

## **At the Vanguard of Contemporary Muslim Thought: Reading Said Nursî into the Islamic Tradition**

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The Kurdish-origin Turkish scholar of Islam Said Nursî's (1878-1960) system of theological contemplation (*tafakkur*) innovatively expands the limits of Muslim religious thought from within the Sunni Islamic tradition. It incorporates aspects of the Muslim creed that scholars of dialectical theology (*kalam*) have conventionally substantiated based on textual evidence as opposed to rational proofs, such as resurrection or the existence of angels, into the realm of rational argumentation. And it bolsters the place of contemplation in Sufi practice, if we understand Sufism (*taşawwuf*) in its broadest sense as seeking excellence through knowledge of God (*ma'rifat Allah*). As such, Nursî stands at the vanguard of contemporary Muslim thought.

More than half a century after his death, however, Nursî also remains a “famous unknown.”<sup>1</sup> His name evokes wide reverential acknowledgement among world Muslims as a rare great scholar from post-Ottoman Turkey but without a sustained engagement with the intellectual content of his oeuvre, *Risâle-i Nur Külliyatı* (The Epistles of Light Collection). Besides Şerif Mardin's pioneering study from 1989 and Coling Turner's recent *The Qur'an Revealed*,<sup>2</sup> English-language academic publications on Nursî's life and works primarily comprise solicited contributions to conferences and edited volumes sponsored by his followers in Turkey. There are

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<sup>1</sup> To borrow a recent description of another similarly influential but underappreciated thinker from the tenth century, Abū Manşūr al-Māturīdī (d. 944), for the contemporary context, see Ulrich Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand*, trans. Rodrigo Adem (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 1-17.

<sup>2</sup> Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey : The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (New York: SUNY Press, 1989) remains an excellent source to situate Said Nursî and the religious movements he inspired in the sociohistorical context of the Ottoman-Turkish continuum, but it does not help in understanding Nursî's contributions to Muslim thought more broadly. Colin Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed: A Critical Analysis of Said Nursi's Epistles of Light* (Berlin: Gerlach, 2013) provides an entryway to Nursî's works for those who cannot read him in the original Turkish and also makes an effort to situate his thoughts in the broader intellectual traditions of Islam.

recent exceptions to this pattern,<sup>3</sup> as well as some exceptional studies among the solicited contributions.<sup>4</sup> But in general, a sense of peripherality defines Nursî's overall reception and the current literature has yet to explore the breadth and depth of his legacy.

Thus, situating Nursî at the vanguard of contemporary Muslim thought first requires an explanation of why his ideas have so far not been thoroughly appreciated among world Muslims or in academia, and that is where this article starts. Next, it introduces Nursî's system of theological contemplation, which develops from a correlative reading and interpretation of the Qur'an and the cosmos to attain knowledge of God. A few insightful studies have explored the utility of this system in reconciling religious thought with modern scientific methodology,<sup>5</sup> but this article highlights that precedents of Nursî's contributions to such a reconciliation already existed in the works of earlier scholars. Nursî's unequivocal approach to the matter and the precise language he develops in articulating his reasoning still present an original contribution. But understanding the more original and innovative aspects of his thinking, which place him at the vanguard of contemporary Muslim thought, requires the examination of a more advanced stage of his theological contemplation. The final section of this article offers that examination by introducing and discussing the significant ramifications of a new concept – “*shu 'ūnat*” – that

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance, Yamine B. Mermer, "The Hermeneutical Dimension of Science: A Critical Analysis Based on Said Nursi's Risale-i Nur," in *The Muslim World*, 1999 89(3/4): 270-96; Hamid Algar, "The Centennial Renewer: Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and the Tradition of Tajdid," in *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 2001 12(3): 291-311; Redha Ameer and Yamine Mermer, "Beyond the 'Modern': Sa'id al-Nursi's View of Science," in *Islam & Science*, 2004 2(2): 119-60; and Şükran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (New York: SUNY Press, 2005), this book is partly a translation of Nursî's authorized biography.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance, M. Sait Özervarlı, "Said Nursi's Project of Revitalizing Contemporary Islamic Thought," in *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003) and several articles in Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' ed. *Spiritual Dimensions of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Risale-i Nur* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> See for instance Mardin, *Religion*, 203-16; Mermer, "The Hermeneutical Dimension of Science: A Critical Analysis Based on Said Nursi's Risale-i Nur", 270-96; Abdur Rahim Choudhary, "Dance of the Particles: A Confluence of Science and Religion" (paper presented at Bringing Faith, Meaning and Peace to Life in a Multicultural World: The Risale-i Nur's Approach, Istanbul, 2004), 50-66; Ameer and Mermer, "Beyond the 'Modern': Sa'id al-Nursi's View of Science", 119-60; İsrâ Yazıcıoğlu, "Perhaps Their Harmony is not that Simple: Bediuzzaman Said Nursî on the Qur'an and Modern Science," in *Theology and Science*, 2013 11(4): 339-55; and Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 95-131.

permeates Nursî's writing thoroughly yet escapes ready recognition due to its subtlety and defies translation for the same reason.

### *Linguistic and Political Peripherality*

A confluence of historical circumstances and linguistic barriers accounts for the paucity of Nursî's general appreciation outside of Turkey. Nursî spent his early life in the thick of the events that culminated with the fall of the Ottoman Empire. He gained considerable fame in this period due to the depth of his knowledge, the sharpness of his mind, and his oratory skills.<sup>6</sup> Following World War I, he supported the Anatolian resistance against Allied and Greek occupation and was invited to Ankara by the Turkish National Assembly. There, Mustafa Kemal offered him a lucrative position as the official state preacher of the eastern provinces. Not seeing eye to eye with the country's newly emerging political leadership, however, Nursî left Ankara and went to the city of Van in eastern Anatolia shortly before the declaration of Republic in October 1923. There, he withdrew to a cave to avoid society and the fame that he had found in it.<sup>7</sup>

The beginning of Nursî's solitary life corresponded to Turkey's isolation from other Muslim societies, as the Turkish Assembly abolished the caliphate in 1924 and a Kemalist elite steered the new Republic's cultural and political course decisively toward Europe in a secular and nationalist paradigm.<sup>8</sup> Over time, many prominent Islamic scholars with transnational

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<sup>6</sup> Nursî's formal scholarly credentials have been a matter of controversy. In his recent study, Ahmet Akgündüz documents that Nursî had two *ijāzahs* (certifications) the chains of which both extend to Ghazālī. Ahmet Akgündüz ed. *Arşiv Belgeleri Işığında Bediüzzaman Said Nursî ve İlmî Şahsiyeti* (Istanbul: Osmanlı Araştırmaları Vakfı, 2013-16), vol. 1, 244-79.

<sup>7</sup> Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, *Tarihçe-i Hayatı* (Istanbul: Envâr Neşriyat, 1995), 30-149. On Nursî's life and intellectual contributions, besides this authorized biography, see Ahmet Akgündüz's massive six-volume publication of documents and materials. Akgündüz ed., *Arşiv Belgeleri*.

<sup>8</sup> Symbolic of this shift were the lines from a poem by Kemalettin Kamu: "Let Kaaba belong to the Arabs, / Çankaya [where the Turkish presidential palace used to be] is enough for us." Translations from Turkish and Arabic are mine here and hereafter except where indicated. Rifat Necdet Evrimer, *Kemalettin Kamu: Hayatı, Şahsiyeti ve Şiirleri*

connections left Turkey and settled mostly in major Arab cities in hopes of being able to practice Islam more freely, but also cutting Turkey off from the transregional networks of Muslim scholarship.<sup>9</sup> Many Muslims around the world met the Kemalist regime's sudden repudiation of Islam with indignation and came to think of Turkey as a lost cause. The one-time abode of the caliphate ceased to be a center of attention among world Muslims at least until the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, following a Kurdish rebellion in southeast Turkey in 1925, which Nursî refused to support, the government exiled him to western Anatolia. He lived the rest of his life there in exile, residing in a distant village outside of the city of Isparta for several years and then being moved between small towns (unless he was in jail due to one of his many court trials). Even when he was allowed relative freedom of movement after 1953 and he settled in Isparta, he remained under close police surveillance.<sup>11</sup>

Nursî had to write and disseminate the *Risâle-i Nur* under the restrictions of a life in exile, and even after his death in 1960, his works continued to be subject to various levels and forms of censure in Turkey. He addressed his epistles first to his “*nafs*” (compulsive self) in what seems to be an attempt to attain closeness to God and then invited “whoever wish[ed] to listen with [him].”<sup>12</sup> He had few listeners at the beginning though. He could not simply open a madrasa and invite students as would be customary for a scholar of his stature in the bygone days of the Ottoman Empire and as he had once done in Van before World War I. The Turkish state had

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(Istanbul: Üçler Basımevi, 1949), 89. Also see, Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1964); and Reşat Genç, *Türkiye'yi Lâikleştiren Yasalar: 3 Mart 1924 Tarihli Meclis Müzakereleri ve Kararları* (Ankara: Atatürk Kültür, Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu, 1998), especially 6-31.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, Mustafa Sabri (1869-1954), Mehmed Zâhid Kevserî (1879-1951), and Mehmed Âkif (1873-1936) left for Cairo; Kaşıkçı Ali Rıza (1884-1969) and Hacı Veyiszade Hacı İbrahim (1892-1945), both from Konya, left for Madinah; and Mullah Ramadan al-Bütî (1888-1990, Sa'îd Ramadan al-Bütî's father) left for Damascus.

<sup>10</sup> See Mona Hassan, *Longing for the Lost Caliphate: A Transregional History*

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 142-217. For an example of how world Muslims perceived Turkey in this period, also see Muhammad Asad, *The Road to Mecca* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 146, 287, and 340-41.

<sup>11</sup> Nursî, *Tarihçe*, 150-678.

<sup>12</sup> Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, *Sözler* (Istanbul: Envâr Neşriyat, 1995), 5.

banned madrasas in 1924,<sup>13</sup> and police surveillance restricted Nursî's ability to interact with the inhabitants of the various locations where he was forced to reside, let alone teach students in a formal institution. Yet, over time, an underground network of mostly ordinary peasants and middle-class town dwellers copied his works by hand or occasionally with spirit duplicators and secretly distributed these copies throughout Turkey. Thanks to the efforts of this core network, which Nursî held together with often hand-delivered letters, his readership reached many thousands even before he was given legal permission to distribute parts of the *Risâle-i Nur* in print in the 1950s, when the popularly elected Democratic Party government relaxed the state's grip on religious expression. In the end, Nursî's teachings inspired several religious movements with considerably large followings in Turkey. And thus, he towers over the Kemalist regime's attempts to marginalize, if not eradicate, Islam from the lives of the Turkish people in Republican Turkey.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, the corollary to this epic achievement is that the lay profile of Nursî's immediate audience and later followers has largely veiled his intellectual contributions from being duly appreciated among Muslims outside of Turkey or in academia. First of all, in his early life, Nursî would write his scholarly works in Arabic, the lingua franca of Islamic scholarship, but he wrote the *Risâle-i Nur* primarily in Turkish in order to accommodate a lay audience.<sup>15</sup>

Some of his works were translated into Arabic and sent to major centers of Islamic scholarship

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<sup>13</sup> *Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Zabıt Ceridesi*, 3 March 1340, 27-29; and Gotthard Jashke, *Yeni Türkiye'de İslamlık*, trans. Hayrullah Örs (Ankara: Bilgi Yayinevi, 1972), 74-75.

<sup>14</sup> Nursî's prosecutor estimated his readership around 600,000 in 1948. Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, *Emirdağ Lâhikası II* (Istanbul: Envâr Neşriyat, 1995), 84. For an overview of *Risâle-i Nur* inspired movements in Turkey, see Mardin, *Religion*, 147-202; Ali Mermer, "Aspects of Religious Identity: The Nurcu Movement in Turkey Today" (Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Durham, 1985); and M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 151-205.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, his two works on logic *Ta'liqât 'alâ Burhân al-Galanbawî fî al-Manṭiq* and *Qizil İcâz 'alâ Sullam*; partial Qur'anic exegesis *İshârât al-İ'câz fî Maẓann al-İcâz*; and several short treatises which he later collated as *al-Mathnawî al-Nūrî* were all written in Arabic in his early life.

around the world during his life time, but a comprehensive translation of his entire oeuvre into Arabic would take place only in the late 1970s, be available in rare editions until the 1990s, and even now, hardly appears in the catalogs of mainstream Arabic-language book distributors.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, while a few of Nursî's epistles were translated into English – as another global language – in the mid-1970s,<sup>17</sup> more comprehensive translations appeared only in the 1980s, and several of his books still remain untranslated. More importantly, most of the existing English-language translations fail to convey the depth and precision of Nursî's own writing in Turkish.<sup>18</sup> Thus, translations have so far not made Nursî's thought fully accessible to the speakers of languages other than Turkish. And since non-Turkish Muslims and most students of Islamic studies typically do not master Turkish as a conduit to Islamic texts, Nursî's reception among world Muslims and academia remain mostly superficial.

Second, as Ahmad el Shamsy highlights in an article on the “social construction of orthodoxy,” the recognition and appreciation of a scholar's contributions are not simply a function of the originality and depth of that scholar's views. Social context “actively receives ideas and promotes, channels and/or suppresses them.”<sup>19</sup> The global social context where one might expect the views of a scholar like Nursî to spread has historically been defined by scholarly and Sufi networks with the addition of Islamist movements since the twentieth century.

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<sup>16</sup> İhsan Kâsım Salihî translated Nursî's works into Arabic in the late-1970s. For excerpts from Salihî's memoirs, see Abdullah Aymaz, "Risâle-i Nurların Arapça'ya Tercümesi," *Yağmur*, 2009 (44), accessed online at <http://www.yagmurdergisi.com.tr/archives/konu/risale-i-nurlarin-arapcaya-tercumesi> on 04 May 2016. For a forum where contributors share information about the reception of Nursî's works among Arabic speakers, see *Arap Dünyasında Risale-i Nur*, accessed online at <http://www.ihvanforum.org/showthread.php?69047-Arap-Dunyasinda-Risale-i-Nur-ve-Arapların-Risale-i-Nura-Bakisi> on 04 May 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Mermer, "Aspects", 102

<sup>18</sup> Şükran Vahide started translating Nursî's works in the 1980s and Hüseyin Akarsu's translations appeared in the 2000s. For observations about the reception of English-language translations in America, see Sammy Aziz, "An Examination of the Dersane Phenomenon: Observations of Its Embodiment in the US and Turkey" (MA Thesis, Hartford Seminary, 2015), 56-58.

<sup>19</sup> Ahmed el Shamsy, "The Social Construction of Orthodoxy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 97-117.

As previously noted, the Kemalist regime's nationalist policies, such as banning the Arabic alphabet, not allowing the pilgrimage to Mecca until the late-1940s, and trying to promote a Turkish version of Islam, had largely isolated Turkish citizens from transregional Muslim networks.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, the Turkish state closed or marginalized, although it could not totally eradicate, the madrasas and Sufi orders in Turkey. In a political context where Sufi practice and formal religious study outside of state institutions were both made illegal, Nursî did not train his students as scholars in the conventional sense, nor did he initiate them into an institutionalized Sufi order. Moreover, he disavowed politics as a matter of principle, therefore eliminating Islamism as an option for his students as well.<sup>21</sup> As a result, the social practices and discursive references of the movements that his works have spurred are not readily recognizable as familiar in transregional Muslim contexts. And Nursî's followers are typically perceived as nice yet exotic others among Muslim networks outside of Turkey, even as they have dispersed around the world especially since the 1970s in order to spread his ideas.

Third, because Nursî addressed primarily a lay audience, his writings do not follow the stylistic conventions of Islamic scholarly disciplines, nor do they explicitly reference the previous literature of those disciplines.<sup>22</sup> Nursî places his epistles in the genre of *tafsîr* (Qur'anic exegesis)<sup>23</sup> and, according to Abdülkadir Badıllı's study, he refers to over six hundred verses.<sup>24</sup> However, except for one book that Nursî wrote in Arabic in his early life and later included into

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<sup>20</sup> On Turkish nationalism and Islam, see Soner Çağaptay, *Islam, Secularism, and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who is a Turk?* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and M. Brett author Wilson, *Translating the Qur'an in an Age of Nationalism: Print Culture and Modern Islam in Turkey* (London: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> On avoiding politics, see Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, *Lem'alar* (Istanbul: Envâr Neşriyat, 1995), 104; Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, *Şuâlar* (Istanbul: Envâr Neşriyat, 1995), 362; and Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, *Mektûbat* (Istanbul: Envâr Neşriyat, 1995), 48-49.

<sup>22</sup> For an explanation of this situation in Nursî's authorized biography, see Nursî, *Tarihçe*, 695.

<sup>23</sup> Nursî, *Şuâlar*, 425.

<sup>24</sup> Abdülkadir Badıllı, *Risale-i Nur'un Kudsî Kaynakları (Tesbitleri, Delilleri, Meâlleri)* (Istanbul: Envar Neşriyat, 2011), 19-51

*Risâle-i Nur* in Turkish translation,<sup>25</sup> he does not typically employ the conventional tools and techniques of Muslim exegetical literature. Again, according to Badıllı's study, he references about one thousand prophetic traditions (*hadîth*) but in many cases, without overtly specifying that he is doing so.<sup>26</sup> As a result, a careful reader may find him engaging many delicate and controversial matters of Islamic scholarship, but he typically does so without describing or even referencing the relevant scholarly controversies and by simply offering his solutions.<sup>27</sup> It is true that Nursî was deprived of access to reference books during his exile years,<sup>28</sup> but given the fact that he had actually memorized many of those books,<sup>29</sup> the absence of precise references and stylistic conventions in his works appears to relate more directly to his purpose in writing. He was trying to instruct a lay audience, as he remarked, "in a way that everybody could understand."<sup>30</sup> As a result, Nursî's writings do not immediately announce the relevance of his contributions to a broad cross-section of complex questions in multiple scholarly disciplines in the Islamic tradition. Understanding that relevance requires a careful engagement with his works, preferably in the original Turkish.

### *Two Faces of Phenomena: Contemplating the Creation*

When Nursî came of age at the turn of the twentieth century, the overall European scientific enterprise and post-Enlightenment thought had successfully challenged the idea of a divine creator, and this challenge had deeply affected the intellectual elites of waning Muslim empires and colonized Muslim communities. Some of those elites who witnessed Europe's level

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<sup>25</sup> Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, *İşârât-ül İ'caz* (Istanbul: Envâr Neşriyat, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> Badıllı, *Risale-i Nur'un Kudsî*, 327-58.

<sup>27</sup> Özervarlı, "Said Nursi's Project", 321-22. For an outline of the theological issues that Nursî has addressed, see Abdülkadir Harmancı, "Klasik Kelâm Problemleri Açısından Nur Risaleleri" (M.A. Thesis, Marmara University, 1994).

<sup>28</sup> Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 88.

<sup>29</sup> For a list of the books that Nursî had memorized, see Akgündüz ed., *Arşiv Belgeleri*, vol. 1, 280-93.

<sup>30</sup> Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 466. Also see Nursî, *Sözler*, 5.

of development from the vantage point of preindustrial Muslim towns and villages wanted to catch up immediately at any cost. Religion had long been a defining aspect of the experiences of their communities, but now, as scientific innovation and technological breakthroughs rapidly improved the realm of possibilities for humanity, reason and empirical observation seemed to be triumphing over revelation as the source of authoritative knowledge. The students who attended the westernized educational institutions of Abdulhamid II's Ottoman Empire, for instance, did not only study empirical science; they believed in it. As they learned medicine, public administration, and engineering, Şükrü Haniöğlu tells us, they also learned about Ludwig Büchner's *Kraft und Stoff* (Force and Matter), a relatively vulgarized exposition of materialism, and read it "as a sort of holy book."<sup>31</sup> When the Ottoman Empire collapsed at the end of World War I, the readers of *Kraft und Stoff*, the believers of positive science as the "most truthful guide in life" that one needed in order to attain "civilization, life, and success," as Mustafa Kemal would say in 1924, took over government in Turkey.<sup>32</sup>

Nursî recognized this situation during his visit to Ankara in 1922-23. In a state of disillusionment in the face of what he perceived to be a "current of irreligiosity" (*zındıka cereyanı*), he searched for a way to defend religion.<sup>33</sup> Institutions such as the army of the caliphate, madrasas as centers of Islamic learning, and Sufi lodges as loci of spiritual guidance had held the harm of that "current of irreligiosity" in check until then, like "walls surrounding the Qur'an," as Nursî would say while interpreting a dream that he had had before World War I. But

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<sup>31</sup> M. Şükrü Haniöğlu, *Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 49. Also see Berrak Burçak, "Science, a Remedy for all Ills. Healing 'the Sick Man of Europe': A Case for Ottoman Scientism" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 2005); and M. Şükrü Haniöğlu, "Blueprints for a Future Society: Late Ottoman Materialists on Science, Religion, and Art," in *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy*, ed. Elisabeth Özdalga (London: Routledge, 2005), 28-116.

<sup>32</sup> Nimet Arsan ed. *Atatürk'ün Söylev ve Demeçleri (1906-1938)*, vol. 2 (Ankara: Türk İnkılap Tarihi Enstitüsü, 1997), 202. For the antireligious tone of Mustafa Kemal's statement, see Haniöğlu, *Atatürk*, 53.

<sup>33</sup> Nursî, *Tarihçe*, 149; and Akgündüz ed., *Arşiv Belgeleri*, vol. 2, 463-76.

the collapse of the Ottoman Empire had brought those walls down. Probably remembering his earlier dream, Nursî decided that the Qur'an itself would defend its teachings now.<sup>34</sup> Later, when he started to write his epistles, he considered them to be inspirations from and the "property" of the Qur'an.<sup>35</sup> "Misguidance (*dalalet*) is easy to eliminate when it proceeds from ignorance," he wrote, but when it "proceeds from science and learning," as he thought was the case with his contemporaries, "that is difficult to eliminate."<sup>36</sup> Winning over his "civilized" contemporaries, required "persuasion, not coercion."<sup>37</sup> And he was convinced that God had bestowed the *Risâle-i Nur* with an "antidotal quality" emanating from "the spiritual light of the Qur'an's miraculousness" as well as endowing it with the power of persuasion to dispel learned and otherwise unyielding misguidance.<sup>38</sup> To persuade his interlocutors, Nursî had to meet them where they started: the phenomenal world that could be the subject of empirical observation, or the cosmos. Thus, he embarked upon a correlative reading of the Qur'an and that phenomenal world, "the great book of the universe" (*kitâb-ı kebîr-i kâinat*) as he would call it,<sup>39</sup> thereby beginning to develop his system of theological contemplation.

Before moving on to an explanation of that system, however, we should note that Nursî considers it not merely a reaction to the philosophical challenges of a particular historical context but rather the product of a simultaneously intellectual and spiritual opening that guided him to a holistic realization about life and existence. Similar to the famous theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-

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<sup>34</sup> Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 368. On the institutions that served like "walls surrounding the Qur'an," see Nursî, *Lem'alar*, 228; Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 446; and Nursî, *Emirdağ II*, 111.

<sup>35</sup> Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, *Kastamonu Lâhikası* (Istanbul: Envâr Neşriyat, 1995), 162; and Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, *Barla Lâhikası* (Istanbul: Envâr Neşriyat, 1995), 10.

<sup>36</sup> Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 23.

<sup>37</sup> Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, *Kaynaklı, İndeksli, Lügatli Risale-i Nur Külliyatı*, vol. 2 (Istanbul: Nesil, 1996), 1922.

<sup>38</sup> Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 23. Also see, Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, *Emirdağ Lâhikası I*, vol. 1 (Istanbul: Envâr Neşriyat, 1995), 22; Nursî, *Sözler*, 752.

<sup>39</sup> Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, *Mesnevî-i Nuriye* (Istanbul: Envâr Neşriyat, 1995), 21.

Ghazālī's (1058–1111) “deliverance from error” following a spiritual crisis,<sup>40</sup> Nursî considers his realization to be the outcome of a period of painful inner search. According to his narration, this search begins in the aftermath of World War I with a swelling unease about what appears to him to be the basely “insignificant” meanings and purposes that “human wisdom” (secular philosophy and science) attributes to existence. While previously an avaricious reader of both Islamic texts and secular subjects, Nursî turns to two great and long-deceased Sufi masters, ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (1078-1166) and Aḥmad Sirhindī (1564-1624), in this period through an intense reading of their books *Futūḥ al-Ghayb* (Openings of the Unseen) and *Maktūbāt* (Letters) respectively. Eventually, Nursî tells us, the two masters help him out of his perturbation by steering him to concentrate his attention exclusively on the Qur’an, and through a “new intermediate pathway between the intellect and the heart,” the Qur’an opens before Nursî a greater realm of meanings and purposes.<sup>41</sup> Once in this realm, what Nursî considers to be the assistance of God’s name All-Wise (*al-Ḥakīm*) reveals phenomena to him as “letters from the Nurturing Lord (*Rabb*)” to be studied by “conscious beings.”<sup>42</sup> And his system of theological contemplation begins to develop, as he reads those letters as “signs of creation” that point to and describe the Creator.<sup>43</sup>

Four concepts that Nursî develops in a treatise that he wrote in 1922 – “nominal meaning (*māna-yı ismî*), indicative meaning (*māna-yı harfî*), intention (*niyet*), and viewpoint (*nazar*)” – enable him to relate the “signs of creation” to God in a methodical way.<sup>44</sup> Each phenomenon, he

<sup>40</sup> Ghazālī relates this process in Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl wa Mawṣil ilā dhī al-‘Izzah wa al-Jalāl*, trans. Jamīl Ṣalībā and Kāmil ‘Ayyād (Damascus: Matba‘at al-Jāmi‘ah al-Sūrīyah, 1956).

<sup>41</sup> For Nursî’s inner search, see Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 355-56; and Nursî, *Lem’alar*, 234-43. For his explanation of his path between the intellect and the heart, see Nursî, *Mesnevî*, 7-8 and 75; Nursî, *Lem’alar*, 50; Nursî, *Kastamonu*, 12, 19; and Nursî, *Tarihçe*, 695.

<sup>42</sup> Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 286-87.

<sup>43</sup> Nursî, *Mesnevî*, 21, and 139-40.

<sup>44</sup> Nursî, *Mesnevî*, 51.

explains, has two faces: one pertaining to the phenomenon itself, which he calls the “nominal meaning,” borrowing from the terminology of Arabic grammar, and the other pertaining to its Creator, which he calls the “indicative meaning.”<sup>45</sup> A flower, for instance, with regard to its nominal meaning is an object possessing various qualities, such as color and fragrance, which appear to human perception as attractive and therefore beautiful. With regard to its indicative meaning, on the other hand, the flower is the work of a Creator, and its various qualities point to the Creator’s attributes, which He manifests in the flower through His act of creation. From this point of view, the flower’s beauty indicates the unlimited beauty of a Creator and reflects it to the extent that such an unlimited beauty can be manifested in a flower’s limited substance.<sup>46</sup>

Nursî teaches that the face of phenomena where nominal meanings appear is transient. The flower’s beauty, to continue with the same example, disappears as it wilts and decays. But such appearances of transient beauty deceive the human hearts. As a result, our hearts get attached to phenomena for phenomena’s own sakes, and the disappearance of phenomena with regard to their nominal meanings induces pangs of separation in the hearts. Therefore, Nursî concludes that the face of phenomena where nominal meanings appear is essentially “ugly” and unworthy of attachment. However, with the right “intention” and “viewpoint,” nominal meanings can be cultivated to yield a beautiful “flowerbed of divine mercy” in the Paradise. For instance, if those who smell a flower and receive a transient pleasure recognize the Creator as the permanent source of that pleasure and offer thanks to Him in return for His mercy in giving such pleasure, then the Creator grants them Paradise. Thus, with the right intention and viewpoint, the transient pleasure of the flower’s fragrance transforms into a means of attaining eternal pleasure and

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<sup>45</sup> For a detailed analysis of this concept, see Ameer and Mermer, "Beyond the 'Modern': Sa'id al-Nursi's View of Science", 119-60.

<sup>46</sup> Nursî, *Sözler*, 625-31; and Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 289-90.

becomes beautiful with regard to its otherworldly capacities. The face of phenomena that manifest indicative meanings by pointing to the Creator's unlimited attributes and names, on the other hand, is beautiful in essence, according to Nursî, and truly worthy of the hearts' attachment.<sup>47</sup>

The significance of this distinction between the nominal and indicative meanings of phenomena becomes clearer when considered in the context of a long-standing and contentious debate among Muslim theologians and mystics about the ontological reality of phenomena and their relation to God.<sup>48</sup> On the one end of this debate, which emerged from the encounter of early Muslim creed with Greek philosophy and in turn raised important questions about human accountability, stands a philosophical position best represented by Avicenna (Abū 'Alī ibn Sīnā, 980-1037) who conceptualized God as the first mover and general – as opposed to absolute – organizer of a pre-eternal cosmic substance.<sup>49</sup> And on the other end, we find the mystic idea of the “unity of existence” (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) that considers phenomena to be devoid of substance as mere manifestations of God's attributes.<sup>50</sup> The first philosophical position has been adamantly criticized by Ghazālī and definitively rejected in the Sunni Islamic tradition.<sup>51</sup> The second mystic position, on the other hand, has largely affected the Sufi traditions within the Sunni fold –

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<sup>47</sup> Nursî, *Sözler*, 214-19, 345-46, and 625-35; Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 289-90; and Nursî, *Lem'alar*, 338-39. On discussions related to God's attributes and names in the Sufi and theological literatures, see Ghazzālī, *The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God*, trans. David B. Burrell and Nazih Daher (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1992); William C. Chittick, "Ibn 'Arabî and His School," in *Islamic Spirituality*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: Crossroad, 1991), especially 58-65; Binyamin Abrahamov, "Fahṛ al-Dīn al-Rāzī on the Knowability of God's Essence and Attributes," in *Arabica*, 2002 49(2): 204-30; Nader El-Bizri, "God: Essence and Attributes," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 121-40; and Tuna Tunagöz, "Mevlânâ'da İlahî Sıfatlar," in *Turkish Studies*, 2013 8(3): 583-608.

<sup>48</sup> For a brief outline of the controversies related to this debate, see David B. Burrell, "Creation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 141-60.

<sup>49</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrine* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), especially 212-14 and 218-26. Of course the *Dahriyya* (materialist atheism) stood at a further extreme than this philosophical approach, but *Dahriyya* would better be categorized as an aspect of Arab rather than Muslim thought.

<sup>50</sup> William C. Chittick, "A History of the Term Waḥdat al Wujūd," in *In Search of the Lost Heart: Explorations in Islamic Thought*, ed. William C. Chittick (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 71-88.

<sup>51</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers: A Parallel English-Arabic Text*, ed. Michael E. Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2000), 12-160.

including Nursî – especially through the teachings of the Andalusian mystic Muḥyi al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240).<sup>52</sup> Perhaps due to its complexity, however, variations and misconceptions of this idea (which are sometimes falsely attributed to Ibn ‘Arabī) have also caused many a controversy, such as for allegedly justifying antinomian tendencies by implying that since good and bad are equal in being the manifestations of God, man cannot be responsible for not distinguishing between them.<sup>53</sup>

We should note that at an ontological level, Nursî’s evaluation of the phenomenal world is not significantly different from that of Ibn ‘Arabī or more precisely, that of Sirhindī’s interpretation of Ibn ‘Arabī.<sup>54</sup> However, at a methodological level concerning how to pursue knowledge of God, distinguishing between the nominal and indicative meanings of phenomena helps Nursî avoid the complications arising from the concept of the unity of existence. Following Sirhindī’s example, Nursî avers that the phenomenal world has substantive existence that is originated and sustained (through continual creation in an occasionalist sense) by God. He holds that in their spiritual journey, intoxication by the beauty of the indicative meanings of phenomena blinds people who subscribe to the unity of existence to the phenomenal world’s substantive existence. This is a permissible position if held after actually leaving the phenomenal world behind in an experiential state and being intoxicated with the beauty of God’s names, as

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<sup>52</sup> The term (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) is typically attributed to Muḥyi al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (1165-1240), but he did not coin it. Ibn ‘Arabī’s own position on the subject does not seem to be in contradiction with the Sunni Islamic doctrines. For a detailed exploration of the subject, see William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn Al-‘Arabī and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994); and Chittick, "Ibn ‘Arabī and His School", 54-57.

<sup>53</sup> Chittick, *Imaginal*, 39-50; William C. Chittick, "Wahdat al-Wujud in India," in *Ishraq: Islamic Philosophy Yearbook*, 2012 (3): 29-40; and Muhammad U. Faruque, "Sufism contra Shariah? Shāh Walī Allāh’s Metaphysics of Waḥdat al-Wujūd," in *Journal of Sufi Studies*, 2016 (5): 27-57, especially 45.

<sup>54</sup> See the parallels in a summary of Sirhindī’s position on Ibn ‘Arabī in Yohanan Friedmann, *Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi: An Outline of His Thought and a Study of His Image in the Eyes of Posterity* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1971), 62-68; and Nursî’s position on Ibn ‘Arabī in Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 83-85, and 448-49; and Nursî, *Lem’alar*, 272-75. Also see For a comparison of Nursî’s views with those of Ibn ‘Arabī, see Stephen Hirtenstein, "'Visions of Plurality in Unity': Said Nursî, Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi, and the Question of the Unity of Being," in *Spiritual Dimensions of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Risale-i Nur*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi‘ (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 287-309; and Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 71-81.

Ibn ‘Arabī has done according to both Sirhindī and Nursī. However, if pursued as a theoretical position, without actually attaining that experiential state, Nursī warns, it may lead to dangerous convictions including a materialist form of pantheism. Moreover, Nursī thinks that the experiential state in which the unity of existence is witnessed is joyful but deficient (*nâkıs*) and does not represent the highest level that one can attain in pursuing knowledge of God, because reality in its totality includes the substantive phenomenal world, which God creates.<sup>55</sup>

Here, Nursī departs from Sirhindī slightly, again, at a methodological level. Sirhindī recognizes the substantive nature of the phenomenal world and suggests that all that is witnessed *in it* is manifestations of God’s attributes. But then, he aims to push the phenomenal world into oblivion by cultivating detachment from it through spiritual disciplining, so that one can witness God’s attributes without the mediation of phenomena and attain complete and exclusive attachment to God. Only after complete detachment is achieved, one can return to the world to live among the people with God.<sup>56</sup> Nursī, on the other hand, thinks that a higher level in knowing God can be attained not by pushing the phenomenal world into oblivion but by observing and contemplating it in order to witness the manifestations of God’s names on its indicative face, especially since the manifestation of some of those names necessitate the existence of a substantive phenomenal world. The names All-Merciful (*al-Raḥmān*) and Provider (*al-Razzāq*), for instance, require the substantive existence of the recipients of mercy and provision. Accordingly, Nursī suggests that the most consummate and unshakable certainty in faith is

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<sup>55</sup> Nursī, *Sözler*, 298-99; Nursī, *Barla*, 264-67; Nursī, *Mesnevî*, 256-57; Nursī, *Mektûbat*, 83-85, and 448-49; and Nursī, *Lem’alar*, 272-75. It is worth noting here that Nursī did not direct his criticism at Ibn ‘Arabī himself, whose position is more complex than can be outlined in this article, but to the broader interpretations of the idea of the unity of existence.

<sup>56</sup> İmam-ı Rabbânî Ahmed Fârûkî Serhendî, *Mektûbât-ı Rabbânî*, trans. Abdülkadir Akççek (Istanbul: Çelik Yayinevi, n.d.), vol. 1, 316-18, 375-77, 524-39, and 690-710; Nursī, *Mektûbat*, 20; ; and Arthur F. Buehler, *Recognizing Sufism: Contemplation in the Islamic Tradition* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 170-72.

attained not by pushing phenomena into oblivion but by witnessing God's signs wherever one turns in the world.<sup>57</sup>

### *The Question of Science*

Distinguishing between the nominal and indicative meanings of phenomena and observing the cosmos from the point of view of indicative meanings allow Nursî to elevate the phenomenal world from the position of a hurdle on the spiritual progress of a seeker of divine knowledge in Sufism to that of a primary source for knowledge of God.<sup>58</sup> Writing about the indicative meaning of phenomena, for instance, he declares that this is what “all the sciences and narrations since the time of Adam have been studying.” Yet, he adds that because divine names and attributes manifest on phenomena in innumerable hidden ways, humanity on its own falls short of “reading even one tenth of the signs” of such manifestation. It needs guidance from the Creator Himself in the forms of revelation and messengers.<sup>59</sup> Thus, scientific investigation, which exposes the various manifestations of God's names, is useful in fulfilling the ultimate human function of knowing God<sup>60</sup> but needs to be guided by divine revelation in order to lead to the true meaning of what it exposes, without being stuck in the nominal – transient and ugly – aspect of phenomena, as secular science and philosophy have done according to Nursî.<sup>61</sup>

Some of the best academic studies on Nursî's thought have elaborated on this issue to argue for the utility of his ideas in reconciling the empirical observation of the universe in modern scientific methodology with religion as containing what the Creator has to say on that

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<sup>57</sup> Nursî, *Mesnevî*, 11-12 and 256-57; Nursî, *Sözler*, 293; Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 83-87, and 330-31; Nursî, *Lem'alar*, 272-75.

<sup>58</sup> Nursî, *Sözler*, 235.

<sup>59</sup> Nursî, *Sözler*, 574

<sup>60</sup> On Nursî's views on knowing God as the ultimate human function, see Nursî, *Sözler*, 120-29.

<sup>61</sup> For Nursî's comparison of the interpretive capacities of secular philosophy and the Qur'an, see Nursî, *Sözler*, 130-32.

which is being observed.<sup>62</sup> This is an accurate interpretation but needs to be qualified. Rather than being unique, Nursî's reading of the book of creation under the guidance of the book of revelation builds on a long-established practice of contemplation in the Islamic tradition.<sup>63</sup> The Qur'an itself calls mankind to reflect upon signs of God in the creation after all,<sup>64</sup> and no less than Ghazālī devotes a chapter of his magnum opus, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (The Revival of Religious Sciences), to the "contemplation of God's creation."<sup>65</sup> In a larger treatise based on this chapter and titled *al-Ḥikmah fī Makhlūqāt Allah* (The Wisdom in God's Creations), after writing about the seas and the qualities of water, Ghazālī moves to a crescendo:

It is astonishing that there are people who are completely heedless of all of this, and some of them pass as smart too. These [natural phenomena] are all clear witnesses, unbreakable proofs, and signs which reveal through the language of their disposition the majesty of their Creator. They teach about the perfection of His power and the wonders of His wisdom and say: 'Do you not see how I am fashioned, how my particles are brought together, what qualities I have, how I am changing from state to state, and how many benefits I have? Can you imagine while you have a sound heart and a sober intellect that I have fashioned myself or something of my kind has done that? This is the creation of the One who is All-

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<sup>62</sup> See footnote 5.

<sup>63</sup> For an analysis of some other early examples of such contemplation, mostly from a philosophical point of view, see Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic*. For a seventeenth-century example that directly inspired Nursî, see M. Sait Özerverli, "Exploring the Spiritual Dimensions of Nature: Ahmed-i Jiziri and Said Nursi," in *Spiritual Dimensions of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Risale-i Nur*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 311-32.

<sup>64</sup> See for instance, *Qur'an*, 2:164; 6:95-99; 7: 185; 10:5-6, 67, 99-101; 12: 103-06; 13: 3-4; and 16: 10-18, 65-69, and 78-81.

<sup>65</sup> Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, 2nd ed. (Jeddah: Dār al-Minhāj, 2013), vol. 9, 227-305.

powerful (*al-Qādir*), Dominating (*al-Qahhār*), Almighty (*al-‘Azīz*), and Compelling (*al-Jabbār*).<sup>66</sup>

Nevertheless, the relevance of empirical sciences to this long-established practice of contemplation in the Islamic tradition has been the subject of a controversy over whether natural sciences would assist the “contemplation of God’s creation” through a systematic observation of the cosmos or obstruct it by drowning the intellect in the mechanics of materiality. And this is where we need to locate Nursī’s contribution with regard to science. The Transoxianian polymath Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī (973-1048), for instance, writes in the early-eleventh century that if a person seeks the truth, his search will eventually lead “to an investigation of the old and new conditions of the world [and] ... This investigation will acquaint him with the Maker and His deserving qualities.” However, it is clear from the context of this seemingly self-evident statement that Bīrūnī was actually writing defensively against a stronger discourse that questioned the utility of empirical inquiries.<sup>67</sup> Ghazālī’s utilitarian ranking of sciences provides a clarifying perspective in this regard. He considers geometry and calculus, for instance, to be permissible sciences in principle but also cautions that they should be deemed forbidden for the weak in faith, because, he explains, studying them has led many Muslims astray. Medicine serves people’s health and therefore Ghazālī finds it necessary, but he deems some of the other “natural sciences,” which in his time included metaphysics, to be both inconsistent with the teachings of Islam and unnecessary with regard to their potential benefits.<sup>68</sup>

One major way that Ghazālī thinks science can lead a person astray is by encouraging the attribution of causality to other than God. The “science of stars,” which in the eleventh century

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<sup>66</sup> Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Ḥikmah fī Makhlūqāt Allāh*, ed. Muḥammad Rashīd Qabbānī (Beirut: Dār iḥyā’ al-‘ulūm, 1978), 35.

<sup>67</sup> al-Biruni, *The Determination of the Coordinates of Positions for the Correction of Distances between Cities*, trans. Jamil Ali (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1967), 3.

<sup>68</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’*, vol. 1, 84-85.

indicated astronomy and astrology together, was his case in point in this respect. He does not object to the calculation of the movements of celestial objects but thinks that relating these movements to life events distracts people from God. He illustrates his concern with the example of an ant. An ant on a piece of paper, he writes, sees only the tip of a pen that is inscribing on the paper but not the fingers that hold the pen, the hand that owns the fingers, or the will that controls the pen. As a result, the ant thinks that it is the pen that inscribes on the paper and remains unaware of the reality beyond the pen. Most humans, according to this example, see the stars and attribute various influences to them, but they remain unaware of the angels that control the stars and God who controls the angels. Only few people who attain profound spiritual knowledge can maintain an awareness of God's power behind all happenings.<sup>69</sup> Thus, Ghazālī finds benefit in the contemplation of the phenomenal world but without directly linking it to science. He worries that the natural scientists of his time, such as Avicenna, would be prone to attributing patterned interactions or regularity in the cosmos to causes and effects, instead of seeing God's power directly behind both.<sup>70</sup>

Nevertheless, Ghazālī does not deny regularity in the phenomenal world. He considers it to be the result of God's custom (*sunnat Allah*), or choice to continually create (again, in an occasionalist sense) in the same way. It is clear that as long as regularity is attributed to God as opposed to mechanical causality, Ghazālī's position on this issue, or the Sunni position in general which Nursî also follows, could be reconciled with positive science as it emerged in Europe after Isaac Newton (1643-1727).<sup>71</sup> But this is only a theoretical statement.

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<sup>69</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'*, vol. 1, 111-15.

<sup>70</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the subject of natural sciences and causality by Ghazālī, see Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence*, 161-77.

<sup>71</sup> On Ghazālī's position on causality and the reconciliation of reason and revelation, see Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 111-234. For similar considerations

Perhaps owing to its Islamic genealogy through the Andalusian transmission, European scientific enterprise started from a deistic position similar to that of Bīrūnī.<sup>72</sup> For instance, complaining about his contemporaries' obsession with Aristotle's works, Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) writes: "They wish never to raise their eyes from those pages [of Aristotle's works] – as if this *great book of the universe* had been written to be read by nobody but Aristotle, and his eyes had been destined to see for all posterity."<sup>73</sup> Yet, similar to the natural scientists that Ghazālī criticizes, the post-Enlightenment European scientific enterprise largely moved away from that original deistic position in a positivistic direction. And while Ghazālī could dismiss his contemporary natural scientists as mostly irrelevant and unnecessary, the scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century transformed life so radically that Muslim thinkers at the turn of the twentieth century could not dismiss positive science in a similar fashion any longer.<sup>74</sup> In the urgency of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, as European states were invading and colonizing Muslim lands, engaging science beyond complete surrender to its authority required an epistemological shift about the worth of science for theological purposes besides its promise of power.

Nursī's contribution regarding the question of science lies in preparing the grounds for such an epistemological shift and, importantly, articulating it in a way that is accessible to the uninitiated minds whose possible misguidance by the natural scientists of his time Ghazālī had feared. By distinguishing between the nominal and indicative meanings of phenomena and demonstrating the utility of this distinction in a plethora of examples, Nursī develops a language

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about Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, see Tariq Jaffer, *Rāzī: Master of the Qur'ānic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 84-130.

<sup>72</sup> For the continuity from Islamic to European scientific traditions see George Saliba, *Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007).

<sup>73</sup> Galileo Galilei, *Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo*, trans. Stillman Drake (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957), 127, emphasis mine.

<sup>74</sup> For Nursī's comment on this subject, see Nursī, *Kastamonu*, 182-83.

that reconnects the European scientific enterprise's positivistic image of the universe back to God.<sup>75</sup> In an oft-quoted passage, he relates how a group of high school students come to him one day and complain that their teachers do not instruct them about God. In response, he tells the students that the sciences they study *do* in fact provide instruction about God in their particular languages and proceeds to explain how several sciences each offer insights about the Creator. He writes, for instance:

... as a wondrous factory where thousands of different varieties of fabric are being woven from a single material indisputably indicates a factory owner and a skillful machine operator, likewise, to the extent that it is larger and more perfect than man-made factories, as measured with the scales of the science of mechanical engineering that you study, this moving and divinely cared for machine – that is the Earth – with hundreds of thousands of heads on it [a reference to trees] each carrying hundreds of thousands of factories [which produce leaves and fruits] indicates and teaches about the owner and masterful operator of the Earth.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, Nursî does not merely assess the permissibility of science; he celebrates it for exposing more of the signs of God through discoveries and inventions. He even considers the scientific discoveries of materialistic nonbelievers to be a cause for their “material success” and the “delay of their punishment,” for, he writes, those discoveries expose the beauties and blessings in God’s creation even as their discoverers remain oblivious to what they expose.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> See Nursî, *Mesnevî*, 81-82 for Nursî’s own comments on this method.

<sup>76</sup> Nursî, *Şualar*, 205-08.

<sup>77</sup> Nursî, *Sözler*, 156-59, and 574; Nursî, *Mesnevî*, 212.

Shu‘ūnat: *Contemplating the Activity in Creation*

The epistemological shift Nursî offers about the worth of science by distinguishing between the nominal and indicative meanings of phenomena is important, but we would be remiss to limit his contribution to contemporary Muslim thought to the reconciliation of science and religion. The more original and innovative aspects of his thought actually begin as he continues in his contemplative journey past the focus on indicative meanings. He writes that after a year of contemplation in the realm of indicative meanings, studying phenomena as “letters from the Nurturing Lord (*Rabb*)” to be read by conscious beings ceased to satisfy his curiosity about the purposes of the “wondrous art” that he witnessed in the phenomenal world. He describes what happens next as the unveiling before him of a greater level of purpose in the creation as “presenting the perfection” of God’s art, the embroidery of beauty that emerges from the variations in the manifestations of His names (*nukuş-u esma*), “the gems of His wisdom, and the gifts bestowed from His mercy to His gaze, thereby being a mirror to His beauty and perfection.” Here the phenomenal world presents its indicative meanings not to conscious beings but directly to the Creator, and Nursî becomes the spectator of that presentation.<sup>78</sup>

After a while, however, he starts to notice even more intricate wonders in the “artfulness and origination of phenomena” and feels the need to move even further. Hence, his focus shifts from the static though variegated beauty of the manifestations of God’s names to the constant movement and regeneration in the phenomenal world. He asks, “What is the secret and wisdom in this amazing activity that unceasingly continues in the universe? Why do these transient things not come to a rest but constantly keep transforming and regenerating?” He turns to two Qur’anic

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<sup>78</sup> Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 287, emphasis mine.

verses: “He [continually] does (*fa`‘ala*) whatever He wills”<sup>79</sup> and “... every day He is *at work* (*ft sha`n*).”<sup>80</sup> And the inspiration Nursî finds in these verses expands his system of theological contemplation with the introduction of a fifth concept: “*şuûn*.”<sup>81</sup>

“*Şuûn*” (Ar. “*shu`ûn*”) is the plural of “*sha`n*” in Arabic meaning “task” or, as in the last verse, “work.” Nursî probably borrows it from Sirhindî, who uses “*sha`n*” to refer to one of the stations that is closest to God’s essence (*dhāt*) in the Sufi practice of “journey to God” (*sayr ilā Allah*).<sup>82</sup> In a similar fashion, Nursî refers to “*şuûn*” – often doubly pluralizing it as “*şuûnat*” (*shu`ûnat* from here on) – as a stage of contemplation in which one can come closest to God’s essence,<sup>83</sup> which itself remains beyond human comprehension according to a prophetic tradition that defines the limits of contemplating God in the Sunni Islamic tradition.<sup>84</sup> The specific connotations that the term “*shu`ûnat*” acquires in Nursî’s usage, however, defy a comprehensive translation and go far beyond referencing a station in the journey to God that is experienced yet not describable.<sup>85</sup> In most cases, it designates patterns and modalities in God’s continual acts of creation. Especially Nursî’s references to “*şuûnat-ı rabbâniye*,” that is, the works of God in His capacity as the Nurturing Lord (*Rabb*) of His creation, provide an innovative investigation into how God deals with the creation. At this stage, Nursî moves from observing the phenomenal

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<sup>79</sup> *Qur’an* 85: 16.

<sup>80</sup> *Qur’an* 55: 29, emphasis mine.

<sup>81</sup> Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 86 and 287.

<sup>82</sup> Serhendî, *Mektûbât*, vol. 1, especially 108-09, 330-31, 340-41, 577-79, 587-89, 596-613, and 770-84. For an analysis of Sirhindî’s conception of journey to God, see Arthur F. Buehler, *Sufi Heirs of the Prophet: The Indian Naqshbandiyya and the Rise of the Mediating Sufi Shaykh* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 98-130, and 245-46.

<sup>83</sup> Nursî, *Mesnevî*, 20.

<sup>84</sup> For general information on this Prophetic tradition, see Badıllı, *Risale-i Nur’un Kudsî*, 831; for Nursî’s reference to it, see Nursî, *Mesnevî*, 257; for Ghazālî’s reference to its variations, see Al-Ghazālî, *Ihyā’*, vol. 9, 230.

<sup>85</sup> Şükran Vahide, for instance, either avoids translating “*şuûnat*” or translates it as “attributes,” therefore confusing “*şifah*” and *shu`ûnat*, since “attribute” is an established translation for “*şifah*.” Hüseyin Akarsu, on the other hand, variably uses “act,” “essential quality,” “essential capacity,” and “indispensable quality,” which is a more conscious effort to express “*şuûnat*” but ends up confusing it with “*fi`l*” (act) and, again, attribute (*şifah*). As a result of these confusions, the significance of the concept of *shu`ûnat* in Nursî’s thought escapes those who read his works in English only. For Sirhindî’s comments on the experiential nature of the spiritual journey, see Arthur F. Buehler, *Revealed Grace: The Juristic Sufism of Ahmad Sirhindî (1564-1624)* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2011), 121.

world as it presents its indicative meanings to the Creator to observing the constant motion, transformation, and regeneration of phenomena as they manifest modalities and patterns in the Nurturing Lord's acts of creation. His gaze proceeds from discerning God's names and attributes on individual phenomena to witnessing the entire creation and the subsystems in it, such as the heavens or the earthly beings, glorify God *altogether* in a silent language.<sup>86</sup>

Nursî explains this experiential realization using various representations (*temsil*) but first cautions that since such representations are cast in human language, they cannot “grasp, encompass, or be a measure for the quiddity” of the Nurturing Lord's *shu 'ūnat*. Instead, they can “help look at” the *shu 'ūnat*, like observing celestial objects with a “telescope” from a distance. Therefore, Nursî wants his expressions that are otherwise “not appropriate in talking about the Transcendental Divine Essence's (*Zât-ı Akdes*) *shu 'ūnat*” to be understood metaphorically, as “cognitive appellations or instruments of contemplation” that he employs in order to expose “the tips of the great law[s] of Lordship (*kanun-u rubûbiyet*),” which he witnesses in the *shu 'ūnat* of the Nurturing Lord's acts of creation.<sup>87</sup>

One such “law of Lordship” relates to Nursî's central question in this furthest stage of contemplation, that is, contemplating the continual activity in the universe. He writes that “activity and movement” are motivated by the objectives that one pursues as well as by the stimulating enjoyment that one finds in the activity itself. The objective of eating, for instance, is nutrition but, as people know from personal experience and empirical observation, the satisfaction of appetite is enjoyable independently of the nutrition that is derived from food, and it stimulates the act of eating. This law, according to Nursî, points in its limited way to unlimited modalities that characterize God's continual acts of creation. These modalities remain

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<sup>86</sup> Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 86-87 and 287.

<sup>87</sup> Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 290.

incomprehensible at the level of God's essence (*dhāt*) but can be observed at the level of His *shu'ūnat*, as His *shu'ūnat* manifest on the creation. Thus, Nursî explains, the “amazing activity,” transformation, and regeneration observed in the phenomenal world result from God's “transcendentally divine and unlimited compassion (*şefkat*) and love (*muhabbet*)” for His creation, which occasion “transcendentally divine and unlimited enthusiasm (*şevk*)” for creating, which occasions “transcendentally divine and unlimited rejoicing (*sürûr*)” as well as – “if it is permissible to say this – transcendentally divine and unlimited zest (*lezzet*)” in creating, which, along with God's mercy, occasion – “if it is permissible to say this – a transcendentally divine and unlimited pleasure (*memnûniyet*) and pride (*iftihar*)” in the “pleasures and perfections that creatures attain through the activation of their potentialities and their improvement toward perfection as a result of the divine power's continual acts” of creating.<sup>88</sup>

#### *Expanding the Scope of Theological Reasoning*

Muslim dialectical theologians have typically considered aspects of creed that belong to the unseen world (*‘ālam al-ghayb*), such as resurrection or the existence of angels, as *sam‘iyyāt* (received matters) as opposed to *‘aqliyyāt* (rational matters). They have explained received matters on the authority of scriptural evidence only and viewed them subordinate to rational matters, such as monotheism and prophethood, which are both received in scripture and have been substantiated in the theological tradition through empirically based or purely rational argumentation.<sup>89</sup> Nursî employs the “laws of Lordship” that he identifies by contemplating the *shu'ūnat* to confirm such aspects of Muslim creed with rational proofs, even though the names and specifics of the phenomena of the unseen world would still need to be identified through

<sup>88</sup> Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 86-87 and 286.

<sup>89</sup> On *sam‘iyyat*, see Marcia Hermansen, "Eschatology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 309. For a comment on this issue by Nursî's students during his life time, see Nursî, *Sözler*, 764.

scriptural evidence. First, he establishes through rational argumentation based on empirical evidence that the cosmos requires a Creator,<sup>90</sup> which falls within the category of rational matters in traditional dialectical theology. At the next stage, however, Nursî reasons that because the *shu'ūnat* originate from God's essence and it is One God who creates everything, the "laws of Lordship" that are observable in the *shu'ūnat* apply to the entire creation, including aspects of the unseen world.<sup>91</sup> As the cogs of a clock are connected to one another and the visible movement of the second hand indicates that the minute hand and the hour hand are also moving even though their motion may not be immediately discernible,<sup>92</sup> once we admit that the entire creation is subject to the same laws and modalities of creation, it becomes logically possible to argue about received matters as corollaries of those laws.<sup>93</sup>

For instance, Nursî writes:

Yes, according to whichever law the Merciful Creator changes and renews the feathered outfit of a bird, according to that law, that All-Wise Maker renews the Earth's outfit every year and changes its appearance at every epoch. And with the same law, He transforms and changes the appearance of the universe on doomsday...

And, according to whichever law of wisdom the All-Powerful Maker gives life to a fly, according to the same law, He revives this plane tree that is before our eyes every spring, He revives the Earth in that same spring, and with the same law, he revives creatures on the Day of Resurrection.

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<sup>90</sup> Nursî, *Mesnevî*, 10-20 and 50-83; and Nursî, *Lem'alar*, 176-94.

<sup>91</sup> Nursî, *Sözler*, 178-79; Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 379; and Nursî, *Şualar*, 166-77.

<sup>92</sup> Nursî, *İşarat-ül İ'caz*, 54; and Nursî, *Sözler*, 41.

<sup>93</sup> See, for instance, on resurrection, Nursî, *Mesnevî*; and Nursî, *Sözler*, 63-93 and 515-34; on spirits and angels, Nursî, *Sözler*, 504-34; and on divine decree, Nursî, *Sözler*, 469-72.

The coherence of these laws across the creation points to the Creator's unity, and their origination from One Creator as observed in His *shu 'ūnat* accounts for their comprehensive application.<sup>94</sup>

That being said, this comprehensive application should not be confused with “emanation,” as posited by Avicenna and criticized by Ghazālī, whereby in the process of creation, the absolute will of God is subordinated to the emanation of the inherent qualities of His essence, which then transfer onto successive stages of creation almost in a mechanical way.<sup>95</sup> *Shu 'ūnat* are witnessed in the succession of God's willful acts of creation, similar to Ghazālī's use of the concept of “God's custom,” which Nursî also employs in building his system of thought.<sup>96</sup> But the laws that are observed in the *shu 'ūnat* differ from “God's custom” in the sense that while “God's custom” refers to patterns that God maintains in the interactions of phenomena, these laws refer to the modalities of creating discerned in God's continual creation of those phenomena. To highlight his point about the non-mechanical nature of the laws of *shu 'ūnat*, Nursî writes that through the regularity and order that God establishes in the universe with his “laws and customs,” He demonstrates “His power, His wisdom, and the complete absence of coincidence in His affairs.” And by breaking that regularity in exceptional circumstances, by varying the appearances and individual characteristics of phenomena that belong to the same taxonomic category, for instance, or by altering the times when plants blossom or rain descends, He “exposes His volition, will, sovereign agency, choice, and that He

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<sup>94</sup> Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 290-91.

<sup>95</sup> On Avicenna, see Nasr, *An Introduction to Islamic*, 197-214. On Ghazālī's criticism of Avicenna, see Al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence*, 55-77.

<sup>96</sup> For instance, see Nursî, *Mesnevî*, 249; and Nursî, *Sözler*, 179. As Said Özerverlı aptly notes, Şerif Mardin's depiction of Nursî's views on this subject as a “mechanistic view of nature” is misleading. See Mardin, *Religion*, 213; and Özerverlı, "Said Nursi's Project", 325.

is under no restriction ... [In this way,] He dispels heedlessness and turns the gaze of humans and the jinn from causes to the Causer of causes.”<sup>97</sup>

Nursî’s *Haşir Risalesi* (Epistle on Resurrection) exemplifies his use of the concept of *shu‘ūnat* for theological argumentation. In this epistle, he lists over twenty “laws of Lordship,” such as “nurturing (*rubūbiyet*),” “sovereignty (*saltanat*),” “generosity (*kerem*),” “justice (*adalet*),” “munificence (*cūd*),” “preservation (*hafīziyet*),” “giving life (*ihya*),” “taking life (*imate*),” and “assistance (*inayet*),” to prove that resurrection is both possible and necessary. Importantly, a few of his proofs, such as the “promise of reward (*va’d*)” and “threat of punishment (*va’id*),” are based on scriptural evidence from the Qur’an and prophetic traditions, but most are first grounded in empirical observation before further elaboration based on scriptural evidence.<sup>98</sup> His argumentation on munificence provides an illustrative example in this regard. Starting from the phenomenal world, Nursî writes:

Yes, adorning the face of the Earth with ornamented artful creations, making the Sun and the Moon a lamp over them, making the Earth’s surface a table of blessings and filling it with the most beautiful varieties of food, fashioning fruit trees as serving plates, and renewing all of this many times at every season indicate unlimited munificence and generosity. Such munificence and generosity necessitate the presence of inexhaustible treasures and mercy as well as an everlasting abode of feasting and bliss where all that is desired is made available. It certainly necessitates that those who enjoy the feast [at the present] continue to do so in that abode of bliss and stay there forever, so that they are not pained by

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<sup>97</sup> Nursî, *Sözler*, 201.

<sup>98</sup> Nursî, *Sözler*, 63-87. Nursî highlights this aspect of the *Epistle on Resurrection* in a letter to one of his students. See Nursî, *Barla*, 320-22.

termination and separation, for there is pleasure in the termination of pain and pain in the termination of pleasure, and such munificence does not agree with giving pain.

In that case, [munificence] necessitates an eternal Paradise where ever-needy eternal dwellers reside, because unlimited munificence and liberality want to bestow unlimited bounties and blessings. The bestowal of unlimited bounties and blessings call for the continuous reception of those blessings and unlimited gratitude [in return], and this necessitates the continuing existence of those who are being bestowed upon so that they show thankfulness and gratitude by continually receiving those continuous blessings. Otherwise, a brief moment of partial enjoyment [in this world] soured by impending termination cannot be reconciled with what such munificence and liberality call for.<sup>99</sup>

Nursî uses a similar line of thinking to prove the existence of “angels and spiritual beings.” He begins by asserting that God manifests His beauty and perfection in the creation “in order to behold it Himself with His discerning vision” and also to demonstrate it to others and “view through their vision.”<sup>100</sup> As a result, Nursî reasons, the adornment of the faces of the Earth and the heavens necessitates the existence of appreciating contemplators and awestricken spectators who will witness God’s beauty and perfection, because, he writes, “beauty demands a lover and food is given to the hungry.” In that case, “the All-Wise Originator, who continually and with enthusiastic activity keeps creating subtle life and luminous intelligent beings” from thick earth and murky water on Earth, “will of course create some conscious creatures” from the fine entities that are “very much deserving of spirits and life,” such as light, darkness, air, and

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<sup>99</sup> Nursî, *Sözler*, 67-68.

<sup>100</sup> Nursî, *Sözler*, 120.

electricity, so that they would behold and appreciate God's beauty and perfection in the heavens too.<sup>101</sup>

But of course the Islamic creed also recognizes the existence of evil spirits, and Nursî's reasoning on this subject is an example of how far the *shu 'ūnat* argument can be taken. After positing his usual caution that what comes next should be understood metaphorically within the bounds of the impossibility of comprehending God's essence, Nursî writes that God has many names and many *shu 'ūnat* that manifest in both majestic (*celâlî*, Ar. *jalālî*) and beautiful (*cemâlî*, Ar. *jamālî*) modalities (which we might consider to be the most comprehensive modalities):

The titles, names, and *shu 'ūnat* [of God] that occasion the existence of light and darkness, summer and winter, or Paradise and Hell demand the generalization of the law of contestation (*mübareze*), similar to other widely-inclusive laws such as the law of reproduction (*tenasül*), the law of competition (*müsabaka*), and the law of mutual assistance (*teaviin*). From the contestation of divine inspirations and demonic delusions on the heart to the contestation of the angels and devils on the far edges of the heavens, [all contestations in the creation] necessitate [and are consequences of] the comprehensiveness of [the law of contestation].<sup>102</sup>

Thus, Nursî uses the concept of *shu 'ūnat* to move scripturally received information that traditional dialectical theology considered beyond rational proof into the fold of rational proof. The theological content he obtains by contemplating the *shu 'ūnat* is based on the richness of empirical evidence. And as such, it bridges the gap between the inability of the mere concept of a rationally known "Creator" to explain the unseen world and the way in which the manifold

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<sup>101</sup> Nursî, *Sözler*, 176-77 and 504-06.

<sup>102</sup> Nursî, *Sözler*, 178-79.

aspects of the seen world suggest unseen phenomena as part of a continuum originating from the purposefulness of a willing conscious God described by perfection.

### *Theological Contemplation for Sufism*

Whether through an exploration of indicative meanings or of *shu 'ūnat* and the related modalities and laws of creation, the practice of contemplating the creation under the guidance of the Qur'an in order to attain knowledge of God constitutes the core of Nursî's thought, permeates the narrative of his oeuvre, and also reveals his place in the Sufi tradition. A cursory reading of his works may give the impression that he was against Sufism or at least certain aspects of Sufism such as the role of Sufi masters in guiding their disciples on the spiritual path.<sup>103</sup> He famously says: "The path of *Risâle-i Nur* is not Sufi practice (*tarikât*, Ar. *tarīqah*) but truth (*hakikat*, Ar. *ḥaqīqah*); it is a twinkling reflection of the path of the Prophet's companions. Now is not the time for Sufi practice, it is the time for saving faith."<sup>104</sup> But a letter written by one of Nursî's students and included in the *Risâle-i Nur* with his approval states that "Qadiri characteristics (*meşreb*) and the Shadhili path (*meslek*) dominantly influence[d] (*hükmediyor*)" Nursî.<sup>105</sup> Moreover, Nursî consistently maintains a respectful, even admiring, attitude toward representatives of the Sufi traditions. He even claims that had Sirhindî been alive in India, he would have traveled there to "visit him despite all difficulties and dangers."<sup>106</sup>

One way to reconcile these two seemingly contradictory positions could be to point out that since Sufi practice was banned in Turkey in 1925 and Nursî was repeatedly accused of and

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<sup>103</sup> Following Ernest Gellner's example, Mardin relates this practice to the difficulty of "man's access to God" and conceptualizes the Sufi masters' role as "the necessary intercession of holy men between man and God," but this is a problematic conception probably resulting from a misreading of Ghazālī's views on God's "love (for man)" and, by extension, imminence. See Mardin, *Religion*, 20. The Sufi conception of guidance on the spiritual path is not "intercession ... between man and God."

<sup>104</sup> Nursî, *Emirdağ I*, 67.

<sup>105</sup> Nursî, *Barla*, 165.

<sup>106</sup> Nursî, *Mesnevî*, 129.

tried for practicing Sufism, it made sense for him to disclaim Sufism for pragmatic reasons.<sup>107</sup> However, pragmatism cannot fully explain his position. He respected the Sufi tradition and in fact, his work should be placed in that tradition, but he also thought that the purpose of Sufism, that is, attaining closeness to God, could be achieved more easily and safely by expanding the practices of Sufism to give greater emphasis to theological contemplation as exemplified in the *Risâle-i Nur*. In his works, he claims that the new path that the *Risâle-i Nur* opened, which he considers to be the property of the Qur'an, both avoids the possible pitfalls of journeying to God on the Sufi path, which he outlines in one of his epistles,<sup>108</sup> and strikes a shorter path to knowledge of God.<sup>109</sup>

Nursî's statement that his epistles represent "not *tarîqah* but *haqîqah*" is key to understanding how he envisioned this shorter path. "*Haqîqah*" means "truth" and can easily be related to the positivist paradigm that Mustafa Kemal's above-quoted words about science being "the most truthful (*hakikî*) guide in life" epitomizes. This notion is probably what Nursî subtly conveyed to his prosecutors in his court trials, and it worked: he was acquitted from all charges of practicing Sufism. However, in Sufi terminology, "*haqîqah*" denotes the destination where "Truth" – with a capital T – is realized at the end of journeying to God on the Sufi path (*tarîqah*). Therefore, Nursî's point in his juxtaposition of *tarîqah* and *haqîqah* should be understood as a reference to the shorter path that he thought he found in the Qur'an and articulated in his epistles. In the 1950s, when he felt relatively free from persecution, he would clarify this position by saying:

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<sup>107</sup> See Nursî's references to this comment on Sufism in his defense statements, Nursî, *Şualar*, 347, 372, and 463.

<sup>108</sup> Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 443-61.

<sup>109</sup> Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 485.

Until now I only focused on the truths of faith and said, ‘It is not the time for *tarīqah*; bad innovations (*bid‘ah*) are preventing it.’ Now the time has demonstrated that it is necessary and imperative for the members of each Sufi order (*tarīqah*) to consider the circle of the *Risâle-i Nur* as the circle of their own order and enter into it, for it contains the essence of the twelve major Sufi orders and the broadest circle within the circle of the Prophetic Path that encompasses all Sufi paths.<sup>110</sup>

Thus, although Nursî was not promoting a Sufi order, he was offering a new paradigm for Sufism, perhaps similar to what Ghazālî had done earlier with his *Ihyā’*, in order to benefit the practitioners of various Sufi orders and non-practitioners alike.

Nursî’s justification for this bold claim is that the contemplative method and elaborations of the *Risâle-i Nur* expose God’s signs on each and every phenomenon, thereby instilling a sense of constant presence before God wherever one turns,<sup>111</sup> and for those who benefit at a deeper level, by also developing a sense of familiarity with God through the contemplation of His *shu‘ūnat*, as it has been described above. According to Nursî, the highest level of certainty in matters of faith (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*) can be attained either experientially, through spiritual discoveries and witnessing, or by elevating knowledge-based “faith in the unseen” to a level of absolute clarity and necessity through the cultivation of “rational proofs and Qur’anic enlightenment with the cooperation of the intellect and the heart.” He argues that the path of spiritual discoveries and witnessing is possible only for an elect few and the circumstances of the modern age make it even more difficult, but that the *Risâle-i Nur* has opened the second path –

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<sup>110</sup> Nursî, *Emirdağ II*, 54.

<sup>111</sup> Nursî, *Mesnevî*, 12.

the path of contemplation – to all of its “faithful students.”<sup>112</sup> In fact, Nursî thinks that the level of “faith in the unseen” is even higher than the level of “witnessing,” because witnessing is subjective and can potentially distort the image of reality, whereas “faith in the unseen” is objective to the extent that it is based on the undistorted representation of reality in revelation.<sup>113</sup> Therefore, he surmises that had trailblazers of Sufism such as Jīlānī, Bahā’uddīn Naqshband (1318-89), and Sirhindī lived in his time, “they would have concentrated all their energy on consolidating the truths of faith and the creed of Islam” in the way the *Risale-i Nur* does.<sup>114</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Despite the sense of peripherality that characterizes Nursî’s overall reception, his innovative system of theological contemplation stands at the vanguard of contemporary Muslim thought. He was a popularizer of knowledge who tried to make what he considered to be the gist of Islamic scholarship more readily available to ordinary Muslims.<sup>115</sup> But he did not simply summarize and rearticulate the existing scholarship in a simpler language. He engaged it as a scholar in his own right and made important contributions. One of his major contributions was the approach he developed in observing and interpreting the phenomenal world as signs pointing to and describing the Creator. By distinguishing between the nominal and indicative meanings of phenomena, he offered a viewpoint that steers a safe way between the mystic paradigm of the unity of existence and the philosophical extreme that relegates God to the position of the first mover of a pre-eternal cosmic substance.

The reconciliation that this safe way enables between religion and science is one of the better studied aspects of Nursî’s lifework. Such a reconciliation was timely at the turn of the

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<sup>112</sup> Nursî, *Kastamonu*, 18-19.

<sup>113</sup> Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 81-83.

<sup>114</sup> Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 22-23.

<sup>115</sup> On his comments on this issue, see Nursî, *Lem'alar*, 167; Nursî, *Şualar*, 538; and Nursî, *Barla*, 15.

twentieth century when Europe's political domination of the rest of the world had vindicated positivist science in the eyes of many Muslim intellectuals as the "most truthful guide" out of their prolonged state of defeat and colonization. However, as this article highlights, Nursî's contributions with regard to the reconciliation of religion and science were not entirely unique, as he built his thoughts on a long-established practice of theological contemplation in the Islamic tradition. His thoughts were still important though, because despite the theoretical possibilities that the discourse of earlier scholars offered, in practice, that discourse had never established a safe and unequivocal pathway between theological contemplation and empirical science in practice. By distinguishing between the nominal and indicative meanings of phenomena, Nursî developed a clear language that helped reconnect the materialist cosmology of Europe's scientific enterprise back to God, thereby enabling an epistemological shift regarding the utility of empirical science in assisting theological contemplation.

That being said, an even more important albeit little noticed contribution of Nursî concerned his application of the innovative concept of *shu'ūnat* to theological contemplation. By reflecting upon the repeated acts of creation in a cosmos observed in activity, Nursî identified modalities in God's creation, and from those modalities, he deduced what he calls the "laws of Lordship," or reliable patterns in the way God deals with His creation. Then he used those laws to expand the scope of rational argumentation in dialectical theology and to bolster the place of theological contemplation in Sufi practice. He developed a treasure trove of arguments to confirm aspects of Muslim creed that have conventionally been considered beyond the realm of rational proof. Finally, even though a superficial reading of his biography and works may give the impression that he did not function in a Sufi paradigm, he considered his discoveries to be the product of a simultaneously intellectual and spiritual opening and engaged Sufism at a profound

level by articulating insights about God and His signs in the creation that the Sufi tradition has typically left to the domain of unarticulated experiential realization.