

Reconsidering Islamic Pluralism in the Contemporary World¹

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The subject of religious pluralism can provoke a great deal of controversy. One could consider all religious knowledge as relative and, therefore, assert that no religion can claim to have the absolute truth. Or, one could claim that his or her religion or understanding is the only truth. Religious pluralism, on the other hand, says that all religions constitute varying conceptions of, and responses to, one ultimate, mysterious divine reality. In other words, religious diversity is legitimate and no single religion has a monopoly on religious truth. Some may see this linkage of religion with pluralism as presenting a potential threat to their religion.

One of the main concerns of inter-human dialogue² as well as religious pluralism is the concept of “the other(s).” This concept uses such social/ethnic divisions, categorizations, and labeling as believers/non-believers, Jew/Gentile, Christian/non-Christian to maintain traditional religious polarity. From the very beginning of history, human nature has led people to construct “the other(s)” and then try to challenge and change it/them. If this goal has not been possible, one side has tried to destroy the other. In this regard, history is full of religious commitments and wars for absolutism.

Huntington has claimed that the twenty-first century will see clashes of civilizations, by which he means clashes of “the others.” Marshood echoes this sentiment: “Civilizations have always constructed ‘the other’ in forms that serve their own interest, and have treated ‘the other’ very violently . . . history has been very much filled with this kind of violence. Tolerance is rare. Indeed, the term ‘civilization’ implies that a ranking hierarchy is always present and that the social construction of civilization is a product of competing interactions between groups. Although some religions are more exclusionist than others, virtually all of them either assert or imply that their own version of the world is true, thereby rendering competing worldviews inferior. In religious language, ‘the other’ is always evil and dirty. Humans couldn’t have created a loving and caring God without creating evil. It is the creation of a jealous god that can’t coexist alongside that of ‘the other.’”³

One of religious pluralism’s main concerns is the concept of “the other(s),” for this attitude is essentially an attempt to understand differences in order to promote life and the universe. This article considers the following questions: How did Said Nursi (1877-1960), a twentieth-century Turkish Islamic scholar, view others who believe and worship differently? Can believers coexist peacefully within the same societal structure? Is there any way to share the world with those who have different religious practices and beliefs? Is a person of another faith saved? How should unbelievers be treated? His responses to such questions will be used to connect the issue of religious tolerance with contemporary events. Especially after 9/11, we discuss practical aspects of his approach to “the other(s),” and their different doctrines, ideologies, and religions in order to promote different views of life and the universe that reflect Islamic universalism.

¹ This article originally appeared as H. Horkuc, “New Muslim Discourses on Pluralism in the Postmodern Age: Nursi on Religious Pluralism,” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 19, no. 2 (spring 2002): 68-86.

² As opposed to interfaith or inter-religious dialogue. I consider both of these terms to be too limiting for the issue being discussed.

³ N. Marshood, *Religious Pluralism and Social Change*. Hudson County Community College. Online.

Said Nursi and non-Muslims

According to Nursi, non-Muslims are not the enemies of Muslims. In fact, he even gave a number of reasons why Muslims should see them as friends: They are the means for awakening the Muslims from their centuries of slumber, Muslims could obtain modern scientific knowledge from them, Muslims have an obligation to persuade them that Islam is the religion of peace, and, since they are the Muslims' neighbors, there must be bonds of friendship between both communities.⁴

Nursi maintained that there was no harm in loving non-Muslims. Since they are developed in science and civilization, such love comes from the improvements they have made in those areas as well as in the public order, which is the basis of all worldly happiness. This type of loving is even mentioned in the Qur'an.⁵ He wrote: "Yet a man is not loved for himself. Maybe the love comes from his attribution or art. It therefore does not necessarily have to be right that all the attribution of a Muslim is Islamic and, contrary to this, all the attribution of an unbeliever is un-Islamic. Nevertheless the attribution or the art which are Islamic might be observed by those who are not Muslim."⁶

The background to Nursi's approach to tolerance is explained by Michel: "Many years before, in 1910-1911, Said Nursi was questioned concerning his desire to build relations of friendship with Christians. He was confronted with the restrictive interpretation that some Muslims had placed on the Qur'anic verse: *O you who believe! Do not take the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors* (5:51). In the light of this verse, he was asked, why did he say that Muslims and Christians should be friends? His answer is instructive, not only for understanding Said Nursi's desire to encourage love and friendship between Muslims and Christians, but for his approach to Qur'anic interpretation. In his view, the Qur'anic prescription is not general but absolute and, as such, can be restricted . . . Time is a great interpreter; if it determines its limits, it cannot be gainsaid. That is, when a matter becomes clear in the course of time, one cannot object to it. Moreover, if the judgment is based on derived evidence, the source of the derivation shows the reason for the judgment."⁷

In applying this principle to the interpretation of this verse, he holds that Muslims cannot be friends with Jews and Christians only when these groups reflect Jewishness or Christianness. "But," he concludes, "Just as not all of the characteristics of an individual Muslim necessarily reflect the teaching of Islam, so also, not all of the qualities of individual Jews or Christians reflect unbelief."⁸

If Muslims discover that a Jew or Christian possesses certain qualities that agree with Islamic teachings, they should consider those qualities as praiseworthy. Thus, it is those good qualities that form the basis for friendship with Jews and Christians. "Can a Muslim love a Christian or Jew?" he asks, and replies with an example of a Muslim man who is married to a woman of the People of the Book. "Of course," he should



⁴ See I. Canan, "The Chief Questions Facing the Islamic World and Their Solutions according to Bediüzzaman Said Nursi: The Reconstruction of Twentieth Century and Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (Istanbul: Yeni Nesil, 1992).

⁵ See B. S. Nursi, "Munazarat," in *Kaynakli-İndeksli-Lugatli Risale-i Nur Kulliyati* (The Epistle of Light), (Istanbul: Nesil Basım Yayın, 1996), 1944.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ T. S. J. Michel, "Muslim-Christian Dialogue and a Co-operation in the Thought of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi," *The Muslim World* 89, nos. 3-4 (1999): 332.

⁸ Ibid., 325.

love her.” His argument is the very fact that the Qur’an permits a Muslim man to marry a Jewish or Christian woman presumes that he can and should love her.⁹ Nursi’s understanding and his openness to an individual’s personal qualities reflect pluralism.

Nursi also indicated his acceptance of pluralism by writing that Muslims should ally themselves with Christians to fight atheism,¹⁰ and that all of the People of the Book should cooperate against the common enemy of atheism or other unreligious ideologies. He wrote: “It is even recorded in authentic traditions of the Prophet that, at the end of time, the truly pious among the Christians will unite with the People of the Qur’an and fight their common enemy: irreligion. And at this time, too, the people of religion and truth need to unite sincerely not only with their own brothers and fellow believers, but also with the truly pious and spiritual ones among the Christians, temporarily [disengaging] from the discussion and debate of points of difference in order to combat their joint enemy ‘aggressive atheism.’”¹¹

Michel states: “Writing during one of the most tragic periods in the history of Anatolia, Said Nursi could not ignore the reality of the deaths of so many innocent persons. It is to his great credit that he rose above sectarian loyalty to address the question of innocent Christians as well as Muslims who fell victim to the times. ‘Even if those innocent people were unbelievers,’ he stated, ‘in return for the tribulations they suffered due to that worldly disaster, they have such a reward from the treasury of Divine mercy that if the veil of the Unseen were to open, a great manifestation of mercy would be apparent in relation to them and they would declare: ‘O Lord, thanks be to You! All praise belongs to God.’”¹²

Nursi considered Europe as having two faces. “Europe is two. One follows the sciences which serve justice and right and activities beneficial for the life of society through the inspiration it has received from true Christianity. This first Europe I am not addressing. Rather, I am addressing the second, corrupt Europe which, through the darkness of the philosophy of naturalism that considered the evils of civilization to be its virtues, has driven humankind to vice and misguidance.”¹³

Nursi and the diversity of truth

Nursi asserted that since truth is not limited to one understanding, there can be many different understandings that vary in form according to time and place. Even sacred laws change according to the times. Indeed, one age may have seen several Prophets,¹⁴ and there were

⁹ T. S. J. Michel, “Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Co-operation in the Thought of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi,” in Fourth International Symposium on Bediüzzaman Said Nursi: A Contemporary Approach towards Understanding the Qur’an: The Example of Risale-i Nur (Istanbul: Yeni Nesil: 1998).

¹⁰ In this regard, see John Obert Voll, “Bediüzzaman Said Nursi and Religion in the 1950s,” *The Muslim World* 89, no.s 3-4 (1999): 255-56.

¹¹ B. S. Nursi, “The Flashes,” in Risale-i Nur 1.0 CD. (Istanbul: Yeni Nesil, 200), 203, note 7.

¹² Michel, “Muslim-Christian Dialogue.”

¹³ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁴ Compare this with B. S. Nursi, “The Words,” in Risale-i Nur 1.0 CD (Istanbul: Yeni Nesil, 2000), 501. “Then, since with the coming of the Prophet of the end of time, man as though advanced from the primary to the secondary stage, and through numerous revolutions and upheavals reached a position at which all the human peoples could receive a single lesson and listen to a single teacher and act in accordance with a single law, no need remained for different laws, neither was there necessity for different teachers. But because they were not all at completely the same level and did not proceed in the same sort of social life, the schools of law became numerous. If, like students of a school of higher education, the vast majority of mankind were clothed in the same sort of social life and attained the same level, then all the schools could be united. But just as the state of the world does not permit that, so the schools of law cannot be the same.”

different Prophets and laws in the same continent during the same century.¹⁵

Regarding the diversity of the schools of law, Nursi replies: “If you say: The truth is one; how can the different ordinances of the four, or twelve schools be true? The answer: The same water governs in five different ways in five ill people of different dispositions, thus: for one, the water is a cure for his illness, and according to medicine, necessary. For another, it is like poison for his sickness and harmful, and medically prohibited. For another, it causes a small amount of harm, and is reprehensible medically. For another the water is beneficial and without harm; according to medicine that is *sunna* for him. And for yet another it is neither harmful nor beneficial; he can drink it with good health, and for him it is medically permissible. Thus, here the truth has become numerous; all five are true. Are you able to say: “The water is only a cure, only necessary, and it governs no other way?”¹⁶

On the diversity of Islamic faith, Nursi states: “When you know your way and opinions to be true, you have the right to say, ‘My way is right and the best.’ But you do not have the right to say, ‘Only my way is right.’ According to the sense of ‘The eye of contentment is too dim to perceive faults; it is the eye of anger that exhibits all vice,’ your unjust view and distorted opinion cannot be the all-decisive judge and cannot condemn the belief of another as invalid.”¹⁷

Given this context, John Voll opines that Nursi’s approach can be considered pluralistic. Voll writes: “In terms of Qur’anic commentary, Said Nursi argues that the verses of the Qur’an reflect the vastness of God’s message and depths of meanings.” He then quotes Nursi: “As the Qur’an of Miraculous Exposition expresses truths through its explicit, clear meanings and senses, so it expresses many allusive meanings through its styles and forms. Each of its verses contains numerous levels of meanings. Since the Qur’an proceeds from all-encompassing knowledge, all its meanings may be intended. It cannot be restricted to one or two meanings like man’s speech, the product of his limited mind and individual will. It is because of this that innumerable truths contained in the Qur’an’s verses have been expounded by Qur’anic commentators, and there are many more which have not been expounded by them.”¹⁸

According to Voll: “This openness to many different levels of understanding reflects a pluralism that is not a relativist position, but rather emphasizes the importance of the role of the individual in the interpretation.”¹⁹

Nursi’s use of metaphors to promote pluralism

Speaking metaphorically, Nursi maintains that the palace of the universe contains four categories of workers: angels, animals, plants and inanimate creatures, and humanity. In a sense, their diverse duties of worship also admit pluralism.²⁰ His characterization of the universe displays a universal pluralism, for: “Man is the place of manifestation of all the Names, but the Names being various has resulted in the universe’s variety and the differences in the angels’ worship, and has also caused a degree of variety among men. The different laws of the prophets, the different ways of the saints, and the different paths of the purified scholars have arisen from this mystery.”²¹

¹⁵ See conclusion in *ibid.*, 500.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 501.

¹⁷ B. S. Nursi, “The Letters,” in *Risale-i Nur 1.0 CD*. (Istanbul: Yeni Nesil, 2000), 314.

¹⁸ Voll, “Bediüzzaman Said Nursi,” 255-56.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Horkuc, “New Muslim Discourses,” 77.

²¹ Nursi, “The Words,” 343.

Basing himself upon the verse *O humanity, We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other*, Nursi writes that this can be understood as: “I created you as peoples, nations, and tribes, so that you should know one another and the relations between you in social life, and assist one another; not so that you should regard each other as strangers, refusing to acknowledge one another, and nurturing hostility and enmity.”²² Thus, being divided into groups and tribes should lead to mutual acquaintance and mutual assistance, not to antipathy and mutual hostility.”²³

The following metaphor aptly summarizes his recognition of pluralism: “If someone is both a teacher, and a policeman, and a clerk of the court, and an inspector in the civil service, in each office he has both relations, and duties, and obligations, and salaries, and responsibilities, and promotion, and enemies and rivals who are the cause of his failures. He appears before the king with many titles, and he sees the king. He seeks help from him with many tongues. He has recourse to many of the ruler’s titles, and seeks his help in many forms in order to be saved from the evil of his enemies. In just the same way, man, who manifests many Names and is charged with many duties and afflicted with many enemies, invokes many of the Names in his prayers and supplications . . . Muhammad the Arabian (Peace and blessings be upon him), the cause of pride of mankind and truly the most perfect man, supplicated with a thousand and one Names in his prayer, *Jawshan al-Kabir*.”²⁴

Using his concept of pluralism, he defended Muhyiddin ibn al-’Arabi, an Islamic scholar of the Unity of Existence, in the following words: “Yes, himself, Muhyiddin was rightly-guided and acceptable, but in all his works cannot be the guide and instructor . . . However, he himself is free of misguidance. Sometimes, a word may appear to be unbelief, but the one who spoke it is not an unbeliever.”²⁵ He also quoted Muhyiddin: “Those who are not one of us and do not know our station should not read our books, for it may be damaging for them.”²⁶

Nursi’s efforts to legitimize Sufism and to reach common understandings with the Shi’a also manifest pluralism.²⁷ Although he opined that some people attached too much importance to Sufism at the expense of serving the cause of spreading the truths of belief, he paid attention to legitimizing sainthood and Sufism and choosing the middle way.²⁸

His concept of pluralism even extended to salvation. As we read in *The Letters*: “The two parts of the confession of faith cannot be separated; they either prove each other, comprise each other; one cannot be without the others. Since the Prophet (upon whom be blessings and peace) was the Seal of the Prophets and the heir of all the prophets, he is at the start of all the ways leading to God. There can be no way to reality and salvation outside his mighty highway. All those with inner knowledge of God and the authorities of these who have researched into reality have said like Sa’di Shirazi: ‘It is impossible, Sa’di, to be victorious on the way of salvation, except by following Mustafa [Prophet Muhammad].’ They also said:

²² Nursi, “The Letters,” 379.

²³ *Ibid.*, 380.

²⁴ Nursi, “The Words,” 344.

²⁵ Nursi, “The Flashes,” 371.

²⁶ For more on this see *ibid.*, 369-70.

²⁷ See Horkuc, “New Muslim Discourses,” 80.

²⁸ In one of his treaties concerning the Nine Allusions, Nursi explains the ways of sainthood and Sufism, deals with the definition of the Sufi path, and explains the truth underlying the terms Sufism, path, sainthood, and spiritual journeying. Nursi, “The Letters,” 518.

‘All ways are closed except the highway of Muhammad.’ However, it sometimes happens that people may be on the highway of Muhammad and within it, without knowing that it is the highway of Muhammad. And it sometimes happens that they do not know the Prophet, but the road they take is part of the highway of Muhammad.”²⁹

Nursi spent his life pursuing his quest to strengthen belief and reform society by means of a moral-based discourse.³⁰ Throughout his long life, he raised a voice of reasonable pluralism in the Islamic world by viewing one person as having numerous personalities, all of which display different qualities.³¹ He accepted that truth could be understood in more than one way, and therefore he was neither an absolutist nor a relativist in matters ranging from religiosity to ethnicism, and from moderation to salvation.³²

Conclusion

In a sense Nursi’s approach to non-Muslims amounts to pluralism. He wrote: “Our action towards non-Muslims is persuasion, for we know them to be civilized, and to show Islam to be elevated and worthy of love.”³³

Believing Islam to be the middle way, Nursi emphasized the importance of moderation and keeping away from want and excess saying “Too much or too little of anything is not good. Moderation is the middle way . . .”³⁴ Finally, by advocating a middle way, Nursi communicated a message of hope and tolerance to others³⁵ when he wrote: “The thing which is most worthy of love is love, and that most deserving of enmity is enmity. It is love and loving that render people’s social life secure and that lead to happiness, [it is these] which are most worthy of love and being love . . . The time for enmity and hostility is finished.”³⁶

In conclusion, we can say that Nursi approaches this world and the Hereafter with a pluralistic view. He accepts different views, ideologies, and races, and his understanding of ethnicity demonstrates pluralism. For him, pluralism or tolerance does not necessarily mean integration or conversion; rather, it means the necessity to promote universal life. The importance that he places upon one innocent individual shows an impressive attitude of religious pluralism.

According to Michel: “In any study of the development of Christian-Muslim dialogue in the twentieth century, special attention must be given to the writings and preaching of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi. As one of the first religious thinkers in the course of this century to propose and promote dialogue between Muslims and Christians, Said Nursi’s advocacy of this dialogue dates back to 1911. This was a full half century before the Catholic Church’s Second Vatican Council urged Christians and Muslims to resolve their differences and move beyond the conflicts of the past to build relations characterized by respect and cooperation. Bediüzzaman’s repeated promotion of Muslim-Christian dialogue is even more striking in that his recommendations frequently date from times of tension and even warfare between Muslim and Christian communities.”³⁷

²⁹ Ibid., 394.

³⁰ Horkuc, “New Muslim Discourses,” 81.

³¹ In this treatise, Nursi explains how a person may have numerous personalities in respect of his different duties. Nursi, “The Letters,” 377.

³² Horkuc, “New Muslim Discourses.”

³³ Cited in Canan, “The Chief Questions.”

³⁴ Nursi, “The Flashes,” 43.

³⁵ See Horkuc, “New Muslim Discourses,” 77.

³⁶ As cited in Michel, “Muslim-Christian Dialogue.”

³⁷ Ibid., 325.