



The Scientific Ideas in Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Risale-i Nur

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 20th century, there was a highly prominent scientific establishment that looked down on religion and all forms of the divine. The claim was even made that a reasonable person could not possibly believe in God, and with the expanding domination of sciences and materialistic philosophy, some argued, religions and faith were becoming outdated. Said Nursi is a contemporary religious scholar who recognized the realities of time and followed them rather than opposing or ignoring them. He strove with all his strength to revive the spirit of religion and convey Islamic thought to those who had lost themselves in Western civilization. He combated in a scientific way the irreligious movements whose main objective was to sow and spread the seeds of materialism and atheism. He approached religion like a scientist by challenging the intellect with deep probing questions related to theology and religion and then looking for answers using rational arguments based on logic and observations. He started his work in a difficult transitional period when Turkey was going through a fanatical trend of adopting modern science and Europeanism as quickly as possible.

Key Words: Nursi, Ottoman, Risale-i Nur, Turkey.

1.1 Nursi's Methodology

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1877 C.E. - 1960 C.E.) developed an antidote to the atheistic misconception that turned scientific knowledge into the knowledge of God. Nursi used observations and reason to prove the stated facts in the scriptures. He argues that all sciences speak continuously of God and make the Creator known in their particular ways and calls the creation of God "the Grand Book of Universe" and the creatures the pages or lines of that Book.²

When a group of high school students³ in Kastamonu visited Nursi and asked him to tell them about their Creator because their teachers did not speak of God, he responded as follows: "all the sciences you study continuously speak of God and make known the Creator, each with its own particular tongue. Do not listen to your teachers; listen to them,"⁴ i.e., listen to the sciences and signs manifested by God each with its own particular tongue in the universe. For Nursi, all created beings manifest God's names to some degree: the whole of the cosmos becomes a hierophany,⁵ with each created being singing the praises of God innately.

Nursi argued that there was no contradiction between religion and science. He maintained that there can be no contradiction between confirmed scientific facts and religion and that careful observation and objective thinking that form the platform of positive sciences necessitate belief rather than disbelief.⁶ Nursi maintains that if there appears to be a contradiction, the two must be reconciled by making sure that the scientific fact is indeed a fact and the scripture is interpreted correctly. If there appears to be a contradiction between authentic narrations and factual sciences, the mind is to be

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² Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Risale-i Nur: The Flashes Collection*, The Thirtieth Flash (Istanbul: Sozler Nesriyat A.S., 2011), 400-01.

³ One of whom was Abdullah Yegn.

⁴ Nursi, *The Words: The Thirteenth Word* (Istanbul: Sozler Nesriyat A.S., 2011), 169.

⁵ A hierophant is a person, especially a priest, who interprets sacred or esoteric mysteries.

⁶ Jenny B. White, "Islam and Politics in Contemporary Turkey," in *The Cambridge History of Turkey Vol. 4: Turkey in the Modern World*, ed. Resat Kasaba (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 377.



taken as foundational and the narration is to be interpreted: Nursi says,

it is among the established methods of Usul, Islamic sciences and Jurisprudence, that if reason (Aql), and narration (Naql) contradict one another, reason is to be taken as the base while religion is interpreted. But, that reason should truly be reason.⁷

He focused on strengthening faith through reasoning and contemplation to fight materialism and positivism. His philosophical originality is the argument that nature is the manifestation of the various names of God. Thus, there can be no contradiction between religion and science because the former is based on the *Qur'an*, the Word of God, and the latter is the study of nature, God's creation. He argued that even the smallest particle is a perfect design, which makes it a sign and proof of the God's master craftsmanship.

1.2 Redressing Scientific Deception

Nursi uses the expression "understand no further than their eyes see, have no heart, are blind, and have grown distant from spiritual matters"⁸ to describe those who subscribe to the positivist⁹ movement and limit knowledge to what is acquired on the basis of observation and experiments. According to Nursi, nature is nothing more than a channel of water, but somehow it is being confused with the source of water because of the over-involvement of one's imagination. The superficial view that views a printing machine as the author of printed books has paved the way for shallow and amusing situations."¹⁰

In his treatise of nature, Nursi responds to Ludwig Buchner's (d. 1899 C.E.) claim of the imperishability of matter who explains his ideas in his book *Force and Matter: Empirico-Philosophical Studies* (1870 C.E.), influencing many Turkish intellectuals as well. In response, Nursi wanted to show the divine power in nature, that God had created nature, and that nature was not the creator. Nursi said, "Nature is only an art and cannot be the artist, it is the law but not the lawmaker."¹¹ He was of the opinion that the tools of atheists itself reject the claims and theories of materialism.

1.3 Narratives and Ideas

At first glance, Nursi appears to read in an uncomplicated way. The famous narrative in *Risale-i Nur* of the two men strolling through the world – one of whom can see that the order of the world is evidence of a Creator who oversees everything and the other who decides to ignore this evidence – is central. Nursi explains that in the same way that a beautiful house needs an architect, so "the cosmos also requires an infinitely wise, all-knowing, and all-powerful maker. For the magnificent cosmos is a palace that has the sun and the moon as its lamps and the stars as its candles."¹²

Said Nursi tried to show the congruity of Islam with rationalist thinking and modern science. He argued that the *Qur'an* reveals the laws of nature as the work of God and that their discovery is to be made through a rationalist interpretation. For Said Nursi, then, the ideology of Western progress, formal rationality, and faith in modern science and technology were not only acceptable but in

⁷ Nursi, *Muhakemat "Rational Arguments"* (Istanbul: Enver Nesriyat, 1998), 12-13. Also: Nursi, *The Fourteenth Flash*, 128.

⁸ Nursi, *The Rays: Eleventh Ray*, 234.

⁹ Positivism is the strict form of empiricism that limits genuine knowledge to what is based on sense experience alone. Positivism holds that the only authentic knowledge is scientific knowledge acquired by the scientific method using observation. It was founded by the French philosopher Auguste Comte in 1830s and spread throughout Europe in the second half of the 19th century.

¹⁰ Nursi, *Muhakemat "Rational Arguments"*, p.139.

¹¹ Nursi, *The Flashes Collection*, 244. Also: Letters, 530.

¹² Nursi, *The Flashes Collection*, 135-36.



complete conformity with the *Qur'an*. The task for Muslims was to gain scientific knowledge by using the sole authority of the *Qur'an* and to then link that knowledge to, amongst other things, the reorganization of the economy.

Nursi sought to realize his vision of progress through the implementation of Islamic principles. He offered a rationalist interpretation of the *Qur'an* through the *Risale-i Nur* to counter the Kemalist view that Westernization was the route to scientific advancement. He believed that Islam represented just such an opening for the cultivation of rational thought and the growth of modern scientific technology.

1.4 Encountering the Scientism

Several signs make clear that Said saw European philosophers, particularly the scientific materialists, as his targets. When he was on trial in 1943 and a commission of religion experts was convened to examine his writings, he not only challenged the competence of the religion experts but demanded that philosophers be brought from Europe to examine his works.¹³ Likewise, in the part of Said's treatises known as the *Flashes of Light*, which he presents as an antidote for the kind of error that comes from atheistic science, he summarizes the arguments offered by materialists to explain the order of nature and compares them with the argument that God created nature. He concludes that the materialists confuse natural law with the Creator. With this observation, Said makes essentially the same point as one of the most telling European attacks on scientific materialists, namely, that they professed to rely only on sense perceptions while positing the universality of natural law, which is not verifiable by sensory perception.

He answered scientific attacks on the *Qur'an* by arguing the inability of natural science to speak about metaphysics. Unlike Islamic modernists who tried to reconcile faith and reason, Said criticized materialists as naive. For Said, there were three ways to acquire Islamic knowledge: the *Qur'an*, the Prophet, and the "Grand Book of the Universe," a phrase expressing his debt to Islamic mystical thought. Within this universe, just as God "makes the sun and the moon attend to their duties," so the manifestations of His Omnipotence include "a magical emanation of true planning, administering, regulating, purifying and assigning duties."¹⁴

1.5 Nursi's Conviction in his Writings

Said Nursi's writings have relatively little to say about ritual.¹⁵ They are primarily concerned with the second theme, i.e., with affirming with the unicity of God. The reason for this shift of emphasis is that Nursi is combating the idea of an eternally existent nature, the theme propounded by his adversaries, the Ottoman materialists of his time. Nursi's sense that Islam was under the siege of positivism and skepticism motivated his writings.¹⁶ This sense of peril actually remained with him until the end of his life, motivating him to defend the *Qur'an* as compatible with human reason.

Moreover, the *Qur'an* is not the source of scientific discoveries, but all scientific discoveries reveal the depth of its message. For instance, "As time grows older," he says "the *Qur'an* grows younger, its signs become apparent."¹⁷ In this case, Nursi, unlike other Islamists, treated scientific discoveries as an attempt to deepen one's understanding of the *Qur'an*. As human knowledge expands in non-religious areas, so does our understanding of *Qur'anic* revelation. By linking the better understanding of the *Qur'an* with scientific discoveries, Nursi sought to open a new and radical reading of the *Qur'an*.

¹³ Serdar Poyraz, "Preliminary Reflections on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and the Nurcu Movement" (Unpublished seminar paper, Ohio State University, 2003): 19.

¹⁴ Serif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 94.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁶ M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 159.

¹⁷ Nursi, *The Letters, Seeds of Reality* (Istanbul: Sozler Nesriyat A.S., 2010), 537.



The *Qur'an* and scientific discoveries together offer a fuller understanding of the *Qur'an*. Nursi thus developed the notion that scientific discoveries are *Asma-al husna* (the names of God, that is, the attributes of God manifested in the universe).

1.6 Conclusions

The foremost problem of his religiously committed contemporaries was the laicist¹⁸ assault on religion, which had its intellectual roots in nineteenth-century European “scientific materialism.” Nursi’s unifying goal was to provide a *Qur’anic* answer to the materialist challenge. Perhaps it was an irony of backwardness that this “scientific materialism” had not confronted the same kind of philosophical critique among the Ottomans that it faced in the late nineteenth-century Europe. Instead, scientific materialism endured and became enshrined in Kemalism and the Republican vision of modernity.¹⁹ That fact left it to Nursi to critique scientific materialism in Islamic terms.

The main target of Turkish positivists was Islam, which they viewed as a source of backwardness. Responding to the penetrating impact of positivism in the Turkish educational system and the total collapse of the Islamic educational system, Nursi tried to demonstrate the compatibility of science and religion, freedom and faith, and modernity and tradition. Nursi spread his own version of science, which, unlike positivism, reconciled faith and science and approached scientific discoveries as the realizations of revelations found in the *Qur’an*. Said Nursi’s point is that the Master of the universe is the Master of modernity.

It is clear that Nursi admits and acknowledges the power of science and its outcomes. However, for Nursi “all science and human progress outside religion and belief is worth nothing, like the heroism of Rustam and Hercules,” for he thought that “all it does is to administer injections to deaden the senses so that through drunkenness and dissipation those grievous fears may be temporarily forgotten.”²⁰ For Nursi, Islam was the master and guide of the sciences and the chief and father of all true knowledge.

¹⁸ The state controlled by non-religious people.

¹⁹ Carter Vaughn Findley, *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism and Modernity: A History* (London: Yale University Press, 2010), 290.

²⁰ Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon* (Istanbul: Sozler Nesriyat ve Sanayi A.S., 1996), 63-64.