death as evidence for God after quoting the verse, "He it is who has created death and life."[169] For Nursi, there is nothing in the

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[166] Ibid, 19th Letter, 129-308.
[167] For examples of Muslim emphasis on proofs of Qur'an and the messengership of Prophet Muhammad see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-dFpCv5gI8, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tlo3mQqOTek, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPkDQvmDviQ.
[168] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 17th Flash, 8th Indication, 219.
[169] Qur'an 67:2.

universe that causes life directly. Further, for life to be sustained, the entire universe must be within the governance of the One who gives life.[170] Interestingly, Nursi also puts forward death as evidence for God. Every living thing that dies is a reminder that living things do not have the capability to sustain or determine their life. Such sustenance and determination can only come from an eternal God. As a second indication, Nursi presents the earth as a single living entity. If spring with its coming to life is evidence for God, the death seen in winter is far greater evidence for the existence and power of God,[171] just as the Qur'an states, "and He revives the earth after its death."[172]

Apart from aspects of design, purpose and governance, Nursi highlights finer aspects of existence. In this existence, there is beauty and beautiful things spread across the cosmos, earth and living beings.[173] He quotes the verse, "He Who makes excellent everything that He creates;"[174] and remarks that everything is created with beautiful form, art and aesthetics.[175] Just as a work of art points to its artist, the beauty displayed in countless beings point to the Artistic Maker (*Sāni*).[176]

A dramatically different proof for God argued by Nursi concerns the human being. Nursi introduces the argument with the verses, "On the earth there are (clear) signs for those who seek certainty, and also in your own selves. Will you then not see (the

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[170] Nursi, *Sözler*, 33rd Word, 23rd Window, 920-921.
[171] Ibid, 24th Window, 922-923.
[172] Qur'an 30:19.
[173] Nursi, *Sözler*, 33rd Word, 26th Window, 925.
[174] Qur'an 32:7.
[175] Nursi, *Sözler*, 33rd Word, 15th Window, 905-906.
[176] Ibid, 25th Window, 924.

truth)"[177] and says "with the inspiration of the Qur'an" human beings become evidence for God in three ways.

First, human nature is a mirror to God's names. Human conscience looks at God using its inherent powerlessness and poverty within its nature. Only an eternal, all-powerful God would be a point of strength and relief.[178] Nursi continues his discussion to assert that human nature also comprises attributes such as knowledge, power and will that enable it to reason that, just as humans build, own and administer a house, they also appreciate God creating, owning and governing the universe.[179] Nursi highlights the way human beings are created with their inner faculties and refined complexity of physical bodies indicates a Creator. He relates the human being as the greatest manifestation of God's Greatest Name, "Just as among the Names there is a Greatest Name (*ism al-'aẓam*), so too among the impresses of those Names there is a greatest impress, and that is human being."[180] Turner suggests Nursi's use of the existential poverty and powerlessness of humans and other created beings is a consistent theme in arguing for the existence of God.[181] Bilal Kuspinal highlights Nursi's assertion that the inconsistency between human needs and their ability to satisfy them as a key argument from the conscience. He further notes that

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[177] Qur'an 51:20-21. Nursi also quotes 41:53 at the beginning of the 33rd Word where most proofs are listed: "We will show them Our manifest signs (proofs) in the horizons of the universe and within their own selves, until it will become manifest to them that it (the Qur'an) is indeed the truth. Is it not sufficient (as proof) that your Lord is a witness over all things?"
[178] Nursi, *Sözler*, 33rd Word, 31st Window, 936.
[179] Ibid. This aspect of human nature becoming an instrument to know God will be explored in more detail in Chapter 6.
[180] Ibid, 936-937.
[181] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 12-13.

Nursi charges human conscience with a natural affinity for truth and God.[182] These themes will be expanded further in Chapter 6.

As a second way that human beings prove God's existence, Nursi draws an analogy in the way the human spirit (*ruh*) governs the body and the way God governs the universe. The human spirit[183] feels all parts of the body with senses. For the spirit, distance does not introduce difficulty as it is related to the entire body. It governs countless affairs of the body without difficulty. In a similar way, God governs the universe with ease, is aware of all things, distance does not limit Him and countless affairs do not cause any difficulty or confusion.[184] Needless to say, with this analogy, Nursi does not equate God as a spirit of the universe, quoting the Qur'an, "to God applies the most sublime attribute."[185]

Third, Nursi poses human life as evidence for God's existence.[186] Nursi posits life as the most valuable product of the universe such that the entire universe and existence is deployed to produce life. The totality of life is there to support human life as the only being with a refined spirit endowed with self-consciousness and emotional faculties to sense the existence and presence of God.[187] The human is not only created in the best integrated composition of inner faculties and outer features, but it

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[182] Bilal Kuspinar, "The Human Conscience as a Proof for the Existence of God: Nursi's Perspective," in *God, Man, and Mortality: The Perspective of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Hasan Horkuc (New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2015), 10.

[183] In the 29th Word, Nursi provides proofs for the existence of the human spirit. Interestingly, in the 33rd Word, Nursi gives an original definition for the human spirit: "That is, man's spirit is a commanding law from among the laws pertaining to creation - the manifestation of Divine Will - which has been clothed in external existence, and is a subtle Dominical faculty."

[184] Nursi, *Sözler*, 33rd Word, 31st Window, 937.

[185] Qur'an 16:60. This verse is often quoted by Muslim theologians when they draw analogies to make the point that God is above any similitude done to him wrongfully and they do not mean to offend the holiness of God.

[186] Ibid.

[187] Nursi, *Şualar*, 7th Ray, 1st Chapter, 11th Level, 165-166.

is also created with beauty of form and being. Such design points the existence of a Maker.[188] Markham calls this the "Beauty Imperative" argument.[189]

4.8 Conclusion

Proving the existence of God has always been the first and foremost endeavour in theology. With the intent to base Islam on firm foundations, Muslim philosophers and theologians in the classical era made important contributions to proofs for the existence of God. Using their knowledge of the world and carefully adopting philosophical and theological discourse available in their time, they excogitated elaborate cosmological, teleological and ontological arguments. Attested by the *imkān* and *hudūth* arguments, the *kalām* cosmological argument became the standard proof for God in Islamic theology. Variants of the design and teleological arguments – such as the arguments from wisdom (*hikmah*), providence (*'inayah*) and creation (*ikhtira'*) – also featured prominently in theology and popular belief. There was also the case for the argument that belief in God comes naturally to innate human disposition and there is no proof needed as long as the innate human nature was not corrupted.

Representing the transition of Islamic scholarship from classical to the modern era, Nursi was influenced by the classical proofs for God and also understood the need to make original contributions, especially to reach the masses who were doubting God on an unprecedented scale. Nursi's arguments for God are similar and different to previous scholarship in a number of ways. Although reluctantly, Nursi refers to the *imkān* and *hudūth* arguments as part of the grander cosmological arguments. Despite his familiarity with these arguments and the works of classical theologians, Nursi

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[188] Nursi, *Sözler*, 10th Word, 12th Truth, 137.
[189] Markham, *Engaging with Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, 28.

departs from the cosmological arguments as he finds them too abstract for ordinary Muslims to grasp. Most significantly, this concern pushes Nursi to establish a link between the cosmological and design arguments reminiscent of al-Rāzī. The main links he finds is the actions that can be identified not only at all levels of existence on earth, but also throughout the cosmos. These actions collectively characterise God's pervasive *rubūbiyyah,* and form the basis of the overarching *governance argument*. For Nursi, this argument is the most significant of all proofs as he calls it the *ayah al-kubra*, the greatest sign or proof.

Without naming them as such, Nursi uses the three main teleological arguments within classical Islamic theology – the arguments from *hikmah*, *'inayah* and *ikhtira'*. Such arguments feature prominently in Nursi's works as they are more relatable for ordinary people and allow the use of Qur'anic verses to support arguments. Nursi often uses the arguments from wisdom similar to al-Māturīdī and creation similar to Ibn Rushd, especially when putting forward life as evidence. Yet, Nursi displays some originality. In addition to Ibn Rushd's argument from '*inayah*, Nursi uses the word *ta'awun* (mutual assistance) and calls this the second major truth after cosmological considerations.

A key feature in Nursi's rhetoric is that he follows in the footsteps of al-Ash'arī and al-Ghazālī in deploying analogies comparing the earth and cosmos to objects familiar to humans, such as a palace, city or book. Nursi is more concerned with the readability and persuasive effect of his arguments rather than following philosophically acceptable proofs. However, Nursi's arguments hold rational and logical ground, notwithstanding the need to peel them from his rhetoric and express them in well-crafted forms.

Rather than being apologetic, Nursi displays confidence in his approach to the proofs of God. At times, he reverses the burden of proof to those that argue the non-existence of God. This approach produces one of the most original proofs for God's existence, the *default proof*. Instead of focusing on the proof of God directly, this proof focuses on the impossibility of all other explanations for existence and the universe. After proving the impossibility of alternative explanations, Nursi makes the conclusion that God's existence is not only a necessity (*wājib al-wujūd*), but also His non-existence is impossible; thus, God creating the universe not only becomes the best explanation but the only possible explanation.

A key distinction in Nursi's approach in relation to the existence of God is the way he entreats the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad as evidence whenever he uses the universe as a focal point. With this emphasis, he ensures the primary position of the revealed sources in his epistemology. While he repeatedly invokes observations from the universe, he is careful not to tip the balance towards the universe and science. He highlights the interdependent relationship between the universe and revelation in affirming the reality of God.

With his proofs of God, Nursi aims to take his readers from an imitative faith (*taqlīd al-imān*) to a deeper and more investigative faith (*tahqīq al-imān*). For Nursi, there is an incommensurate distinction between proof of existence and proof of non-existence. This is because proof of existence is more powerful, and each proof and evidence supports one another to build a consensus. This explains the intensity of Nursi's writings and the way he often merges arguments. For Nursi, proofs from the universe not only prove the existence of God, as will be discussed in the next chapter, they also demonstrate God's unity (*tawḥīd*).

CHAPTER 5: TAWHID – THE UNITY OF GOD

5.1 Introduction

After investigating whether God exists comes a second important theological question – is God one? The answer to this question invariably determines Islamic cosmology and Islamic understanding of the way God relates to the world.[1] Islam's emphatic response to this key question is the doctrine of *tawḥīd.* Even a cursory reading of the Qur'an reveals a cannonade of verses arguing for a single creator who is intimately involved with the affairs of the world.[2] When questioned by one of his followers to sum up Islam in a few easy to remember words, Prophet Muhammad replied, "Say, 'I believe in God', and then be straight."[3] *Tawḥīd* with its absolute monotheistic doctrine is impressed as the central tenet of Islam.

There are three immediate quandaries associated with an absolute monotheistic theology. First, if *tawḥīd* includes God as the disposer of affairs of the world, does God direct the operation of the universe through universals only or is He also involved with the particulars. Second, if God is the absolute creator and disposer of the affairs of the universe, do causes have independent creative effects and what precise role, if any, do they have within the creative and operational processes of the universe. Third, if God is the "Lord of the worlds"[4] and sole disposer of affairs, how does one God govern the vast cosmos, innumerable events occurring in the universe

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[1] The way humans relate to God will be covered in the next chapter.
[2] Qur'an 2:22, 2:115, 2:117, 2:148, 2:164, 2:258, 3:5, 3:29, 3:83, 3:190, 6:97, 7:54, 10:5, 13:2, 13:15-16, 14:32-33, 14:38, 15:26, 16:4, 16:12, 16:49, 16:65, 17:37, 19:67, 20:50, 21:30 22:88, 23:12-14, 24:41, 25:2, 25:39, 29:44, 29:61, 30:22, 30:26, 30:50, 31:25, 31:28-29, 32:4, 32:7, 33:54, 35:9, 35:11, 36:33, 36:38-40, 36:77, 37:6, 40:16, 40:57, 41:11-12, 42:29, 45:4, 46:4-5, 50:15, 67:5, 79:27, 87:7.
[3] Muslim, *Iman*, 62. See also the Qur'anic verse 41:30 for the same expression. In this verse, the word '*istiqāmu*' is translated as 'stand straight and steadfast' by Abdullah Yusuf Ali. This generally refers to being on a middle path of balance and moderation as opposed to deviation and going to extremes.
[4] Qur'an 1:2.

and functioning of countless life forms all at the same time?[5] Responding to these theological imperatives characterises the Islamic cosmological discourse.

This chapter examines how the unity of God is demonstrated and explained with various proofs within the classical Islamic theology, and how Muslim theologians address the immediate theological implications arising from absolute monotheism. The chapter explores and analyses Nursi's contributions to the proofs of God's unity and his answers to key theological and philosophical implications of the absolute monotheism of God. The chapter shows that Nursi made three main contributions to the understanding of *tawḥīd* in Islamic theology. First, he articulated an advanced definition of *tawḥīd* to include not only a broad understanding of the unity of the creator, but to witness a stamp of unity in every created object. Second, he expanded on the traditional proofs of *tawḥīd*. He contributed to the discourse on cause and effect, and provided new proofs to argue that causes do not have real effects. Third, he thoroughly explained how the creation of universals and particulars would have no difference to God's power and there is no more difficulty for God to govern a small object than the entire universe. With these contributions, Nursi strengthens *tawḥīd*, the most significant doctrine of Islam.

5.2   Definition of Tawḥīd and Nursi's Contribution

The word *tawḥīd* literally means 'unification'. When used in reference to God, it means to declare and assert the oneness of God.[6] More precisely, *tawḥīd* refers to the type of monotheism where the absolute unity of God is asserted and God is declared as the sole creator of the universe and governor of its affairs. An account of *tawḥīd* would not be complete without mention of its polar opposite, *shirk*, which literally

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[5] Two other key implications of *tawḥīd* are: (1) divine measuring and creation of human actions; and (2) the problem of suffering and existence of evil in the world.

[6] Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (New York: Paragon House, 1994), 43.

means "to share, to be a partner, to give someone a partner."[7] In Islamic theological lexicon, *shirk* refers to any belief or action where partners are associated with God's divinity, attributes and lordship.[8] The strong prohibition of *shirk* in Islam[9] not only reinforces the importance of *tawḥīd*, but provides checks and balances to preclude any adulteration of pure monotheism. Consequently, for Muslim theologians, upholding *tawḥīd* and avoiding *shirk* have been the key impulses when confronted with new theological interpretations and dealing with crucial theological issues.

Not surprisingly, *tawḥīd* features as a primary theme in Nursi's works. He persistently argues that the "tree of universe" from its widest cosmic boundaries to the smallest detail is within the power and will of the Single One of Unity (*Dhāt al-Wahid al-Ahad*).[10] Nursi adds that true appreciation of the Creator, universe and human being would only be possible with *tawḥīd* and oneness; through *tawḥīd*, the beauty and perfection of God manifests.[11] The act of feeding young with mother's milk may be dismissed by attributing it to some causes. Yet, when viewed from the perspective of *tawḥīd*, the act of feeding countless young within each of the millions of species through the simultaneous inspiration of their mothers appears as a great act of compassion (*raḥma*) and beauty (*jamal*) by God.[12] The perfection of the universe can only surface through *tawḥīd*.[13] Attributing a masterpiece of art to its artistic maker immensely increases its value, but severing the art from its maker dramatically reduces its value to its basic constituting parts. Similarly, the purpose of the universe and value of existence are only established when linked to one Creator. Rejection of

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[7] Ibid, 49.
[8] Ibid, 49-52.
[9] See Qur'anic verses 6:163; also see 4:116 for *shirk* as the only unforgivable sin. The Qur'an uses the word '*shirk*' in 75 verses.
[10] Nursi, *Şualar*, 2nd Ray, 1st Station, Introduction, 25.
[11] Ibid, 1st Fruit, 26.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Nursi, 32.

God and *shirk* sever God from Creation and render the universe as a chaotic place and reduce its value to its material parts.[14] *Tawḥīd* also becomes instrumental for humans to "attain highest perfections, and become the most valuable fruit of the universe and the most perfect and refined of creatures."[15] Humans have numerous needs and desires, and can feel an innumerable array of pains, yet their ability to meet their needs and end pains is exceedingly limited.[16] Among countless innate emotions, there is an intense desire for eternity in human natural disposition. Only a creator who can govern the entire universe "like a palace" can close one door and open another to an afterlife.[17]

Nursi gives two distinctive appreciations, hence definitions, of *tawḥīd*. One is the *apparent tawḥīd* that is understood and appreciated by ordinary believers. The second is the *true tawḥīd* of people who have attained higher levels of understanding and certainty.[18] Nursi gives the analogy of how large amounts of goods arriving in a market can be associated with a businessman in two ways. The first is to look at the sheer size of operations and conclude that only the biggest businessman with the capacity to deal with so many goods would be the one responsible. In this approach, there is room for many other businessmen to claim ownership for parts of delivery and business operations. The second way is to look for and identify trademarks belonging to the businessman on every product. In this respect, every product directly testifies its owner and establishes a single source with far more certainty.[19]

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[14] Nursi, *Sozler*, 23rd Word, 1st Chapter, 1st Point, 417-418.

[15] Nursi, *Şualar*, 2nd Ray, 1st Station, 3rd Fruit, 37.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Nursi, *Sozler,* 22nd Word, 1st Flash, 390.

[19] Ibid.

Similarly, in the appreciation of *apparent tawḥīd*, an ordinary believer would state God is one, has no partner and there is no one like Him. In contemplating the scale of the universe, they reason that such a majestic universe can only be created and owned by one God.[20] *True tawḥīd* and its appreciation are far more profound:

> The true divine unity (*tawḥīd al-haqīqī*) is to attain a perpetual awareness of the divine presence and to confirm and believe almost with the certainty of seeing (*'ayn al-yaqīn*) that everything emerges from the hand of God's Power and that in no way does He have any partner or aide in His divinity, ownership and governance (*rubūbiyya*) of the universe. This outcome is achieved by opening a window directly onto God's light in everything visible in the universe and clearly observing and reading the stamp of God's power, the seal of His governance (*rubūbiyya*), and the inscriptions of His divine pen on everything in the universe.[21]

Reading from the reverse, three points of emphasis can be identified in this definition. First, an observance and identification of divine creation and power in every object acts like a trademark pointing to one God. This means one can find God and a signature of *tawḥīd* in everything.[22] Second, this appreciation of *tawḥīd* is far more meaningful and fosters a deeper conviction with a high level of certainty that there is only a one divine being who has complete ownership and control over the affairs of the universe. Third, such conviction raises the level of faith from blind faith to the certainty of seeing. A person begins to see God's presence in everything and every event, resulting in the spiritual outcome of a perpetual awareness of God – *ihsan*. So, *tawḥīd* is not only "the most exalted sacred duty and natural obligation," but it is also the "worship of faith" (*'ibada al-īmāniyya*).[23] With his definition of

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[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Nursi, *Şualar*, 2nd Ray, 2nd Chapter, 4th Truth, 209.
[23] Ibid, 208.

tawḥīd, Nursi inseparably links the universe to the highest spiritual goals and in a single paragraph unifies all major aspects of Islam.[24]

This is more clearly discernible in the 23rd Word, where Nursi discusses the outcomes and benefits of belief. Nursi links four key Islamic concepts giving rise to the outcome of happiness: "Belief (*īmān*) necessitates divine unity (*tawḥīd*), divine unity necessitates surrender (*taslīm*), surrender (to God) entails reliance (*tawakkul*) and the necessary outcome of reliance is happiness in both worlds."[25] With this, Nursi stresses the point that, if belief can result in appreciation of true divine unity, this results in a genuine devotional surrender to God. If one realises that the entire Creation is within the governance of God and there is a constant awareness of this, the person has no choice but to submit to such an overwhelming power. Such devotional submission will enable a person to understand what they can and cannot do, leading to reliance on God. Such reliance removes unnecessary distress and pressures of life leading to happiness in this world and, through faith and good deeds, they will also gain happiness in the afterlife.

The concept of *tawakkul* can easily be misunderstood and lead to fatalism. Cognisant of this danger, Nursi explains the condition of a person who does not rely on God with the analogy of a man who boards a ship but continues to carry his luggage. While he may be able to carry it at the beginning, the weight becomes unbearable after a short time. In reality, the ship could easily carry him and his luggage if only he realised and submitted to the captain of the ship. People without true appreciation of *tawḥīd* are crushed under the load of life as they are unable to offload their 'baggage' in a conscious reliance on God who is in full command of the ship of the

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[24] As will be covered in the next chapter, Nursi further qualifies *tawḥīd* with the concepts of *wahdāniyya* (unity) and *ahadiyya* (uniqueness).
[25] Nursi, *Sozler*, 23rd Word, 1st Chapter, 3rd Point, 421.

earth.[26] Reliance is not a senseless rejection of causes, rather it is to expect the final results from God while considering causes as a veil of God's power, and considering the fulfilment of causes as a form of active prayer.[27]

5.3 Proofs of God's Unity in Classical Islamic Theology

In demonstrating the oneness of God, classical Muslim theologians generally rely on two main proofs – *dalil al-tadbīr*, the argument of administration of God in the way He directs and sustains the affairs of the universe; and *dalil al-tamanu'*, the argument of mutual hindrance arising from multiple deity considerations. Scholars of the later period generally followed these arguments with nuances in these broad categories.

One of the earliest theologians to articulate the *tadbīr* argument as a proof for the oneness of God is Harith al-Muhasibi (781-857). He argued that every entity in the natural world from inanimate entities to plants, animals and human life fit together perfectly. This interconnectedness entails there is unity in administration (*tadbīr*) and points to the unity of the cause for the universe.[28] Al-Māturīdī gives a number of supporting contentions for the *tadbīr* argument. A purposeful *tadbīr* can be observed when one considers acts of lordship (*af'āl al-rubūbiyya*) in the world.[29] Series of events (seasons and seasonal processes) and entities (the sun, earth and moon) in the natural world combine to produce the single result of life and continue to sustain life. This is only a possibility if all these events and entities join in conscious collaboration or they are administered by one God. Since such collaboration is impossible, the *tadbīr* observed in the world can only be the handiwork of one God.[30]

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[26] Ibid, 422.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Yaran, *Islamic Thought on the Existence of God*, 34.
[29] Ulrich Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand*, trans. Rodrigo Adem (Boston: Brill, 2015), 270.
[30] Al-Māturīdī, *Kitâb al-Tawhid*, 32.

Al-Māturīdī argues that opposing forces show their effect in a single entity and conflicting attributes are present in the nature of things. Yet, they all produce harmony and beneficial outcomes, indicating they are the *tadbīr* of a single source, the all-Powerful God who does everything with wisdom (*hikma*).[31] As discussed in the previous chapter, Nursi follows similar reasoning to demonstrate various patterns of action in the universe pointing to the existence of God.

The *tadbīr* argument requires some knowledge of the world to appreciate. For most lay-Muslims, whenever evidence for the oneness of God is raised, the *tamānu'* argument usually comes to mind. A basic understanding of the argument is to reason, if there was more than one god, there would be chaos rather than order in the universe. Since there is apparent order, there must be only one God. The *tamānu'* argument relies and expands on the reasoning provided in verse 21:22 and other similar verses in the Qur'an:[32]

> Had there been in the heavens and the earth any deities other than God, both (of those realms) would certainly have fallen into ruin. All-Glorified God is, the Lord of the Supreme Throne, in that He is absolutely above all that they attribute to Him.[33]
>
> Say: "If there were, as they assert, deities apart from Him, surely they would seek a way to the Master of the Supreme Throne (the dominion of the creation)."[34]
>
> There is no deity along with Him; otherwise each deity would surely have sought absolute independence with his creatures under his authority, and they would surely have tried to overpower one another.[35]

The logical basis of the *tamānu'* argument as expressed by classical period theologians is mutual hindrance and hence incapacitation if there were two or more

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[31] Ibid, 33.
[32] Fathalla Kholeif, introduction to *Kitab al-Tawhid*, by Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Abu Mansur Al-Māturīdī and Fathalla Kholeif (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1970), xxiii.
[33] Qur'an 21:22.
[34] Qur'an 17:42.
[35] Qur'an 23:91.

gods. The argument is advanced as follows: If there is more than one god, they will not always agree. It is possible they would wish to exert opposite effects on the same thing. One of them may will for a stone to move, for example, while the other may will for it to remain motionless. The association (*ta'alluq*) of both wills with the stone are equally possible. Yet, occurrence of both actions at the same time is impossible. If the two gods are equal, their power would mutually hinder one another and no change would happen even though they willed to cause an effect. However, this is not what is observed in the world. Change occurs all the time. If, however, one of the deities overcomes the other, one of them is rendered powerless. Powerlessness indicates need and, therefore, origination (*hudūth*) and possible existence (*imkān*), attributes belonging to created beings rather than a god. Hence, the one who is rendered powerless cannot be a god. Since plurality of divinity results in either mutual hindrance or powerlessness, the existence of more than one god is impossible.[36]

Interestingly, al-Ash'arī, and just about all Ash'arite theologians, solely poses the *tamānu'* argument to argue for the oneness of God.[37] A leading Ash'arite theologian, al-Juwaynī, succinctly articulates the *tamānu'* argument and addresses various objections to the argument.[38] Al-Ghazālī develops the argument further and focuses on the impossibility of allocating separate jurisdictions to each god, presumably one creates the heavens while the other the earth or one creates animals while the other creates plants.[39] Al-Ghazālī asks: 'is the god capable of creating the heavens also capable of creating the earth?' If the answer is yes, then this would mean there would be nothing to differentiate between the two gods in terms of power. He demonstrates

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[36] Ibn Yusuf, *Imam Abu Hanifa's al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained*, 74.
[37] Cited in Al-Māturīdī and Kholeif, *Kitab al-Tawhid*.
[38] Al-Juwaynī, *A Guide to the Conclusive Proofs*, 31-35.
[39] Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Ghazali's Moderation in Belief*, 75.

that multiplicity of similar things is impossible without there being a difference. In other words, the two gods would be the same. If the answer to the original question is 'no,' then this restriction would be impossible since a god capable of creating heavenly objects would also be capable of creating earthly objects as they are made from similar substances.[40] In either case, there is impossibility; therefore, it is not possible to divide the cosmos and world between multiple gods and allocate them various jurisdictions for the orderly running of affairs.

However, al-Māturīdī uses *tadbīr* and *tamānu'* arguments as well as arguments from scriptures[41] in his list of nine proofs for the oneness of God.[42] In accounting for this distinction, Rudolph Ulrich contends that al-Ash'arī deliberately neglects the *tadbīr* argument because in his theology there was no room for the notion of "autonomous natures that must be supervised."[43] However, while al-Māturīdī acknowledges the world and entities in it depend on God, he acknowledges the natures (*tabā'i*) of things had effects that needed ordering and directing by God.[44] This distinction is an important testing ground in locating Nursi within the Ash'arī and Māturīdī theological spectrum.

According to Ulrich, another feature that distinguishes al-Māturīdī is his appeal to the sense in which God is naturally understood in the human mind as 'the One' (*al-wāhid*).[45] For al-Māturīdī, *wāhid* is the first of numbers and when humans speak of greatness and superiority of leading people in society they say 'the one and only …' Analogously, God is conceived as the one and only, and the greatest and first of

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[40] Ibid.
[41] Al-Māturīdī's epistemology covers three fundamental sources – revelation, pure reason and experience of the world (scientific knowledge). Hence, he often puts forward arguments from scriptures.
[42] Ulrich, *Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand*, 270-271.
[43] Ibid, 273.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.

those that exist[46] – an interesting articulation reminiscent of the ontological argument and backtracking to the argument a century before Ibn Sina.

Al-Māturīdī presents another unique argument based on the notion the world is finite. He argues, if the notion of more than one god is accepted, it would mean the universe and entities in it are also infinite. Since there are infinite numbers, it is also feasible there would be infinite numbers of gods. There is no reason to stop at two. Since each god would want to be associated with a minimum of one thing, it follows there would be infinite numbers of things in the universe. Since the universe, world and entities in them are finite, it follows there is only one God.[47] Even though the finite nature of the world is Aristotelian in origin, as Fathalla Kholeif observes, its application to the proof of God's unity is unique to al-Māturīdī.[48] In fact, this is a characteristic of classical Islamic theology in that Hellenistic philosophical conclusions or ideas are occasionally assimilated within an Islamic framework to develop creative and unique arguments supporting Qur'anic propositions of faith.

Thus, Muslim theologians largely produce *tadbīr*and *tamanu'* arguments for the oneness of God. While Ash'arite theology mainly focuses on the *tamanu'* argument, Māturīdite theology is more flexible in considering all logical proofs that lead to the oneness of God. In the seminal theological works of the classical era, the unity of God is proven with *tadbīr* and *tamānu'* arguments and they immediately segue to discussions focusing on the nature and attributes of God.[49]

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[46] Al-Māturīdī, *Kitâb al-Tawhid*, 31.
[47] Ibid, 31.
[48] Kholeif, introduction, xxiv.
[49] The discussion on God's nature and attributes will continue in the next chapter.

5.4   Proofs of Tawḥīd in Risale-i Nur

Nursi expands on the classical *tadbīr* and *tamānu'* arguments and presses three other proofs of *tawḥīd* – order and harmony argument; ease in creation argument; and interdependence argument. He also provides arguments for God's unity from the nature and attributes of God and from the nature of particulars in the universe.

At the end of the major epistle, 7th Ray, Nursi explains why he spends considerable effort and detail in articulating proofs of *tawḥīd*:

> The Risale-i Nur is not only renovating a minor damage or a small house; it is reconstructing an immense destruction and repairing an enormous fortress harbouring Islam. It is not only striving to reform an individual's heart and conscience, but also with the medicines and miraculousness of the Qur'an and faith (*īmān*), it is striving to remedy the collective heart (*kalb-i umūmi*) and the collective thought (*afkār-ı āmme*) wounded by instruments compiled over the last thousand years; and it is reforming the collective conscience (*vicdan-ı umūmi*) impaired by the breaching of Islamic symbols and principles on which masses of ordinary believers rely.[50]

As covered in Chapter 2, Nursi's revivalist motive and purpose is distinctly apparent in this excerpt. Nursi continues to highlight that such a massive task requires numerous proofs, strong evidence and extensive detail. He claims the *Risale-i Nur* performs this function as well as being the means for the development of faith and its progression through numerous degrees of belief.[51] He agglomerates to theology more function than what was accomplished in the classical era. It seems plausible to assume he believed the reconstruction of Islamic thought, society and civilisation must begin with the expression of Islamic worldview and its fundamental principles in a way attuned to the contemporary mind.

Interestingly, only in one paragraph in the 32nd Word does Nursi touch on the classical *tamānu'* argument of mutual hindrance. He argues, since there is an

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[50] Nursi, *Şualar*, 7th Ray, Warning, 240.
[51] Ibid.

unbroken chain of interdependence from particles to cosmic objects, the power of God is infinite and permeates the entire universe. If there is another god, it would have to possess a finite power as two infinites cannot exist at the same time. For this god to have any claim to governance of any part in the universe, a finite power must overcome an infinite power and set a boundary to the plane of influence of the infinite power. This would mean what is infinite would become finite. Since this is impossible, it is also impossible to have more than one God.[52] Nursi does not repeat or develop this argument elsewhere in his works. Once again, this is most likely due to its abstract nature and Nursi's aversion of abstracts with the concern his readership may not understand or read his works due to its difficulty and appealing only to the mind.

In addition to the *tamānu'* argument, using the reasoning encapsulated in the verse 21:22, Nursi provides the *order (niẓām) and harmony (intiẓām) argument* for the unity of God. From atoms to living things and stars in the earthly and heavenly realms, there is a "most perfect order," "most beautiful harmony" and "just balance."[53] If there was more than one God, their involvement would derange the order and harmony in the universe and there would be observable effects of such a disorder.[54] Nursi explains that the order, harmony and balance in the universe is not just fixed once, but constantly maintained in a dynamic system. There is a continuous flux of "incomings and outgoings" on earth with the harmony between many competing elements and forces maintained, yet the whole planet is kept clean, for example, at the same time.[55] The stars and cosmic objects are also kept in order

[52] Nursi, *Sozler*, 32nd Word, 1st Station, 1st Aim, 825.
[53] Nursi, *Şualar*, 2nd Ray, 3rd Station, 2nd Sign and Proof, 54.
[54] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 30th Flash, 4th Point, 5th Indication, 587.
[55] Nursi, *Şualar*, 2nd Ray, 3rd Station, 2nd Sign and Proof, 54.

through the balancing of forces holding them together.[56] Another key dimension is the ordering seen at every level of existence and between layers of existence towards clear benefits and purposes. Such purposeful order requires knowledge, wisdom, will and choice in the orderer: "Order is a complete expression of unity; it demands a single orderer. It leaves no place for *shirk*, the source of dispute and disorder," contends Nursi.[57] In addition, every object is given beauty in proportion to its natural dispositions and the best possible existence is what exists. To drive this point home, Nursi makes a rare but significant quotation from al-Ghazālī, *laysa fī'l imkān abda' min mā kān* (There is no existence more beautiful than this within the sphere of contingencies),[58] which is known to have caused rigorous debate in the history of Islamic theology with respect to discourse on theodicy.[59]

An immediate reaction to this statement is the obvious imperfections, ugliness, suffering and evil in existence. Nursi anticipates this objection in the form of answers to two questions: An instance of ugliness can be considered an indirect form of beauty if it generates numerous instances of beauty. If that instance of ugliness is removed, it would cause numerous instances of ugliness by virtue of causing the disappearance of those numerous instances of beauty. Secondly, just as the existence of darkness allows innumerable degrees of light and numerous degrees of heat result from coldness, rare cases of ugliness exist as a unit of measurement to display a wide array of beauty. If ugliness did not exist there would only be one type of beauty and

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[56] Ibid, 55.
[57] Ibid, 7th Ray, 2nd Chapter, 5th Truth, 221.
[58] Ibid, 2nd Ray, 3rd Station, 2nd Sign and Proof, 55.
[59] Mehmet S. Aydin, "The Problem of Theodicy in the Risale-I Nur," in *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 215.

innumerable forms of beauty would be kept hidden. So, creation of occasional ugliness is indirectly beautiful.[60]

The second question focuses on the problem of theodicy and demands an answer as to why helpless individuals are subjected to ugliness, suffering or evil. His answer is original: Suffering and evil are occasional results of universal laws, called *'adat Allah* (habits of God). These laws keep the order and harmony in the universe, giving rise to many benefits and useful outcomes. To ensure these outcomes, God allows the occasional suffering and evil to exist as unavoidable collateral. The cosmic order with the universal laws also opens an arena where God's names are displayed in infinite ways. At the same time though, God provides His mercy and help.[61] This approach is unique. What Nursi is saying is that suffering and evil is produced not with that intent, but to maintain the cosmic order and life on earth. He gives the example of the rain: Life would could not be possible without rain, but it sometimes causes floods and destruction. No one could argue that rain should be totally removed to prevent occasional floods.[62]

Apart from the conventional order and harmony argument, Nursi also puts forward the *ease in creation* argument in association with the Qur'anic verse 21:22 as one of the consistent proofs for the unity of God. It is not about the abstract notion of mutual hindrance, rather the focus is the premise that "in unity (*tawḥīd*) there is a necessary ease and facility while in associating partners (*shirk*) there are impossible difficulties."[63] Nursi takes the stakes higher and contends the counter-intuitive

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[60] Ibid, 56. Elsewhere in his works, particularly in 13th Flash, Nursi gives more detailed explanations of evil and suffering. He uses similar lines of reasoning to argue that complete removal of evil and suffering would result in greater evil.
[61] Ibid, 57.
[62] Ibid, 56.
[63] Nursi, Şualar, 2nd Ray, 2nd Station, 2nd Matter, 47.

mystery, "the greatest universal (*kull*) is like the smallest particular (*juz'ī*) and that there is no large or small difference between them," is one of the most important principles of Islam and most significant foundations of *tawḥīd*.[64] Proceeding with this assumption, if it can be demonstrated that things and events occur with ease in the universe, the unity of God is proven.

Nursi first demonstrates the premise there is ease in unity and difficulty in multiplicity. He does so by giving familiar examples. It is far easier to direct a soldier, for example, if he is given into the command of one army officer rather than if they were given into the command of one hundred officers. Furthermore, the provision of the whole army becomes as easy as provision of a single soldier if it is carried out through a single administrative centre. If, on the other hand, the provision of a single soldier is referred to multiple centres and factories, it becomes as difficult as the provision of the whole army. For each item of provision for a single soldier a factory would be needed to produce it. So, numerous factories would be required to supply a single soldier.[65] Similarly, growing thousands of fruits on a tree becomes very easy when it is given to one root and trunk system and a single law of growth applies throughout the tree. Whereas, if the growth of a fruit is expected to be carried out by external sources (other than the tree-trunk system), growth of every fruit becomes as complex as the tree, for "the elements and constituents needed to produce a single seed is the same as those required to sustain the whole tree."[66]

Nursi adds that ease in creation within the natural world occurs in spite of four competing opposites associated with production: (1) if the production is very fast, it would be hard to produce in large quantities in an orderly fashion; (2) things that are

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[64] Ibid, 7th Ray, 2nd Station, 4th Truth, 214.
[65] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 23rd Flash, Conclusion, 3rd Question, 313.
[66] Ibid.

artistic and possess high quality would usually be more difficult, require high skills and more time to produce, hence they would be more expensive and produced in limited quantities; (3) things that are produced abundantly would lack quality and hence would be cheap; and (4) producing many things at the same time would introduce difficulties of separation and differentiation.[67] Yet, in the natural world, all these opposites are overcome in an astonishingly easy fashion – artistic, valuable and complex beings are produced in abundance, very quickly, easily, with little expense and with exceedingly high quality and differentiation.[68] For Nursi, the combinations of so many opposites and the counter-intuitive results in the production of entities in the universe is only possible if Creation is the product of unity, a single source (God), rather than the multiplicity of causes or divinities.[69]

As the third main argument for the unity of God, Nursi illustrates the *interdependence argument* in the 32nd Word. This argument is similar to the one articulated by al-Muhasibi, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. The key distinction with Nursi is that he focuses on the interdependence of beings across the universe rather than the interconnectedness of things to produce one outcome. The crux of the argument is that there is tight interdependence in the universe from the smallest of particles to the largest cosmic objects. If this is true, the universe must be the product of a single creative and administrative source: God.

As in the case of his expositions on the existence of God, Nursi uses an imaginary dialogue with an advocate of *shirk* who has a putative claim to any part of Creation and hence associate partnership with God in His governance of the universe.[70] An

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[67] Nursi, *Şualar*, 7th Ray, 2nd Chapter, 3rd Truth, 213-214.
[68] Ibid, 2nd Ray, 2nd Station, 2nd Matter, 48.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Nursi, *Sozler*, 32nd Word, 1st Station, 805.

atom, notes Nursi, can perform numerous functions in the building of numerous beings. These functions are beyond the atom to figure out as it lacks the knowledge and power to direct itself. To make the task more difficult, countless atoms of the same element do similar functions within the entire universe. So, the one who has power over a single atom must also have power over all atoms of the same type. Further, these atoms become important ingredients, for example in red blood cells, thus the one who governs all atoms must also administer the functions of red blood cells.[71] Nursi maintains his argument to impress that red blood cells are an essential component in the functioning of living cells, which are in turn fundamental constituents of the entire system of the human body. Further, humans depend on the ecosystems of plants and animals, which depend on the earth, sun, galaxies and entire universe.[72] So, there is inseparable dependence between all things and beings in the universe.

After a detailed and dialogical coverage of the entire Creation, Nursi quotes the verse 21:22 and concludes, "There is nothing, from a fly's wing to the lamps in the heavens, there is no *shirk*, even the size of a fly's wing, in which those things ascribed to God as partners could interfere."[73] In his approach, Nursi makes three main points, starting with the smallest particles and moving by layers to reach the largest galaxies to cover the entire Creation. First, each entity fulfils numerous purposeful tasks in many places that require knowledge and power beyond that entity. Second, each entity is not on its own, there are also numerous members of the same entity fulfilling the same function horizontally across the universe. They work together for creative outcomes that seem to be beyond them to achieve. So, the

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[71] Ibid, 805-806.
[72] Ibid, 806-815.
[73] Ibid, 815.

source of governance must include a dominion covering all entities of the same kind. Third, each entity is an essential ingredient for higher layers of Creation. The one who has power over that entity and its related entities must also be able to establish and administer the relationship between two related layers of Creation. In this way, Nursi illustrates an inseparable interdependence vertically between all layers of existence and similarity of function horizontally. He makes the final conclusion, "With respect to *rubūbiyya* (governance), the universe is a disintegrable and indivisible universal (*kull*) and all-encompassing (*kulli*) entity"[74] and hence can only be governed by one God.

Nursi provides two additional arguments for *tawḥīd* in the 2nd and 7th Rays – from God's attributes and actions; and from particulars in existence. With respect to the attributes and actions of God, Nursi focuses on *ḥākimiya* (sovereignty), *kibriyā* (grandeur) and *'aẓama* (splendour), *kamāla* (perfection), *'iṭlaq* (limitlessness) and *iḥāṭa* (comprehensiveness). The sign of *ḥākimiya* is the rejection of interference and sharing of sovereignty.[75] Nursi puts forward the analogy that, even within the human domain, leaders reject any share of leadership or sovereignty. A country will not have more than one leader at a time and, if there is, it will cause disorder, instability and even civil war at the extreme.[76] If weak and limited humans feel this way, God would reject sharing of His sovereignty on a greater scale.[77] As Turner identifies, this example does not suggest God is hungry for power or a tyrant, rather it suggests God's sovereignty does not accept intervention on account of it being absolute.[78] The mark of *kibriyā* and *'aẓama* is that it does not need assistance or aid. The scale of

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[74] Nursi, *Şualar*, 7th Ray, 2nd Chapter, 4th Truth, 219.
[75] Ibid, 2nd Ray, 2nd Chapter, 1st Requirement, 42.
[76] Ibid, 7th Ray, 2nd Chapter, 4th Truth, 205.
[77] Ibid, 2nd Ray, 2nd Chapter, 1st Requirement, 42.
[78] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed,* 123.

Creation from stars to beings on earth and the complexity of acts of governance of the universe and the earth show God has absolute greatness and splendour.[79] The sun leaves no need for other sources of light by virtue of its intensity and all-pervasiveness of its light. Similarly, God's power is so sublime and compelling that it does not leave any room for the assistance of lesser powers.[80] The sign of *kamāla* is the rejection of powerlessness, for the perfection of the features of living beings require an absolute power and this can only belong to a single essence, hence requires unity. The qualities of *'iṭlaq* and *iḥāṭa* go against partnership, for they have a tendency to spread without limitation. The fact that all actions of governance are spread across the universe and plants, for example, tend to occupy all available space show these actions are limitless, and limitlessness can only be the quality of one.[81]

Nursi develops similar arguments from *ulūhiyya* (divinity), *rubūbiyyah* (governance), *fattāhiyya* (opening), *rahmāniyya* (mercifulness), *rahīmiyya* (compassion), *idāra* (administering) and *razzāqiyya* (bestowment of sustenance).[82] What is common in all these arguments is that God's nature and attributes are shown to be absolute, as proven, for Nursi, by the scale of their effects vertically and horizontally across the universe. Nothing can penetrate the absoluteness of God's pervasive activity, creativity and dominance of Creation. Since absoluteness has no need for an aide or partner, God's nature and attributes require that He is one, unique and without equal.

From universals of existence, Nursi proceeds to the other extreme of particulars and asserts that the particulars of existence demonstrate *tawḥīd* in two ways. First, the

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[79] Nursi, *Şualar,* 7th Ray, 2nd Chapter, 4th Truth, 210.
[80] Ibid, 2nd Ray, 2nd Chapter, 1st Requirement, 43.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid, 7th Ray, 2nd Chapter, 204-237.

benefits and purposes of Creation focus at the level of particulars of existence.[83] The richest activity for divine purposes concentrates over physicality. Not only the diversity of divine blessings are delivered through physicality of particulars, but the seeds of human worship are also expressed through their experience at the level of physical particulars.[84] Even though particulars are innumerable and diverse, such immaterial concentrations demonstrate *tawḥīd*. Second, even though there is a diversity of life and innumerable individuals of living beings, preservation of life in "the heart (seed and egg) of the fruits" of living beings as well as all human memories indicate a single act of preservation of a Wise Creator.[85]

> Therefore, with regard to its benefits, a fruit looks to its tree's owner. With regard to its seed, it looks to all the parts, units, and nature of the tree. And with regard to the stamp on its face, which is similar on members of its species, it gazes on all fruits of the tree.[86]

So, even though the multiplicity of particulars may seem to be unrelated at first sight, every entity points to the entire existence and God. Hence, there is a "truth of *rubūbiyya al mutlaq* (absolute governance)" encompassing the entire Creation rejecting any inclusion of causes.[87] Nursi explains that, just as an orchard farmer is ultimately concerned with the harvest of fruits to the outermost branches, the Creator of the "tree of universe" has concentrated the fruits of the creative outcomes of his works in the details of Creation and the outermost layers of physicality, which is the realm of elements, plants, animals and humans. Surely, Nursi adds, if God is the Creator, He would not leave them to mere chance or causes. Moreover, the human recognition of God through belief and building relations with God through worship are higher purposes linked to the display of creativity. Surely, God would not ignore

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[83] Ibid, 2nd Ray, 2nd Chapter, 1st Requirement, 46.
[84] Ibid, 11th Ray, 8th Matter, 300.
[85] Ibid, 2nd Ray, 2nd Chapter, 1st Requirement, 46.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid, 7th Ray, 2nd Chapter, 2nd Truth, 205.

the diversion of belief and worship to anyone other than Him, otherwise His entire creative activity would be rendered futile.[88] This shows there is the "truth of *ulūhiyya al-mutlaq* (absolute divinity)" rejecting any partnership.[89]

A distinctive pattern in Nursi's proofs for the unity of God is that he covers all angles. He argues for *tawḥīd* from the universals to particulars of existence; from God's nature to living beings in the world; and vertically and horizontally covers the entire universe. His arguments from ease of creation and interdependence of beings from the smallest to the largest planes of existence are original and compelling to illustrate that the universe is a whole, and the cause of the universe and its operation must be attributed to a single source. Nevertheless, an absolute monotheistic approach has its implications.

Implications of Tawḥīd on Causality

The way one God creates and exclusively governs the universe and every process therein raises significant theological implications. How does a single God create everything in the universe when there seems to be layers to existence and the creation of things occurs sequentially and tends to follow a predictable series of events in a causal relationship? What roles do causes have in the Islamic cosmology informed by *tawḥīd*? If causality is recognised, it seems to limit God's power and governance. If it is denied, it appears to abnegate the observed order and sequence of events predictable by science.

As early as the eighth century, Muslim theologians recognised these implications and formed a theological position that everything in the universe occurs through the active and direct power of God, while their Christian counterparts saw no issue in

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[88] Ibid, 2nd Ray, 2nd Chapter, 1st Requirement, 45.
[89] Ibid, 7th Ray, 2nd Chapter, 1st Truth, 204.

maintaining that God acts through intermediate causes.[90] For Muslim theologians, their position was consistent with the Qur'an that left no room for speculation and insisted that God is involved in everything from cosmic events to the falling of a leaf.[91] It was Muslim philosophers who gave some room for causality in their pursuit to find a reasonable account for the universe and a Creator who acts behind veils. What transpired was a spectacular theological debate in medieval Islamic thought spanning across two centuries with the main contenders being al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā, al-Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd.

Griffel contends the primary factor that led to this debate was the Ash'arī cosmology of occasionalism and the related concept of atomism.[92] While concepts of atomism originated in the early Hellenistic philosophy, they were rejected by Aristotle and all later philosophers as well as Christian and Jewish theologians preceding Muslim scholars.[93] Wolfson postulates the adoption of atomism by *mutakallimūn* (theologians) was due to its predilection to reject causality.[94] Although al-Māturīdī was not very clear on the ontological structure of the world,[95] as Cerić notes, he was definite in his repudiation of causality and the doctrine that God is continuous in the act of creating.[96] Al-Ash'arī was more direct in setting the foundations of the theological conceptualisation of atomism. Atomism provided a cosmology to explain God's involvement in the world behind the veil of things and apparent causes. For Ash'arite theologians, it preserved God's full and absolute control over His creation and set a bulwark before philosophical encroachments to the omnipotence of God.

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[90] Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, 518.
[91] See verses 7:191, 10:35, 14:37, 30:39, 35:38, 36:82 and 80:25-32.
[92] Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 125.
[93] Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, 467.
[94] Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 125.
[95] Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunni Theology*, 242.
[96] Cerić, *Roots of Synthetic Theology in Islam*, 134.

At the heart of the atomism and occasionalism cosmology lies the assumption that the smallest indivisible (*lā yatajazza'u*) particle, the atom,[97] has two aspects. One aspect is the substance (*jawhar*) or essence, which is like an empty shell. It acquires attributes (singular *'araḍ*) that give it observable qualities (colour, odour, shape and others). At the moment of creation, God forms an association (*ta'alluq*) between the atom and its unique attributes. These associations are not permanent; they have to be created at every moment in time. If God wills it, He creates the association and its qualities differently from one moment to the next. So, the existence as perceived by humans is a series of occasions (like the frames of a movie) that are recreated at every moment anew. Because this creation occurs so fast, we perceive it as continuous succession of cause and effect. Since God is absolutely free and there is no necessity for God to create an occasion because of the previous one, one occasion does not cause another. It is purely God's creation at every moment. So, there is no necessary reason (*sabab*) or cause (*'illa*) for any effect. What is observed as consistent and predictable events is because God has a habitually consistent way of creating.[98]

Muslim philosophers had a different approach. They aimed to explain *marātib al-mawjūdāt* (hierarchy of beings), as al-Fārābī called it,[99] and develop a cosmology that best explained causality and how God relates to His creation. Influenced by Neoplatonism, al-Fārābī was the first to develop an original synthesis of the hierarchy of intelligences[100] corresponding with each sphere of beings where lower beings are caused by higher efficient causes.[101] Al-Fārābī's understanding of 'cause'

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[97] Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, 466.
[98] Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 125-127.
[99] Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam*, 95.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 136.

is Aristotelian and means "material, formal, efficient and final cause" resulting in the existence of a being. Al-Fārābī calls them primary sources (*mabda'*) and for him there are six – the First Cause, secondary causes, the active intellect, soul, form and matter.[102] God, as the First Being, proceeds and emanates (*fayḍ*) by virtue of His overflowing goodness giving rise to the hierarchy of observed entities from cosmos to things on earth.[103]

The main motive in al-Fārābī's hierarchy of intelligences and emanation is an attempt to explain how an imperfect and dependent world originates from a perfect and self-sufficient God. It is built on Ptolemy's (d. 165) geocentric cosmic model where the earth is the centre of the universe – sun, moon, five planets known at the time, sphere of fixed stars and tenth supreme sphere (*falak al-aflāk*) as the highest sphere of existence.[104] Each sphere has a physical existence and a soul dominated by an intellect (*'aql*). Each intellect causes the existence of its sphere, governs its movement and causes the existence of the next lower sphere.[105] The key starting point is that the cosmos is an emanation from the Necessary Being who overflows (*yafiḍ*) in an act bounty (*jūd*) "giving rise to the first intellect."[106] With respect to the Necessary Being, al-Fārābī' remarks, "one should believe this is God."[107] Hence, God is the First Cause and therefore the ultimate cause of the chain of emanations resulting in lower spheres and intellects.[108] When the first intellect comprehends the Necessary Being, it brings about the second intellect, and when it comprehends itself, it generates the soul of the supreme sphere.[109] The succession of emanations

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[102] Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam*, 96.
[103] Fakhry, *A Short Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism*, 41.
[104] Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 136-137.
[105] Ibid, 137.
[106] Fakhry, *A Short Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism*, 52.
[107] Cited in Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 137.
[108] Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 137.
[109] Fakhry, *A Short Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Mysticism*, 52.

continues where each intellect entails the next and their corresponding cosmic spheres until the lowest, the active intellect, is produced in the sublunary sphere where plants, animals and humans live. Everything on earth is produced by a combination of elements according to the characteristics defined by "substantive forms" emanating from the active intellect.[110] About the nature of intellects, al-Fārābī remarks, "one should believe they are the angels."[111]

Ibn Sīnā further develops these ideas and places causality at the kernel of existence, "for everything occurring in motion, or everything composed of matter and form, there are existing causes," he noted.[112] For ibn Sīnā, God is distinguished with other efficient causes in that He is the First Cause and the essential cause (*'illa dhātiyya*) connoting that the effects caused by God arise necessarily from His essence.[113] All other secondary causes depend on their immediate higher sphere. Yet, there is also a necessary link between causes and conditions. If all conditions are assembled, the effect must immediately ensue, as is the case that cotton will necessarily burn if fire is brought near it.[114]

In their cosmology, al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā aim to link the origination of everything in the universe to God and develop a system for the explanation of the entire cosmos and its events.[115] A distinctive feature of their thought is that causes had real effects even though they ultimately originated and therefore linked to the First Cause (God). Although their system of cosmology looks complete, logical and sound with the science of their time, it seems highly speculative and lacking clear support from the

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[110] Ibid.
[111] Cited in Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 137.
[112] Cited in Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 134.
[113] Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 135.
[114] Ibid, 137.
[115] David B. Burrell, "Creation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim J. Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 149.

Qur'an. The idea of a multiple hierarchy of intelligences appears to carry connotations of *shirk* and the notion of necessary emanation seems to abnegate the will of God. There is not much room for God's active involvement in the world other than the initial generation of the first intellect. To be fair to ibn Sīnā, he acknowledges the absolute governance of God:

> In the world as a whole and in its parts, both upper and earthly, there is nothing which forms an exception to the fact that God is the cause (*sabab*) of its existence and origination and that God has knowledge of it, governs it, and wills its coming into being; it is all subject to His government (*tadbīr*), determination (*taqdīr*), knowledge and will.[116]

Nevertheless, a theological response was inevitable and it came from al-Ghazālī. Al-Ghazālī not only attempts to maintain the doctrine of pure *tawḥīd*, but he also tries to find an acceptable theological position to explain the order and predictability of events in the universe. Earlier Muslim theologians, including those from the Ash'arite school, developed the notion of *'ādah* (habit) – God acts consistently by way of habit and "repeated actions of God are performed by Him by causing the continuance of the habit (*bi-ijrā' al-'ādah*)."[117] Al-Ghazālī prefers to use the term *sunnah* (habitual way) synonymously with *'ādah*,[118] most likely to embed the notion within the Qur'an's use of the term.[119] Al-Ghazālī explains that God has created in the human soul the knowledge that He will not make sudden unexpected changes to things around us (convert a book on a table to a boy, for example) although He is capable of doing so. When we see a pattern of past events repeated habitually (*al-'ādah*), we are led to believe the same pattern will continue in the future.[120] Yet, such

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[116] Cited in Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 138.
[117] Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, 546.
[118] Ibid, 550.
[119] The expression '*sunnata Allah*' (habitual way of God) appears in five places in the Qur'an. See for example, "(That was) the way of God (*sunnata Allah*) with those who passed before. You will never find any change in God's way (*sunnata Allah*)" (33:62).
[120] Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, 548.

an observation does not exclude the involvement of other unseen causes. What guarantee can be given that parents of a child are the only efficient causes when there could be many hidden ones?[121] He further explains that what is perceived as causes are actually conditions (*shurūt*) for the creation of a thing, "the creation of life is a condition for the creation of knowledge, not that knowledge is produced (*yatawallad*) by life."[122] Al-Ghazālī further elaborates that the conditions are in a concomitant relationship (*iqtirān*) with the produced effects.[123] Concomitance is established by God "due to habitual course of things" and therefore can be broken by God. When cotton is brought near a fire it burns because of this concomitance, but it can be changed or reversed if God so willed.[124]

Although none used the term 'natural law,' Muslim theologians' descriptions of habits of God (*sunnat Allah*) give an explanation for the consistent patterns of creating and action by God and can be described as laws. There is one crucial difference between the concepts of a natural law as it is understood in science and the consistent patterns generated by habits of God. Unlike the concept of inalterable natural laws, in the notion of habits, there is no necessity that, for example, lack of food and drink should cause hunger. It just does so habitually.[125] Muslim theologians were careful not to entrap God into a system of necessities,[126] hence they firmly insist on the caveat that reversal of a causal relationship is possible if God wills it, but, in actuality, God does not change His habits with the exception of miracles. Miracles are simply God's temporary suspension of the habitual exercise of His power to

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[121] Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 152.
[122] Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, 550.
[123] Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 205.
[124] Al-Ghazālī, *Moderation in Belief*, 101.
[125] Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, 113.
[126] Burrell, "Creation," 149.

support the mission of a prophet.[127] The result is, as Goldziher contends, every natural phenomena is the creative outcome of a particular act rather than the consequence of a constant law.[128]

Ibn Rushd made a one last dash in five counter-arguments against al-Ghazālī and theologians with similar denial of the efficacy of causes. First, for Ibn Rushd, denial of causes equates to denial of scientific knowledge and wisdom for "scientific knowledge (*al-'ilm*) is the knowledge of things by their causes and wisdom is the knowledge of invisible causes."[129] Second, since humans naturally desire knowledge, denial of causes would lead to the removal of something that is inseparably part of human nature.[130] Third, Ibn Rushd asserts that denial of causality also negates the most critical premise of the cosmological argument for God – everything that begins must have a cause. If causality is removed, there is no way of "arriving at a knowledge for the existence of God."[131] Fourth, Ibn Rushd builds a complex argument on the accepted notion that atoms, therefore things, have essence and attributes. The essence of a thing is the cause of why things are different and prone to particular actions. He argues that from the essence of a thing, its nature, appropriate actions would proceed, and if no action proceeds, there would be no unity to the nature of a being. Since "being and unity are one and the same," the denial of causality would lead to denial of the essence, which would result in the denial of unity and in the end result in "non-being," which is absurd.[132] In the fifth point, Ibn Rushd provides a counter-argument for the notion of the habit (*'adah*) of God. He contests that, if it is said God acts habitually, it would entail He had also acquired the

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[127] Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, 548.
[128] Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, 113.
[129] Ibid, 553.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Ibid, 554.
[132] Ibid, 554-555.

habit of acting repeatedly "in the same way by His having acted in that same way."[133] This would mean habit (*al-'adah*) is a competence (*malakah*) developed in God after repetitive action. This would infer some change has occurred in God, an idea rejected by theologians and the Qur'an.[134]

In the end, Watt, as with many historians of Islamic theology, maintains that Ibn Rushd had minimal influence in the Muslim world due to his failure to convince Muslim scholarship that philosophy had a place alongside normative textual theology.[135] Griffel contrasts this view and contends that al-Ghazālī found a synthesis between Ibn Sina's philosophy and Ash'arite theology to construct his own version of Islamic cosmology.[136] This, in the end, resonated with scholarly circles and the Muslim masses effectively sidelining Ibn Rushd.

5.6   Nursi's Perspective on Causality

Centuries later, Nursi joined the debate. Analysis of Nursi's works demonstrates that he followed the normative Islamic theological line in giving no room for the effectiveness of causes in the world. During his discussion of the default argument for God (presented in the previous chapter), Nursi argues that causes cannot be responsible for purposeful and creative outcomes for "physical causes only bring matter together, they cannot produce something they do not possess."[137] Similar to al-Ghazālī,[138] the belief that causes have real effects, in Nursi's view, leads to one of the most subtle forms of *shirk*. Hence, he touches on the subject matter of causality in numerous passages of his works usually in tandem with discussion on *tawḥīd*.

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[133] Ibid, 555.
[134] Ibid, 556.
[135] Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, 119.
[136] Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 11.
[137] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 23rd Flash, Conclusion, 314.
[138] Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology*, 204.

Nursi acknowledges that just about all effects in the universe appear to have been linked to causes, but this is a deception of human perception due to the apparent ordering of things.[139] Closer examination, Nursi adds, reveals that causes do not have "real creative effects."[140] To explain why humans perceive an effective relationship between a cause and an effect, Nursi focuses on the Ghazālian concept of *iqtirān* (concomitance). In Nursi's usage, *iqtirān* means the co-existence of two or more entities at the same time and place for a creative outcome to be produced.[141] Since the non-existence of a single thing can sometimes appear to stop an effect or the addition of a thing can seem to start a process, people wrongly associate that single thing as the operative cause (*'illa*). In reality, for something to emerge, numerous ingredients (*muqaddamāt*) and conditions (*shurūt*) are required to co-exist at the same time.[142] For instance, a man can cause the destruction of a whole garden by not opening the irrigation valve. Yet, the harvest can only be produced with the timely assembly of numerous other ingredients and conditions in addition to water supplied by irrigation.[143]

Even if the right conditions are met and all ingredients are assembled, they are not sufficient to produce the effect, for the effect is a creative outcome that requires the will and power of God.[144] After quoting verse 39:62,[145] Nursi makes the statement "when we look at the cause and effect in everything in the universe, we see that the greatest of causes do not have sufficient power to produce the least of effects."[146] There is an observable inconsistency between causes that are exceedingly ordinary

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[139] Nursi, *Sozler*, 32nd Word, 2nd Station, 1st Aim, 826.
[140] Ibid, 33rd Word, 27th Window, 926.
[141] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 17th Flash, 13th Point, 4th Matter, 231.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Ibid.
[145] "God is the Creator of all things, and He is the Guardian (with power of disposition) over all things."
[146] Nursi, *Sozler*, 33rd Word, 27th Window, 926-927.

and powerless, and the effects that are remarkably valuable and artful.[147] Nursi provides evidence to support his observation. Among all causes, the human being is the most capable cause with a far-reaching will and widespread capacity to act. Yet, even with the most obvious of all human actions of eating, thinking and speech, the portion belonging to humans is negligible.[148] When the act of eating is considered, the only conscious parts are the choice of food and act of chewing. Whereas eating involves hundreds of successive actions, from digestion to how the nutrients are separated and used in cells, to finally generate the nutritional benefits. In a separate passage, Nursi adds the human memory as a "miracle of power" that cannot be attributed to the folding of the brain cortex, neurons or atoms in the brain, yet the human memory is capable of recording an immense library of data from childhood to old age.[149] Similarly, the human part in the act of speech is negligibly small. So, in the most basic human functions and actions, as a great cause, the human part is a negligible ingredient in the final effect, proving that causes do not generate the effects.

Nursi's main argument hinges on two key premises. First, for a creative outcome to emerge, many conditions, elements and other constituting parts must assemble together to produce an effect. So, it cannot be attributed to a single cause, but a collection of causes. This is a Ghazālian idea and not unique to Nursi. What is unique to Nursi is the second premise. The collection of causes produce a synergistic effect (Nursi calls it *ījādī*, creative) where the value and art displayed in the effect is far greater than sum of its individual parts. For Nursi, this difference cannot be explained by anything material. Hence, the effect cannot be attributed even to a

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[147] Ibid, 928.
[148] Ibid, 32nd Word, 2nd Station, 1st Aim, 826.
[149] Ibid, 33rd Word, 27th Window, 927.

complete collection of causes. Therefore, there must be a purposeful will, knowledge and power for all effects to be created and this can only be attributed to God.

In the 22nd Word, after defining the two types of *tawḥīd*, Nursi clarifies where causality fits in a *tawḥīd*-centric cosmology. He states, divine "dignity (*ʿizza*) and majesty (*ʿaẓama*) demand that causes are a veil to the hand of (divine) power in the view of reason, while unity (*tawḥīd*) and glory (*jalāl*) demand that causes withdraw their hands from the true effect."[150] This explanation is worded in a way to appeal to a believer seeking to understand why causes exist at all if God is the real actor behind everything. The statement has two parts. In the first part, Nursi assigns a role for causes. They are required to veil God's dignity and majesty as sometimes humans can attribute something evil or ugly to God due to their narrow and subjective perspective. Diseases and the angel of death are veils to God as the real actor of taking lives so people do not blaspheme against God in sorrow.[151] Causes are also required for humans to understand the laws of nature as a reflection of God's order of the universe, and harness them for their benefit.[152] In the second part of the statement, Nursi negates causes in having any creative power. Ultimately, all power giving rise to creative effects comes from God.[153]

In explaining how God's power shows its effect on the physical universe, Nursi poses the analogy of a mirror. Just like a mirror has two sides, one side shiny and transparent while the other side is coloured and opaque, the reality of existence has two facets: *mulk* (manifest world) and *malakūt* (inner unseen world).[154] The *mulk* aspect of existence is what is observed and where all things perceived as causes

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[150] Ibid, 22nd Word, 1st Station, 1st Flash, 392.
[151] Ibid, 393.
[152] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 16th Flash, Conclusion, 195.
[153] Nursi, *Sozler*, 22nd Word, 1st Station, 1st Flash, 390.
[154] Ibid, 391.

reside. It is opaque and coloured, and can have different states of appearance.[155] It is where opposites such as beauty–ugliness, good–evil and large–small merge to generate degrees of things to human perception. Since such mergers often confuse the human mind to see this face as ordinary and inappropriate, they require causes to veil God's dignity and majesty.[156] At the same time, there are four things that do not require causes to veil them – existence, light, life and compassion – for they are pure and free from wrong perceptions. Nursi gives the example of rain as an expression of compassion. Although how rain forms in clouds is postulated by science, it is not entirely understood. There is no scientific law that can predict when it will rain for it is an expression of God's compassion to His creatures. Predictions of rain through instruments and the science of meteorology is only a forecast after some signs have emerged. Otherwise, rain cannot be predicted as precisely as the rising and setting of the sun.[157] Similarly, coming into existence (*wujūd*) is purely good hence attributed to God, while all evil is caused by non-existence of essential elements for existence to occur.[158] A building, for example, only exists together with all of its constituting parts. If one essential part is missing, it will collapse.[159] Since causes are not linked with these four entities, existence, light, life and compassion, there are no laws to explain their existence and science cannot predict their occurrence.[160] His main point is that no cause has the properties to produce these four things and therefore cannot be attributed to them. Nursi's assertion that 'existence, light, life and compassion do not have causes' is interesting and would be good to examine in more detail.

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[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid, 29th Word, 1st Aim, 3rd Fundamental, 712.
[157] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 16th Flash, Conclusion, 195.
[158] Ibid, 13th Flash, 4th Point, 136.
[159] Ibid.
[160] Ibid, 16th Flash, Conclusion, 195.

The *malakūt* aspect of existence, although unseen, is where God's power acts directly. Just like the transparent and shiny side of the mirror, in this face, everything is pure, beautiful, fair and good.[161] There is no need for "gathering of causes" or "ordering of causes" to produce an effective outcome. Hence, for Nursi, causes are only apparent in the visible universe; they have no part in the reality of *malakūt*, the inner dimensions of existence.[162]

Nursi's distinction is aimed not at proving such a reality, but to reconcile the contrast between the human perception of causes before an effect happens and the need to explain how God would govern all affairs in the universe without being seen. Importantly, as indicated with the mirror analogy, in Nursi's cosmology, there is only a thin veil between what is seen and the unseen dimension of existence where God's power is in a constant act of creativity. Nursi does not see the need to get involved in the layers of intelligences of Ibn Sina and the occasionalism of Ash'arī theology to deal with a universe that is entirely governed by God without the need for causes.

Nursi says Creation could only occur in two ways: *'ibda* as instantaneous original creation from nothing (Tr. *hiçten*) or *insha* as creation by composition from existing matter over time.[163] Even though something does not exist physically, it does exist within the sphere of God's knowledge. *Qadar*, the title of divine knowledge, determines an immaterial blueprint for everything.[164] In this respect, they could not be considered absolutely non-existent before coming into existence in the phenomenal world. In the case of *'ibda*, the all-pervasive divine power and command

[161] Nursi, *Sozler*, 22nd Word, 1st Station, 1st Flash, 391.
[162] Ibid.
[163] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 30th Flash, 4th Point, 4th Indication, 582.
[164] Nursi, *Şualar*, 2nd Ray, 2nd Station, 2nd Matter, 48.

kun fa yakūn (be and it is),[165] could then instantly originate over those blueprints "as easily as lighting a match" or appear as suddenly as "rubbing a chemical would expose a text written in invisible ink."[166] In the case of *insha*, a being could easily form by the composition of atoms according to the immaterial blueprint obeying the *qadarī* laws and all-pervasive power of God, similar to a trained army at rest would easily gather in formation by the call of a trumpet, signalling the authority and power of the commander, and in accordance with military rules.[167] If existence is not attributed to an omniscient and omnipotent God and instead attributed to multiple hands, nature or causes, Nursi asserts, everything becomes exceedingly difficult to produce.[168] This would mean there cannot be an immaterial blueprint (in knowledge) to model the existence of things. When there is no blueprint to work with, the apparent (*zāhirī*) nothingness becomes absolute (*mutlaq*) nothingness and "absolute nothingness can never be the source of any existence."[169] Hence, creation by *'ibda* would be impossible for anything other than God. *Insha* would be exceedingly difficult, for without immaterial blueprints, one has to accept the operation of thousands of physical templates over the tiny body of an insect, for example.[170]

There are two important distinctions to these notions. First, as Turner underscores, what Nursi means by *'ibda*, the original creation from nothing (*creation ex nihilo*), is not "transforming nothing into existence," as Nursi views this as logical impossibility.[171] Rather, Nursi means that something that has never existed in a physical form but existed within the sphere of God's knowledge, is brought to

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[165] Qur'an 36:82.
[166] Nursi, *Şualar*, 2nd Ray, 2nd Station, 2nd Matter, 48-49.
[167] Ibid, 49.
[168] Ibid.
[169] Ibid.
[170] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 23rd Flash, Conclusion, 3rd Question, 314. The notion of ease will be continued in section 5.7 in addressing the question: 'how can one God created everything with ease?'
[171] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 128.

existence instantly for the first time. It would be fair to assume that, for Nursi, although material existence is according to a template, the atoms and features of the entity would be formed into existence rather than collected from existing atoms. Second, Nursi recognises that the compositional creation, *insha*, also occurs over the immaterial blueprints, but with the difference that the formation of the entities occurs through the gathering of atoms over time and according to certain laws. The idea of an immaterial blueprint in divine knowledge is interesting. One indication of their existence would be the mathematical nature of the natural laws. Nursi makes this connection and says that mathematics in the universe is a reflection of God's name *Muqaddir* (Determiner).[172]

Significantly, Nursi does not completely deny the role of causes or state they should be ignored. As indicated before, he sees causes and ordering of causes as essential for humans to understand the laws of nature, God's pattern of action and harness them for human benefit in technology.[173] Further, adhering to causes is actually a type of prayer, which Nursi calls *active prayer*. Gathering of causes by human activity does not *create* the outcome, but acts as taking an active position to beseech God for the creation of the effect. Ploughing soil knocks on the door of the treasures of mercy, for this type of active prayer ensures no essential ingredient for the creation of effect is missed, but the final creative result is left to God. Nursi makes the point that the One of Absolute Generosity (*Jawad al-Mutlaq*) generally accepts active prayer.[174] The notion of active prayer is interesting and can serve as an important concept for believers in avoiding the inaction of fatalism and arrogance of materialism.

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[172] Nursi, *Sozler*, 20th Word, 2nd Station, 355.
[173] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 16th Flash, Conclusion, 195.
[174] Nursi, *Sozler*, 23rd Word, 5th Point, 426.

5.7 How can One God Create and Govern the Universe?

An important outcome of *tawḥīd*, as understood and argued by Nursi, is that everything depends on God's will and power at all times no matter how insignificant it may be. Nursi recognises this doctrine has two important theological implications soliciting an explanation. First, since there are innumerable things and events in the universe, how does one God govern everything at all times?[175] While the human mind may think such governance is difficult, the observation is that creation occurs "effortlessly, quickly, directly and without contact."[176] As Nursi puts it, this is one of the most significant tricks of the mind to reject God,[177] as the mind sees an apparent contradiction.[178] Moreover, Nursi quotes the following verses to highlight the Qur'anic claim that to God's power there is no difficulty:[179]

> The creation of you all and the resurrection of you all is but like (the creation and resurrection of) a single soul for, verily, God is all-hearing, all-seeing.[180]
>
> When He wills a thing to be, He but says to it "Be!" and it is. So, All-Glorified is He in Whose Hand is the absolute dominion of all things, and to Him you are being brought back.[181]
>
> The advent of the Last Hour will be like the twinkling of an eye, or closer still.[182]

Ultimately, Nursi rhetorically asks about the wisdom and mystery of this ease in creation.[183]

Nursi begins his reconciliation of the ease in creation and seeming difficulty of its administration by stating, "The relation of divine power is according to laws, that is,

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[175] Ibid, 32nd Word, 2nd Station, 2nd Question, 828.
[176] Ibid, 14th Word, 4th Point, 235.
[177] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 13th Flash, 13th Indication, 158.
[178] Nursi, *Sozler*, 16th Word, 1st Flash, 271.
[179] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 23rd Flash, Conclusion, 2nd Question, 312.
[180] Qur'an 31:28.
[181] Qur'an 36:82-83.
[182] Qur'an 16:77.
[183] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 23rd Flash, Conclusion, 2nd Question, 312.

it applies equally to many and few, large and small."[184] He gives seven analogies to show one source can easily achieve many things at the same time and how certain tasks that look difficult may be carried out easily.

First, by the mystery of luminosity (Tr. *şeffafiyet*), the sun can appear in a small bubble or an entire ocean effortlessly at the same time.[185] If the sun had volition and reflected its light wilfully, reflection of its light on a single transparent particle would be as easy as reflection on the entire earth.[186] Second, by the mystery of responsiveness (*muqabala*), a person with a candle, placed in the centre of a circle made up of people holding mirrors, would be able to reflect the light to all people and their mirrors by virtue of being in the centre of the circle.[187] Third, by the mystery of systemic order (*intizām*), a child cam move a small boat and a large ocean liner with the same effort.[188] Fourth, by the mystery of obedience (*imtithal*), a commander can march a solider and the entire army with the same command.[189]

Fifth, by the mystery of balance (Tr. *muvazene*), very large but sensitive scales can weigh two walnuts or two large objects equally.[190] If two particles or two stars equal in weight are placed in each of the scales, a small exertion or force on one scale would easily move it.[191] Sixth, by the mystery of abstraction (Tr. *tecerrüt*), an essence free from individuality can enter into everything large or small without

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[184] Nursi, *Sozler*, 29th Word, 2nd Aim, 3rd Fundamental, 3rd Matter, 713.
[185] Ibid, 10th Word, Conclusion, 138.
[186] Ibid, 29th Word, 2nd Aim, 3rd Fundamental, 2nd Matter, 713.
[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid, 10th Word, Conclusion, 138.
[189] Ibid, 139.
[190] Ibid.
[191] Ibid, 29th Word, 2nd Aim, 3rd Fundamental, 2nd Matter, 714.

difficulty. A very small fish has the same essence of being a fish as a whale, or a microbe has the same animate essence as a rhinoceros.[192]

Nursi applies these analogies to God's power and governance. He contends that divine power manifests luminously and hence omnipresent and omnipotent. The innermost nature of matter in unseen dimensions (*malakūt*) is transparent where it receives the omnipresent divine power without difficulty. There are also systems ingrained in the universe making things easier to accomplish. Matter and things also are absolutely obedient to divine commands that manifest to human perception as natural laws. Furthermore, like the scales analogy, existence and non-existence of things are equally possible and a slight effort could easily tip them over to existence.[193]

For Nursi, the response of the creation to divine power and commands is not just absolute, the essence of everything and the way the universe is engineered also play a part. Everything has a tendency to seek its point of perfection.[194] This tendency multiplies to needs, and those needs magnify to strong passion. Such tendencies, needs and passions are like seeds and qualities that enable matter and Creation to respond to the divine laws of creation.[195] Furthermore, Nursi compares the universe to a majestic oak tree in its design and operation where thousands of fruits and millions of seeds are exposed to a simultaneous act of artistic creation.[196] The core laws of the tree's formation is present in its roots and trunk through the network of branches and interdependencies of systems. The operation of all of these is made possible by the presence of a manifestation of divine will – which can be called the

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[192] Ibid.
[193] Ibid, 10th Word, Conclusion, 139.
[194] Ibid, 29th Word, 2nd Aim, 3rd Fundamental, 2nd Matter, 714.
[195] Ibid.
[196] Ibid, 32nd Word, 2nd Section, 2nd Aim, 829.

spark of life – present in every branch, leaf, fruit and seed. Through the systems in the tree and presence of the spark of life, countless actions involved in the growth of the tree and maintenance of its life are performed simultaneously, without one thing obstructing another and nothing being neglected.[197] Nursi concludes, in a similar way, God has total disposal over the tree of the universe and He governs everything simultaneously and effortlessly. Divine laws of creation show their effect everywhere at the same time and the creative processes are facilitated through a network of interdependencies across the universe.[198]

Nursi's explanations show the most effective use of analogies. Nursi poses his use of analogies as one of the most important reasons why his works are influential and effective in dealing with difficult theological problems. He maintains that analogies act like a "telescope that brings distant truths closer" to understanding.[199] He adds the beauty and power of his works are "flashes from the analogies of the Qur'an" and his only share is that he felt great need for them.[200] Nursi also anticipates the objection that analogical reasoning does not always lead to certain knowledge. There is a type of analogical reasoning, Nursi responds, that is far stronger and indicates more certainty than logical syllogism for "it demonstrates the tip of a universal truth by means of a partial comparison and constructs its judgement on that truth."[201] It demonstrates, Nursi adds, a law encapsulated within that universal truth enabling understanding of the complete truth and application of the universal law to particulars.[202] By the analogy of the sun and how its luminosity propagates, a law of a truth is demonstrated that "light and luminosity cannot be restricted as for them

[197] Ibid.
[198] Ibid, 830.
[199] Nursi, *Mektubat*, 28th Letter, 7th Matter, 7th Point, 530.
[200] Ibid.
[201] Nursi, *Sozler*, 32nd Word, 2nd Chapter, 2nd Aim, 836.
[202] Ibid, 837.

distance and proximity are the same, many and few are equal, and space cannot limit them."[203] The analogy of the tree – with its numerous leaves and fruits growing by virtue of one root and trunk system and the application of a single law – demonstrates the tip of a truth that, like the tree, "the majestic universe, too, displays and is the field of operation of that law of truth and mystery of Divine Oneness."[204]

Nursi is able to maintain the requirements of *tawḥīd* where God is absolute and the disposer of all affairs and at the same time satisfy the mind of any perceived difficulty of one God disposing all affairs. Nursi's explanations are original contributions to Islamic theology and understanding of *tawḥīd*. No other theologian saw these as a problem and then tackled them head on to produce theological and rational explanations.

5.8   Conclusion

Considering *tawḥīd* is the central tenet of Islamic faith, Nursi's extensive deliberations are not surprising. In his theological-oriented Islamic revival, a deeper and more profound understanding of *tawḥīd* plays a crucial role. In that respect, Nursi underscores his central aim of reconstructing the metaphysical fortress of Islam and collective consciousness of Muslims, in his view, heavily battered from a thousand years of intellectual and spiritual onslaught. A key evidence of his approach is seen in the way Nursi defines *tawḥīd* as ordinary *tawḥīd* and true *tawḥīd*. In his definition of true *tawḥīd*, Nursi combines a direct witnessing of the imprints of God's power and governance on every object, and hence gains a perpetual awareness of God. He considers true *tawḥīd* as a worship of faith (*'ibada al-īmāniyya*) and links it to happiness in this world and the next.

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[203] Ibid.
[204] Ibid.

In proving the unity of God, Nursi generally follows the two main arguments of the classical Muslim theologians – proof of divine administration, *dalil al-tadbīr*, and proof of mutual hindrance, *dalil al-tamanu'*. Nursi only briefly touches on the *tamanu'* argument in his characteristic aversion of purely logical and philosophical arguments. Nursi greatly expands on the classic *tadbīr* argument. A distinctive pattern in Nursi's proofs for the unity of God is that he covers all angles. He argues for *tawḥīd* from the universals to particulars of existence; from God's nature to living beings in the world; and vertically and horizontally covering the entire universe. His arguments for ease of creation and interdependence of beings from the smallest to the largest planes of existence are original and compelling to illustrate that the universe is a whole, and the cause of the universe and its operation must be attributed to a single source. Considering the fact that Ash'arite theology mainly focuses on the *tamanu'* argument, while Maturidite theology focuses on a wide array of arguments but mainly the *tadbīr* argument, Nursi approaches more to the Maturidite theological line with respect to the proofs of God's unity.

Another indicator of Nursi slanting towards the Maturidite end of the theological spectrum is his avoidance of the trademark Ash'arite theology of occasionalism. Nursi does not see the need to get involved in the layers of intelligences of Ibn Sina or the occasionalism of Ash'arī theology to deal with a universe that is entirely governed by God without the need for causes. However, as will be discussed in the next chapter, he says God continually manifests His names over the mirror of creation. In this sense, he embraces the Qur'anic concept of the '*kun*' command of God being responsible for all creation. For Nursi, reconciling this with the reality of the observed world is the most important theological aim in relation to understanding *tawḥīd*. He exerts considerable effort in finding this reconciliation through the

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creative use of analogies. Nursi makes significant original theological contributions in his explanations of how one God can easily create and govern the entire universe.

Analysis of Nursi's works demonstrates that he followed the normative Islamic theological line on their view of causality, in that causality is a deception of senses. Similar to al-Ghazālī, a consistent theme in Nursi's works is that belief in the effectiveness of causality leads to a subtle form of *shirk.* Hence, he touches on the subject matter of causality in numerous passages of his works usually in tandem with discussions on *tawḥīd.* Although he repeats some of al-Ghazālī's arguments, his explanations are unique and easy to grasp. An original contribution of Nursi in showing the ineffectiveness of causality is the main argument that an effect has far greater value and art than the sum of all causes required to create them. Hence, they cannot be just attributed to causes and God's will and power is at work behind a thin veil of existence.

Importantly, Nursi does not completely deny or ignore the role of causes. For believers to appreciate the grand design of the cosmos, Nursi clarifies where causality fits in a *tawḥīd* -centric cosmology. Causality is important to veil God's dignity and majesty; therefore it has a place as long as no creative power is attributed to causes as required by God's unity and glory. Causes are also required for humans to understand the laws of nature as a reflection of God's order of the universe, and harness them for their benefit. He qualifies adhering to causes as an active prayer that is more likely to be accepted than a traditional verbal prayer.

Nursi is able to maintain the requirements of *tawḥīd* where God is absolute and the disposer of all affairs and at the same time satisfy a believer's mind of any perceived difficulty of one God disposing all affairs. No other theologian saw these as a

problem and then tackled them head on to produce theological and rational explanations making original contributions to Islamic theology and understanding of *tawḥīd*. One area that is the testing ground of this approach is the locus where God's relation to Creation and humans relating to God intersect. This will be tackled in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6: MA'RIFAT ALLAH – KNOWING AND RELATING TO GOD

6.1   Introduction

The third key theological question about God follows naturally from the previous two – if God exists, is one in divinity and governs the universe at every instant, how should humans relate to God? The theological response to this question determines the way humans develop an understanding of and experience God in their everyday spiritual lives. The response is invariably associated with the transcendence–imminence problem. If God is transcendent, beyond space and time, He is rendered unreachable, hence relating to Him becomes exceedingly difficult. In faith traditions emphasising the absolute transcendence of God, divine intermediaries inevitably appear to cover the gap between God and humans who are bound by space and time, yet yearn to feel God's presence in their lives. Conversely, emphasis on His imminence and accessibility leads to tendencies to anthropomorphise God into worldly images or make Him part of the universe. Is it possible to avoid both?

The Islamic theological response to the transcendence–imminence problem has been addressed by two main disciplines: *kalām* (theology) and *tasawwuf* (Sufism).[1] The cynosure of the theologians was to determine God's attributes and establish how they were related to His essence. For theologians, the nature of God was at stake, hence they focused on the preservation of His unity with multiple attributes to be consistent with the Qur'an rather than a detailed exposition of God's names and attributes or the direct experience of God. This approach seemed appropriate for the context in which

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[1] Nicholas Lo Polito, *Abd Al-Karim Al-Jili: Tawhid, Transcendence and Immanence* (UK: University of Birmingham, 2010), 115.

scholars like Al-Ash'arī and Al-Māturīdī wrote on theology as a response to the anthropomorphic representations of Mushabbiha (anthropomorphists) and the rationalistic doctrines of Mu'tazilites. They aimed to maintain *tawḥīd* and avoid *shirk*. The inevitable implication of this emphasis was to limit the experience of God to abstraction of thought.

In contrast, Muslim mystics (Sufis) primarily inculcated the notion that the way to attain closeness to God was through a deep knowledge of God achieved through religious practices and spiritual experiences, leading to a simple ascetic life rather than abstract and highly rational explanations of God's nature and attributes. Although spiritually fulfilling for initiates, this approach drew criticism for being highly subjective and open to controversial notions that appear to violate *tawḥīd*.

Nursi's aversion of theological abstractions was established in the previous chapters. He is equally distant to approaches and terminology of Sufism, as illustrated in Chapter 2. Navigating between the two disciplines, Nursi argues that the Qur'an presents God as transcendent and imminent at the same time, giving immediate close access without violating God's unity and transcendence. God is transcendent in His essence, but imminent in the way He reflects His *asma al-ḥusna* (beautiful divine names) on the cosmos, the earth and every entity of God's Creation. Notwithstanding the role of devotional practices, the key approach in relating to God at a theological level is to realise knowledge of God through contemplation of His names and attributes as reflected in the universe. Nursi also maintains that, while almost all faith traditions broadly agree on the existence and unity of God (or Godhead), the main theological differences stem from each faith's response to the fundamental question of how humans should relate to God. *Shirk* in belief and controversial doctrines of

mysticism emerge from varying ways of relating to God. In short, Nursi contends the Qur'anic approach delivers the benefits of theology and Sufism while simultaneously avoiding the risks. Although traditionally *ma'rifat Allah* (knowledge of God) was seen to fit within the realm of mysticism, Nursi strips it from being purely spiritual concept and makes it part of theology. This is one of the main trusts of Nursi and one of his main original contributions to Islamic theology.

6.2 Knowledge of God in Classical Islamic Theology

In classical Islamic theology, there are three main themes with respect to the nature and knowledge of God – the relationship of God's attributes (*sifāt*) to divine essence (*dhāt*); how one understands and interprets Qur'anic expressions that would lead to anthropomorphism if taken literally; and the list of accepted attributes of God, particularly similarities and differences between the mainstream theological schools of al-Ash'arī and al-Māturīdī.

An examination of classical scholarship reveals intense debate around the definition and conceptualisation of *dhāt* and *sifāt*.[2] Nader El-Bizri underscores this discourse for its implications on the dialectical concepts of unity–plurality and sameness–otherness.[3] These discussions also have significant implications for Islam's strictly monotheistic position as well as the transcendent–imminent problem. The main debate transpired between the two mainstream Sunni schools and their antagonists, the Mu'tazilites. Mu'tazilites insist the attributes of God have "no existence distinguishable to His essence, but rather emanated from the essence of God;"[4] God

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[2] Sa'd al-Din Al-Taftazani, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam: Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani on the Creed of Najm al-Din an-Nasafi*, trans. Earl E. Elder (New York: Colombia University Press, 1950), 45.
[3] Nader El-Bizri, "God: Essence and Attributes," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim J. Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 122.
[4] Yusuf, Introduction, 20.

speaks, for instance, through His essence (*dhāt*), and God's speech only exists at the time of speaking.[5] God is "knowing without possessing knowledge; powerful with possessing power" and so on.[6] What drives Mu'tazilites to these conclusions is their concern that recognising attributes separate to God's essence leads to anthropomorphism and affirming multiplicity in God's essence.[7] Their position, they claimed, has no inference of plurality in the essence of God nor the consequence of "existence of numerous eternals and necessarily existent beings."[8] The only complication is the Qur'an is replete with expressions describing God with qualities that are deemed as attributes. Mu'tazilites explain that attributes do not exist in reality, but such Qur'anic expressions are a mechanism to facilitate "human comprehension" of God.[9]

Sunni theologians were alarmed and insisted this position contradicted clear verses of the Qur'an and charged Mu'tazilites with deviation. A correct theology had to be consistent with the Qur'an and Sunnah for it to be deemed Islamic and not mere speculation. Hence, God's attributes had to be affirmed. Further, they argued the Mu'tazalite explanations were absurd. Taftazānī contended the Mu'tazilite argument was like saying "a thing is black but there is no blackness in it."[10] At the same time though, Sunni theologians realised, if they were to contemplate divine attributes as separate to God, it would lead to separation of God into entities resulting in *shirk*. They explained: when a 'knowledgeable person' enters a room, it is not said 'knowledge entered the room' nor it is said 'knowledge and the person entered the

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[5] El-Bizri, "God: Essence and Attributes," 124.
[6] Al-Taftazani, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam*, 49.
[7] Ibid, 123.
[8] Ibid, 50.
[9] El-Bizri, "God: Essence and Attributes," 123.
[10] Al-Taftazani, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam*, 48.

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room'.[11] Hence, Sunni theologians held a suprarational view – God's attributes (*sifāt*) are neither His essence (*'ayn dhātihī*) nor other than His essence (*ghayr dhātihī*).[12] Further, Sunni theologians precisely insisted that God's attributes are eternal at all times. God is a creator whether He is creating or not; God has the attribute of speech eternally whether He is speaking or not.[13] They did not see any element of *shirk* in presenting God's attributes as eternal. Taftazānī explains:

> There is no absurdity in the eternity of the possible [attributes] if this eternity subsists in the essence of the Eternal, is necessarily existent in Him, and is not separated (*munfasil*) from Him. Not every eternal is a god, so the existence of a number of gods is not implied from the existence of eternal [attributes]. We must rather say that God taken with His attributes is eternal.[14]

Interestingly, both the Mu'tazilites and their Sunni counterparts claim to vehemently preserve the central tenet of *tawḥīd*. The significance of the discussion is that it highlights the importance of *tawḥīd* to the Islamic creed and the extent to which early scholars went to defend it.

The second major area of discourse in the classical Islamic theology with respect to knowing God has been the discussion on various Qur'anic expressions that would lead to anthropomorphism if taken literally. When encountering Qur'anic verses such as, "your Lord's Face forever remains,"[15] "I created with My own hands"[16] and "The Compassionate, Who sat on the Throne,"[17] it is difficult to determine how successfully anthropomorphism can be avoided. In many verses, the Qur'an also refers to God as speaking, hearing and seeing as well as attributing qualities such as

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[11] Ibn Yusuf, *Imam Abu Hanifa's al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained*, 75.
[12] Yusuf, introduction, 20.
[13] Ibn Yusuf, *Imam Abu Hanifa's al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained*, 72.
[14] Al-Taftazani, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam*, 50.
[15] Qur'an 55:27.
[16] Qur'an 38:75.
[17] Qur'an 20:5.

wrath, mercy and patience.[18] While the anthropomorphist Hashawiyya sect believed God literally had limbs and organs, Muta'zilites maintained the polar opposite that literal understanding of these expressions equated to idolatry. They insisted such expressions must be understood metaphorically, 'hand' should be interpreted as power, 'seeing' as knowledge and 'face' as the grace of God.[19]

Sunni theologians also thought it was theologically precarious to give literal meanings. They explained the Qur'an also had expressions of incomparability (*tanzīh*), such as "and comparable to Him there is none"[20] and "there is nothing whatever like Him,"[21] that prevent a literal understanding of the earlier verses. In their view, the Mu'tazilite approach of purely associating metaphorical meanings was equally wrong as it limited the meanings of these expressions through interpretive fixation. The immediate Sunni approach was that of caution and followed a position described as *tafwīd* (consignment) – accept these expressions as they are revealed in the Qur'an *bilā kayf* (without how); that is, consign their true meaning to God without interpretation.[22]

There were, however, nuances in the classical Sunni theology. As early as the eighth century, Abu Hanifa broke from the absolute *tafwīd* position and called expressions as special "attributes of God" without explaining what those attributes connoted.[23] Al-Ash'arī refused to confirm denotations "of God's hand or face are either corporeal members or mere metaphors."[24] Notwithstanding al-Ash'arī and other Sunni theologians supporting *tafwīd*, they have also written about the need for *ta'wīl*

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[18] Lo Polito, *Tawhid, Transcendence and Immanence*, 114.
[19] Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, 221.
[20] Qur'an 112:3-4.
[21] Qur'an 42:11.
[22] El-Bizri, "God: Essence and Attributes," 127.
[23] Ibn Yusuf, *Imam Abu Hanifa's al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained*, 99.
[24] El-Bizri, "God: Essence and Attributes," 129.

(interpretation).[25] The dictum of *tafwīd* was not satisfactory for later generations as it restricted legitimate interpretation of the Qur'an and understanding of God. Al-Māturīdī and al-Juwaynī forcibly argued the same words and expressions are used elsewhere in the Qur'an and they are freely interpreted. There is nothing that should prevent their interpretation when used in association with God.[26] Ibn Daqiq al-'Id (d. 1302) followed a middle ground saying, "*ta'wīl* of these attributes are acceptable if the meaning is close to the popular usage (*takhatub*)."[27] Ibn al-Humām (d. 1457) followed a situational approach – if people misunderstand, then *ta'wil* should be done so people are not allowed to deviate, otherwise they should be left alone.[28]

The third main subject matters of discussion in classical Islamic theology has been the list of God's attributes and their descriptions. There has been remarkable agreement in this respect within the majority and mainstream Sunni theology. Attributes of God are usually listed in three groups. The first is the personal attribute (*sifat al-nafsiyya*) and there is only one: the Existence (*wujūd*).[29] Al-Ash'arī said *wujūd* is the same as the *dhāt* (essence) of God, while Rāzi and other scholars maintained *wujūd* was an added description.[30] The second group of attributes are the five negating attributes (*sifāt al-salbiyya*) as they negate attribution of their opposite to God – self-subsistence (*qiyam bi-nafsihī*), oneness (*wahdāniyya*), beginningless (*qidam*), endlessness (*baqa'*) and unlike the creation (*mukhalafatun li-l hawādith*).[31] The third group of attributes are called the affirmative attributes (*sifāt al-*

[25] Lo Polito, *Tawhid, Transcendence and Immanence*, 25.
[26] Al-Juwaynī, *A Guide to the Conclusive Proofs*, 32.
[27] Ibn Yusuf, *Imam Abu Hanifa's al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained,* 104.
[28] Ibid, 105.
[29] Muḥammad Sāliḥ Farfūr, *The Beneficial Message and the Definitive Proof in the Study of Theology*, trans. Wesam Charkawi (Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio: Al-Rashad Books, North American distributors, 2010), 83.
[30] Ibn Yusuf, *Imam Abu Hanifa's al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained*, 85.
[31] Farfūr, *Definitive Proof in the Study of Theology*, 83.

thubūtiyya)[32] and there are eight in total. The seven agreed upon between all Sunni theologians and schools are – life (*hayāt*), knowledge (*'ilm*), will (*irāda*), power (*qudra*), hearing (*sama'*), sight (*basar*) and speech (*kalām*).[33]

There is a difference of opinion on the attribute of creating (*takwīn*), which the Māturīdī School adds as the eighth affirmative attribute. The Ash'arī school holds that *takwīn* is an association (*ta'alluq*) of the attribute of power with a particular effect (*athar*). While the attribute of power is eternal, the associations and subsequent effects are created, hence *takwīn* cannot be an attribute as this would lead to associating eternity to created beings (*mukawwan*).[34] The Māturīdī school responds saying the attribute of *takwīn* is eternal, but its associations and effects are created just like the attribute of knowledge is eternal, while what is known (*ma'lūmāt*) is created.[35] Māturīdī scholars add that, if *takwīn* is originated, then it would mean another *takwīn* originated it. The second *takwīn* would need a third *takwīn* and so on leading to an infinite regress unless an eternal *takwīn* is accepted.[36] Scholars generally say the difference is semantics as both schools acknowledge God as the sole creator and disposer of the affairs of the universe, and that attributes of God are eternal.[37]

So, classical Islamic theology mainly focuses on God's attributes – the affirmation of attributes in relation to God's essence, the list of agreed upon attributes and how to correctly understand expressions used for God in the Qur'an without violating His transcendence. In fairness to theologians, they stress every believer is charged with

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[32] These attributes are also called *sifāt al-ma'āni* (entitative attributes) or *sifāt al-wujūdiyya* (existential attributes). Irrespective of how they are termed, the list does not change.
[33] Farfūr, *Definitive Proof in the Study of Theology*, 83.
[34] Ibn Yusuf, *Imam Abu Hanifa's al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained*, 83.
[35] Ibid, 84.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid, 76.

the duty to acquire knowledge (*ma'rifa*) of God and faith must be based on certain knowledge instead of imitation (*taqlīd*).[38] Nevertheless, they did not emphasise the names of God nor is there detailed discussion on the way humans should understand and relate to God. It is no surprise that these theological matters escape most ordinary Muslims who need to relate to God in their everyday life and why Muslim mystics find the *kalām* discourse on God less than satisfying.

Ma'rifa – Knowing God through Spiritual Experience

In contrast to *kalām* theology, Islamic mysticism (Sufism) focused on the relationship with and experience of God rather than abstractions of theology. Muslim mystics not only wanted to practice Islam and form correct beliefs, but they insisted a Muslim must also be aware of "God's presence in all things" to correctly relate to God.[39] This ideal is encapsulated in the concept of *ihsān* defined by the Prophet as "to worship God as if you see Him. Even if you do not see Him, God sees you."[40] Muslim mystics insisted the presence of God can be seen with the eye of the heart to the extent God reveals Himself.[41] A framework for a complete understanding and relating to God is usually expressed in Sufi literature with three linked concepts – *imān-billah* (belief in the existence and unity of God), *ma'rifat-allah* (knowledge of God) and *muhabbat-allah* (love of God). The inference is, as belief in God matures, it will give the fruits of knowledge and love of God.

The most notable of the three is *ma'rifat-allah*, a notion matured over time. Annemarie Schimmel suggests it was Dhū'n-Nūn Misrī (796-859) who first formulated a distinctive theory of *ma'rifa* as the intuitive knowledge of God as

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[38] Ahmad ibn al-Bashir al-Qalawi al-Shinqiti, *Islam in the School of Medina: A Commentary on Ibn 'Ashir's Murshid al-Mu'in*, trans. Asadullah Yate (Norwich, UK: Divan Press, 2013).
[39] Murata and Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, 246.
[40] Ibid, 276.
[41] Ibid, 277.

opposed to a knowledge unveiled through spiritual experience.[42] Previously, *ma'rifa* was included under the umbrella of *'ilm*, which comprised rational and revealed knowledge.[43] A frequently cited *hadith qudsī*[44] in Sufi (*tasawwuf*) literature – "I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known, so I created the world"[45] coupled with the verse, "I have not created the jinn and humankind but to (know and) worship Me"[46] – form the basis of the Sufi teaching that God reveals Himself through the cosmos, and the purpose of human beings is to know and worship God.[47]

Al-Muhāsibī classified knowledge into three categories – knowledge of lawful and unlawful; understanding of matters pertaining to afterlife; and *ma'rifa*. While the first two are attainable through study, intellect and reflection (*tafakkur*), *ma'rifa* can only be attained through a personal relationship with God.[48] By the tenth century, Abū Nasr al-Sarrāj (d. 988) and others argued that a complete appreciation of religious sciences (*ulūm al-dīn*) must include *ma'rifa* and related teachings to it developed by Sufis, and going even further al-Sarrāj pressed the real *fuqahā'*[49] are the Sufis for their profound understanding of religion and God.[50] Returning to basics, Abū Talīb al-Makkī (d. 996) and al-Ghazālī after him emphasised the knowledge and

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[42] Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 43.

[43] Shah Shah-Kazemi, "The Notion and Significance of Ma'rifa in Sufism," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 13, 2 (2002): 159.

[44] Refers to the words of God as quoted and expressed by Prophet Muhammad outside of the Qur'an.

[45] Shah-Kazemi, "Significance of Ma'rifa in Sufism," 158. This hadith does not appear in the canonical six hadith collections.

[46] Qur'an 51:56. Ibn Abbas (d. 687) quotes from Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661) that 'to worship' in this verse means to be instructed with legal and religious obligations. Ibn Abbas also gives the view that 'to worship' encapsulates the meaning 'to declare My Divine Oneness and worship Me'. According to Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, 'to worship' comprises pious following of God's commandments and doing what is good and honourable toward fellow human beings. He also asserts the key expression '*li-ya'budūn*' implies 'to know and worship' God.

[47] Shah-Kazemi, "Significance of Ma'rifa in Sufism," 158.

[48] John Renard, *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism: Foundations of Islamic Mystical Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 20.

[49] Generally used to refer to jurists.

[50] Renard, *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism*, 28-29.

practice of the five pillars of Islam as essential stepping stones for a deeper appreciation of inner spiritual dimensions of worship.[51]

Crucially, *mahabba*, love of God, is equally a central aspect of Sufi literature pertaining to *ma'rifa*. Al-Makkī reminded it was a requirement of faith emphasised by Prophet Muhammad that "God and His Messenger should be more beloved to the faithful than anything else."[52] He proceeded to describe nine aspects of divine love.[53] Al-Ghazālī agreed, however, he nuanced "*mahabba* without *ma'rifa* is impossible – one can only love what one knows,"[54] and, "if love increases in proportion to knowledge, he who knows God best, loves Him the most."[55] Abu Yazid asserted, "His love for me preceded mine for Him,"[56] suggesting the reciprocal nature of the relationship between humanity and God established on *mahabba*. Accordingly, Sufi literature suggests love is a natural consequence and precursor to a mutual and intimate relationship with God.[57] Al-Ghazālī continued the theme to contend that the highest spiritual station to reach is perfect love, the longing to see God in the afterlife.[58] Al-Ghazālī's younger brother Ahmad (d. 1126) also wrote a classic book on love of God suggesting that to truly appreciate *tawḥīd* one must experience an inner identification of love only for God.[59] Sufis emphasise the purpose for the creation of humans is to realise love since only humans are capable of returning

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[51] Ibid, 36.
[52] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 131.
[53] Ibid,132.
[54] Ibid, 130.
[55] Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, "Place of the Religious Commandments in the Philosophy of Al-Ghazali," *The Muslim World* 51, 3 (1961): 176.
[56] Shah-Kazemi, "Significance of Ma'rifa in Sufism," 169.
[57] Sufi literature on *ma'rifa* is broad and extensive. To illustrate my argument I have only discussed a few critical aspects of it.
[58] Maha Elkaisy-Friemuth, *God and Humans in Islamic Thought 'Abd al-Jabbār, Ibn Sīnā and Al-Ghazālī* (London: Routledge, 2006), 137.
[59] Murata and Chittick, *The Vision of Islam,* 246.

God's love.[60] So, although love of God is seen as one the highest aims, it hinges on knowledge of God.

An important outcome for belief, knowledge and love of God is *qurbiyya*, closeness to God.[61] This pertains to an inner closeness to the presence of God and certainty in one's consciousness. Closeness is achieved through first fulfilling all Islamic obligations and then undertaking extra devotions as guided by one of the most important *ḥadīth qudsī* for Sufism:

> My servant ceases not to draw nigh onto Me by works of devotion, until I love him and when I love him I am the eye by which he sees and the ear by which he hears. And when he approaches a span, I approach a cubit and when he comes walking I come running.[62]

Spurred on by this *hadith*, Sufis state love of God coupled with *qurbiyya* will ultimately lead to annihilation in God's overpowering unveiling such that, as Junayd al-Baghdādī (220-298) proclaimed, "Love is the annihilation of the lover in His attributes and the confirmation of the Beloved in His essence."[63] Junayd was not the first to say so, but was the first to take annihilation up to divine attributes only and limit identification of the divine essence – a reconciliation between the reality of experience and theologically safer position.

This is where the key Sufi notion of knowing oneself leading to knowledge of God enters. Al-Muhāsibī stresses that, while knowing God is open to everyone, only those who polish the mirror of their heart will be receptive of divine light.[64] Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz (d. 890), in his thirteen stations of spiritual experience, mentions knowledge

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[60] Ibid, 310.
[61] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 133.
[62] Ibid. This hadith is considered authentic and reported by Bukhari (6970) as well as the well-known forty hadith compilation of Imam Nawawī (d. 1277).
[63] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 134.
[64] Renard, *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism*, 21.

of the self (*ma'rifat al-nafs*) as an essential intermediary to knowledge of God.[65] Al Makkī goes further and calls for a deeper and more refined self-knowledge expressed as knowledge of the heart (*'ilm al-qulūb*).[66] This theme continues and al-Ghazālī underscores the heart (*qalb*) as opposed to the intellect (*'aql*) as the seat of perception (*idrāq*), knowledge (*'ilm*) and *ma'rifa* as a higher cognitive appreciation of God and the "immediate experiential spiritual knowledge of God."[67] Al-Ghazālī stresses that human nature possesses a predisposed capacity (*isti'dād*) for *ma'rifa* in that it shows innate qualities and an ability to relate to God.[68]

These ideas are combined and further developed into a systematic mystical cosmology by Ibn 'Arabī. His most recurring theme is the discussion on the names of God. The universe and all things within manifest the traces (*athar*) of God's names as they are the signs (*āyāt*) placed by God in the world alluded to in many verses of the Qur'an.[69] "God's Reality infinitely transcends the world," said Ibn 'Arabī, "but it also mysteriously penetrates all things."[70] Just as Junayd before him, Ibn 'Arabī defines the goal of a Sufi to "assume the character traits of God as one's own (*takhalluq bi akhlaq Allah*)."[71] In this way, a perfected human being (*insān al-kāmil*) through the guidance of revelation is capable of manifesting the entire array of God's names.[72] What he means is that the latent attributes in human nature have to be nurtured to become an outward character of the person.[73] In a way, human nature is conducive to mirroring attributes of God.

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[65] Ibid, 22.
[66] Ibid, 37.
[67] Ibid, 47-48.
[68] Ibid, 48.
[69] Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabī: Heir to the Prophets*, 29.
[70] Shah-Kazemi, "Significance of Ma'rifa in Sufism," 162.
[71] Murata and Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, 304.
[72] Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabī: Heir to the Prophets*, 31.
[73] Murata and Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, 308.

Ibn 'Arabī lived in the pivotal thirteenth century where Sufism provided spiritual solace to Muslim masses suffering under the devastation of the Mongol invasion sweeping much of the eastern half of the Muslim world. Sufi orders diffused across the Muslim world with the complete mystical system articulated and popularised by Ibn 'Arabī.[74] The key to attain *ma'rifa* and relate to God is to unveil – remove barriers to vision and understanding through God's light enabling a person to feel the presence of God within oneself and in the world.[75] The world, universe and everything within them are like mirrors that reflect the divine names; therefore, humans must endeavour to purify their souls so they can be elevated to experience the beauty and goodness of the divine reflected in the universe.[76]

Could any person get to the level of knowledge and love of God? Just about all Sufi masters concede that only a select few could make it all the way. Attainment of divine knowledge and predisposing the soul to receive divine self-disclosure hinges on reaching spiritual states (*ḥāl*) and stations (*maqām*) through the critical combination of knowledge (*'ilm*), leading an ascetic life (*zuhd*) and undertaking a strict regimen of invocations and remembrance (*dhikr*) of God's names to cultivate an inner development of the heart (*qalb*).[77] Still, there were no guarantees. As al-Hakīm al-Tirmidhī (750-869) explained, one has to be worthy of divine knowledge and closeness, "*ma'rifa* is a bounty which God gives to His servant when He opens for him the door of favour and grace, beginning without the servant's being worthy of that."[78] Thus, although knowledge, love and closeness to God is open to everyone,

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[74] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 279.
[75] Murata and Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, 262.
[76] Goldziher, *Islamic Theology and Law*, 135.
[77] Shah-Kazemi, "Significance of Ma'rifa in Sufism," 160-166.
[78] Nicholas Heer, *A Sufi Psychological Treatise* (California: Stanford, 1961), 31.

the path to realising their truth and internalising them meant traversing a long and arduous path of self-purification and development.

When theology and Sufism (*tasawwuf*) are considered together, they appear complementary, yet there is always tension between them. The theologians focused on transcendence and incomparability of God (*tanzīh*) to preserve the integrity of the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*), but this also rendered God unreachable to ordinary believers. Theologians emphasised the affirmative attributes, such a knowing, life, hearing and seeing, to facilitate at least a minimum knowledge of God. However, this was hardly sufficient to attain the level of *ihsān* and *ma'rifa* indicated by revealed sources. *Tasawwuf*, on the other hand, focused on the nearness and immediate experience of God within oneself and in the world.[79] In this way, humans could relate to, know, love and get spiritually close to God. Sufis have been phenomenally successful in much of Islamic history as spiritual elite and ordinary Muslims found a far more fulfilling experience in the Sufi path than the abstractions of theology. Yet, the sophisticated ideas and discourse of *tasawwuf*, especially when reduced to the level of ordinary Muslims, alarmed theologians and they charged *tasawwuf* for inadvertently leading people to *tashbīh,* positing similarity to God. Is it possible to combine two wings of Islam – *īmān*, correct beliefs represented and explained by theology, and *ihsān*, right spiritual focus – to achieve the immediate presence of God expounded by *tasawwuf* and make it accessible to ordinary Muslims? This is precisely what Nursi attempted to accomplish.

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[79] Murata and Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, 263.

6.4   Transcendence-Imminence Paradox and Three Ways of Relating to God

If God exists, how does one have access and relate to an unseen, transcendent God?[80]

Excluding some mentally ill who claim to speak to God,[81] there is no direct channel

of revelation or human agent who communicates with God.[82] Human inability to see

God or enter into a direct line of communication renders God distant. Yet, believers

have a need to develop a close relationship with God and feel God's imminent

presence in their lives. In many faith and spiritual traditions, followers look for ways

leading to a satisfying relationship with God.

Nursi recognises this theological problem and builds an argument that God can be

infinitely transcendent (distant) and absolutely imminent (close) at the same time. He

begins by quoting a number of Qur'anic verses that give the impression God is

absolutely close to His creation: "So, All-Glorified is He in Whose Hand is the

dominion of all things;"[83] "No living creature is there but He holds it by its forelock

and keeps it under His complete control;"[84] and "We are nearer to him than his

jugular vein."[85] He also quotes verses that infer distance: "And to Him you are being

brought back"[86] and "The angels and the Spirit ascend to Him, in a day the measure

of which is fifty thousand years."[87] The main interpretation Nursi provides is, while

God is closer to humans than themselves, it is humans who are distant to God. The

key way to address this asymmetry and enable humans to get close to God is to be

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[80] Qur'an 2:3.

[81] Prophets have also claimed to speak to God. The concept of prophethood in Islam is that God appoints a rather reluctant human being to convey revealed words of God to people. Among others, Muslim theologians put forward sanity and high levels of intelligence (*fatāna*) as important criteria for a true prophet.

[82] Muslims believe the Qur'an is the literal word of God. Hence, for Muslims, reading the Qur'an equates to speaking with God.

[83] Qur'an 36:83.

[84] Qur'an 11:56.

[85] Qur'an 50:16.

[86] Qur'an 36:83. Taken literally, if they will be brought back to God, there must be some distance at present.

[87] Qur'an 70:4.

aware of God's closeness through manifestations of His names and attributes in the universe and on human nature.[88]

To illustrate his argument, Nursi uses the analogy of light and sun, as he often does.[89] There are three ways one can relate to the sun. First, if one wishes to "meet" directly with the sun, one must overcome many layers of restrictions and travel a long, hazardous distance to reach it, a feat very hard to accomplish.[90] Second is the assumption that the sun literally comes to the level of creation without the need to travel. The sun incarnates in a single object or a spark of the sun is embedded within everything. Incarnation of the sun is impossible as no entity has the capacity to behold its greatness and this way leads to ignoring the real sun and assuming divinity in objects or incarnation.[91] Third, the sun is close to humans with its unrestricted light and immaterial reflection. Since humans are restricted with physicality (that is, space and time) they are immensely distant to the sun. The only reasonable way humans can relate to the sun is through its reflections, manifestations and attributes such as light, heat and colours embedded in its light.[92]

Similarly, there are three ways humans can relate to God. First, assuming God is transcendent and inherently distant to humans, people may try to reach God through a spiritual journey. Success in this approach depends on one's ability to ascend spiritually and it may take many years with no guarantee of success.[93] Second, if God was to come down to human level by incarnating in earthly form, then people would relate to God through the incarnate person without going through a long and arduous

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[88] Nursi, *Sözler*, 16th Word, 3rd Ray, 277-288.
[89] Nursi employs variants of the sun and light (*nūr*) analogy in resolving a number of theological problems. This is one of the reasons why his works are called *Risale-i Nūr* (Epistles of Light).
[90] Nursi, *Sözler*, 16th Word, 3rd Ray, 277.
[91] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 23rd Flash, 2nd Word, 1st Impossibility, 299.
[92] Nursi, *Sözler*, 16th Word, 3rd Ray, 277.
[93] Ibid, 278-279.

spiritual journey. However, such belief assumes earthly objects have the capacity to comprise the transcendent God.[94] Third, is to focus on God's names and attributes as reflected in the universe and human heart.[95] God is already close to humans through His attributes, just like the sun is close with its light, heat and reflection in spite of its distance. By focusing on God's ever-present imminent closeness through His names and attributes, one can relate to God far more deeply and safely without having to go through a long, arduous spiritual journey or violating God's unity.[96]

With this analogy and its application, Nursi achieves a number of goals. His first objective is to resolve the apparent contrast between the verses indicating divine closeness and distance. In his resolution, a distinction between the way God relates to His creation and how humans relate to God is made. Although God is extremely close to humans and the rest of the creation, humans are commonly distant to God as they contemplate an unseen God beyond space and time. As a second objective, Nursi draws a critique of mystical (Sufi) paths to God as inadequate in advancing the majority of believers to the ultimate goal of realising truths of belief and God.[97] Although such mystical paths are legitimate and offer many benefits, they may take a lifetime of spiritual struggle with no guarantees, only a few complete this arduous spiritual journey and often there are associated spiritual and theological risks.[98] Without naming any, Nursi is also critical of faith traditions that attribute divinity to humans, other living or non-living beings or the entire universe. As will be covered further on, for Nursi, these faith traditions emerged when their followers chose to

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[94] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 23rd Flash, 2nd Word, 1st Impossibility, 299. According to the Qur'an, such beliefs invariably lead to *shirk* (associating partnership to God) as they violate *tawhīd* (God's unity). See Qur'an 4:36, 4:48; 6:22, 6:71-94.
[95] Nursi, *Sözler*, 16th Word, 3rd Ray, 278.
[96] Nursi, *Şualar*, 7th Ray, 2nd Section, 5th Truth, 229.
[97] Nursi, *Mektubat*, 5th Letter, 47-48.
[98] Ibid, 29th Letter, 9th Part, 5th Allusion, 635.

relate to God by bringing Him to earthly or human level and this is why there are dramatic differences between faith traditions even though they broadly agree on the existence and unity of God.

Nursi's aim is to distinguish what he calls the "Qur'anic way" of relating to God. This is the third way in the analogy where one relates to God through focusing on His imminent closeness through the manifest divine names and attributes leading to an intimate knowledge of God (*ma'rifa*). Since God's names and attributes are key to understanding God, Nursi notes, the Qur'an is replete with names of God where they are linked to natural phenomena and instances within human life.[99] Nursi calls the divine immediacy of God *aqrabiyya* and draws a distinction with the mystical concept of *qurbiyya*, an expression used in Sufism referring to the human spiritual closeness to God.[100] He asserts that *aqrabiyya*[101] is always there, but people are either not aware of it or do not focus on it. All it takes is a leap of awareness (just like being aware of the sun by feeling heat and light on one's skin) usually brought about through the agency of prophethood and revelation.[102] Nursi underscores the Companions of Prophet Muhammad achieved this type of awareness and closeness to God without going through many states and stations of spiritual journeying.[103] With this distinction, Nursi also finds an explanation distinguishing sainthood and prophethood.

> Sainthood (*walāya*) is spiritual journeying through the levels of closeness to God (*qurbiyya*); it requires traversing of many levels and to some extent time. While prophethood (*risāla*), whose light is the greatest, looks to the mystery of

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[99] Nursi, *Sözler*, 25th Word, 2nd Ray, 9th Point, 573. As an example, see Qur'an 59:22-24 where nineteen names of God are listed in three verses.

[100] Nursi, *Sözler*, 27th Word, Addendum, 3rd Cause, 2nd Aspect, 663.

[101] In Arabic, '*qurbiyya*' means closeness and '*aqrabiyya*' means 'closer' or 'closer than closeness.'

[102] Nursi, *Sözler*, 27th Word, Addendum, 3rd Cause, 2nd Aspect, 663.

[103] Ibid, 31st Word, 1st Fundamental, 763.

exposition of Divine immediacy (*aqrabiyya*), for which an instant of time is sufficient.[104]

Thus, Nursi positions the Qur'anic way of relating to God on a deliberate focus and reflection on God's names and attributes as theologically safe, taking far less time, being accessible to most people and most significantly resulting in the attainment of a constant awareness of being in God's presence (Turk. *huzur-u dāimi*).[105] As discussed in the previous chapter, this is the most important theological and spiritual outcome of *tawḥīd*.

If names and attributes are central to gaining knowledge about and relating to God, how does one detect them correctly and with sufficient level of certainty? Nursi develops his Qur'anic way of relating to God further by exploring this question with the well-known Qur'anic verse proclaiming, "God is the Light of the heavens and earth."[106] One possible meaning of this verse, Nursi explains, is that belief in God produces an enlightened worldview where God's light reflects on the human heart and human life such that a believer not only begins to see things as they really are and attains a deeper awareness of the reality of human condition, but more significantly a believer attains a path to the knowledge of God.[107] As a second explanation of the light verse when read in conjunction with the verse,[108] "Whatever is in the heavens and the earth glorifies God, and He is the All-Glorious, the All-Wise,"[109] Nursi asserts the universe is created with multiple realms encircled around

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[104] Ibid.
[105] Nursi, *Mektubat*, 26th Letter, 4th Section, 2nd Matter, 463.
[106] Qur'an 25:35: "God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The example of His Light is like a niche wherein is a lamp; the lamp is in a crystal; and the crystal shining as if a pearl-like star; lit from the oil of a blessed olive tree that is neither of the east nor of the west. The oil would almost give light of itself though no fire touches it: light upon light! God guides to His Light whom He wills. God strikes parables for people. God has full knowledge of all things."
[107] Nursi, *Sözler*, 23rd Word, 2nd Point, 420.
[108] Ibid, 25th Word, 3rd Light, 1st Ray, 582-583.
[109] Qur'an 57:1.

one another like the petals of a rose. The names of God become the main source of illumination in a unique tapestry of reflection in each realm.[110] So, in Nursi's Qur'anic way, God's light encapsulates knowledge about God in terms of His names and attributes providing a way to relate to God with the greatest level of certainty. As this light reflects on the mirror of human nature and the universe, it becomes detectable and discernible rendering God's light a tangible reality.

6.5   Detecting Divine Names and Attributes through Human Nature

Nursi asserts the "human being becomes a mirror to divine names (*asmā al-ilāhī*) in three aspects."[111] First, just as darkness allows light to be known, human nature through its weakness, poverty, needs and limitations shows the numerous degrees of God's attributes (*awsāf al-ilāhī*), such as power (*qudra*), generosity (*ghinā*) and compassion (*raḥma*). Second, through God-given but limited human attributes such as seeing, hearing, knowing and owning, humans can comprehend the respective infinite divine attributes. Third, the names of God manifest in the way human beings are physically and spiritually designed and created.[112]

Characteristic of his approach, Nursi begins exploring the key mechanism in human nature facilitating the mirror-function by citing a verse from the Qur'an: "We offered the trust (*amāna*) to the heavens, and the earth, and the mountains, but they shrank from bearing it, and were afraid of it, but human has undertaken it..."[113] The Qur'an does not elaborate on the meaning of *amāna*.[114] Nursi explains that one of the

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[110] Nursi, *Mektubat*, 29th Letter, 5th Section, 582-585.
[111] Nursi, *Sözler*, 33rd Word, 31st Window, 1st Point, 936.
[112] Ibid. See also Nursi, *Şualar*, 4th Ray, 5th Level, 109-110. The third way human beings mirror God's names will be covered further on in this chapter when the *ahadiyya* manifestation of God's names is discussed over the design of a flower.
[113] Qur'an 33:72.
[114] Qur'anic exegetes generally interpret *amāna* as the Qur'an, humans being charged with the duty of being a vicegerent of God (caliph) on earth or human will-power. Al-Ghazālī said the trust is *ma'rifa*.

multiple meanings of the key expression *amāna* is that it refers to '*anā*' ('I' in Arabic):[115] the human faculty of 'self-awareness' enabling a person to say 'I am' and differentiate themselves from other beings.[116] *Anā* as a "key to the hidden treasures of the Divine Names" and placed "in the hand of human and is attached to their ego-self (*nafs*)," not only enables humans to get to know God, but it also is a "mysterious key that unlocks the secrets of the universe."[117] He defines the nature of *anā* as:

> The All-Wise Artistic Maker (*Sāni al-Hakīm*) has trusted the human being the *anā* that comprises of the necessary samples and pointers to show and make known the reality of His divine attributes (*sifāt*), qualities (*shu'ūnāt*) and governance (*rubūbiyya*), such that *anā* acts as a unit of measurement to know the functions of governance (*awsāf al-rubūbiyya*) and qualities of divinity (*shu'ūnāt al-ulūhiyya*).[118]

The key distinction in this passage is the idea that human attributes become units of measurements to know not only God's attributes and qualities, but also how God governs the universe for God's attributes are absolute and infinite and unlike any of His creation. In a way, human nature and its qualities are like a dark line across an infinite whiteness. By virtue of this dark line (limited human nature) becoming a point of reference, the infinite whiteness (the limitless nature of God's attributes) becomes comprehensible. *Anā* fulfils this function;[119] that is, although it is meaningless in itself (similar to a 'kilogram' would mean nothing on its own, but becomes meaningful if used in 'a kilogram of oranges'),[120] by associating *anā* with the infinite attributes and qualities of God, an imaginary line of similarity (*tashbīh*) is drawn over the incomparability (*tanzīh*) of God, giving humans a point of reference to get to know and relate to God. Humans, for example, can understand the infinite

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[115] Nursi, *Sözler*, 30th Word, 1st Aim, 724.
[116] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 179.
[117] Nursi, *Sözler*, 30th Word, 1st Aim, 724-725.
[118] Ibid, 725.
[119] Ibid, 725-726.
[120] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 179.

knowledge of God by virtue of their limited knowledge. Human ownership of a house can make them understand that the universe also has an owner. Human artistic ability enables them to appreciate the artistic creativity of God.[121] Thus, for Nursi, human nature is given certain abilities and attributes in a finite manner to appreciate God's infinite names, attributes and qualities without getting into anthropomorphism. Similar to how a thermometer would measure temperature and its varying degrees, *anā* and human nature is an instrument (*mīzān*) that "makes known absolute, all-encompassing and limitless attributes of the Necessarily Being (*wājib al-wujūd*)."[122] If it was not for the instrument of *anā*, humans would be unable to "unlock the doors of universe;"[123] hence, recognising and appreciating God would be inconceivable and consequently relating to God would be impossible. In a way, Nursi makes a unique contribution and elaboration to the Ghazālian idea that *amāna* in verse 33:72 refers to *ma'rifa*.[124] Importantly, Nursi warns, if the instrument of *anā* was not to perform this function properly, it starts to take ownership of what it detects and the thin imaginary line materialises and thickens, enveloping the entire human nature and becoming a source of all evil (*shar*), deviation from truth (*dalāla*) and associating partners (*shirk*) with God.[125] For this reason, Nursi adds,[126] the Qur'an carries a warning, "He is indeed prosperous who has purified it (*nafs*), and he is indeed lost who has corrupted it."[127]

This idea works for the affirmative attributes of God such as knowledge, will, power and life, but what about the negating attributes that humans do not have, such as

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[121] Nursi, *Sözler*, 30th Word, 1st Aim, 726.
[122] Ibid, 727.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Renard, *Knowledge of God in Classical Sufism*, 49.
[125] Nursi, *Sözler*, 30th Word, 1st Aim, 727-728.
[126] Ibid, 727.
[127] Qur'an 91:9-10.

eternity or self-subsistence? This is where finer human emotions and feelings embedded deep within human nature become significant. Among all human faculties, "the king of all emotions," Nursi underscores, is the desire for eternity, which is so insatiable it is "only satisfied with eternal life and the One who is Eternal."[128] The desire for eternity is engrained in human natural disposition (*fitra*) as a mirror to reflect the Eternal One of Beauty (*bāqī dhū al-jamāl*) so human beings can love and long for God. Humans often erroneously claim ownership for the reflection of God's eternity in human nature (as the desire for eternity) and in the process spawn an intense feeling of self-love and self-preservation instead of turning to the Eternal God.[129] Nursi interprets in this vein[130] the hadith, "Verily God has created human in the image of Most Compassionate (*sūrat al-raḥmān*)"[131] and concludes:

> Now, the true meaning of your life is this: acting as a mirror to the manifestation of Divine Uniqueness (*aḥadiyya*) and the manifestation of the Eternally Besought One (*ṣamadiyya*). Put differently, it is acting as a mirror to the Single and Eternally Besought One (*dhāt al-aḥad al-ṣamad*) through a comprehensiveness displayed by being a focal point for all Divine Names (*asmā al-ḥusnā*) manifested in the universe.[132]

Nursi's use of the expression 'focal point' is significant. Although a point is nothing in itself, by being a 'focal' point it gains immense value within a system of optics. In a similar manner, each human being, although small in stature, gains the immeasurable worth of being the focal point of divine purposes for the entire cosmic system and existence.

How can one be sure that humans are not projecting themselves to God? Nursi is aware of the potential problem and attempts to address it by investigating deeper into

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128 Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 17th Flash, 1st Point, 201.
129 Ibid, 14th Point, 234.
130 Ibid, 14th Flash, 2nd Station, 5th Mystery, 178-179.
131 Bukhari, *isti'zān*, 1; Muslim, *birr*, 115.
132 Nursi, *Sözler*, 11th Word, 189.

the mystery of human nature. He begins by stating, on one hand, the human capability to mirror all divine names and attributes enables them to understand and get to know God, but on the other they enable humans to excel in perfections (*kamālat*).[133] Nursi emphasises that human spiritual development and the unravelling of all human potential hinge on the essence of human nature becoming an all-comprehensive mirror to God's names and attributes.[134] This idea is central to Nursi's theological solution to how humans relate to God – human nature and its twin outcomes facilitate humans to relate to God in a deep and meaningful way. Nursi continues to wedge important caveats, explaining the diversity of faith traditions and why there are differences within a given faith tradition. Having limited power and will, varying abilities and a diversity of desires, Nursi underscores, humans end up searching for the truth of God through numerous veils and obstacles that intervene in the search. While some people cannot overcome such barriers, others only penetrate through a few.[135] Added to that, the level of human spiritual capacity also influences the way names and attributes of God are understood. Colours of the reflections of Divine Names vary according to the capacity of the mirror (human nature) over which they manifest. People, who receive such reflections, sometimes cannot be the means to a complete manifestation of a Divine Name.[136] Even further, manifestations of the divine names take on different forms with respect to universality and particularity, shadow and actual. Some human capacities are not able to go beyond the particularity and some get stuck in the shadow. For some, in proportion to their spiritual capacity, a divine name dominates their natural disposition and spiritual

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[133] Ibid, 24th Word, 2nd Branch, 450.
[134] Nursi, *Mektubat*, 12th Letter, 1st Question, 71.
[135] Nursi, *Sözler*, 24th Word, 2nd Branch, 450.
[136] Ibid.

capacity at the expense of others.[137] Consequently, not only there is an inherent subjectivity, there is also a natural tendency to gravitate towards a particular theological slant in human nature influencing the way they appreciate, understand and relate to divine names, attributes and ultimate reality of God.

To expand further, Nursi develops his light and sun analogy. There are three ways the sun's light could reach human perception. First is the reflections on objects such as flowers. When the pure light from the sun reaches a flower, it dissipates; some colours are absorbed while others are reflected. The reflected light reaches the human eye in a pattern that gives the flower its unique colour design. In the process, pure sunlight is altered by the limited reflecting capacity of the flower.[138] Reflection through the moon and planets is the second indirect way sun's light could reach human perception. The moon receives a tiny fraction of sun's light radiated omni-directionally. Although the moon is exposed to pure sunlight, only a shadow of the light[139] is reflected towards the earth, in proportion to the moon's capacity. While far greater than the flower, the moon's capacity is also limited.[140] Direct projection of the sun during the day over all objects is the third way the sun's light reaches human perception. Since there is no intermediary, the light is intense, pure and universally sensed as every transparent object – glasses, windows and water bubbles – receives the full attributes of the sun encapsulated and transmitted through its light.[141] In this analogy, the sun's light represents ubiquitous reflection of God's names and attributes and how God reveals Himself. It represents the three ways of knowing God (*ma'rifat Allah*). Nursi asserts that, even if ultimately people may agree on some core

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[137] Ibid, 450-451.
[138] Ibid, 451.
[139] The reflected light from the moon looks white as the light from the sun, but it loses its heat.
[140] Nursi, *Sözler*, 24th Word, 2nd Branch, 452.
[141] Ibid, 452.

tenets, depending on which way is followed not only leads to a differing understanding of truths of God, but also they determine the degree to which human perfections (*kamālat*) are attained.[142]

In the first way, the natural human disposition (*fitra*) is like the flower in the analogy. Although, every person is capable of receiving God's light and an understanding of God, the pure light is dissipated through the limited human capacity particular to each person.[143] Since human nature is an opaque mirror, it invariably dissipates and refracts God's light. Although beautiful nuances of understanding of God is possible, it becomes impossible to get the full truth of God in this way just as it is impossible to see the full reflection of the sun through a flower.[144] Nursi does not mention directly, but it is not too difficult to deduce that he is referring to spiritual journeying through mysticism. If one was to unfold their innate potential through mystical experience, God's light would beautify them like the sun exposes the inherent beauty of a flower. However, one's understanding of God hinges on their inner capacity and level of spiritual development achieved, hence often falls short of being complete and pure. Their *subjective reality* colours the way they comprehend God's reality.

Accessing the sun's light through the moon represents truths of faith as received and expressed by the philosopher. Although a philosopher's access to the truth of God is of a higher order than that of human mystical experience, it is nevertheless only a shadow.[145] Nursi placing the philosophical (and connected rational theology) way of attaining truth above mystical experience is interesting as there would be many, including al-Ghazālī, who would think otherwise. So, in a way, Nursi gives more

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[142] Ibid, 455-456.
[143] Ibid, 453.
[144] Ibid, 454.
[145] Ibid, 453.

prominence to human reason above inner experience. However, Nursi continues, the philosopher may only find the truth of God by rational inference behind multiple layers of intellectual veils.[146] Even if the philosopher is elevated all the way to the moon "by the stairs of reason," he will find the moon to be a dark and desolate place without real light of its own.[147] A philosopher may be able to prove existence and unity of God, but will have to concede their incapacity to prove afterlife. Hence, all they can do is to imitate ordinary believers in the tenet of afterlife despite their prowess in intellectual enquiry.[148] Hence, according to Nursi, although philosophy is a way to access truth, the philosopher could only attain an *incomplete reality*.

The third way represents the light of God received by revelation conveyed through a true prophet of God and is the Qur'anic way, as Nursi often refers to it. Prophethood and revelation (of the Qur'an), Nursi insists, open a window in every object directly onto God.[149] In this way, ordinary believers can attain higher access to the truth of God as they do not rely on their limited ability, reason and spiritual experience. Because they understand a universal and transcendent God is the source of all truth, opaque objects and puzzling mirrors do not baffle them. Every object in the universe and the universe as a whole become mirrors to God's names and attributes.[150] It is certainly the case that revelation encapsulated by scriptural text is also a source for division and misinterpretation. Nursi should be understood within his epistemological framework: when a person relies on revelation (the Qur'an) as a primary source for knowledge of God and then confirms this knowledge with reflections and observations in the universe (as directed by the Qur'an) through the

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[146] Ibid, 455.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid, 455-456.
[149] Ibid, 453.
[150] Ibid, 455.

use of reason, they overcome the *subjective reality* of mystical experience and the *incomplete reality* of pure reason to find the *objective reality* of God's light as reflected in the universe. Consequently, a *complete reality* of God can be appreciated.

There are two important implications of this long analogy and its application. First, Nursi recognises there could be an element of truth in every faith tradition and one cannot say differences between scholars, philosophers and mystics within a given tradition like Islam can prove one another wrong. Their differences are caused by changes in emphasis, the intellectual and spiritual levels attained and inherent human subjectivity leading people to think they solely have access to truth. This is significant in that it is an inclusive approach to theology while acknowledging that every path is the same. It also explains why there are so many differences between faith traditions and within a tradition.

Second, inherent human subjectivity does not mean it should be dismissed completely. As explained in this section, Nursi gives to human nature in the form of *anā* an instrumental function to detect and understand God. To prevent errors, the human capacity to appreciate God has to be complemented with more objective sources. For Nursi, the main sources are the Qur'an and the Qur'anic way of reading the book of universe. As discussed in Chapter 3, the universe gains an epistemological place within theology as a third but crucially objective source. Nursi makes a vital link between human nature and the universe and how divine names manifest in both, "Just as the entire set of divine names manifest on the phenomenal world ('*ālam*), which could be considered as the greater human (*insān al-akbar*), so too, those names manifest on the human nature, which could be considered the lesser

world ('*ālam al-asghar*)."[151] Thus, in Nursi's epistemology and resulting theological hermeneutics, if a name of God revealed by the Qur'an is confirmed with empirical observations of the universe and attested by human nature through inner reflection, then it becomes certain knowledge about God.

6.6   Divine Names, Attributes and Waḥdāniyya–Aḥadiyya Manifestations

Before exploring how Nursi demonstrates the manifestation of God's names across the universe, important related concepts explicated by Nursi need to be covered. Specifically, how Nursi explains names and attributes and how their manifestations (*tajalla*) occur through *jalāli* (majestic) and *jamāli* (beautiful) as well as through *waḥdāniyya* (oneness) and *aḥadiyya* (uniqueness) modes.

In his works, Nursi gives an order of divine acts (*af'āl*), names (*asmā*), attributes (*sifāt*), qualities (*shu'ūnāt*) and essence (*dhāt*). This is similar to the order of divine unveiling (*tajallī*) outlined by Jīlī (d. after 1408) based on Ibn 'Arabī.[152] The key exception is that Nursi includes *shu'ūnāt* and excludes discussion about the perfect human (*insān al-kāmil*) as the only one who can appreciate the divine essence. Islamic mystical distinction outlined by Nursi maintains that the signs of creation (*āyāt al-takwiniyya*), as evidence for propositions of faith identified in the universe, not only demonstrate God in all respects but also their perfection point to the perfection of God's qualities and attributes.[153] He gives the example of a palace to demonstrate how they can be easily identified (Figure 2). The inscriptions and adornments of a palace show the perfection of the master builder's *acts*. The perfection of the acts illustrate the perfection of the master's *titles* and *names* and level of his skills in building. The perfection of the names and titles show the

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[151] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 12th Flash, Conclusion, 39.
[152] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 281.
[153] Nursi, *Sözler*, 22nd Word, 2nd Station, 10th Flash, 409.

perfection of the *attributes* qualifying the master builder's artistic and creative competence. The perfection of the art and attributes show the perfection of the aptitude and essential capacities, which could be termed *essential qualities* (*dhātī shu'ūnāt*), of the master builder. Finally, the perfection of those essential qualities and capacities show the perfection of the master's *essential nature* (*dhāt*).[154] Nursi quotes the verse, "do you see any flaw"[155] and applies the analogy to understanding God through created things: The faultless and well-ordered objects of creation observed in the phenomenal world point to the perfect actions (*af'āl*) of an Effective Possessor of Power (*muassir dhi al-iqtidār*). Those perfect acts point to the perfection of names (*asmā*) of a Glorious Actor (*fā'il dhū al-jalāl*). Perfection of names necessarily testifies to the perfect attributes (*sifāt*) of the Named One of Beauty (*musamma dhū al-jamāl*). Perfect attributes point to the perfection of essential qualities (*shu'ūnāt*) of the Attributed One of Perfection (*mawsuf dhū al-kamāl*), and those perfect qualities demonstrate the perfect Essence (*dhāt*) of God.[156]
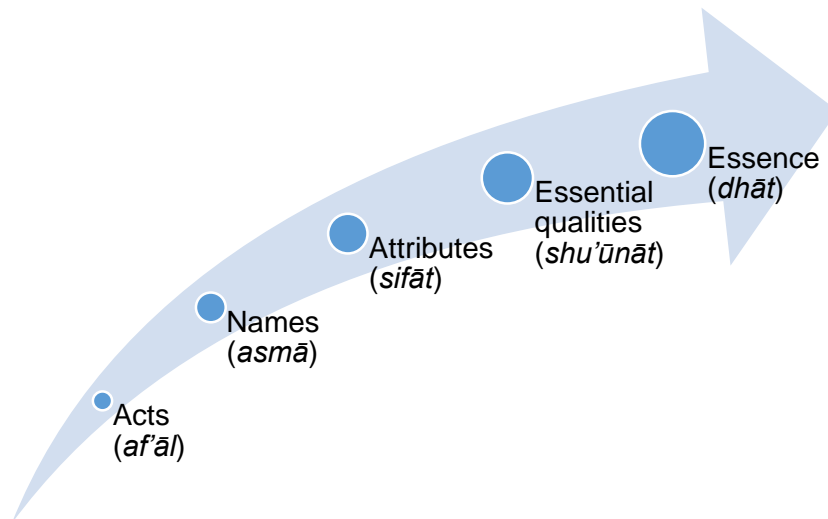

Figure 2: From acts (*af'āl*) to the divine essence (*dhāt*)

One could list observations in the natural world that may appear less than perfect and the existence of evil and suffering as counter examples to Nursi's reasoning. Nursi would say his discussion on cause and effect, outlined in the previous chapter, would apply here also. His main objective with this analogy and its application to the understanding of God is the order and relationship between *af'āl*, *asmā*, *sifāt*, *shu'ūnāt* and *dhāt*, and more importantly how one can start from observable and measurable objects in the phenomenal world to argue the existence of God and also entailment of names, attributes, divine qualities and essence of God. Nursi makes this clear with his premise, "just as a well-crafted work cannot be without actions, actions cannot be without an actor."[157] He builds all his major argument on this fundamental premise.

Significantly, Nursi lists the seven affirmative attributes (*sifāt al-thubūtī*) – life, knowledge, power, will, seeing, hearing and speech[158] – and excludes the distinctly Māturīdī theology by avoiding *takwin* as a distinctive attribute. Nursi uses the expression *amr al-takwin* (creative command) throughout his works and declares, "The letters that originate from creative command (*amr al-takwin*) show their effect on the essence of objects (*wujūd al-ashyā*) as physical forces."[159] He also refers to the Qur'anic command *kun fa yakūn* (be and it is)[160] often and, in reference to how seeds are created, he asserts, "the creation of those chests (seeds) is so swift in the *kāf-nūn* factory that the Qur'an declares they are created in a single command."[161] So, with respect to attributes of God, Nursi follows the distinctive Ash'arī theological position. Interestingly, Nursi repeatedly posits events in the phenomenal world as

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[157] Nursi, *Şualar*, 4th Ray, 6th Level, 113.
[158] Ibid, 7th Ray, 1st Chapter, 19th Level, 199.
[159] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 28th Flash, 20th Point, 454.
[160] Qur'an 36:82.
[161] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 4th Ray, 2nd Level, 100,

divine actions to prove God's attributes and in this respect he is more in line with al-Māturīdī. He also contends the way *Risale-i Nur* discusses theological matters alluding to the compassion and wisdom of God in cosmos is a reflection of the divine names *Hakīm* (All Wise) and *Raḥīm* (All Merciful),[162] a distinctive Māturīdī approach. Al-Māturīdī also explains many theological matters on the premise that all of God's actions are wise and His wisdom is comprehensible to human understanding.[163] This shows Nursi does not restrict himself to one theological school, rather he follows the principles of general Sunni theology.

Nursi's emphasis and usage of the expression '*shu'ūnāt*' in reference to God is interesting and unique. Classical Muslim theologians used the terms *kayfiyāt* (qualities) and *malakāt* (habits).[164] *Shu'ūnāt* is the plural of *sha'n*, which has a number of meanings: 'action', 'work' and 'quality'. Nursi uses the word to mean two distinctive concepts when referring to God. First, *shu'ūnāt* refers to divine qualities associated with the attributes of God that provoke the manifestations of those attributes. As an example, God had the creative quality (*khallāqiyya*) before He created anything. The creative quality in God's essence is referred to as *shu'ūnāt*. When He creates something His name Khaliq (Creator) manifests on the created entity. In referring to this concept, Muslim theologians repeatedly use expressions such as "God was the Creator even before he created anything" for each attribute to drive home the eternal nature of God's attributes.[165] In illustrating *shu'ūnāt*, Nursi says life is one of the most comprehensive mirrors to divine qualities (*shu'ūnāt al-ilāhi*) for living beings in the universe can only be created by God who is also living

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[162] Nursi, *Şualar*, 7th Ray, 2nd Chapter, 3rd Truth, 230.
[163] Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology*, 298.
[164] Al-Taftazani, *A Commentary on the Creed of Islam*, 50.
[165] Ibn Yusuf, *Imam Abu Hanifa's al-Fiqh al-Akbar Explained*, 71-72.

(*Hayy*). The name *Hayy* indicates the attribute of life (*ḥayāt*), which shows the sacred qualities of a living essence (*dhāt*).[166]

The second usage refers to sacred qualities (*shu'ūnāt al-muqaddasa*), such as love, mercy, gratitude, that humans would describe as emotions. Such qualities are attributed to God in the Qur'an with expressions such as, "God loves those who are devoted to doing good"[167] and "God does not love the wrongdoers."[168] Nursi warns that whenever such qualities are attributed to God the word 'sacred' (*muqaddasa*) should be used to distinguish human emotions to divine qualities as God has no opposites nor is God similar to any being.[169] In support, Nursi quotes[170] "There is nothing whatever like Him. He is the All-Hearing, the All-Seeing."[171] At the same time, he also quotes, "Whatever attribute of sublimity there is in the heavens and the earth, it is His in the highest degree, and He is the All-Glorious, the All-Wise,"[172] to argue that names, attributes and qualities could be attributed to God. The two verses balance one another – God can have names, attributes and qualities so humans can relate to God, but they can only be attributed to God in an analogous way so God is not anthropomorphised.[173] With this warning in mind and in an appropriate way to His sacredness, Nursi maintains, the human being becomes a mirror to God's divine qualities (*shu'ūnāt*) through refined human emotions and subtle feelings that are ingrained in human nature and become evident as a quality of life.[174]

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[166] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 30th Flash, 5th Point, 1st indication, 595.
[167] Qur'an 2:195.
[168] Qur'an 3:57.
[169] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 30th Flash, 6th Point, 1st Ray, 615.
[170] Ibid, 14th Flash, 5th Mystery, 179.
[171] Qur'an 42:11.
[172] Qur'an 30:27.
[173] Nursi, *Lem'alar,* 30th Flash, 6th Point, 1st Ray, 615.
[174] Ibid, 5th Ray, 635.

A key distinction in Nursi and how he explains the emergence of opposites in the universe and particularly on earth rests in the way God's names are grouped under *jalāli* (glorious) and *jamāli* (beautiful) names. Ancient Greek philosophers to Muslim philosophers and mystics have held the idea that give-and-take of opposites (light–darkness, good–evil, heat–cold and so on) is at the heart of change and diversity in the world.[175] What is unique to Nursi, as Turner identifies,[176] is that he explains the existence of opposites to divine names – each group of names (*jalāli* and *jamāli*) requires a separate and distinctive set of manifestations leading to an interplay of opposites in the phenomenal world.[177] Without those opposites, the universe would be static and constant and there would be no diversity in creation. For Nursi, all wise purposes, transformations and developments including the opposing faculties within human nature earn their origin to the manifestations of *jalāli* and *jamāli* names.[178] Within the universe and the earth, majestic large scale cosmic objects, powerful forces and even pounding of waves are a reflection of *jalāli* names, while smaller more refined objects, subtleties and blessings of sustenance are reflections of *jamāli* names.[179]

Jalāli and *jamāli* groupings are a familiar distinction in Islamic theology and mysticism.[180] Although within God's essence such distinction would not arise, it helps humans understand why God would have qualities like wrath and love at the same time. If God was to be contemplated only through *jalāli* names, He would be so glorious and majestic that the only appropriate way to relate to Him would be fear. However, if God was understood only through *jamāli* names, He would be restricted

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[175] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 65.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 13th Flash, 9th Indication, 147.
[178] Ibid, 147-148.
[179] Nursi, *Mektubat*, 20th Letter, 2nd Station, 4th Word, 334-335.
[180] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 66.

to anthropomorphic understandings.[181] Nevertheless, as Turner observes, while *jalāli* names and their manifestations illustrate the transcendence and incomparability (*tanzīh*) of God, humans intimately understand and relate to God through *jamāli* names and their manifestations.[182] *Jamāli* names impart a balanced understanding of God and generate a sense of awe; however, as will be discussed further in the next section, Nursi links *jamāl* and *kamāl* of God to not only human ability to love and relate to God, but also to the very purpose for the existence of the universe.

Interestingly, Nursi links *jalāl* and *jamāl* to two other important concepts of *tawḥīd* –*waḥdāniyya* (oneness) and *aḥadiyya* (divine uniqueness) – "So, just as *wahdāniyya* is apparent in the focal point of *jalāl* (glory) and *ḥashma* (majesty), so too bounty and munificence proclaim *aḥadiyya* (uniqueness) in the focal point of *jamāl* (beauty) and *raḥma* (mercy)."[183] The *waḥdāniyya* and *aḥadiyya* modes of manifestation of divine names are crucial not only to identify those names in the universe, but also, for Nursi, they explain why the universe appears the way it does. The *wahdāniyya* mode of manifestation occurs in a horizontal, more general manner across the universe resulting in general similarities, whereas the *ahadiyya* mode of manifestation occurs in a vertical, more focused manner resulting in uniqueness. When he is explaining the name *Fard* (Individual), he says this name comprises the names *Wāḥid* (One) and *Aḥad* (Unique).[184] The fact the universe is an inseparable whole with all its constituting parts demonstrates a manifestation of *wahdāniyya*. By the same token, the human being is designed of inseparable and harmonious parts is a manifestation of *ahadiyya*.[185] On the human species, the distinction is clearly

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[181] Ibid, 67.
[182] Ibid, 28-30.
[183] Nursi, *Mektubat*, 20th Letter, 2nd Station, 4th Word, 336.
[184] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 30th Flash, 4th Point, 577.
[185] Ibid, 1st Indication, 577-578.

observed: The fact human faces look similar in general, with the same features of eyes, nose and mouth, shows the stamp of oneness (*sikka al-waḥdāniyya*), and the fact each human face is identifiably different shows a stamp of uniqueness (*sikka al-ahadiyya*).[186]

Nursi points out it is not possible for everyone to appreciate *wahdāniyya* at all times, as knowledge and appreciation of manifestations of God's names and attributes across the earth or cosmos is required. Whereas *ahadiyya* manifestations always point to specifics and individuals; hence, they are easier to observe and fathom.[187] The sun shines its light omni-directionally and covers all things on earth. While this may facilitate knowing the existence and oneness of the sun, it does not allow intimate knowledge. This corresponds to *wahdāniyya.* At the same time, the sun shows a reflection of itself on every transparent object and, in line with the capacity of each object, they reflect its light, heat and colours. This corresponds to *ahadiyya*.[188] For this reason, Nursi adds, the Qur'an often switches to something specific whenever it mentions universals and grand aspects of existence: "And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your languages and colours."[189] So, *wahdāniyya* and *ahadiyya* manifestations are required for humans to fully appreciate God's divine names and attributes.

The *wahdāniyya* and *ahadiyya* distinctions are useful as they allow Nursi to develop a clear framework to illustrate manifestations of Gods names. While *wahdāniyya* considerations and scans of the universe allow to find ground to establish the unity and oneness of God, it is the *ahadiyya* perspective that zooms and identifies names of

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[186] Ibid, 3rd Indication, 579.
[187] Ibid, 14th Flash, 4th Mystery, 176-177.
[188] Nursi, *Mektubat*, 20th Letter, 2nd Station, 4th Word, 335.
[189] Qur'an 30:22.

God on living things that most people are familiar with. Hence, it is *ahadiyya* that allows relating to God more closely. Nursi shows that God's names can be identified at the universal and particular, and demonstrates his main idea that the universe is a mirror to God's names and attributes allowing human reason to test whether the names of God mentioned in the Qur'an and identified through human nature can be objectively established on empirical observations.

6.7   Illustrations of God's Names Manifesting in the Universe

Nursi touches on God's names and attributes throughout his works, but the clearest discussion occurs in the 30th Flash when he details six names of God – *Quddūs* (Holy), *'Adl* (Just), *Hakīm* (Wise), *Fard* (Individual), *Hayy* (Living) and *Qayyūm* (Subsistent), collectively considered to make up the Greatest Name (*ism al-'aẓām*) of God.[190] In elaborating these names, Nursi particularly illustrates their *waḥdaniyya* manifestations. Two names, *Quddūs* and *'Adl*, are covered in this study.

The name *Quddūs* comes from the Arabic root q-d-s meaning 'pure', 'sacred' and 'blessed'. Nursi focuses on the meaning of purity and states the purity and cleanliness seen in the universe and phenomenal world is a key reflection of the name *Quddūs*.[191] He begins by quoting, "And the earth, We have spread it out, and how excellent We are in spreading it out,"[192] and guided by the verse gives numerous instances of related observable acts. Analogously, he suggests the universe is like a constantly working factory and the earth is like a guesthouse with a ceaseless flow of

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[190] This list making up the Greatest Name (*ism al-aẓām*) of God relies on the view of Ali ibn Abu Talib (d. 656) the fourth Rightly-Guided Caliph. Prophet Muhammad located the *ism al-'aẓām* in a list of divine names, but did not identify what it was. He added that a prayer invoked by the Greatest Name would never be rejected. Muslim scholars attempted to identify the Greatest Name. Al-Ghazālī quotes 'Ali's six names and makes a commentary on them. Abd al-Qadir Jilani (d. 1166) says the greatest name is *Hayy*, whereas for Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624) it is *Qayyum*.
[191] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 30th Flash, 1st Point, 555.
[192] Qur'an 51:48.

guests and activity. As commonly known, operations of factories and guesthouses produce waste and, unless deliberately removed, they will be rendered unusable.[193] Remarkably, the universe and particularly the earth are free of waste, clean and fresh. When they appear the opposite as a result of constant activity, any impurity and waste is swiftly removed and cleaned. These infer there is a purposeful act of cleansing taking place.[194] Zooming onto particular instances of cleaning, annually millions of plants and animals die on earth, but their corpses are cleaned by purpose-designed scavengers and insects. Without such deliberate acts of cleansing, the earth would quickly fill with corpses.[195] In the human body, just as breathing cleans the body of poisonous carbon dioxide, the white blood cells remove harmful microorganisms.[196] Just as eyelids clean and protect the eye and flies clean their wings so does rain wash away dirt and waste on the ground and clouds clear to leave a bright and clean skyline.[197] Nursi concludes:

> Thus, this single act of truth, the act of cleansing, is the greatest reflection of a Greatest Name (*ism al-'aẓām*), the name *Quddūs* (Most Holy), observable over the greatest cosmic sphere to such an extent that it shows as directly as the sun Divine Existence (*mawjudiyya al-rabbāniyya*) and Divine Unity (*wahdāniyya al-ilāhiyya*) together with God's Most Beautiful Names (*asmā al-ḥusnā*) to far-sighted discerning eyes.[198]

The visible act of cleansing shows the existence of God – either all the creatures involved in the act of cleansing, from particles and flies to the earth and stars, would have to know and consider the cleansing needs of the cosmos and natural world, or each would have to possess the divine attributes will, knowledge and power to enforce the act of cleansing on a global scale, or they would have to be members of a

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[193] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 30th Flash, 1st Point, 556.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Ibid, 556-557.
[196] Ibid, 557.
[197] Ibid.
[198] Ibid.

cosmic council where they would discuss, agree and allocate tasks to regulate the cleansing function. Since these are absurd, Nursi underscores, the act of cleansing necessarily requires the existence of God.[199] Nursi also argues for the unity of God: since the act of cleansing is observed at a universal scale, it can only be the act of a single God. Nursi continues to argue that the act of cleansing and purifying shows the one who undertakes the act must be a Purifier and Pure (*Quddūs*).[200] Finally, Nursi links[201] these observations to revealed teachings and states it is because of the requirement of the name *Quddūs* that Prophet Muhammad said, "Cleanliness is a part of belief"[202] and the Qur'an declares, "Surely God loves those who turn to Him in sincere repentance and He loves those who cleanse themselves."[203]

Nursi follows the same approach to illustrate the *wahdāniyya* manifestation of the name *'Adl*. Among other meanings, the word *'Adl* in Arabic implies 'justice', 'fairness' and 'balancing'. Guided by the verse, "There is not a thing but the stores are with Us, and We do not send it down except in due, determined measure,"[204] Nursi identifies numerous acts of balancing in the universe and natural world: the gravitational balances within the solar system; keeping earth's temperature relatively constant including balancing heat lost to space and received from the sun; balance of water-cycle on earth; life and death balance within ecological systems; matching features and instincts of animals with their roles in the natural world; balancing between body's need for oxygen, breathing and the number of red blood cells; the balance within a living body and its functions; and ultimately establishing and maintaining the balance and equilibrium between all parts and functions in the

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[199] Ibid, 559.
[200] Ibid, 560.
[201] Ibid.
[202] Muslim, *Tahāra*, 1.
[203] Qur'an 2:222.
[204] Qur'an 15:21.

universe while countless changes and transformations are taking place.[205] In a similar line of argument to the name *Quddūs*, Nursi concludes the universal act of balancing and maintaining equilibrium proves the existence and unity of God, and illustrates the grand manifestation of the name *'Adl*.[206] He ends saying the name *'Adl* demands believers are similarly just and balanced as underpinned by the mention of the word 'balance' (*mīzan*) four times[207] in the verses, "And the heaven – He has made it high (above the earth), and He has set up the balance. So that you may not go beyond the balance. And observe the balance with full equity, and do not fall short in it."[208]

Nursi's approach in the 30th Flash achieves three main objectives. First, he illustrates how reflections of a divine name could be identified across the universe illustrating a *wahdāniyya* manifestation. Nursi says, within the numerous worlds in the universe and the world of each living species, a divine name manifests in a dominant manner while other divine names manifest deferentially.[209] Awareness and appreciation of God's names in the universe and each world allow humans to get to know God. Second, he links names of God to human conduct and character. Humans should be clean because God is *Quddūs*. They should be fair and just because God is *'Adl*. In this way, human beings can attain higher levels of perfections (*kamalāt*) and, by virtue of knowing themselves better, they relate to God in a more profound way. Third, and quite noticeably, Nursi applies his epistemological framework, discussed in chapter three, to develop a methodology to every matter concerning God (Figure 3) – start with a related verse from the Qur'an; identify empirical evidence establishing a purposeful act, or function, at a universal scale; use this evidence to

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[205] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 30th Flash, 2nd Point, 561-563.
[206] Ibid, 561.
[207] Ibid, 564.
[208] Qur'an 55:7-9.
[209] Nursi, *Sözler*, 24th Word, 1st Branch, 446.

prove the existence, unity and related name of God; and finally relate this back to the teachings of the Qur'an. He overcomes the subjectivity of human nature, using evidence from the 'book of universe,' to confirm what humans have in their natures and what the Qur'an teaches about God – revelation envelops everything to guide human thought and bypass human subjectivity.
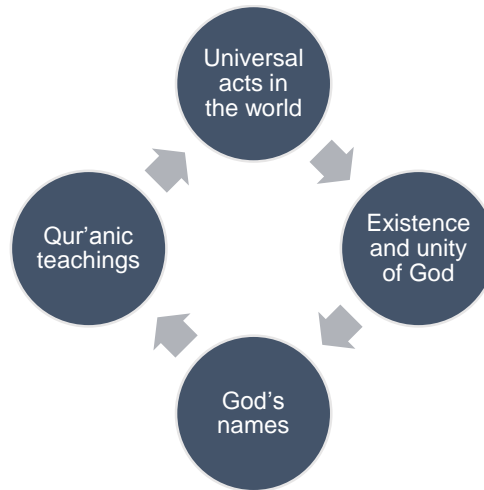

Figure 3: Nursi's empirical epistemology applied to God

In the *ahadiyya* manifestation of divine names, an entity becomes the locus for a number of names. An illustration is the way Nursi explains the how the four names listed in the verse, "He is the First (*Awwal*), the Last (*Akhir*), the All-Outward (*Zāhir*), and the All-Inward (*Bāṭin*), He has full knowledge of everything"[210] are manifested on a single tree.[211] The seed from which the tree comes contains the program of how the tree will be constructed and function, illustrating the name *Awwal*. The fruits and seed of a tree comprise the index and summary of states, attributes and purpose of the tree, depicting the name *Akhir*. The embellishments and features displayed over the outer form of the tree exhibit the name *Zāhir*. Finally, the

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[210] Qur'an 57:3.
[211] Nursi, *Şualar*, 2nd Ray, 3rd Station, 3rd Sign and Proof, 59.

machinery and the orderly function of the internal components of the tree point to the name *Bāṭin*.[212]

Nursi provides a more graphic and lengthier illustration of *ahadiyya* manifestation in the 32nd Word, where he postulates eighteen names could be identified on a single flower.[213] He first takes the reader from the empirical observations in the phenomenal world towards the *Jamāl* (Beauty) and *Kamāl* (perfection) *shu'ūnāt* of God by disclosing the meanings and acts associated with appropriate divine names in nine steps (see Table 1). If a statue of a flower is made, the sculptor has to first determine the shape of the outer form, whose proportions shows the divine names *Muqaddīr* (Determiner), *Munazzim* (Proportioner) and *Musawwīr* (Giver of Form). This is followed by setting general limits and dimensions of the physical form, which requires knowledge and wisdom illustrating the names *Alīm* (All-Knowing) and *Hakīm* (All-Wise). Once the general form and its dimensions are set, the flower is crafted to reveal its full form and endowed with features displaying the names *Sāni* (Crafter) and *Muḥsīn* (Bestower of Bounty). The colouring of the outer form and features adorns and illuminates the flower, depicting the names *Muzayyīn* (Adorner) and *Munawwīr* (Illuminator). The subtleties in its aesthetics and benevolence of the design of its features benefitting the flower's life demonstrate the names *Laṭīf* (Subtle) and *Karīm* (Generous). The bestowal of beauty, aesthetics, benevolence and generosity entail the will to be known and loved, indicating the names *Wadūd* (Loving) and *Ma'rūf* (Known One). Adorning the flower with a fruit and beneficial outcomes directs attention from adornment to bestowal of blessing and from favour to mercy, exhibiting the names *Mun'īm* (Bestower) and *Raḥīm* (Merciful). Such actions and attributes point to the divine qualities of compassion and grace,

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[212] Ibid, 59-60.
[213] Nursi, *Sözler*, 32nd Word, 3rd Section, 853.

illustrating the names *Raḥmān* (Gracious) and *Hannān* (Compassionate). Qualities of mercy and grace emanate from the beauty (*jamāl*) and perfection (*kamāl*) of the Divine, illustrating the name *Jamīl* (Beautiful).[214]

1	Determine the outer form	*Muqaddīr* (Determiner), *Munazzim* (Proportioner), *Musawwīr* (Giver of Form)
2	Set general limits and dimensions of form	*Alīm* (All Knowing), *Hakīm* (All Wise)
3	Craft outer shape and endowing its features	*Sāni* (Crafter), *Muḥsīn* (Bestower of Bounty)
4	Adorn the features and illuminating with life	*Muzayyīn* (Adorner), *Munawwīr* (Illuminator)
5	Subtleties in aesthetics and beneficial features	*Laṭīf* (Subtle), *Karīm* (Generous)
6	Will to be known and loved	*Wadūd* (Loving), *Ma'rūf* (Known One)
7	Adorn with fruits and purposeful outcomes	*Mun'īm* (Bestower), *Raḥīm* (Merciful)
8	Qualities of mercy and grace	*Raḥmān* (Gracious), *Hannān* (Compassionate).
9	Beauty and perfection of Divine Essence	*Jamīl* (Beautiful)

Table 1: Summary of how divine names can be identified on a single flower

Nursi also advances the argument from the reverse of this analysis – arrive from divine beauty and perfection to the determination of the outer physical form of the flower[215] to drive home the point that, whichever direction of analysis and reasoning one takes, the same divine names could be identified. If this many names could be identified on the physical features of a flower, Nursi adds, an interplay of more names could be identified when a human being is considered in all physical, spiritual and emotional aspects.[216]

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[214] Ibid, 854-856.
[215] Ibid, 857.
[216] Ibid, 858.

What is the purpose of such intricate interplay of divine names and the involvement of humans? The answer lies in the notions of *jamāl* and *kamāl*. Nursi says the prime purpose for the existence of the universe is God's *jamāl* and *kamāl* for they would inevitably "want to be seen by the beholder and by other adoring eyes."[217] So, God created this majestic palace as an exhibition hall and adorned it with His artistic creativity for His own sacred view and through the appreciating eyes and consciousness of human beings.[218] Although the beauty and perfection displayed in the universe is only a shadow of the real *jamāl* and *kamāl* of God,[219] humans have the capacity to get to know and love God through the manifestations of God's beautiful names and attributes.[220] Nursi suggests, in return for fulfilling this purpose, humans attain happiness and moral perfection, "as for the perfection of your life within happiness, it is to perceive and love the lights of the Pre-Eternal Sun depicted on the mirror of your life."[221] Those who recognise God through the signs placed in the universe, get to know God through display of divine names, and love God in appreciation of His beauty and perfection, inevitably relate to God through display of worship:

> The greatest purpose for this universe is to realise a universal and comprehensive human worship and servanthood (*ubūdiyyah al-kulliyyah al-insāniyyah*) in response to manifestations of Divine Lordship (*rubūbiyyah*). And the ultimate purpose for human being is to reach that servanthood (*ubūdiyyah*) through knowledge, sciences (*ulūm*) and moral perfections (*kamalāt*).[222]

Most significantly, this passage links God's purpose for the universe and human life to not only to worship of God in a ritual sense, but also to the qualitative aspects of human worship displayed through human virtues and scientific knowledge of the

[217] Nursi, *Sözler*, 11th Word, 177.
[218] Ibid, 178.
[219] Ibid, 32nd Word, 2nd Section, 3rd Purpose, 3rd Indication, 843.
[220] Ibid, 2nd Indication, 842.
[221] Ibid, 11th Word, 189.
[222] Ibid, 20th Word, 2nd Station, 357.

universe. This is a critical idea for Nursi as he is aware his theological approaches could only be fully appreciated and put into practice through a detailed knowledge of the phenomenal world and universe through the lens of the Qur'an. Since so much hinges on the universe acting as a concave mirror reflecting God's light carrying reflections of divine names on the focal point of human nature, any notion that suggests the universe is an illusion is deeply troubling for Nursi.

6.8   Nursi's Critique of Waḥdat al-Wujūd – Unity of Existence

One of the most controversial and contested concepts in mystical theology in relation to how humans relate to God is Ibn 'Arabī's *waḥhdat al-wujūd* (unity of existence) concept, often misunderstood by his supporters and criticised by his opponents. Even though Ibn 'Arabī articulated the ideas at the foundation of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, he did not exactly use the expression.[223] Regardless of how it is worded, understood and viewed by theologians, *waḥdat al-wujūd* has had significant influence not only in the way humans relate and understand God, but also how one constructs a cosmology of Islam.

The meaning Ibn 'Arabī gives to the key word *wujūd* is important. *Wujūd* is generally translated in Western literature as 'existence' and 'being,' but it literally means 'finding'.[224] Even though *wujūd* came to denote existence, Ibn 'Arabī parlayed the implications of the literal meaning into Islamic mysticism.[225] Ibn 'Arabī applies *wujūd* to God's essence (*dhāt*) as the only real Being. *Wujūd* for Ibn 'Arabī means God is the only one who truly finds and is found.[226] It should be noted that Being (*wujūd*) is not used by Ibn 'Arabī in a purely ontological sense where something is

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[223] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 72.
[224] Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, xix.
[225] Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabi: Heir to the Prophets*, 17.
[226] Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, xix.

there to be found, rather, it is also the reality of finding; that is, whenever God is said to be the *wujūd,* it entails and demands consciousness, knowing and perception.[227] Anything other than God, cosmos and each entity within cosmos, is 'existent' (*mawjūd*) as a shadow of true *wujūd* as they neither find nor are found in any real sense of the word except they enter into existence through a *wujūd* granted to them by God.[228] In that sense, things only have a 'borrowed *wujūd*' depending on God's real *wujūd*[229] and it is returned to God whenever each entity exits the phenomenal world.[230] Hence, when used for God, *wujūd* means Being, but for everything else other than God, *wujūd* means existence (*mawjūd*).[231]

These notions give rise to two major implications. In one sense, there is only God's *wujūd* and everything else is non-existence in the true sense of the term. God is totally other, incomparable and transcendent (*tanzīh*) to every other thing.[232] In another sense, whenever humans find God, He is immanently present in the knower's awareness.[233] Anything else found, *wujūd* (being in consciousness and perception) appears and, consequently, things are experienced by humans as sufficiently real.[234] So, there is some similarity (*tashbīh*) between humans who are constantly finding God, themselves and others, and God who alone finds in an absolute sense.[235] Yet, just as there would be no reflection without a source of light, without the real *wujūd,* things have no existence.[236] So, none (*lā*) exists (*mawjūd*) but He (*hū*) in either case.

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[227] William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 6.
[228] Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, xx.
[229] Ibid.
[230] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 73.
[231] Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabi: Heir to the Prophets*, 17.
[232] Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, xxi.
[233] Chittick, *Ibn 'Arabi: Heir to the Prophets*, 18.
[234] Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, xxi.
[235] Ibid.
[236] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 74.

It is no surprise that most find these ideas confusing and easily reduced to statements such as *lā mawjūda illa hū* (no existent but He). Sirhindi (d. 1624), although a Sufi, was one of the more prominent critics of Ibn 'Arabī. He differentiated experiences as physical (*wujūdī*) and contemplative (*shuhūdī*). When a person experiences annihilation in God, it is the ego-self (*nafs*) that is experiencing it rather than the body.[237] Judging by his own mystical experiences, Sirhindi explains when mystics successfully abandon their *nafs* in an ecstatic state, they experience the unity of God as a bright reality. It is as though the phenomenal world is the dark sky and entities within it are stars; they all disappear by the appearance of the sun. Similarly, for those who are confronted with the radiance of unity, the phenomenal world disappears and they interpret God to be everything or the only Being (*wujūd*). Consequently, they declare the phenomenal world as illusion and erroneously interpret what they experience as experiences of God,[238] falling into a deluded state of transcendental escapism.[239] For Sirhindi, this was dangerous for the experience is just the first station on a long mystical journey, whereas they think it is the final station and those who see the world as illusion end up considering Islamic ritual practices (Shari'ah) as superfluous. So, it would be more correct to say *waḥdat al-shuhūd* (unity of witnessing) rather than *waḥdat al-wujūd*.[240]

Importantly, Sirhindi's critique illustrates he was responding to the followers of *waḥdat al-wujūd* in his time rather than Ibn 'Arabī, who respected Shari'ah and never said the world was an illusion or the same thing as God.[241] Although strongly critical at times, Sirhindi conceded Ibn 'Arabī established the foundations of *ma'rifa*

[237] Buehler, *The Juristic Sufism of Ahmad Sirhindi*, 271.
[238] Ibid, 52-53.
[239] Ibid, 47.
[240] Ibid, 53.
[241] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 75.

and explained *tawḥīd* and the origins of the cosmos and its multiplicity to such an extent that "Most of the Sufis who came after him chose to follow him and most used his terminology. Even I, miserable as I am, have profited from the blessings of this prominent man and learnt much from his views and insights."[242]

With this backdrop in mind, Nursi touches on this concept mainly with a critical eye. It is not clear to what extent Nursi has studied Ibn 'Arabī's works, nor does he venture into a lengthy discussion on how Ibn 'Arabī described his interpretations. This is no surprise as this is how Nursi approaches all notions and arguments. Nevertheless, he gives some allusions on his understanding of *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *waḥdat al-shuhūd*.[243] For Nursi, *waḥdat al-wujūd* is to only focus on the Necessary Existence (*wājib al- wujūd*) of God and see the rest of existence as a shadow so much so it would be said it does not deserve to be called 'existent' at all. Even going further, everything other than God is nothing but an illusion and has no real existence to the extent that the manifestations of God's names are only reflections on imaginary mirrors.[244] Ibn 'Arabī did not deny the existence of the universe, but as Turner notes, those who followed his path and could not appreciate the subtleties of his teachings may have come to that conclusion.[245] Nursi acknowledges the *waḥdat al-wujūd* school bears an important truth: If a person spiritually rises with the strength of *imān* (belief) and attains a high level of sainthood (closeness to God) by exudation of certainty of feeling (*haqq al-yaqīn*), the highest form of belief, then

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[242] Buehler, *The Juristic Sufism of Ahmad Sirhindi*, 57.
[243] Nursi, *Mektūbat*, 29th Letter, 9th Part, 5th Allusion, 635.
[244] Ibid, 635-636.
[245] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 77.

existence other than God appears as a shadow and imaginary relative to the powerful experience of God's Existence (*wujūd*).[246]

Yet, Nursi is respectfully critical of Ibn ʿArabī and his theology of *waḥdat al-wujūd.* Nursi contends that Ibn ʿArabī is a guide in general, but he could not be a guide in all matters. He states Ibn ʿArabī usually proceeds without restraint in his quest for truth, hence Ibn ʿArabī often falls in opposition to the principles of Sunni theology (*qawāid ahl al-sunnah*) and the majority of theologians. Further, Nursi highlights that some of Ibn ʿArabī's writings are open to misunderstanding and, if taken literally, they could imply theological deviation, but a more fair assessment would be that Ibn ʿArabī is clear of deviation.[247] He does not mislead; however, he is sometimes misled as what he sees and experiences is real but not the entire truth.[248] Hence, very few people understand Ibn ʿArabī and his works, and most scholars strongly discourage the uninitiated from reading his works.[249]

His critique of Ibn ʿArabī demonstrates how Nursi positions his theological approach and differentiates it from those of theologians (*mutakallimūn*) and Sufi mystics (*ahl al-tasawwuf*). He asserts that theologians limit the universe to temporality (*hudūth*) and contingency (*imkān*) considerations before "rising above them in thought" to get to existence of God and His unity.[250] This approach falls short in delivering a complete knowledge of God nor does it lead to attaining an awareness of God's presence.[251] He is equally critical of Sufi mystics who follow the way of *waḥdat al-wujūd* declaring *lā mawjūda illa hū* (no existent but He) or those who follow *waḥdat*

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[246] Nursi, *Mektūbat*, 29th Letter, 9th Part, 5th Allusion, 636.
[247] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 28th Flash, 7th Point, 433.
[248] Ibid, 9th Flash, 2nd Question, 77.
[249] Ibid, 78.
[250] Nursi, *Mektūbat*, 26th Letter, 4th Part, 4th Matter, 465.
[251] Ibid, 2nd Matter, 462.

al-shuhūd stating *lā mashhūda illa hū* (none witnessed but He).[252] Even though they genuinely attempt to acquire knowledge of and attain closeness to God, Nursi adds, those who highlight only God's existence (*wujūd*) end up impelling the universe to nothingness and those who only insist on witnessing God (*shuhūd*) consign the universe to oblivion.[253] Although Nursi is critical of *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *waḥdat al-shuhūd* in this instance, he makes it clear that *waḥdat al-shuhūd* is the safer of the two intermediary stations on spiritual journeying.[254] Although *waḥdat al-shuhūd* is the moderate way of the Sufis, it is still placed within the greater doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*.[255] Ultimately though, Nursi prefers the expressions *lā ma'būda illa hū* (no object of worship but He) and *lā maqsūda illa hū* (no purpose but He) as these express best "the wide highway of the Qur'an."[256] Instead of rendering the universe to oblivion or nothingness, the Qur'anic approach recognises the importance of the universe and harnesses it as a source to inform about God.[257]

Theologically, Nursi levels three major criticisms to *waḥdat al-wujūd.* First is the allusion associated with *waḥdat al-wujūd* that the universe and existence do not have real existence. Nursi states such a notion is at odds with the firm Qur'anic consensus established by the Companions and the following generation of scholars (*tābi'īn*) that "the reality of things have fixed, real existence" (*haqāiqu 'l-ashyā' thābitatun*).[258] God is the Creator and with His creation the universe exists in reality.[259] Since God transcends space and time, His association with the universe is a creator–creation relationship. Claiming 'everything is Him' is wrong and the more correct statement

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[252] Ibid, 4th Matter, 465.
[253] Ibid.
[254] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 9th Flash, Addendum, 89.
[255] Ibid, 14th Flash, 2nd Station, 5th Mystery, 179.
[256] Nursi, *Mektūbat*, 26th Letter, 4th Part, 4th Matter, 466.
[257] Ibid, 2nd Matter, 462.
[258] Nursi, *Mektūbat*, 18th Letter, 2nd Important Matter, 122.
[259] Ibid, 123.

should be 'everything is *from* Him'.[260] Equally significantly, as also argued by Sirhindi,[261] real existence of the universe and multiplicity of contingent beings within it are required for all six essentials of Islamic faith, not just belief in God's existence and unity. A firm grounding of essentials other than belief in God, Nursi adds, cannot be constructed on imagination alone.[262] Consequently, when a person intoxicated in the ecstatic state of *waḥdat al-wujūd* re-enters the world of sobriety, they should leave the experience behind and not act in accordance with it for what is experienced is not meant to be articulated or absorbed through cognition. Any attempt to the contrary is not sustainable with the principles of reasoning and speech, and knowledge proceeding from the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet.

The second of Nursi's theological criticisms of *waḥdat al-wujūd* is that the doctrine only gives prominence to a few names of God, such as *Mawjūd* (Existent), *Waḥid* (One) and *Aḥad* (Unique), the manifestations of all other names becomes unreal or dependent (Turk. *itibari*). In actuality, all names have equally real and direct manifestations and they are not shadows, secondary or dependent on another name.[263] Nursi explains this with an analogy: Imagine there are mirrors in each corner of a room. Each mirror shows a reflection of the room as well as the other three mirrors. It would be false to assume by looking at only one mirror that it is the only one comprising everything else. Other mirrors equally display a reflection of not only the room but also other mirrors.[264] In a similar way, each Divine name requires a mirror to reflect on. The name *Razzaq* (Sustainer) requires beings in need of sustenance; the name *Raḥmān* (Most Compassionate) requires conscious beings in need of

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[260] Ibid, 122.
[261] Buehler, *The Juristic Sufism of Ahmad Sirhindi*, 113.
[262] Nursi, *Mektūbat*, 29th Letter, 9th Part, 5th Allusion, 636.
[263] Ibid, 18th Letter, 2nd Important Matter, 123.
[264] Ibid, 124.

compassion; and the name *Raḥīm* (Most Merciful) requires the existence of a tangible paradise. If the names *Mawjūd*, *Waḥid* and *Aḥad* are held to be fundamental and others are secondary and dependable to these names, then this would devalue many other names of God.[265]

This is the most original and important of Nursi's objections to the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd.* Nursi sees *waḥdat al-wujūd* as fundamentally deficient in the way God's names fully manifest on the entirety of the universe and hence provide a deficient understanding and knowledge of God. For Nursi, there is no reason why God's names and their manifestations should be limited in the way *waḥdat al-wujūd* does.

Nursi's emphasis is more apparent in his third more subtle but significant critique of *waḥdat al-wujūd*. This time, Nursi is critical of Ibn 'Arabī directly by saying he confuses the essence of things to their physical outward existence. Nursi explains this with a complex analogy: There is a key difference between how the sun manifests in a mirror and how it appears as an image on photographic paper produced by light reflecting from that mirror. The mirror contains the image of the sun and also qualifies by it with its colour and brightness. Since there is a close link between sun and image, the two can be confused as the same. It would be fine to say, "There is nothing apart from the actual sun in the mirror," if the intent is that the mirror contains the direct reflection of the sun.[266] The mirror represents the universe and nature of all things as they reflect God's names. As Nursi contests, Ibn 'Arabī and his followers erred when they rejected the fixed (*thābit*) reality of things by their exclusive focus on things as mirrors enveloping reflections of God's names and

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[265] Ibid.
[266] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 9th Flash, 2nd Question, 78-79.

critically supposing reflections to be identical with what is reflected (God) and claimed, "there is no existent but God."[267] However, in the case of the photograph, the image of the sun would be fixed on the paper. The nature of the image on the photograph is completely different to the actual sun and the sun's manifestation takes another form of existence. In this case, it would be wrong to say, "There is nothing in it other than the sun." Although the photograph's fixed image is produced by a reflection of the sun, it has a separate existence.[268] The photograph represents the contingent beings in the universe. Although they reflect the sacred divine names, they have a separate existence (*wujūd*) to God's Necessary Existence (*wājib al-wujūd*) made constant (*thābit)* by the power of God.[269]

So, why are people attracted to and seem to be stuck on what *waḥdat al-wujūd* offers? Nursi gives two main reasons. First is their inability to comprehend and appreciate the maximum degree of the creativity of divine governance (*rubūbiyya*) and that everything comes to existence directly with divine will and power. They are obliged to say "everything is either Him, or does not have existence, or is imaginary, or is His reflection."[270] Second is the attribute of love that never wants to be separated from the beloved and yearns for closeness to the beloved. Those who experience closeness to God's presence in the spiritually intoxicated state, ignoring the distance and separation in sober state, declared "no existent but He" to escape the dreadfulness of separation.[271] Nursi sums up saying the first is caused by intellectual underdevelopment with regard to higher appreciations of belief and the second is

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[267] Ibid, 79.
[268] Ibid, 78-79.
[269] Ibid, 80.
[270] Ibid, Addendum, 85.
[271] Ibid, 85-86.

caused by the exceptional expansion of the heart on the path of love.[272] In a way, for Nursi, it is an imbalance between an underdeveloped mind and overdeveloped heart that underpins people's attraction to the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd.* This conclusion honours the people of *waḥdat al-wujūd* while being critical; however, Nursi also demonstrates his main approach of balance between mind and heart as a feature of the Qur'anic approach.

Apart from a critique at a theological level, Nursi's criticism of *waḥdat al-wujūd* reflects his concern for the modern believer under the influence of numerous conflicting modern philosophical ideas and concoctions of beliefs. He points out that emphasis on *waḥdat al-wujūd* in the modern era has three harmful aftereffects.[273] First, it is possible for a person to attain a level of spiritual perfection through *waḥdat al-wujūd* and *waḥdat al-shuhūd,* only if they have transcended corporeality and causality. In this respect, they can reach the level of "denying the universe in the name of God," a limiting but an acceptable position. However, if they are stuck in causality, they could end up "denying God in the name of the universe."[274] Put differently, for the spiritual elite, it is a legitimate way to enter a state of absolute saturation of God's existence after they outstrip the sphere of causality and sever their attachment to contingent beings by renouncing everything other than God.[275] But, presenting these ideas as intellectual knowledge to those who are submerged in causality and materialism leads to unintended excrescences. Since they see nothing but the phenomenal world and through their love for it they are tightly attached to it, intellectually seeing God and the universe as one transfers God's eternal attributes to the universe as well. This further leads to a reversal in the key idea of *waḥdat al-*

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[272] Ibid, 86.
[273] Ibid, 28th Flash, 7th Point, 431.
[274] Nursi, *Mektūbat*, 18th Letter, 2nd Important Matter, 122.
[275] Ibid, 29th Letter, 9th Part, 5th Allusion, 635.

wujūd – instead of denying the universe and contingent beings for the sake of divine existence, they end up denying God on account of the universe.[276]

The second harm is the way *waḥdat al-wujūd* staunchly rejects duality of everything other than God, including the evil-commanding souls (*nafs al-ammara*). This may appear to be fine for those who have purified their carnal selves. But, since materialism and individualistic egotism are impressed upon modern humans inflating their evil-commanding souls, any emphasis on *waḥdat al-wujūd* could result in further impairment of their egos and direct them to covet themselves as objects of worship.[277]

Third, *waḥdat al-wujūd* has the propensity to cause false imaginations about God.[278] Exceptionally, if a person speaks of *waḥdat al-wujūd* and in thought "leaves behind the universe" to turn only to God feeling God's intense presence in a state of spiritual ecstasy, that person with the strength of their faith could truly experience that everything comes directly from God.[279] However, a person who stands with the "universe in front" and submerged in causality and "stuck in the swamp of naturalism" would end up mixing ideas of *waḥdat al-wujūd* with their confused understanding of God leading to false projections and imaginings about God.[280]

Clearly, Ibn 'Arabī did not teach glorifying the evil-commanding soul, reject God or intend to lead people to misunderstand God. Turner contends that Nursi's dismissal of *waḥdat al-wujūd* as a dysfunctional doctrine to attainment of true faith originates from his concern over the real threat of materialistic naturalism spread across the

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[276] Ibid.
[277] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 28th Flash, 7th Point, 431.
[278] Ibid, 432.
[279] Ibid, 433.
[280] Ibid.

Muslim world in the early twentieth century. Turner adds that Nursi did not want to risk contributing to the spread of atheism by showing inclination towards *waḥdat al-wujūd*.[281] While I tend to concur with Turner on his analysis, there are two other considerations. At the turn of the twentieth century, Sufism was still very dominant in the late Ottoman society and by extension in the early decades of the Turkish Republic. Sufi ideas and doctrines including *waḥdat al-wujūd* were widespread with the uneducated masses and educated elite. The educated elite was also increasingly influenced by materialistic naturalism. It was the merging of Sufi ideas (without proper guides) and materialism (without critical Islamic evaluation) that worried Nursi and made him emphasise the harms.

Second, as explored in this section, Nursi was genuine in his criticism of *waḥdat al-wujūd* on theological grounds. He certainly does not dismiss it as outright false and recognises the doctrine has a certain element of truth, but he does not see it representing the ultimate truth. Importantly, Nursi makes exceptions in all cases for those who genuinely experience what Ibn 'Arabī taught and spoke about. He, however, sees the key limitation of *waḥdat al-wujūd* as being a reflection of spiritual experience rather than certain knowledge based on evidence grounded in revelation and reason.[282] He excuses those who see *waḥdat al-wujūd* as the highest truth, saying those who enter the state of *waḥdat al-wujūd* find it pleasurable and ecstatic so much so that they resist coming out of it leading them to think it is the ultimate spiritual level.[283] Their words appearing as deviant uttered in this state could be excused, but not for those who are sober.[284] At the same time, he categorically states deep down the doctrine is fundamentally flawed. Scholars were tolerant of Ibn 'Arabī because

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[281] Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 78.
[282] Nursi, *Mektūbat*, 18th Letter, 2nd Important Matter, 122.
[283] Ibid.
[284] Nursi, *Lem'alar*, 14th Flash, 2nd Station, 5th Mystery, 178.

the fundamental theological and epistemological differences are so subtle and elevated that they escaped scholars altogether. If they were to realise them, it would have been "an extremely serious fall for him (Ibn 'Arabī), and grievous error."[285]

6.9   Conclusion

How one should relate to God is the most significant part of theology as it defines the way believers experience God in their everyday lives. In this respect, theology (*kalām*) and Sufism (*tasawwuf*) have vied for the hearts and minds of Muslims throughout the history of Islam. The classical Islamic theology mainly focused on the attributes of God. Theologians deduced negating and affirmative attributes of God from the Qur'an and Sunnah. They insisted the list of agreed upon affirmative attributes, such as hearing, seeing, will and power, should be understood in the light of the negating attribute that God and His incomparability (*tanzīh*) is unlike any of His creation. In fairness to theologians, they stressed every believer is charged with the duty to acquire knowledge (*ma'rifa*) of God and their faith must be based on certain knowledge instead of imitation (*taqlīd*). Nevertheless, they did not emphasise the names of God nor is there detailed discussion on the way humans should understand and relate to God.

Tasawwuf, on the other hand, focused on the nearness and immediate experience of God within oneself and witnessing the manifestations of God in the world. Only in this way, can humans relate to God, phantom a claim to know and love God, and get spiritually close to God. Sufis have been phenomenally successful in much of the Islamic history as spiritual elite and ordinary Muslims found a far more fulfilling experience on the Sufi path than the abstractions of theology. However, the

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[285] Ibid, 9th Flash, 2nd Question, 78.

sophisticated ideas and discourse of *tasawwuf*, especially when reduced to the level of ordinary Muslims, alarmed theologians and they charged *tasawwuf* for inadvertently leading people to *tashbīh*, positing similarity to God. So, a long-lasting tension between *kalām* and *tasawwuf* stood before scholars of the modern era.

Nursi's writings on how humans are meant to relate to God reveal some of his most interesting and original contributions and a synthesis between agreed principles of theologians and spiritual insights of mystics. He does so by creating a space with his concomitant avoidance of pure abstractions of theology and esoteric discourses of Sufism.

On the theological side, Nursi stays within the general principles of theology. He is similar to Ash'arī theology with his exclusion of *takwin* as part of the affirmative attributes. He is also related to Māturīdī theology with consistent alluding to the wisdom of God reflected in the universe. However, he is too original to be boxed into the major schools of theology and it is reasonable to conclude he stays within the general ambit of Sunni theology. In this approach, Nursi stays within the guidance of the Qur'an, but does not balk to interpret it. His interpretation of the trust in verse 33:72 given to humans is unique and significant. For Nursi, the trust is *anā,* human self-awareness, which acts as an instrument to detect the names and attributes of God. By associating *anā* with the infinite attributes and qualities of God, an imaginary line of similarity (*tashbīh*) is drawn over the incomparability (*tanzīh*) of God, giving humans a point of reference to get to know and relate to God.

With this interpretation, Nursi enters the realm of mystical insights. He immediately restrains himself and instead of the Sufi emphasis of *qurbiyya*, human spiritual closeness to God, he highlights *aqrabiyya*, divine immediacy of God. While

achieving *qurbiyya* depends on human effort and is not achievable for most, *aqrabiyya* is always there if people could take a leap of awareness usually brought about through the agency of prophethood and revelation. While the Qur'an acts as an instruction manual teaching the invaluable methodology of reading the book of universe, the universe becomes an objective source of knowledge to test the veracity of Qur'an's theological and ethical teachings. Essentially, in Nursi's theology and cosmology, the universe and the phenomenal world are designed to facilitate humans to relate to God. Humans and the cosmos become mirrors to reflect God's beautiful names, attributes and qualities, which enable humans to appreciate the person-essence (*dhāt*) of God.

Nursi's critique of Ibn 'Arabī and his doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* is a case in point that tests the consistency of his method and to what extent he absorbs spiritual concepts within the scope of theology. For Nursi, the universe and all things reflecting God's names and attributes are key Qur'anic notions that enable God to be known with a level of certainty not possible in either pure theology or mystical experience. This becomes the basis for his criticism of *waḥdat al-wujūd* as he contends the doctrine does not represent the full and free manifestations of God's names visible across the universe and on all things. On another level, God's names manifesting on the Creation is a spiritual concept or at least a concept championed by mystics. Nursi embraces this idea and presents it as Qur'anic and brings it under the scope of theology, but this is as far as he will go. With his critique and explanations of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, ultimately Nursi attempts to position all key aspects of theology in their respective place: God is the Creator of the universe with a clear purpose and the universe has real existence; the immediacy of God is reflected over the universe, which acts as a mirror to God's names and attributes; primal instincts to search for

God and machinery to appreciate God are placed in human nature; humans relate and get close to God by believing in God, gaining an intimate knowledge of God, triggering love of God and expressing that love in acts of devotional worship; and revelation and prophethood guide humans in achieving these goals.

CONCLUSION

This study argued that Said Nursi, in response to the intellectual, spiritual, social and political challenges facing the Muslim world, followed a theological revival method and produced a fresh expression of Islamic theology based on the Qur'an. In doing so, not only has he made original contributions to normative Islamic theology, he has also brought essential theological aspects of Islam to the ordinary Muslim reader whom otherwise would have no access to such knowledge. For Nursi, the availability of such knowledge was vital for the revival of Islam as religious schooling and spiritual institutions collapsed in the aftermath of colonisation and Muslim minds had been disconcerted by the influences of the rising materialism of modernity.

This study hinged on the definition of theology as a rational endeavour to understand everything about God from within a faith tradition and its scriptures in response to intellectual and to some extent spiritual problems posed by the conditions of a particular time and place. While the rational aspect of theology makes it understandable and acceptable to its followers, its response to the conditions of time and place is an attempt to make it relevant and applicable for the age. At the same time, its faithfulness to revealed texts keeps the integrity of theology within the faith tradition across centuries. These three aspects of theology combine to pose great risk and stimulus at the same time creating the *theologian's tension* in the mind of a Muslim scholar troubled by religious and intellectual challenges of their times. The history of Islamic theology has largely been an interplay of how the theologian's tension manifested in each era and how scholars of each era responded to the forces and challenges at play.

The development of Islamic theology through history follows a trajectory making it largely a reactive discipline. As early Muslim theologians encountered theological problems originating from encounters of Islam with other religions and philosophies, they have refrained from delving deep into them and discouraged their students and ordinary believers from engaging in active theological discourse (*kalām*). Inevitably, the spirit of curiosity, competitive human nature, natural resistance to blind faith, people's demand for rationally satisfying answers and most significantly an instinct to preserve the integrity of Islam combined to instil an impulse to engage in theology. It was the scholars with the courage to overcome the theologian's tension who gave birth to the discipline of Islamic theology.

The first three centuries of Islamic theological history witnessed an intellectual struggle chiefly with Mu'tazilites, philosophers and other sects considered heretical, precipitating in the development of Ash'arite and Maturidite Sunni schools of theology – largely designated as *ahl al sunna wa al-jama'a*, the broad mainstream community following the Qur'an and Sunnah. Islamic creeds on debatable matters were developed and explained in major theological works. Coinciding with the emergence and spread of madrasa education from the eleventh century onwards, theology became a central part of the Islamic education system. Although this inclusion ensured theology's place as a core Islamic discipline among *fiqh, tafsīr* and *hadith*, it also stagnated its further development.

Theology's place with ordinary Muslims were not as palatable. Theology with its rational abstractions did not appeal to Muslim masses who needed guidance in everyday life and spiritual solace in the aftermath of the Crusades, the Mongol invasion and the devastation of Black Plague. Sufism became a mass movement with

its emphasis to cultivate an inner transformation and motivation to relate to God through spiritual experiences. In this climate, a different type of theological approach, the *mujaddidī* line, emerged and was represented by popular figures like al-Ghazālī and Sirhindi who approached Islamic theology from an interdisciplinary perspective coupled with the activism to revive Islam within the Muslim masses. Muslim scholars from the thirteenth century onwards continued to respond to circumstances of their era to preserve mainstream Islamic theology and to a limited degree made original theological contributions.

The modern era brought with it an unprecedented change in all facets of life and human thought. Global events and European colonisation ushered in the collapse of Muslim empires and classic Islamic civilisation. Enlightenment philosophy, scientific developments and Western modernity spawned new philosophical and theological challenges for theologians from all faith traditions, including Islam. Since Islamic theological history demonstrates that Muslim scholars invariably responded to the circumstances and challenges of their time, the dramatic circumstances inevitably solicited an even a stronger theological response. What was surprising was the lack of such responses in the modern era.

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi is a notable exception. Nursi lived during a tumultuous period of time spanning the collapse of the Ottoman Empire; emergence of secular nation states; two world wars; and the challenges imposed by the European modernity on traditional Muslim societies and Islam. Secular modernist governments persecuted religious activism invariably posing before Muslim scholars the *revivalist dilemma* – how does one carry out the responsibility of reviving Islam while at the same time avoiding confrontation with nervous authorities? Under these conditions

and faced with dilemmas, most Muslim scholars attempted to base their revivalism on a complete exegesis and reinterpretation of the Qur'an and saw Islam as a holistic system to be implemented at all levels of society. Consequently, rather than focusing on theology, they concentrated on religiosity, social and political reforms inspired by Islam. Secular authoritarian governments responded with persecution resulting in a spiral of social and political turmoil (including violence) that characterised Muslim societies in the twentieth century.

The revivalist dilemma was felt far more acutely by Nursi. His diagnosis of the ailments facing the Muslim world and hence his prognosis were different. His activism followed a different trajectory and applied a distinctive methodology. During the late Ottoman era, he identified the main problem facing Muslim societies to be the tension between science and religion, and the polarisation between the madrasa educated traditional Muslims and the modern school (Turk. *mektep*) educated secular and modernist Muslims. To address the root cause, he proposed and worked hard to realise an educational model that would concurrently teach science and religion. As the new Republic of Turkey emerged from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire after WWI, the challenge before Nursi dramatically amplified. Madrasas and Sufi lodges were closed, making it impossible to pursue a traditional Islamic educational and organisational model. The switch from the Arabic to Latin alphabet prevented the new generation of Turkish Muslims from accessing the rich literature of Islam. Additionally, Nursi was exiled and had to spend much of his post-1925 life in house arrests, trials and imprisonments with severe restrictions of mobility and social contact. Under such circumstances, Nursi followed a non-political and non-violent theological revival method. With this approach, Nursi was able to achieve his revival objectives, survive persecution and maintain a high moral ground by

distancing himself and his followers from politics and violence to build a firm foundation for Islamic revival.

Nursi's choice of the theological revival method was not just a tactical accommodation. He diagnosed the root problem facing Muslim societies as the atheistic assertions of the materialistic philosophy and the doubts to faith they injected in the hearts and minds of Muslim masses. Classic Islamic theology was inadequate with its abstractions and emphasis on subject matters that were no longer relevant. Sufism was insufficient as it assumed a strong faith and avoided intellectual enquiry. Nursi's Qur'anic way was to merge the intellectual and spiritual goals in one body of thought and worldview expressed and compiled in his *magnum opus*, the *Risale-i Nur* collection. Consequently, his writings were the most important instrument in Nursi's theological revivalism. His activism comprised writing and disseminating theological exegesis of the Qur'an, which became popular and one of the most significant examples of modern Islamic revivalism.

Since the conditions under which Nursi operated were unique and extremely challenging, and he reserved his writing activities solely on theology leaving behind a large body of theological writings, has he made original contributions to theology and if so to what extent? It was this question that this study investigated.

One of Nursi's most significant contributions is in Islamic epistemology. The classical Islamic discourse on theology and its epistemology originated within the Qur'an and Sunnah as primary sources of knowledge. For classical theologians, knowledge offered by the Qur'an is definitive as the authentic word of God and the entire content of the Qur'an is accepted as true knowledge. Since Prophet Muhammad was guided by God, what he said and did are also infallible and reveal

certain knowledge. This epistemological foundation was a major leap forward for the early Muslim community as they migrated from a Bedouin and tribal society – collectively identified as the era of *jahiliyyah* (ignorance) – with no previous sources of knowledge other than stories and practical wisdom. As the Muslim community studied the Qur'an and Sunnah, and advanced in civilisation, they were exposed to new issues, ideas and theologies as well as sources of knowledge. It became necessary to consider additional sources, chief among them being the *isrāīliyyāt* (Jewish and Christian sources), science and human reason ('*aql*). With *isrāīliyyāt* receiving heavy criticism and science being rudimentary, reason was the main contender as an independent source of knowledge alongside revelation.

Two centuries of tension between revelation and reason culminated in the Ash'arī and Māturīdī Sunni theological schools where a relative balance was achieved or, more correctly, reason was incorporated as an epistemological source only with the condition of subservience to revelation. While the majority of the Muslim world followed these two theological schools, traditionalists, who gave no place to reason, and Mu'tazalites, who gave primacy to reason, precipitated at either end of the theological spectrum. Al-Ghazālī's spiritual insight (*kashf*) became the third source of knowledge and was even considered superior to reason within Sufism and the masses who followed Sufi orders from the twelfth century onwards. So, classical Islamic epistemology for theology in the classical era consisted of the Qur'an and Sunnah as revelation (*naql*), human reason (*'aql*) and spiritual insight (*kashf*).

In the modern era, dramatic increases in human knowledge of the natural world and the universe, and major developments in science and technology shifted the epistemological equilibrium to an interplay between empiricism of science and the

traditionalism of religion. In the Western world, the epistemological value of scriptures was reduced and supremacy of science was accepted. In the case of Islamic scholarship, the primacy of the Qur'an and Sunnah persisted, but science and philosophy encroached within the intellectual and theological Islamic discourse without proper epistemological considerations.

Nursi attempted to address the modern imperative and influences by incorporating the universe and natural world within the bounds of Islamic epistemology as a primary source along with the Qur'an and Sunnah. Nursi resurrected the idea that the universe is a divine book of creation, a rich source of knowledge on existence, unity and the names and attributes of God. The universe holds an exegetical role to the Qur'an; simultaneously, the Qur'an is defined as an interpreter of the universe. The Qur'an directs humanity to the right perspective and reveals the codes to decipher the language of the universe. In this respect, the Qur'an and the universe are an inseparable whole as both are equal revelations from God in different forms. Human reason is an important instrument that discovers the correlation between the Qur'an and the universe. If reason can confirm Qur'anic faith propositions with empirical evidence from the universe, than they become certain truths. Most significantly, Nursi shifts the classic epistemological *naql* and *aql* considerations to *naql* and universe with *aql* as the essential instrument that investigates the correlation between the two. Nursi also stressed Prophet Muhammad as the primary human agent who forms a bridge between *naql* and the universe. He is the sign of the book of universe, the finest culmination of the Qur'anic vision for human beings and the teacher of the true purpose of the Qur'an, universe and human beings. Thus, Nursi's epistemology becomes a holistic system linking the Qur'an, Prophet Muhammad, the universe and human reason.

Nursi's major contribution to Islamic epistemology is the incorporation of the universe and natural world, hence science, as primary sources of theological knowledge. Importantly, this is not done at the expense of the Qur'an and Sunnah. In his epistemology, the Qur'an and Sunnah not only retain their role as primary sources of knowledge, but also their positions are strengthened by their reciprocal linking to the universe. At the same time, science is not imported to Islamic epistemology wholesale. Nursi makes the significant distinction that its positivistic perspective has to change. Effectively, Nursi repositions science and its findings as an empirical course within the realm of theology.

The implications of Nursi's epistemological contribution are far reaching. They provide a firm intellectual and empirical basis for faith propositions of the Qur'an. If the universe is God's revelation and should be read like a book, studying the universe, hence science, becomes an act of worship in reflection, *tafakkur* done in the name of God. Such a position achieves a reconciliation between science and religion (Islam), clearing the way for Muslims to more effectively deal with the fact that modern science and technology have a Western connection. Further, Nursi's approach opens the door for a far more concrete educational reform than those proposed by other prominent twentieth century Muslim reformers. A key distinction of Nursi is that he does not just give a new epistemological theory. He puts it to full use in developing his exposition of Islamic theology.

Proving the existence of God has always been the first and foremost endeavour in theology. With the intent to base Islam on firm foundations, Muslim philosophers and theologians in the classical era made important contributions to proofs for the existence of God. Using their knowledge of the world and carefully adopting

philosophical and theological discourse available in their time, they excogitated elaborate cosmological, teleological and ontological arguments. Attested by the *imkān* and *hudūth* arguments, the *kalām* cosmological argument became the standard proof for God in Islamic theology. Variants of the design and teleological arguments – such as the arguments from wisdom (*hikmah*), providence (*'inayah*) and creation (*ikhtira'*) – also featured prominently in theology and popular belief. There was also the case for the argument that belief in God comes naturally to innate human disposition and there is no proof needed as long as the innate human nature was not corrupted.

Representing the transition of Islamic scholarship from classical to the modern era, Nursi was influenced by the classical proofs for God. Nevertheless, he understood the need to make original contributions, especially to reach the masses who were doubting God on an unprecedented scale. Nursi's arguments for God are similar and different to previous scholarship in a number of ways. Although reluctantly, Nursi refers to the cosmological arguments of *imkān* and *hudūth*. Despite his familiarity with these arguments and the works of classical theologians, Nursi departs from the cosmological argument as he finds them too abstract for ordinary Muslims to grasp. This concern pushes Nursi to establish a link between the cosmological and design arguments reminiscent of al-Rāzī. The main links he finds are the actions that can be identified not only at all levels of existence on earth, but also throughout the cosmos. These actions collectively characterise God's pervasive *rubūbiyyah,* and form the basis of the overarching *governance argument*. For Nursi, this argument is the most significant of all proofs as he calls it the *ayah al-kubra*, the greatest sign or proof.

Without naming them as such, Nursi uses the three main teleological arguments within classical Islamic theology – the arguments from *hikmah*, *'inayah* and *ikhtira'*. Such arguments feature prominently in Nursi's works as they are more relatable for ordinary people and allow the use of Qur'anic verses to support arguments. Nursi often uses the arguments from wisdom similar to al-Māturīdī and creation similar to Ibn Rushd, especially when putting forward life as evidence. Yet, Nursi displays some originality. In addition to Ibn Rushd's argument from *'inayah*, Nursi uses the word *ta'awun* (mutual assistance) and calls this the second major truth after cosmological considerations.

A key feature in Nursi's rhetoric is that he follows in the footsteps of al-Ash'arī and al-Ghazālī in deploying analogies comparing the earth and cosmos to objects familiar to humans, such as a palace, city or book. Nursi is more concerned with the readability and persuasive effect of his arguments rather than following strictly foolproof logical constructions. Nursi's arguments, however, hold rational and logical ground, notwithstanding the need to peel them from his rhetoric and express them in well-crafted forms.

Rather than being apologetic, Nursi is confident in his approach to the proofs of God. At times, he reverses the burden of proof to those who argue the non-existence of God. This approach produces one of the most original proofs for God's existence, the *default proof*. Instead of focusing on the proof of God directly, this proof focuses on the impossibility of all other explanations for existence and the universe. After proving the impossibility of alternative explanations, Nursi makes the conclusion that God's existence is not only a necessity (*wājib al-wujūd*), but also His non-existence is impossible; thus, God creating the universe becomes the only possible explanation.

A key distinction in Nursi's approach in relation to the existence of God is the way he entreats the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad as evidence whenever he uses the universe as a focal point. With this emphasis, he ensures the primary position of the revealed sources in his epistemology. While he repeatedly invokes observations from the universe, he is careful not to tip the balance towards the universe and science. He highlights the interdependent relationship between the universe and revelation in affirming the reality of God.

In his intense discourse and merging of arguments, Nursi aims to take his readers from an imitative faith (*taqlīd al-imān*) to a deeper and more investigative faith (*tahqīq al-imān*). This can be particularly observed in Nursi's extensive deliberations on *tawḥīd,* the central tenet of Islamic faith. In his theological-oriented Islamic revival, a deeper and more profound understanding of *tawḥīd* plays a crucial role. In that respect, Nursi underscores his central aim of reconstructing the metaphysical fortress of Islam and collective consciousness of Muslims, in his view, heavily battered from a thousand years of intellectual and spiritual onslaught. A key evidence of his approach is seen in the way Nursi defines *tawḥīd* as ordinary *tawḥīd* and true *tawḥīd*. In his definition of true *tawḥīd*, Nursi combines a direct witnessing of the imprints of God's power and governance on every object, and hence gains a perpetual awareness of God. He considers true *tawḥīd* as a worship of faith (*'ibāda al-īmāniyya*) and links it to happiness in this world and the next.

In proving the unity of God, Nursi generally follows the two main arguments of the classical Muslim theologians – proof of divine administration, *dalil al-tadbīr*, and proof of mutual hindrance, *dalil al-tamanu'*. Nursi only briefly touches on the *tamanu'* argument in his characteristic aversion of purely logical and philosophical

arguments. Nursi greatly expands on the *tadbīr* argument. A distinctive pattern in Nursi's proofs for the unity of God is that he covers all angles: from the universals to particulars of existence; from God's nature to living beings in the world; and vertically and horizontally covering the entire universe. His arguments for ease of creation and interdependence of beings from the smallest to the largest planes of existence are original and compelling to illustrate that the universe is a whole, and the cause of the universe and its operation must be attributed to a single source.

Any examination on *tawḥīd* inevitably open a discussion on causality and theology. Analysis of Nursi's works demonstrates that he followed the normative Islamic theological line on their view of causality, in that causality is a deception of senses. Similar to al-Ghazālī, a consistent theme in Nursi's works is that belief in the effectiveness of causality leads to a subtle form of *shirk.* Although he repeats some of al-Ghazālī's arguments, his explanations are unique and easy to grasp. An original contribution of Nursi in showing the ineffectiveness of causality is his main argument that an effect has far greater value than the sum of all causes required to create it. Hence, resultant creative outcomes cannot be just attributed to causes. The value gap between the causes and the effects account for God's will and power at work behind a thin veil of existence. Importantly, Nursi does not completely deny or ignore the role of causes. Causality is important to veil God's dignity and majesty; therefore, it has a place as long as no creative power is attributed to causes as required by God's unity and glory. Causes are also required for humans to understand the laws of nature as a reflection of God's order of the universe, and harness them for their benefit. He qualifies adhering to causes as an active prayer that is more likely to be accepted than a traditional verbal prayer.

For Nursi, reconciling God's universal governance (*rubūbiyyah*) with the reality of the observed world is the most important theological aim in relation to understanding *tawḥīd*. He exerts considerable effort in finding this reconciliation through creative use of analogies. Nursi makes significant original theological contributions in his explanations of how one God can easily create and govern the entire universe. Nursi is able to maintain the requirements of *tawḥīd* where God is absolute and the disposer of all affairs and at the same time satisfy a critical mind of any perceived difficulty of one God disposing all affairs. No other Muslim scholar saw this as a theological problem and then tackled it to make original contributions to Islamic theology and understanding of *tawḥīd*.

A key test of Nursi's unique method and epistemology is the theology of how one should relate to God, the most significant part of theology defining the way believers experience God in their everyday lives. In this respect, theology (*kalām*) and Sufism (*tasawwuf*) vied for the hearts and minds of Muslims throughout the history of Islam. The classical Islamic theology mainly focused on deducing the affirmative and negating attributes of God from the Qur'an and Sunnah. They insisted that the list of agreed upon affirmative attributes, such as hearing, seeing, will and power, should be understood in the light of negating attribute that God and His incomparability (*tanzīh*). While theologians stressed every believer is charged with the duty to acquire knowledge (*ma'rifa*) of God and their faith must be based on certain knowledge instead of mere imitation (*taqlīd*), they did not emphasise the names of God nor is there detailed discussion on the way humans should understand and relate to God. *Tasawwuf*, on the other hand, focused on the nearness and immediate experience of God within oneself and witnessing the manifestations of God in the world. Only in this way could humans relate to, phantom to know and love, and

spiritually get close to God. Sufis have been phenomenally successful in much of the Islamic history as both spiritual elite and ordinary Muslims found a far more fulfilling experience on the Sufi path than the abstractions of theology. However, the sophisticated ideas and discourse of *tasawwuf*, especially when reduced to the level of ordinary Muslims, alarmed theologians and they charged *tasawwuf* for inadvertently leading people to *tashbīh*, positing similarity to God. So, a long-lasting tension between *kalām* and *tasawwuf* stood before scholars of the modern era.

Nursi's writings on how humans are meant to relate to God reveal some of his most interesting and original contributions, and a synthesis between agreed principles of theologians and spiritual insights of mystics. He does so by creating a space with his concomitant avoidance of pure abstractions of theology and certain esoteric discourses of Sufism. On the theological side, Nursi stays within the general principles of Sunni theology of acknowledging God's negating and affirmative attributes. His explanations, though, go beyond the rational considerations and once again anchor in observations from the natural world and universe. Nursi always stays within the Qur'anic boundaries, while at the same time finding original grounds for theological exegesis. His interpretation of the 'trust' given to humans in verse 33:72 is unique and significant. For Nursi, the trust is *anā*, human self-awareness, which acts as an instrument to detect names and attributes of God. By associating *anā* with the infinite attributes and qualities of God, an imaginary line of similarity (*tashbīh*) is drawn over the incomparability (*tanzīh*) of God, thus giving humans a point of reference to get to know and relate to God.

With this interpretation, Nursi enters the realm of mystical insight. He immediately restrains himself and instead of the Sufi emphasis of *qurbiyya*, human spiritual

closeness to God, he highlights *aqrabiyya*, divine immediacy of God. While achieving *qurbiyya* depends on human effort and is not achievable for most, *aqrabiyya* is always there if people take a leap of awareness, usually through the agency of prophethood and revelation. The immediacy of God is discernible by detecting God's Light guided by the objective reality of revelation (the Qur'an) and it becomes possible to decipher God's names and attributes by identifying empirical patterns of actions in the natural world and across the universe. When one gets to know God, they can then cultivate an intimate love and closeness with God. While the Qur'an acts as an instruction manual teaching the invaluable methodology of reading the book of universe, the universe becomes an objective source of knowledge to test the veracity of the Qur'an's theological and ethical teachings. Essentially, in Nursi's theology and cosmology, the universe and phenomenal world are designed and created to facilitate humans to relate to God. Humans and the cosmos become mirrors to reflect God's beautiful names, attributes and qualities, which enable humans to appreciate the person-essence (*dhāt*) of God.

Thus, Nursi's exposition of Islamic theology is a synthesis between creedal theology and mystical cosmology. He uses key insights and outcomes from *kalām* theology and *tasawwuf* mysticism, but puts both to the critical test of the Qur'anic approach. In doing so, he absorbs key spiritual concepts within the scope of theology. His critiques of Ibn 'Arabī and the notion of *waḥdat al-wujūd* illustrate Nursi's unique theological blend. For Nursi, the universe and all things reflecting God's names and attributes are key Qur'anic notions that enable God to be known with a level of certainty not possible through either pure theology or mystical experience. This becomes the basis for his criticism of *waḥdat al-wujūd* as he contends the doctrine does not represent the full and free manifestations of all God's names visible across

the universe and on all things. On another level, God's names manifesting on the Creation is a spiritual concept or at least a concept championed by Muslim mystics. Nursi embraces this idea, presents it as Qur'anic and brings it under the scope of theology, but this is as far as he will go. He is not prepared for wholesale adoption of spiritual concepts and will put them to the test of fundamental Qur'anic principles agreed by scholarly consensus. With his critique and explanations of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, ultimately Nursi attempts to position all key aspects of theology in their respective places: God is the Creator of the universe with a clear purpose and the universe has real existence; the immediacy of God is reflected over the universe, which acts as a mirror to God's names and attributes; primal instincts to search for God and machinery to appreciate God are placed in human nature; humans relate and get close to God by believing in God, gaining an intimate knowledge of God, triggering love of God and expressing that love in acts of devotional worship; and revelation and prophethood guide humans in achieving these goals.

It is difficult to place Nursi's theology within the Ash'arite or Maturidite frameworks. With respect to the proofs of God's unity, Nursi approaches more to the Maturidite theological line, considering that Ash'arite theology mainly focuses on the *tamanu'* argument, while Maturidite theology focuses on a wide array of arguments but mainly the *tadbīr* argument. Another indicator of Nursi slanting towards the Maturidite end of the theological spectrum is his avoidance of the trademark Ash'arite theology of occasionalism. Nursi does not see the need to get involved in the layers of intelligences of Ibn Sina or the occasionalism of Ash'arī theology to deal with a universe that is entirely governed by God without the need for causes. He is also related to Māturīdī theology with his consistent allusion to the wisdom of God as reflected in the universe, so much so that Nursi labels his works

characterising a reflection of the divine name *Hakīm* (Wise). At the same time, he displays a distinct Ash'arī character with his lack on inclusion of the attribute of *takwin* as part of the affirmative attributes of God. In fact, he is too original to be boxed into one of the two major schools of theology, although he remains strictly within the general ambit of Sunni theology.

All in all, Nursi makes three significant contributions to Islamic theology. First, he brought the rich tradition of Islam to contemporary audience whose access to Islamic learning had been severed by the effects of colonisation or closure of traditional madrasa education under authoritarian governments. In this respect, Nursi did not have to be original. Transmitting the scholarly tradition of Islam to current and future generations under challenging circumstances was a major contribution in itself. Second, Nursi does not simply echo the past tradition. He reframed it by highlighting and detailing the parts he considered most needed by contemporary Muslims. His main concern was to persuade and remove doubts from the minds of confused Muslims exposed to myriad philosophies, thought systems and faith traditions. He did so by using the power of persuasion, rhetorical devices and creative analogies to bring complex theological concepts nearer to the understanding of most people. In this sense, Nursi's writing gave fresh expressions to classic Islamic ideas. Finally, his epistemological considerations and justification of the universe as a source of knowledge is not unique, but he is the only contemporary scholar to forcefully stress it and build a completely fresh Islamic theology and cosmology on this epistemological foundation. This allowed him to find new proofs for the existence and unity of God and develop original explanations in the important question of how to relate to God in modern times for people with a critical mind.

Future development in Nursian studies could focus on these three contributions on other aspects of Islamic theology Nursi expands on and makes orginnal contributions. These would include, proofs of afterlife, divine determination and free will, human spitrituality, Qur'anic exegesis and interpretation of hadith.

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