

Geoffrey Nash *

*A FUNDAMENTAL AESTHETIC: SAID NURSI'S
RE-WRITING OF THE QUR'AN
INTO THE IDIOM OF MODERNITY*

Keywords: Said Nursi; modernity; Islamic revival; Qur'an; miracle

Abstract: *Modernity in Europe led to widespread retreat from orthodox Christian belief, whereas in the Muslim world religious expression has been maintained. Where British authors regretted the passing of traditional views of the world and the cost of this in terms of culture, the writings of the twentieth-century Muslim revivalist author Said Nursi demonstrate how, by a combination of faithfulness to the fundamentals of Islamic belief, and a style infused with parables, tropes and purportedly rational argumentation, the masses in modern Turkey could be sustained in their religion. While not a fundamentalist according to key constituents of the term, Nursi nonetheless adheres to the fundamentals of belief about the Qur'an: its inimitability and inerrancy. His writings explain the Qur'an's effect as imbuing the everyday world with the halo of the miraculous, as he builds a fundamental aesthetic upon this premise. Thomas Carlyle is shown to adopt a comparable evocation of miracle in *Sartor Resartus*, however a sense of a direct involvement of divinity in the world such as is found in Nursi's writings is decisively missing, marking the distinction between modern European views of the cosmos and the Muslim author's still traditionally religious one.*

Coming to terms with the passing of tradition

One intersection of religion and literature in modern society belongs to a larger set that is concerned with modernity's penetration and reduction of traditional cultures. In this article I place a Muslim writer's reaction to this process within a comparative frame, with the aim of establishing cross-cultural perspectives believing these can be especially beneficial in destabilising and starting to dismantle West v Islam binaries. They might be seen as an important solvent to simplistic notions that argue continuing adherence to religion in Muslim societies causes them to be dysfunctional owing to their failure to fully embrace the onward march of civilization à façon occidentale.

An Eastern Anatolian Kurd, learned in Arabic but for whom writing in Turkish did not come easily, Said Nursi's writings were intended to be an inspired hermeneutic, re-stating the eternal verities of the Qur'an for the modern age. Nursi invested in his *magnus opus* the *Risale-i Nur* an abundance of parables and tropes, both traditional and modern, the latter drawn from science, technology, administration and governance, designed to reinforce core Islamic concepts and themes. This article concentrates on Nursi's incorporation of affective and evocative

* University of Sunderland, UK.

language and rhetoric to lend power to the Qur'anic message, and argues that the aesthetic is enlisted in the didactic cause of confirming the ordinary believers in the central verities of the religion of God (din allah).

One of the most important studies on Nursi's significance as a religious figure in the modern period, Şerif Mardin's *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey* (1989), explores Nursi's life and work in the context of the passing of traditional society in Turkey in the wake of the intrusion of the modern world and the specific inflection modernity took on in that country. Nursi's task in the *Risale-i-Nur*, to attempt to rescue a religio-cultural world view from the forces of secularisation and materialism is, I propose, not entirely dissimilar to efforts to regain spiritual territory lost to the same forces advancing in European Christian societies. Voices in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Western Europe were also raised against the erasure of the dykes of religious tradition; in England Tractarianism and Romanism supplied bulwarks for some. I do not see these as Christian parallels to Nursi, however, because where he embraced science and democracy and showed inclinations towards egalitarianism and socialism, ultimately they were socially reactionary and in denial concerning the modern world.

Thinkers who were aware of the losses sustained by the passing of tradition and who operated from within a broader recognition of the legacy of Classical/Christian civilisation included Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, W.B. Yeats and T.S.Eliot. They retained an ambiguous relationship toward what Yeats called "the filthy modern tide". None of them had a programme for reviving Christianity comparable to Nursi's effort on behalf of Islam; that might be because the verities of Christian doctrine, underwritten by dogmas that combined mythology and the miraculous, were for them virtually unsustainable. With the exception of Eliot, the quartet abandoned orthodox Christian belief, in part struggling to re-constitute the core beliefs of tradition in re-affirmation of a sense of the transcendent without which the world would fall into chaos, or was in fact in the process of doing so.

As Isobel Armstrong argues in her discussion of Victorian poetry, Carlyle was among the earliest to perceive that in Britain in the early nineteenth century the changes in production, labour relations and the circulation of money had ramifications for culture and ultimately religion:

The mythos, the Greek name for word, is society's representations, the imaginative symbol by which it lives... The mythos is continually open to a new definition. Renewed representations are the means by which change occurs. The mythos, or a view of culture as a series of representations, is the idealist's version of ideology, the product of imaginative but not material conditions. Christianity, Carlyle thought, would be superseded. (Armstrong 6)

Hugh McLeod, quoting Max Weber on modernity's disenchantment of the world, argues in *Western Europe* "the decline of the supernatural was a long drawn out and very gradual process, but the nineteenth century, with its railways and steamships, its electric telegraph and its huge mechanised factories, its universal

education and its daily newspapers, perhaps administered the coup de grace [to religion]"(99-100).

It would not be an Orientalist remark to say that change in the mythos was slower in coming to an Islamic society such as Turkey's. Mardin's study makes this clear, but it also shows that in spite of the inroads of secularisation, clerics in the late nineteenth century were ready to accommodate aspects of modernity to Islam: "'ulema who had not been pre-empted by the *Tanzimat* were elaborating their own theories about the superiority of Islam and its contribution to democracy or science" (Mardin 118). We might ask: were the British/Anglo-Irish writers, in spite of their lamentations over the loss of tradition more in-tune to the irreconcilability of religion and the modern world? Or was the tradition of high literary culture in which they worked superior to the popular religious culture which Nursi addressed in his grand piece of religio-literary exposition, the *Risale-i Nur*? Conversely, was Islam superior in that it enabled a renewal (*mujjadid*) such as that proposed by Nursi? Though implicit in much of the discourse that circulates around the West v Islam binary, from the point of view of comparative inquiry these are not useful questions, particularly once it is accepted that "there are multiple paths to modernity" (Eickelman 57). Suffice to say Nursi made the decision to address the masses because he understood it was on their adherence to Islam that Turkey's continuance as a Muslim nation depended. He believed this to be vital since the Ottoman derived religious heritage was under sustained attack from the forces of materialism and secularisation through the agency of the crusading regime established by Kemal Atatürk which threatened to erase the traditional, Sufi-derived faith of the Turkish masses.

Aesthetics and fundamentalism

The central focus of this inquiry is Nursi's re-presentation of the Qur'anic message of the one omnipresent, omnipotent deity in an aesthetic way underpinned by what is frequently argued to be a rational appeal to his readers. John Voll calls this his "effort to synthesize science and religion" (55). Recognition of the need to re-cast the meanings of the Qur'an in new ways sets Nursi, as Dale Eickerman has argued, within a modern frame. "[A]n underlying element in the style of Nursi's writings...is that they are distinctively modern, encouraging the reader to question and enter into an active and critical engagement with the text" (Eickelman 54). Nursi recognised that Islam's holy book reveals truth in a multitude of ways to suit the minds of its hearers:

God's revelation presents truth to all people, but, because of their different capacities, times, and contexts, they will understand that truth in different ways. The "Qur'an contains allegories and comparisons, and by means of them teaches most profound matters to the ordinary people." However, on "comparisons and metaphors passing from the elite to the common people, that is on their falling from the hands of learning to those of ignorance, with the passage of time they are imagined to be literally true." (Voll 59)¹

¹ In-citation quotations are from Bediuzzaman Said Nuri, *The Flashes Collection*.

This may not be the type of discourse we would normally expect from fundamentalism, which tends to close the religious text down to fixed, specific meanings. Nursi's writings on the other hand open up the Qur'an's rich metaphoric possibilities. Yet, as I shall suggest below, in his manipulation of the Qur'an's aesthetic values, Nursi has a fundamental purpose.

In his study, *Fundamentalism: The Search For Meaning*, Malise Ruthven considers whether scriptural literalism, belief in the inerrancy of scripture, and the collapsing of myth into history, are each integral to the term fundamentalism. While admitting that a modern Islamist thinker such as Sayyid Qutb might well be considered an Islamic fundamentalist, Ruthven does not consider him a literalist when it came to interpreting all Qur'anic verses, though he does point out:

...most orthodox Muslims, not just those described as Islamists or militants, are fundamentalist in the sense that they take the Koran to be the literal Word of God, as dictated to the Prophet Muhammad through the agency of the Angel Gabriel. (60)

Unlike Qutb, Nursi graduated from a seminary. His brilliance as a young religious scholar formed by a mix of Sufi and philosophical nostrums, his involvement in the Young Turk revolution of 1908, later abandonment of politics to concentrate on writing the *Risale-i Nur*, and internal exile under the Kemalist government, make his spiritual biography somewhat different to those of revivalists' like Qutb and Abul Ala Mawdudi. The "radical" movements spawned by their writings demonstrate that "the phenomenon of present day 'fundamentalism' does not [have a very high degree of religious content]. Islam as piety has been replaced by Islam as ideology" (Glassé 166). In comparison to Qutb and Mawdudi's hard-line rejection of secularism, democracy and nationalism (Choueiri 136) Nursi also struggled against the secularism of Atatürk, but in a non-political way. However he did not denigrate democracy and he refused to join movements of Kurdish nationalism.

If he is neither strictly scriptural literalist nor concerned with the installation of an Islamic politics that purports to exclude the ungodly evils of indigenous secular governments and the West, in what sense is Nursi's position fundamentalist and how is this connected to the aesthetic inscribed in his writings? He undoubtedly subscribed to the inerrancy of the Qur'an, holding to core beliefs, such as the resurrection of the dead and the day of judgement (*yawm al-din*). The Qur'an has a didactic purpose central to which is its revelation to the faithful how they "can save their lives in the hereafter" (Nursi, *The Words*, 155). Vital to this purpose is to lead them through "a door opening on to an everlasting world, eternal happiness, and a world of light" instead of passing through the door "to a prison of solitary confinement, an eternal dungeon" (155). With respect to the Qur'an's status as the unerring Word of God, Nursi adheres immovably to the fundamentals. He celebrates - wholly in line with tradition - its inimitable qualities. He elevates its revelation

above philosophy (by which he frequently intends the thought of Western materialist philosophers) and following the verse: “We have not instructed [the Prophet] in poetry, nor is it meet for him” firmly refutes the suggestion that Islam’s holy book is a form of poetry.

These positions would seem to place him within traditional if not fundamentalist territory. But as stated above, Nursi’s hermeneutic does not force literal meanings upon the Qur’an, neither does he strip it of its metaphorical beauty. On the contrary, poetry is not demoted on account of its language and devices – far from it – but because of its purposes: “the mark of poetry is to adorn insignificant and dull facts with big and shining images and fancies, and make them attractive” (151). The problem with poetry and philosophy (the latter “says that man’s creation is ordinary, despite its being a comprehensive miracle of power, and looks on it indifferently” (150)) is that they lack the inspiration and vision to truly disclose the meaning of things. In contrast “the truths of the Qur’an are so elevated, shining and brilliant, that even the greatest and most brilliant imaginings are dull and insignificant in comparison with them” (150).

The proper approach the reader should adopt towards the Qur’an is embedded in a parable. A “renowned Ruler Ruler”, an “Artist-King” embellished the holy book “in a script worthy of the sacredness in its meaning and the miraculousness in its words so that its marvel-displaying stature would be arrayed in wondrous apparel... Since the outer beauty was an indication of the brilliant beauty and striking adornment in its meaning, it became a truly precious antique.” The ruler invited two people, a European philosopher and a Muslim scholar each to write a book about the “wisdom and purposes” of the “bejewelled Qur’an”. The failure of the “self-centred, nature worshipping European” philosopher-scientist who, ignorant of Arabic, is only able to describe the book as an “ornamented antique”, as against the success of “the truth-loving, scrupulous scholar” who produces a commentary on the “sacred truths and lights of mysteries beneath the veil of the decorations”, are both predictable. However, beneath the polemical tropes lay the following assumptions: 1) the Qur’an is designedly splendid on account of the profundity of its message; 2) its beauty is not incidental though it may be a veil to those who cannot penetrate its true meanings 3) the parable itself discloses the purposes of the Qur’an: on the one-hand engendering wonder, adherence and recognition of truth in the believer (who like the scholar is versed in its language and able to decipher its meanings), and on the other, bemusing to those who are lost in the materiality of nature and unable or unwilling to understand its majesty. Overall, the impact of the parable is strongly reliant on its evocative language and embedding within the Oriental wisdom-literature tradition.

Writing the Qur’an into modernity

Nursi’s tafsir is notable for its emphasis on the Qur’an as the “supreme miracle” by which the miracle of the creation, that is the natural world and its underlying spiritual reality, is made known to man. As part of his project “of reviving the faith for the modern age” (Isra 96) Nursi made the task of his exegesis to reveal how the Qur’an discloses the mystery and miracles in everyday life. “With its acute expositions, the Qur’an of Miraculous Exposition rends the veil of familiarity and the habitual cast over all the beings in the universe which are known

as ordinary things but are all extraordinary and miracles of Divine Power, and reveals those astonishing wonders to conscious beings” (Nursi, *The Words*, 150). Nursi’s “interpretation of miracle stories in relation to everyday events starts with accepting the apparent cause-effect relations we assume in nature, and seeing the very conjunction of a natural cause with its effect as a sign of the divine” (Isra 100).

Every particle of soil is potentially capable of giving rise to all the different seeds that exist. If it is not acting under command, it must contain within itself equipment and instruments corresponding to all the various trees and plants in the world. Or, to put it differently, one must attribute to the particle such artistry and power that it is aware of the structure of each of them, knows the forms that each of them caused to assume, and is capable of fashioning those forms. The same is true with respect to the particle and other realms of creation.

From this you can understand that in all things there are numerous and manifest proofs of God’s unity. (Nursi, *Resurrection*, 32)

The core statement that God is the creator of all life is here attached to the traditional argument that nature could not of itself have engineered such a system of perfection; this is ingrained from microcosm to macrocosm by the divine architect, where the attributes on display in the particle reveal an *artistry* and power it could not possibly have produced itself.

A certain correspondence exists between Nursi’s method and aesthetic in disclosure of the miraculousness of the creation and Carlyle’s mystical exposition of natural supernaturalism in *Sartor Resartus*. For Carlyle too the everyday world we perceive, conditioned by space and time, veils the eternal from humans (“hide[s] from us the brightest God-efulgences”)

“...were it not miraculous, could I stretch my hand forth and clutch the Sun? Yet thou seest me daily stretch forth my hand and therewith clutch many a thing, and swing it hither and thither. Art thou grown a baby, then, to fancy that the miracle lies in miles of distance, or in pounds of avoirdupois of weight; and not to see that the true inexplicable God-revealing miracle lies in this, that I can stretch out my hand at all; that I have free Force to clutch aught therewith?” (Carlyle 209)

Carlyle’s language can however be deceptive and closer scrutiny shows he did not intend a fully theological rendition of God’s presence in the universe. According to David J. DeLaura Carlyle (and Matthew Arnold’s) view of God and nature was derived from “Spinoza and ‘Pantheism’, a line of thinking mediated [to them] by Goethe” (141). Armstrong’s emphasis on Carlyle’s phrase “nothing is done directly” (4)² is intended to encapsulate the way whereby industrial production detached men from the world of nature, and how this detachment was infused into the cultural, and we add the spiritual thought-world of Europe. This progressively disabled a belief in God’s direct activity in the world and meant that teleological

² Armstrong is quoting Carlyle’s 1829 *Edinburgh Review* Article “Signs of the Times” (59)

ideas, at least in so far as they embodied a divine order behind the natural world, could no longer be entertained by intellectuals. Thus the notion of miracle we meet in *Sartor Resartus* is preceded by an experience in which the speaker famously deprecates the impact of eighteenth-century mechanistic philosophy on his world-view –

To me the Universe was all void of Life, of Purpose, of Volition, even of Hostility: it was one huge, dead, immeasurable Steam-engine, rolling on, in its dead indifference, to grind me limb from limb. (Carlyle 133)

However much the poetry of natural supernaturalism declares the miracle of the world, Carlyle draws back from seeing in this the work of an active divine principle. To complete the comparison: Carlyle's statement of miracle, for all its appeal to the eternal silences and its claim that "the meanest province of the universe is the star-domed City of God" (210), in practice, in typical nineteenth-century European style, effects the withdrawal of the maker of the universe to far off spaces. Nursi's portrayal of the world, in contrast, affirms that it is the supreme sign, the book of revelation, demonstrating the "dominicality" of its creator. The "beautiful face of the heavens, inscribed with the gilt lettering of the stars...calls [the beholder] saying: 'look at me, and I shall guide you to what I seek'" (Nursi, *The Supreme Sign*, 20).

Nursi's method in the above is to adduce another parable in which a traveller sets out to question the created world concerning its evidences of its maker. Typically, the writing is structured around questions and responses in which affirmation of a series of religious principles ensues. A claim frequently made for Nursi's writings, as we have seen, is that "by following the methods of the Qur'an, [they] prove rationally all the truths of belief, such as God's existence and unity, prophethood, and bodily resurrection, but also that these truths are the only rational explanation of existence, man and the universe" (Algar 8). However this rationality is not in fact derived from philosophical or scientific method, or at least from modern forms of these. Rather it appeals to traditional 'proofs' long adopted in Muslim apologetics, with the insertion of updated metaphors utilizing modern inventions such as the aeroplane, trains and the telephone in stories which Nursi himself confirmed "are to facilitate comprehension and to show how rational, appropriate, well-founded and coherent are the truths of Islam" (Nursi, *Resurrection*, 11). I wish to argue instead that it is more by rhetorical force and appeal to deep-seated intuition that Nursi's writings achieve their effect. They are crafted in such a way as to awake an aesthetic sensibility in their audience already schooled in traditional ways of thinking and are therefore likely to readily gain spiritual assent.

Conclusion

We are therefore left with the question as to how far Nursi's writings truly represent a response to modernity beyond their incorporation of superficially modern tropes. To stage a full answer to this question we might wish to place them within the context of Islamic modernism, comparing their similarity to and departure from the statements of figures such as Muhammad Abduh and his followers. Alternatively

we might argue that Nursi is less a modernist, more a revivalist for whom the truths of religion are eternal and only need to be dressed in new clothes – that is in language appropriate to the listeners of his time. In this he can be said to respond to Carlyle’s insight in *Sartor Resartus* that there was a need “to embody the divine Spirit of that Religion [Christianity] in a new Mythos, in a new vehicle and vesture, that our Souls, otherwise like to perishing, may live” (154). Carlyle did not attempt to perform this delicate task himself. Among his successors Arnold did, but by a very different method to Nursi, and unlike him with next to no success as far as his co-religionists were concerned. Therefore the findings of this comparative cross-cultural study of texts confirm the observations set out at the beginning. A sense of divinity directly involved in the world is to be found in Nursi’s writings whereas it is decisively missing in the British writers, marking the distinction between modern European views of the cosmos and the still traditionally religious one of the Muslim. This however leaves open the broader questions raised concerning the impact of modernity on the religio-cultural positioning of writers from two discrete cultures.

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