

Modernity

HAKAN YAVUZ

Being Modern in the Nurcu Way



One of the defining conflicts of modern Turkish life is the great tension between society and the state. This tension has been articulated in terms of the conflict between Islamic social movements and the state ideology, Kemalism. Alberto Melucci argues that social movements constitute an active resistance that seeks to free everyday life from colonization by central government so that individuals may realize their unique potential and assert their collective identity.¹ This aptly describes the Nurcu movement, an Islamic faith movement based on the writings of Said Nursi (1876-1960). Nursi suffered persecution at the hands of the Kemalist elite and was eventually exiled. Even his dead body posed a 'security threat'. After his death, his body was exhumed by military coup leaders in 1960 and reburied at an unknown location.

Why did Said Nursi and his followers represent a threat to the Kemalist State? What are the major characteristics of the Nurcu movement? How has the Nurcu movement remained the most powerful faith movement in Turkey? The following seeks to answer these questions.

A challenge to Kemalism

In order to understand the perceived threat of Nursi to the state, it must be understood that in Turkey, Kemalism is as powerful as Islam; it is Turkey's official ideology, functioning as a state religion. Therefore, a movement that strengthens Islamic identity is a challenge to state ideology. Said Nursi, founder of the Nurcu movement, stressed the significance of reading and writing. His works, known as the *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati* (The Epistles of Light), were believed by him and his followers to be bestowed by God and were thus considered semi-sacred. The writings of Nursi have three interrelated goals: to raise the consciousness of Muslims; to refute the dominant intellectual discourses of materialism and positivism; and to recover collective memory by revising the shared grammar of society, Islam. Responding to the penetrating impact of positivism in the Ottoman educational system and the total collapse of the Islamic educational system, Nursi tried to demonstrate the compatibility of science and religion, freedom and faith, modernity and tradition. He updated the idioms of Islam in terms of the dominant universal discourses of science, human rights, and the rule of law. In sum, the *Risale-i Nur* constitutes an alternative basis upon which Muslims can build their personality, and redraw the boundary between the state and society.

Said Nursi in 1952.

The writings of Said Nursi

There is no clearly articulated political design in the writings of Said Nursi; the purpose is rather to protect Islam from the fanaticism of traditionalist religiosity, and modern knowledge from unbelief. His writings constantly try to build a Muslim personality that is pious and modern; tolerant but firm about the core virtues of Islam. Nursi's books were his refuge and have become the avenue to fulfilment for soul-searching Turks. Mehmet Kirkinci, a prominent second generation Nurcu, has referred to Said Nursi's works as the 'light' which helps to overcome the darkness of Anatolia. Nursi's books are the 'home' in which many Muslims find their self-identity. As Kirkinci claims, 'I free my loneliness through these books. I examine myself and my history within and between the lines of *Risale-i Nur*.² In a way, these books have become the architects of the Anatolian Muslims' heart and soul.

According to his writings, there are three ways of acquiring Islamic knowledge: the Qur'an, the Prophet, and the universe which he usually refers to as the 'Grand Book of Uni-

verse'. He used the laws of nature to explain the power of a creator. By replacing the text with ulema (or sheikh), Nursi tried to respond to the fragmentation of religious authority in Islam. In response to the prevailing tendency toward scepticism and the discursive shift from a religious to a secular worldview, Nursi attempted to develop a new conceptual terminology that would bring religion and science together. According to John Voll, Nursi tried 'to see connections between science and religion', rather than refuting the laws of science. Nursi stressed the multi-layered meanings of the Qur'an and taught that nature had no meaning in itself but rather signified *mana-yi harfi*, the existence of order and the presence of God. He always supported freedom of speech and considered it the necessary framework for genuine faith. He tried to protect secular education from unbelief and religious education from fanaticism by reconciling faith and science.

Although Said Nursi was reacting to an originally European materialist philosophy and atheism, he was very careful not to reject Europe *intoto*. He differentiated between the good and bad institutions and practices of Western civilization. Nursi expected to transform society by raising Muslim consciousness. He had always felt himself in *gurbet* (estrangement) and explained how he overcame this sense of isolation through dynamic belief, trust, and patience. Belief, for Nursi, was the guide that shapes the individual life. His struggle in life offers a powerful model for other Muslims to follow in overcoming lone-

liness and alienation by becoming conscious of God.

Nursi, as a native Kurd and pan-Islamist, witnessed the collapse of the multicultural Ottoman Empire, the formation of the Kemalist republic, and a decade-long experiment of democracy. A discussion of Said Nursi is, in effect, a discussion of the modern history of Turkish society. Nursi embodied the varying strategies – whether engagement, withdrawal or opposition – employed by an Islamic movement in response to oppressive Kemalist policies that sought to wipe out the collective memory of Anatolian Muslims. Nursi, by abridging a shared Sufi tradition and contemporizing Islamic concepts for the Anatolian Muslims, sought not only to preserve but also to update Turkish memory in new public spaces.

Nursi's teachings have helped to create a neo-Sufism in Turkey. His books have freed Islamic knowledge from the hegemony of the ulema and have thus democratized this knowledge. He popularized science by reframing it within Islamic idioms. Nursi represents the seismic shift from the *tekke* (Sufi lodge) to text, and from oral Islam to print Islam. Although his ideas evolved within Nakşibendi and Kadiri Sufi *tekkes*, his thought transcended the traditional framework of questions and answers. His writings reach the most dynamic and refined level of Anatolian and Ottoman Sufi Islam. Most of Said Nursi's teachers belonged to the Khalidi Nakşibendi order, but he also read the writings of Abdul Kadir Geylani, the founder of

the Kadiri order. He was heavily influenced by the writings of Nakşibendi leaders, such as Ahmed Sirhindi of India and Ahmed Ziyaeddin Gümüşhaneli.

After identifying the enemies of Islam as ignorance, fragmentation, and poverty, Nursi presented education, hard work, and consensus as a solution. Nursi's Islam is personal Islam. Even his understanding of sharia reflected this personal commitment. In *Isarat-ül İcaz*, Nursi defines sharia as way of determining right from wrong, good from bad, and licit from illicit through consciousness rather than force. In other words, a just society is not built by force, but by righteous men and women.

Dershane: sites of Islamic modernities

The Nurcu movement represents a dynamic conceptualization of the interaction between modernity and religion. The movement can be considered modern in that it espouses a worldview centred around the self-reflective and politically active individual's ability to realize personal goals while adhering to a collective identity. It seeks to shape local networks and institutions in relation to the global discourses of democracy, human rights, and the market economy. In this sense, we may say that Nursi is the founder of modern religious discourse in Turkey. The Nurcu movement has responded effectively to the search for identity that has been a salient characteristic of Turkish politics since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Through religiously rooted and socially shaped networks, the Nurcus (participants of the Nurcu movement) have sought to establish a sense of community within a laic state. The Nurcu reading circles, or *dershanes*, have become the institutions that integrate the individual into society and polity. They can be analysed as textual communities formed around Nursi's *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*.³

The word *dershane* in modern Turkish can refer to a special apartment floor or a one-floor building and a congregation of people who meet there to read and discuss the writings of Nursi. This process of discussion is called *sohbet* (conversation) and generally takes place after work or on Friday evenings. Although almost all conversations start with the writings of Nursi, they take different directions and most likely end with political or business exchanges. The *Risale-i Nur* becomes a basis for conversation and provides a shared vocabulary to discuss socio-political events in and outside Turkey. Conversation is an important aspect of Turkish socio-political culture, and the *dershanes* are central to Nurcu identity as they facilitate the formation of close relationships among followers, who form bonds of trust and civility. As informal networks of people, ideas and capital, *dershanes* help to institutionalize a pattern of conduct in society.

Before the 1983 economic liberalization instituted by Turgut Özal, Nurcus met in private homes. With the help of newly accumulated capital, the Nurcus began to buy separate buildings where they could assemble and discuss social issues from the perspective of the *Risale-i Nur*. These *dershanes* led to the emergence of a new Nurcu elite and gave greater visibility to the new Anatolian bourgeoisie.

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The proliferation of *dershanes* coincided with the fragmentation of the Nurcu movement along class, gender, ethnic and regional lines. The *dershanes*, formed as textual-communities, create new public spaces which are able to empower Turkish civil society. They have played a crucial role in the evolution and pluralization of Islamic movements in Turkey and have also been instrumental in the formation of a counter-elite in Turkey. It is significant, for example, that *dershanes* have been used as dormitories for university students. *Dershanes*, as urban networks of Sunni Islam, do not separate religion from everyday life; rather, they seek to shape everyday life through Islamic idiom and practice. *Köprü*, the most serious journal devoted to the *Risale-i Nur*, has a circulation of 5,000 – some 3,500 copies of which go to the *dershanes*.

Print Islam and the emergence of communities around the text are very much an urban phenomenon. Increased literacy, an expanded market economy, and the proliferation of information technology have not lead to the secularization of society, but have rather facilitated the emergence of Islamic movements. Due to greater access to available resources and the flexibility of Islamic terminology, the Nurcu movement is rooted in urban centres. Its main goal is not to return to an Islamic past but to Islamicize the present by reinterpreting the shared language of Islam. Nursi helped to create and nurture an oppositional and insurgent consciousness within the limited public sphere under the domination of the Kemalist state.

The strengthening of market forces in Turkish society has turned the *dershanes* into centres of economic as well as social activity.

People meet to discuss business issues and disseminate new information to other members. In other words, *dershanes* provide avenues for the realization of individual interests as well as the preservation of a collective identity. *Dershanes* are connected to a specific group of people and represent religiously shaped new public spaces that quickly become integrated into the surrounding community. *Dershanes* help to create social energy – the willingness of human beings to act from their ideals.

In Germany and Holland, I have visited several *dershanes* run by the community of Fethullah Gülen.⁴ They fulfill multiple functions and aim to attract Muslim university students. They are successful among the Turks and some Turkified Kurds. *Dershanes* in Europe function as *kervan saray* where Turks may enjoy coffee and socialize. They have the multiple function of disseminating information, finding jobs, facilitating new friendships, and allowing access to diverse social networks. Personal trust and communal control are brought together. These *dershanes*, spread across Europe, help Nurcus locate each other. In some *dershanes*, maps can be seen on which *dershanes* in other European cities are identified with green stickers. By marking the map of Europe with *dershanes*, Nurcus start to see Europe as a familiar territory – even a second homeland. Being organized horizontally, not hierarchically, *dershanes* stress solidarity, participation, and integrity. In a way, they help to build sustainable communities. These networks facilitate coordination and amplify information about the trustworthiness of other Nurcus.

Being Muslim in the Nurcu way

Being a Muslim in the 'Nurcu way' means becoming a conscious Muslim in good deeds and knowledgeable in science, culture, and business. Recognizing that modernity does not acknowledge God, the Nurcus want to overcome this by calling Muslims to rationalize the Qur'an and take science seriously.

The Nurcus have been trying to institutionalize new ethics and 'pious activism' through a worldly asceticism. Religious salvation, for Nursi, assumes contemplative action and hard work. The Nurcu way reconciles religious contemplation and activism as mutually constitutive. Nursi defines Islam in terms of tolerance, love and reason.

After Nursi's death in 1960, due to varying regional, class, and ethnic identities, the Nurcus fragmented into several sub-communities with different interpretations and positions on political issues: ranging from a tolerant Fethullah Gülen (b.1938) to radical Aczmeni groups. Since 1983, the movement has undergone a division along ethnic Turkish and Kurdish lines. The Kurdish Nurcus tend to treat Said Nursi as a Kurdish nationalist, whereas the Turks stress his pan-Islamism. Many Kurdish nationalists interpret Nursi's exile and persecution as the example of the persecution of the Kurdish identity. However, the court cases show that his persecution was the result of his struggle to renew Islam against the social engineering of Kemalist reforms. Moreover, some Turkish Nurcus, such as Yeni Asya of Mehmet Kutlular and the Fethullah Gülen community, reimagined the movement as a 'Turkish Islam' and nationalized it. When a religious movement seeks legitimacy in the eyes of laic state,

which either excludes religion from the state structure or seeks to control it through inclusion, the only method of gaining legitimacy and support from the state is nationalism. In other words, religious groups seek to maintain their relevance and legitimacy before the state by stressing their contribution to nationalism and national culture.

The Nurcu movement, with its 5 million followers, is undergoing a transformation: a process of ethnicization along Turkish and Kurdish lines; seeing the European Union as the hope for shaping a democratic Turkey; and 'going global' through expanding their networks and internalizing global discourses of human rights. The modernity of the Nurcu movement is also a testimony to the catastrophic success of the Kemalist project of creating a European nation. ◆

Notes

1. For an understanding of modern social movements, I recommend Alberto Melucci (1989), *Nomads of the Present, Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society*, London: Hutchinson Radius.
2. Interview with Mehmet Kırkıncı, 25 September 1995.
3. Yavuz, M. Hakan (1995), 'Print-Based Islamic Discourse and Modernity: The Nur Movement', *Third International Symposium on Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, pp. 324-350.
4. Yavuz, M. Hakan (1999), 'Towards an Islamic Liberalism?: The Nurcu Movement and Fethullah Gülen', *Middle East Journal* 53 (4), pp. 584-605.

M. Hakan Yavuz is assistant professor of Political Science at the University of Utah, USA.
E-mail: hakan.yavuz@poli-sci.utah.edu