

THE SUFI INFLUENCE IN SAID NURSI'S LIFE AND THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT

Said Nursi (1878-1960) was the most influential Muslim scholar, intellectual, and activist in the history of modern Turkey. His ideas and activities greatly contributed to the resurgence of Islam in the country. In fact, his influence had a global reach as a result of the initiatives of the grassroots movement he founded. The existing literature on Nursi usually dealt with his contributions to the interfaith dialogue. Few researchers paid attention to Nursi's relationship with Sufism. They generally suggested that Nursi was not a Sufi while having some sympathy for it. However, they did not examine his works to detect possible Sufi ideas in Nursi's thought.

In my research, I analyze Nursi's life and thought in the context of larger Sufi tradition. I trace the Sufi influences in his magnum opus, the *Risale*, about his view of Allah, the cosmos, and humanity. In my search for Sufi worldview in Nursi's books, I primarily rely on the central Sufi concepts of *tashbīh*, *tanzīh*, *karâmât*, *dhikr*, *sohbet*, and service and try to demonstrate that Sufism had a considerable influence on him during the second part of his life which he spent in seclusion. I also show that his understanding and application of these concepts differed from traditional Sufi groups. He presented the Sufi thought and practices in a way that was relevant to his primarily Turkish readers. Hence, I attempt to portray Nursi as an intellectual who rearticulated traditional Sufi thought for his modern audience. I argue that Nursi reflected both popular and intellectual aspects of that tradition in his writings.

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INTRODUCTION

Said Nursi (1878-1960) was the most influential Muslim scholar, intellectual, and activist in the history of modern Turkey. The resurgence of Islam in Turkey could not properly be understood without the ideas, writings, and the grassroots initiatives of this figure. Born in Eastern Anatolia during the late Ottoman era, Nursi witnessed the fall of that Islamic Empire and the establishment of modern Turkey on secular grounds.

Accordingly, he noticed the change of values in society as a result of the modernization reforms in the late Ottoman and early modern Turkish years. He developed a culturally authentic response to counter and possibly reverse that trend. Despite the intimidations, threats, and multiple exiles he had to endure in the early years of modern Turkey, his treatises on the matters of faith reached a wide audience and found acceptance among both the educated and the uneducated. His grassroots movement played an important role in reversing the secularization trend and reviving cultural-religious values in modern Turkey.

Nursi was a multi-dimensional person and it is difficult to put him into a particular category. He displayed aspects of traditionalism, modernism, and Sufism. He was also a scholar of Islam, an intellectual, and an activist. He worked hard for the modernization of education and the adoption of constitutional reforms in the late Ottoman era. He was a life-long activist promoting freedom, religious-cultural values, and the unity of Muslims. He excelled in modern sciences and philosophy and participated in intellectual discussions through his articles, speeches, and books. He was also a scholar who wrote about a wide range of issues including theology, the Qur'ânic exegesis, and

the *hadīth*. I think, among all these qualities, Nursi was primarily an activist who worked tirelessly for the promotion of the ideas and values he cherished.

Nursi was one of the representatives of unofficial Islam in modern Turkey. From the very beginning of the foundation of the Turkish Republic, Nursi was regarded as a threat to the secular worldview promoted by the state. Accordingly, he was persecuted, exiled, imprisoned and his writings were censored. It was only after the end of the one-party rule in 1946, Nursi experienced relative freedom which allowed him to publish his works. However, his ideas and followers were still treated with suspicion by the authorities throughout the history of the modern Turkey. For example, until very recently, there were very few academic studies on Nursi in Turkish universities, which testifies to the degree of stigma attached to him.

The existing literature on Nursi can be put into four categories. Much of the available research explored the contributions of Nursi to interfaith dialogue. These studies highlighted Nursi's promotion of dialogue and his calls for the followers of all religions to work together for the betterment of the world. Some of the topical studies can be put in this category as well, such as Nursi's view of *jihād*, environment, and Eurocentrism. The second type of research examined the group founded by Nursi, the Nur Movement, and its role in the revival of Islam in Turkey. Such studies tried to find the reasons behind the success of the movement and listed several reasons, including apolitical faith-based activities, emphasis on individual piety and non-violence, outreach programs, and the cultural authenticity of Nursi's ideas. Another group of researchers tried to find the commonalities between Nursi and some other Muslim or non-Muslim thinkers. This type of studies explored, in a comparative manner, topics including

revelation, reason, modernity, and religion. The last type of literature on Nursi examined his approach to spirituality. This literature explored Nursi's view and practice of spiritual themes including prayers, supplications, the role of belief, and the relationship between Allah and humans. The works on Nursi and Sufism could be put in this category. It should be noted that the studies on Nursi and Sufism are very few. The scarcity of studies may have to do with the stigma attached to Sufism in Turkey and the Islamic world in modern times. In Turkey, the Sufi orders have been outlawed since 1925, which has probably affected potential research on Nursi's relationship with Sufism.

Much of the available research on the topic was articles analyzing Nursi's view of Sufism. These studies usually highlighted that Nursi was not a Sufi, he differed from them in his view of the human beings and the cosmos, and also his books did not resemble the works of Sufis. The only exception to this was the pioneering work of Şerif Mardin, which presented Nursi as a Sufi and his movement as an extension of Naqshbandiyya *tariqa*, in his book *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Said Nursi*, published in 1989. Mardin analyzed Sufism and Nursi from a sociological perspective. He drew attention to the role of Sufi saints in Turkish-Anatolian Islam. He argued that the Anatolian version of Islam always incorporated saints who were seen as mediators between the faithful and Allah. Accordingly, he thought, the audience of Nursi viewed him as a saint, and as a result, became attracted to his personality. He also attributed Nursi's use of Sufi concepts to his awareness of the type of the audience he was dealing with. Mardin's work provided great insight about the nature of Anatolian Islam and the role of the Sufi saint in it; however, it overlooked the

influence of Sufi thought in Nursi's works and also its role in his personal life. In other words, he paid little attention to the texts and the inner world of Nursi.

Another important work was called "Sufism and Tarikat in the Life and Work of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi", an article by Hamid Algar published in *The Journal of the History of Sufism* in 2001. Algar provided detailed information about the Sufi presence in Eastern Anatolia at the time of the Nursi's childhood and the Sufi masters he came into contact with. Algar argued that the schools Nursi attended in his childhood and teenage years were affiliated with a Sufi order and that such orders controlled the educational institutions in Eastern Anatolia at that time. Algar concluded that Nursi usually had a tense relationship with the Sufi masters he met and that while Nursi appreciated Sufi thought and practices, he was not a Sufi and never formally initiated into an order. While Algar's article provided valuable information about the Sufi masters with whom Nursi had a relationship, it did not pay attention to Nursi's writings to see some potential Sufi influence in his thought.

A more recent article by Marcia Hermansen was called "Said Nursi and Maulana Ilyas: Examples of Pietistic Spirituality among Twentieth-Century Islamic Movements" and published in *The Journal of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* in 2008. In this piece, she compared these two non-political movements and called them the "post-tarikat articulations of Sufi values" (Hermansen 85). She thought that the Nur movement displayed certain Naqshbandiyya characteristics while eschewing the hierarchical structure of that order. She concluded that the persecution of the Sufi groups in modern Turkish republic compelled the movement to do away with the hierarchy. The article was primarily a study of the Nur Movement, not Nursi's works, and tried to illustrate that

similar circumstances caused similar responses in the case of the two movements, which were non-political, and based on individual piety and activism.

Another recent article on Nursi and Sufism was “A Religiological Analysis of Nursi’s View of Sufism Expressed in the ‘Nine Allusions’ (Telviha[^]t-ı Tis’a) of the *Risale-i Nur*” by Alan Godlas published in *The Journal of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* in 2008. Godlas analyzed Nursi’s view of Sufism and concluded that, while Nursi agreed with certain aspects of Sufi worldview, he nonetheless disagreed with it in other important areas. This article specifically dealt with the issue of how Nursi viewed Sufism and did not tackle with the question of if and how Sufism influenced Nursi’s thought. In another article, Kuspinar compared Nursi with Rumi in *The Concept of Man: Mevlana Jalal al-Din and Said Nursi*” and concluded that Nursi relied on the Qur’ân and human reason in dealing with this issue while the latter mostly narrated what he witnessed in his mystical experience.

In my study, I trace the influence of Sufi thought in Nursi’s life and his writings. Looking at the works he produced during different stages of his life, I try to illustrate Nursi’s changing relationship with Sufism. Nursi’s environment, studies, contacts, and experiences all played a role in that changing relationship. He spent his childhood and part of his youth in an environment filled with Sufi elements. However, in his youth he became part of the Ottoman elite and intellectual circles, where he was exposed to Western rationalist thought and modern sciences. During the same time, he was also acquainted with the views of the Muslim modernists who strove to find a solution to the decline of Muslims. Muslim modernists were usually skeptical of the traditional Islam including Sufism and called for a return to the original sources of the religion as well as

the adoption of the Western scientific thought. The defeat of Muslims and the colonization of their land at the end of the World War II made Nursi question his assumptions about everything. He spent most of his adult life in exile and prison, which brought him new challenges on a personal level. All these changing circumstances affected Nursi's relationship with Sufism. I think it is imperative to look at Nursi's life and surrounding circumstances in different stages of his life to reach an accurate picture of his relationship with that tradition.

In the first chapter, I provide an overview of the history of Sufism including its definition, origins, major characteristics and institutionalization. I discuss the reasons behind the growth of Sufism in Muslim communities ever since its inception. I also illustrate the strong Sufi presence in Anatolia during the Saljuk and Ottoman Empires and its influence on the cultural and religious imagination of the inhabitants of that land.

In the second chapter, I provide information about the setting in which Nursi lived during his formative years. He spent his childhood and part of his youth in Eastern Anatolia during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. I discuss the social and political circumstances in that region during that time. Like other parts of the Empire, the Eastern Anatolian territories were going through an unstable period brought on by the Russian attacks, Armenian revolutionary activities, and the administrative and educational reforms enacted by the Ottoman state. Also in this chapter, I point out the prevalence of the Sufi perspective in Eastern Anatolia during Nursi's childhood. He was exposed to such a discourse very early in his life and attended schools affiliated with Sufi orders. I examined Nursi's relationship with the Ottoman elite, intellectuals as well as the well-known Muslim modernists of the time. From the age of eighteen until his early forties,

Nursi spent most of his time with the state elite and intellectuals trying to find answers for the decline of the Ottoman Empire and Muslims in general. He also became acquainted with the views of Muslim modernists who called for educational and political reforms and the incorporation of the Western rational scientific thought into Islam to stop the decline of Muslims. I argue that such an environment influenced Nursi's thought and activism as well as his relationship with Sufism, as demonstrated by his writings from that time. After the establishment of the modern Turkey, Nursi spent many years of his life in exile and prison. During those years, he produced his magnum opus, the *Risale*, in which he primarily focused on matters of theology.

In the final chapter, I trace the Sufi influences in Nursi's view of Allah, the cosmos, and humans in the *Risale*. I primarily rely on the Sufi concepts of *tashbīh*, *tanzīh*, *karâmât*, *dhikr*, *sohbet*, and service in my search for the Sufi elements in Nursi's life and thought. I try to demonstrate that Sufism had considerable influence on him during the second part of his life, which he spent in seclusion. I also illustrate that his understanding and application of these concepts different from traditional Sufi groups. He articulated the Sufi thought and practices in a way relevant to his modern audience. I also clarify that Nursi did not incorporate these elements into his religious life and thought just an extension of the general Islamic spirituality. Rather, the presence of these ideas and practices manifested a significant Sufi influence on Nursi.

Briefly, I discuss the origins, the historical development, the main tenets, and the central themes, namely *tashbīh*, *tanzīh*, *karâmât*, *dhikr*, *sohbet*, and service, of the Sufi discourse in the first chapter. I also elaborate on the role of Sufism in the Anatolian religious and cultural landscape to understand the kinds of Islamic elements Nursi was

exposed to and incorporated as part of his natural upbringing. The issues I discuss in this chapter are essential to look for the possible Sufi influences in Nursi's life and work which is the purpose of my study. In the second chapter, I provide an overview of Nursi's life as well as the historical context to understand the formation and the development of his ideas about Islam generally and Sufism specifically. In the third chapter, I examine Nursi's books to locate the Sufi concepts of *tashbīh*, *tanzīh*, *karâmât*, *dhikr*, *sohbet*, and service and compare and contrast his understanding and application of these elements to traditional Sufism. In the final analysis, I argue that Nursi adapted and re-articulated these essentially Sufi themes for his modern audience.

My study is significant for several reasons. First, it is a contribution to the existing research on Nursi, which has primarily overlooked the role of Sufism in his thought. As a corollary to this, my study highlights the Sufi practices in the circles of the Nur movement which have made significant contributions to the Islamic revival in Turkey. Second, my work challenges the current research on Islamic resurgence in Turkey, which usually has focused on the political Islamic groups and has paid little attention to the Sufi-oriented movements. Finally, my thesis is an addition to the studies which have concentrated on the Muslim modernists and the politically-motivated Islamic revivalist movements that arose in India and Egypt and have paid little attention to Nursi and his non-political and Sufi-influenced efforts in Turkey.

CHAPTER 1

AN OVERVIEW OF SUFISM

Definition

Sufism has been generally defined as the Islamic mysticism.¹ Such a definition overlooks the origins, the orientation, and the non-mystical aspects of this rich tradition. It is true that mystical experience has always been an important component of Sufi worldview; however, other dimensions, namely piety, morality, social reform, institutionalization, and master-disciple relations have also been essential. The suitability of the usage of the term mysticism for Sufism, which is a Christian concept, is contested by some scholars who argue that the Sufi description of the encounter with ultimate reality is particular in that it does not connote incarnation or monism. Also, the Sufis express their love and desire for re-union with the beautiful beloved, Allāh, as a result of the joy they experience in their mystical encounter.² This type of sentiment is really different than the one described by Otto who called the numinous an awe-inspiring, wholly other, and terrifying deity.³ Associating Sufism with mysticism also comes with

¹ A.J. Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam*, London: George Allen & Unwin Lmt, 1956, p. 11; Reynold A. Nicholson *the Mystics of Islam*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1966, p. 1.

²Lloyd Ridgeon, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 126.

³*Ibid.*, p. 126.

the “orientalist-baggage” which tried to divorce it from Islam and locate its origins in Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Neo-Platonism⁴. Certain orientalists presented Sufism as the universal religion within Islam and argued that Sufism was the Aryan response to the Semitic legalism of Arabs.⁵ Chittick indicated that he hesitated to use the word mysticism for Sufism “to avoid negative connotations of mysticism as being vague speculation at best and mindless mush at worst” and also for the fact that “much Sufi literature is not mystical.”⁶

Sufism was an experience without a definition for its early practitioners, and making a definition encompassing all aspects of this phenomenon was very difficult if not impossible for both the insiders and the outsiders. The early Sufis generally did not attempt to define their experience. Al-Qushayrî (d. 1074), who wrote one of the early books on Sufism, indicated that Sufism could not be defined. In his well-known work, *Risale*, al-Qushayrî reported and explained deeds of past Sufi masters and common concepts central to the Sufi path rather than formulating a definition.⁷

The tradition widely referred to now as Sufism began during the 8th century as a *zuhd* (pietistic renunciation) movement and preserved this characteristic throughout its history.⁸ The mystical union with the divine became part of Sufism during the 9th century; however, it was not viewed as the most essential component of that tradition by the vast

⁴ Carl W. Ernst, *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Traditions of Islam*, Boston: Shabala, 201, p.8.

⁵ Ibid., p.8.

⁶ William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000, p.9.

⁷ Abu 'l-Qasim al-Qushayri, *Al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism*, Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2007, translated by Alexander Knysh, p. 1-4.

⁸ Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*, Online Edition, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/templeuniv>. Edinburg University Press, 2007, p.1.

majority of its practitioners.⁹ The members of that movement concerned themselves more about leading Allāh-conscious moral lives rather than tasting the mystical union. Accordingly, a moral life based on the example of the Prophet Muhammad and the teachings of the Qur'ān grounded in society was their priority. They were interested in the spiritual well-being of the communities they lived in along with their own.¹⁰ After the institutionalization of the movement in the 11th through the 13th centuries, the master-disciple relationship and the observation of the rules of the *tariqas* (orders)¹¹ became an essential part of Sufism. In fact, some Sufis defined it as *adab* (right interaction).¹²

Throughout its history, Sufism maintained a great diversity as a result of the integration of local cultural elements and different views of influential individuals who contributed to the formulation of the tradition. While some of them favored total renunciation of the world, the majority was in favor of an inner-worldly asceticism within the community as well as marriage and gainful employment. Some individuals emphasized grief, mourning, and repentance from sins, while others talked about *ma'rifa* (gnosis) and love of the beloved. Some of them used *samā'* (hearing, attentive listening, music, and dance) to enhance their spiritual experience and others opposed it. Even though the majority of Sufis were socially conformists, some of them maintained antinomian practices. Many stayed away from the rulers and politics; however, some called for social and political engagement. Sufi scholars like al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and al-

⁹ Ibid., p. 1.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.6.

¹¹ *Tariqas* can roughly be translated as orders. However, the local branches of each *tariqa* were flexible and independent compared to Christian orders which had common rules to observe.

¹² Reşat Öngören, *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi*, www.islamansiklopedisi.info. Vol: 40, p.119-126. Accessed on 1/22/2016.

Hujwārī (d. 1077) focused on the practical aspects of Sufism such as daily *dhikr* (the constant remembrance and the mention of Allāh’s names) and *tazkiya al-nafs* (the purification of soul), while Ibn al-‘Arabī paid attention to the metaphysical speculations about the manifestations of the divine names and attributes in the cosmos.¹³ Hence, it was not possible to reflect all this diversity when Sufism was reduced to mysticism only.

The members of the Sufi path were well aware of the great diversity within the group. In their view, the multiple definitions of Sufism circulated around only testified to its richness and indicated that each definition was limited by the background of the individual who formulated it. Nicholson collected some of definitions in his book, and it would be helpful to quote few of them to demonstrate certain characteristics of Sufism as articulated by the very practitioners. “Sufism is this: that action should be passing over the Sufi which was known to Allāh only, and that he should always be with Allāh in a way that is known to Allāh only.” This formulation refers to an important Sufi worldview which is to avoid *riyā’* (ostentation, hypocrisy, and showoff) and seek the pleasure of Allah only. “Sufism is wholly self-discipline.” “Sufism is, to possess nothing and to be possessed with nothing.” This articulation talks about a central Sufi theme which is ascetism. “Sufism is not a system composed of rules or sciences but a moral disposition.” This definition draws attention to the necessity of the leading a moral life in the Sufi path. “Sufism is freedom and generosity and absence of self-control.” This statement refers to the joy and loss of self-control which a practitioner feels when he/she experiences union with Allah. The type of loss of self-control described in this definition is usually associated with the intoxicant Sufis such as al-Hallāj (d.922). “It is this: that Allāh

¹³Alexander Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History*. Leiden: Brill, 201, p.9.

should make you die to yourself and should make you live in Him” This expression highlights the state of *fanā’* (annihilation in Allāh) in the Sufi mystical journey. “To behold the imperfection of the phenomenal world, nay, to close the eye to everything imperfect in contemplation of Him who is remote from all imperfections-that is Sufism” This formulation underscores the role of *murāqaba* (inner observation or contemplation) in this path. Through contemplation, a practitioner discovers that the real satisfaction comes with finding the absolute perfect, Allah. “Sufism is control of the faculties and observance of breaths” This definition emphasizes that self-concentration is essential for a successful mystical journey. “It is Sufism to put away what you have in your head, to give what you have in your hand, and not to recoil from whatsoever befalls you.” This statement underlines the importance of total submission to Allah which is promoted by many Sufis as illustrated later in this chapter.¹⁴ This expression also emphasizes the need to empty the self of all content, inner and outward.

Sufism is essentially an experience followed by a practice, and no single definition does justice to this complex phenomena. The Sufi way aims to produce an individual who worshipped Allāh as if he saw Allāh. In order to bring about and preserve such Allāh-consciousness, the Sufis focus on *dhikr*, the remembrance and glorification of Allāh at every moment. They strive to *tazkiya al-nafs* (the purification of soul) through renunciation and seclusion to make their hearts sensitive to the presence of the divine. They uphold *ma’rifā* over rational speculations to know *tawhīd*, the oneness of Allāh. They emphasize the intimacy and the immanency of Allāh contrary to the theologians

¹⁴Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1966, p.26-27.

and philosophers who talk about the transcendence of the creator. They also place great significance on the role of *walī* (the spiritual guide) in the development of spiritual faculties.¹⁵ These were the common themes found in the different Sufi paths and a more elaborate picture of these elements will be provided later in the chapter.

Origins

The name Sufi appeared in the history of Islam during the 8th century in Iraq and was used for people who wore wool as a sign of ascetic and renunciation piety.¹⁶ The practitioners were called either Sufi or *mutasawwif*, the adjective of the noun *tasawwuf*.¹⁷ Sufism had initially disparate and heterogeneous beginnings; however, it turned into a more coherent movement and established itself as a distinct mode of piety in Baghdād during the 9th and the 10th centuries. Some of the first members of the movement in its early period had some anti-social and radical tendencies, but beginning with the second half of the 9th century they repositioned themselves, tamed their radicalism, and blended well with the mainstream. Nevertheless, Sufis always had some ideas and practices which did not sit well with the orthodox Islam. While different modes of piety existed in different parts of the Islamic world including Iraq, Khurāsān, Iran, Transoxania, and Syria, the Sufi piety formulated in Baghdād fused with them and dominated them primarily during the 10th century. Eventually, all these diverse forms of piety came to be called Sufism.¹⁸

¹⁵ Karamustafa, p.20.

¹⁶ Karamustafa p.1; Ridgeon, p.3.

¹⁷ The root of the noun had few connotations including to purify.

¹⁸ Karamustafa, p.1.

The issue of the origins and the sources of Sufism has been a constant theme in the works of the scholars both Muslim and non-Muslim. The initial orientalist approach, which tried to locate Sufism outside Islam in Hindu, Aryan, or Greek thought, is now largely discredited.¹⁹ Another group of Western scholars tried to demonstrate that while Sufism had its origins probably in Islam, it was greatly influenced by the Eastern religions and cultures.²⁰ They listed the similarities between Sufism and these traditions to support their assumption; however, they failed to demonstrate conclusively that Sufis borrowed their ideas from the surrounding religions and cultures. For example, Nicholson argued that the theme of love in Sufi literature was inspired by the Christian mystical thought. However, the theme of love was deeply rooted in the Qur'ân as well, so the Sufis did not need to go elsewhere to discover it as successfully argued by Schimmel, Chittick, and Ernst.²¹ Some Muslim modernists also have viewed Sufism as a foreign influence on Islam and accused it of causing the decline of Muslims.²² More recent works on Sufism in the West have acknowledged the Islamic origins of Sufism and tried to locate the major themes of that tradition such as piety, asceticism, renunciation, and mystical experience in the Qur'ân, the *hadīth* and the life of the Prophet Muhammad.²³ The perennialists regarded Sufism and particularly its mystical aspect as the universal

¹⁹ Look at Ernst, p. 8-18 for an overview of the oriental approach.

²⁰ Ernst, p.14. Such views were expressed by Tholuck, Nicholson, and Watt.

²¹ For a discussion on the Islamic sources of Sufism, look at Annemarie Schimmel. *Deciphering the Signs of Allāh: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1994; William Chittick. *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, p. 10-13; Carl W. Ernst, *An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition in Islam*, p.32-45.

²² Ernst, p.202. Muhammad Iqbal viewed it as an outside influence on Islam and called it passive, quietest, and fatalistic.

²³ Ernst, p. 32-58.

dimension of Islam and called for an adherence to the formal teachings of the faith to reach the mystical core.²⁴

The followers of the Sufi path, from the beginning, viewed themselves as the true followers of the Qur'ân and the exemplary life of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. The vast Sufi literature produced during the early period of Sufism in the 9th and the 10th centuries claimed that the Sufi path, which was based on renunciation and ascetic piety, was the way of the Prophet Muhammad and his friends. When mystical experience became an important part of the Sufi life during the 9th century its upholders also justified it by citing some verses in the Qur'ân, the *hadīth*, and the life of the Prophet.²⁵ It is fair to say that while Sufism had its origins in Islam, it was also influenced by the local cultural and religious elements as it spread throughout the Islamic world. Sufism did not probably consciously borrow un-Islamic elements; however, it happened naturally as it encountered with different cultures.

Renunciation and ascetic piety existed in different stripes among Muslims in the 8th century during the late Umayyad and the early 'Abbāsīd rule. The early ascetics were mostly educated and middle class merchants and artisans living in Iraq, Iran, Khurāsān, and Syria. Their perspective of renunciation varied greatly depending on their social, cultural, and educational background. The early individual renunciation gave birth to a

²⁴ Jean-Luis Michon and Roger Gaetani, ed. *Sufism: Love and Wisdom*, Canada: World wisdom Inc, 2006. p. 10.

²⁵The verses Sufis mention to legitimize the mystical union with Allah included the primordial covenant verse in the Qur'ân 7:172, the light verse in the Qur'ân 24:35, and the verses that talked about the *mi'raj* (The Night Journey of the Prophet Muhammad) in the 53:1-18. The Sufis also trace their origins to the people of the Suffa, individuals who lived in the first masjid compound in the city of al-Madina during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and dedicated themselves to learning and teaching Islam.

more uniform mystical type of piety during the 9th century in Baghdād. Hasan al-Baṣrī (d.728) from Basra was a famous ascetic who inspired a number of well-known individuals whom later came to be known as Sufis. Even though the early Sufi authors such as Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d.996) called al-Baṣrī the *imam* (the leader or the pioneer) of the Sufis, Hasan did not call himself as such, and such a designation did not exist in his time. Al-Baṣrī was a member of the *tābi'ūn* (the generation succeeding the companions of the Prophet), and he was known for his fierce warnings to the believers about the dangers of leading this worldly life and the dangers of the hellfire. He urged them to be Allāh-conscious and live as if they saw Allāh, for even though they did not see Him, He saw them. He was also very critical of the luxurious life of the members of the Umayyad ruling class. However, there was no indication that he was in favor of violent rebellion against the political authority. Those who frequented the circle of al-Baṣrī such as 'Abd al-Wāhid b. Zayd (d. 750) were called *bakkā'ūn* (the weepers) due to their frequent crying for their sins and the fear of the hellfire. They offered *nāfila* (supererogatory prayers) along with the required prayers, mentioned daily *dhikr*, and many of them participated in *jihād* on the frontiers. The concept of *awliyā'* (people divinely selected for the gnosis of Allāh) and inner piety also existed among them. One of them was Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya (d. 801), who also lived in Basra. She talked about the love of Allāh and her desire of union with Him. She was celibate and practiced extreme asceticism and self-denial.²⁶

Other well-known ascetics lived in frontier towns in Syria and Upper Mesopotamia. They often went to the frontier regions due to their disdain with the

²⁶ Knysh, p.18.

worldly life in the capital, Baghdād. Each practiced a different type of ascetic piety. Ibrāhīm b. Adham (d. 778), for instance, was in favor of complete renunciation and withdrawal from society. He did not work and relied on Allāh for his sustenance. He often spent time in the desert, sometimes with Christian monks, and talked about *murāqaba* and *ma'rifa*. 'Abd Allāh b. Mubārak (d. 797) promoted inner worldly oriented piety. He encouraged his listeners to work and earn their living as merchants and craftsman and stay in society as active individuals. He himself was a successful merchant and often took part in *jihād*. He was a *hadīth* collector and wrote a book titled *Kitāb al-Zuhd* (The Book of Renunciation). Another famous ascetic was Al-Fudayl b. 'Iyād who was known for his grief, mourning, repentance, and fear and hope of Allāh. He stayed away from rulers and encouraged people to work and support their families. Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī (d.830) also lived in Syria and was a student of 'Abd al-Wāhid b. Zayd. He was most likely a celibate, put his reliance on Allāh for his living, and expressed content for anything happened to him, good or bad. He talked about the states and stations in the mystical journey and emphasized the importance of striving against human self or ego. Some other ascetics were also present the Islamic world during the late 8th and the early 9th centuries and their understanding of piety differed greatly. Shaqīq al- Balkhī (d. 810) in Khurāsān was known for his extreme renunciation and complete reliance on Allāh for livelihood without any type of work. Dhu'l-nūn al-Misrī (d. 860) in Egypt was an ascetic with mystical ideas. He referred to Allāh as a friend and a lover. *Ma'rifa*, for al-Misrī, came to *awliyā'* as a result of their direct encounter with Allāh. He also came up with the systematic formulation of the states and stations of the mystical

journey.²⁷ These famous ascetics represented different types of pious renunciation. They were called *zuhhād* (renunciants), *bakkā'ūn* (weepers), *nussāk* (those who sacrifice), and *ābid* (worshipper).²⁸

It was in Iraq and particularly in Baghdād where Sufī piety developed. The name Sufī began circulating around during the middle to the late 8th century in Iraq and probably initially referred to a group of people known for their social radicalism and renunciation. Their choice of wool as a garment was probably a symbol of extreme renunciation. A few were celibate and some practiced vegetarianism.²⁹ The Baghdād school inherited the ideas of early pious individuals from Basra and Al-Kūfa and particularly those of Hasan al-Basrī. Baghdād attracted many individuals including ascetics after it became the capital of the 'Abbāsids. The spread of the Baghdād Sufī piety took place through the efforts of individuals who came to Baghdād, learned the tradition, and took it with them when they returned. The ideas of Hasan al-Basrī found their way to Baghdād through al-Hārith b. Asad al-Muhāsibī (d. 857), who was born in Basra, was introduced to the ascetic tradition of al-Basrī, and later settled in Baghdād.³⁰ Along with al-Muhāsibī, Ma'rūf al-Karkhī (d. 815), Bishr al-Hāfī (d. 842), and Sarī al-Saqatī (d. 847) were the pioneers of the Baghdād school. Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz (d. 899) and Abū'l-Husayn al-Nūrī (d. 908) made important contributions to the Sufism in that city. However, it was al-Junayd b. Muhammad al-Baghdādī (d. 910) who formulated and

²⁷ Knysh, p.36.

²⁸ Karamustafa, p. 7.

²⁹ Karamustafa, p. 7.

³⁰ Knysh, p.43-47.

articulated the principles of this school in a way acceptable to the mainstream scholars and paved the way for Sufism to take root in society.

Al-Muhāsibī received theological and judicial education in the Shāfi‘ī school of law, and worked as a preacher and a teacher. He mainly talked about sincerity and doing everything for the sake of Allāh and avoiding *riyā’* (ostentation, hypocrisy, and showing off). Accordingly, he talked about the nature of human psychology and human weaknesses. The love of Allāh was an important theme in the thought of al-Muhāsibī. He urged his audience to live within society as ascetics and earn their livelihood without attaching themselves to this world.³¹ Sarī al-Saqatī was a merchant and a *hadīth* collector. He waged *jihād* in Syrian frontier. At some point in his life, he abandoned trade and formal studies and completely devoted himself to Allāh. He was immersed in contemplation of Allāh and oblivious to the world around him. He talked about both the fear and the love of Allāh, but he was constantly mourning for his sins.³² Al-Kharrāz talked about the spiritual stations and intimacy with Allāh. He indicated that when a Sufi completed all the stages and the stations, he attained the realization that there was only Allāh and nothing else existed. This idea was commonly expressed by many Sufis in the form of “there is no real but the Real.”³³ In other words, this was how Sufis understood the Islamic testimony of faith which taught that there was no god but Allāh. al-Kharrāz also indicated that the intimacy with Allāh was an experience which could be tasted only by the elite, *awliyā’*, who were selected by Allāh.³⁴ This idea of divine selection was

³¹ Knysh, p. 47.

³² Knysh, p. 51-52.

³³ This idea was expressed by many of his contemporaries and later Sufis such as al-Ghazālī, Rūmī, and Ibn al-‘Arabī, and it became a hallmark of Sufi mystic thought.

³⁴ Karamustafa, p.10.

typical among the early members of the school of Baghdād and it was inherited by the Sufis in the following centuries. The *karāmât* (marvels, saintly miracles) associated with the Sufi mystics also existed in this early stage of the movement; however; it seems that they did not place a high value on such occurrences during that phase. Al-Nūrī talked about the superiority of mystical experiential knowledge over rationalist arguments to prove the existence and the oneness of Allāh. His perspective represented the typical Sufi position and set them apart from both the semi-rationalist theologians such as Ash‘arīs and Māturīdīs as well as the rationalist Mu‘tazila. Al-Nūrī placed a high value on the human heart and viewed it as the locus of the manifestation of Allāh and the medium where the Sufi mystic experienced union with the divine. He and other Sufis always talked about the experiential aspect of this encounter and clarified that union was one of experience and not one of essence or substance. Nevertheless, there were always some people who accused Sufis of teaching incarnation during both the formative and the later years of Sufism. Al-Nūrī urged his audience to stay hungry and practice non-attachment to the world and the bodily needs in order to realize and maximize their spiritual potential. He also asked them to be attentive to their surroundings and sounds to hear the voice of Allāh.³⁵

Al-Junayd al-Baghdādi was a disciple and nephew of Sarī al-Saqāfī and he had a merchant background. He studied theology and jurisprudence in Shāfi‘ī school of law. He was described as the greatest exponent of the sober mystical tradition as opposed to the intoxicated branch represented by Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 848 or 875) and al-Husayn b. Manṣūr al-Hallāj (d. 922). Junayd emphasized that the type of union with Allāh in the

³⁵ Karamustafa, p. 15.

Sufi discourse did not connote incarnation. Such an explanation aimed to counter the criticism directed at al-Hallāj, who was accused of teaching a substantial union of mystics with Allah. He further explained that the highest spiritual station was not *fanā*” (annihilation in Allāh), rather it was *baqā*’ (separation from Allah or self-subsistence), which meant leading an Allāh-conscious life with a new awareness achieved at the end of the mystical experience. The kind of awareness that Junayd talked about was witnessing the divine presence and beauty in the world while living separated from the beloved and yearning for Him. Also, based on the new consciousness, the mystic realized that Allāh was the only real being who existed and everything else existed only metaphorically. This thought was already in circulation in Baghdād by the time of Junayd, and it became an essential component of Sufi mysticism going forward. It was expressed in different ways by the members of the both the sober and intoxicated schools. Al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and Ibn Al-‘Arabī (d.1240) reiterated this idea in the following centuries. Naturally, such a language and some other practices made Sufism a suspect in the eyes of the mainstream theologians. While the language of al-Hallāj alienated the orthodox, “Junayd’s self-control laid the foundations on which most of the later Sufi mysticism was built”.³⁶ Though the members of both the intoxicated and sober schools talked about the same mystical experience, the latter exercised more self-restraint and used a more careful language in the description of that experience to avoid the attacks of the theologians and

³⁶ Knysh, p. 56-57. Al-Hallāj’s famous statement was, “I am the Real,” which was really offensive, for the faithful, to the belief in the oneness of Allāh. He also called Satan the great monotheist due to his refusal to prostrate for Adam. While Al-Hallāj and Al-Bistāmī talked about the same mystical journey as the members of the sober school, they were overwhelmed with their experience and talked about it freely and openly. However, the members of the sober school exercised self-control and used a more careful language.

to make it more acceptable to the faithful. Junayd also talked about divine selection, the idea that only Allāh brought the people He chose to the state of union with Him and that the human self must be annihilated in order to experience that state. For Junayd, the original human state was the state of unity with Allāh during the original *mīthāq* (the primordial covenant), and the goal of the Sufi was to relive that moment while in this world.³⁷

These principles, as articulated by Junayd, represented the major characteristics of Baghdād Sufism. The group preferred experiential knowledge over rational explanations to know the *tawhīd*, the oneness of Allāh. They despised the rationalist Mu'tazila school and viewed the method of the theologians insufficient to prove the existence of Allāh. They did not pay attention to the formal sciences such as theology, philosophy, and jurisprudence. They observed the rules of mainstream Islam and aligned themselves with Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (d.855), the founder of the Hanbali school of law, due to his reliance on the Qur'ān and the *hadīth*. They followed the four schools of law; however, they were less interested, at least initially, in the Hanafi school due to its very favorable position toward human reason. To them, *mari'fa* came as a result of the direct encounter with Allāh at the end of the mystical journey which was filled with states and stations. While stations were attained through one's own effort, the states came to a mystic as a gift from Allāh. The experience of witnessing the oneness of Allāh came after the domestication of the human self through asceticism, seclusion, and poverty. *Dhikr*, *samā'*, and *murāqaba* helped and enhanced the spiritual journey. Junayd urged his followers to stay away from political activism and focus on the religious well-being of the members of the

³⁷ Karamustafa, p.17-18.

community. This principle was upheld primarily by most of the Sufis, which prevented them from becoming targets of politicians. The case of al-Hallāj was an exception and not the rule and it was probably his fierce criticism of the rulers and his calls for social justice which played the major role in his execution. His offensive statements about the matters of religion were probably used as a disguise and a pretext.

The early members of Baghdād Sufism came from middle class merchants and artisans along with people with religious education such as theologians, jurists, and *hadīth* collectors. Sufism started as an urban movement and preserved this characteristic in the ensuing centuries while also penetrating rural areas.³⁸ The practitioners blended well with the communities they lived in since they were often social conformists and followed the rules. They tamed their excesses through the efforts of Sufi scholars and scholar Sufis such as al-Hujwārī (d.1077) and al-Ghazālī, which helped them become an integral part of the social fabric.

Several factors contributed to the growth of Sufism. The fast spread of Islam in its early period resulted in mass conversions, and Sufis always offered their services to the newcomers through their institutions and wandering ascetics.³⁹ Also, Sufism offered an alternative to the formalist theologians and jurists. They promoted a religious life grounded in intimacy with Allāh, which satisfied the spiritual hunger of many Muslims who were dissatisfied with formal teachings.⁴⁰ Another reason behind the fast expansion of this movement, as argued by Nicholson, was the excessive worldliness in the cities of

³⁸ Karamustafa, p.23.

³⁹ Ibid, p.134.

⁴⁰ FazlurRaḥmān, *Revival and Reform in Islam*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000, p.81-91.

Umayyad and ‘Abbāsīd Empires which caused people to seek alternative modes of piety which was offered by Sufis. The historical context in which Sufism arose corroborates this view; however, the continued expansion of this movement in the following centuries showed that Sufism was more than just a reactionary movement and it provided something substantial that people could not find in formal teachings promoted by theologians. Nonetheless, the members of the Islamic community in Baghdād and other cities attained enormous wealth as a result of the expansion of the Umayyad and ‘Abbāsīd states. The luxury was particularly apparent among the members of the ruling elite. Some of the early pious ascetics such as Hasan al-Basrī were sharply critical of that lifestyle, which they thought was contrary to the practice of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. Accordingly, they emphasized piety, renunciation, asceticism, fear of Allāh and the hellfire as a response to that prevailing lifestyle. The ideas and the practices of these early pious individuals gave birth to Sufism. Watt argued that the ‘*ulama*’ (scholars) often sided with the ruling elite and had their own share of this worldliness which hurt their legitimacy in the eyes of the faithful. Accordingly, he said, people turned to Sufis, who in their view were the true and authentic representatives of Islam. However, this perspective was hardly justified, considering the fact that some Sufi groups flourished with the support of the ruling class especially during the Ottoman Empire as illustrated later in the chapter.

Mystical traditions and well-known mystics existed outside Baghdād as well during the 9th and the 10th centuries. Baghdād Sufism blended with local mystical traditions elsewhere in the Islamic world and incorporated new elements. While the mystic traditions outside Baghdād had some similar themes to the Sufis, they also had

differences. The Malāmatiyya in Nīshāpūr represented one such movement. The Malāmatiyya emphasized the urgency of the constant blame of the lower self and avoidance of the public praise. Accordingly, they avoided distinct public rituals such as *samāʿ* and *dhikr*. After the Baghdad Sufism spread to these areas, all these distinct mystic traditions came to be called Sufism. There was no doubt that Baghdād Sufism both shaped the local mystical trends and was influenced by them. However, it is hard to document the specific areas of influence. Baghdād Sufism initially spread to Nīshāpūr, Khurāsān, and Hijaz, and later to all parts of the Islamic world. Also, there were mystics outside Baghdād such as al-Hakīm al-Tirmidhī (d.910) from Khurāsān who thought that Allāh could not be known in his essence, but could be known through His names and attributes, for his names and attributes were manifested in the creation. This idea resonated well with many Sufis who emphasized the nearness of Allāh rather than his transcendence. Among the later Sufīs, Ibn al-ʿArabī really elaborated how the cosmos was the locus of the *tajallī* (theophany) of the names and attributes of Allāh. Another well-known mystic was Sahl al-Tustarī (d.896) from southwestern Iran, who was known for severe fasting and ascetic piety. He taught that there was a constant battle between heart and lower self and the latter should be tamed by hunger, vegetarianism, and seclusion. He also believed that Allāh created Muhammad from His light and everything else from that light, an idea which was in circulation long before him.⁴¹ Even though these mystics were not called Sufis during their lifetime, they were categorized as such in later Sufi literature.⁴²

⁴¹ Karamustafa, p.42.

⁴² Ibid., p.43-47.

The Sufi school of Baghdād experienced some uniformity and social legitimacy as a result of the efforts of Junayd; however, some of its members still had anti-social and religiously unorthodox practices. Such practices included celibacy, vegetarianism, avoidance of gainful employment, complete withdrawal from society, *samāʿ*, gazing upon the beardless young men for contemplation, mixed-gender meetings, and a certain proclivity for outlandish behavior.⁴³ While some of these practices dissipated over the course of the history of Sufism such as gazing upon the beardless young man to contemplate about the beauty of Allāh, they never disappeared. For instance, *samāʿ* has been preserved in some Sufi circles to this day.⁴⁴ Other practices such as vegetarianism, celibacy, and avoidance of gainful employment existed, albeit minimally. “The antinomian Sufism always functioned as an indispensable mirror in which Sufis could look to see a critical reflection of their true place in society and on the spiritual path.”⁴⁵ Generally, Sufis placed an emphasis on being faithful to the formal teachings of Islam and they were critical of some of the elements within their circles.

The mystical aspect of Sufism has always been viewed with suspicion by the orthodoxy and such suspicion from time to time expressed itself in the form of open attacks and accusations of heresy. A well-known incident took place in 877 when some of the Sufis of Baghdād were persecuted and fled the city temporarily. This case was famously known as the Ghulām al-Khalīl (d. 888) trial named after the *wazīr* of al-Muʿtadid who persecuted some of the Sufis including al-Nūrī (d. 907) for using the verb

⁴³ Karamustafa, p.101.

⁴⁴ The Nakshbandiyya group stayed away from *samāʿ* while Qādiriyya and Mawlawiyya group still practice it.

⁴⁵ Karamustafa, p. 114.

of *'ishq* instead of *mahabba* to describe their relationship with Allāh. Even though both nouns meant love, the latter was rooted in the Qur'ān and connoted spiritual love while the former had the implications of secular love which included sexual relations.⁴⁶ In the end, the Sufis were acquitted and no charges were brought, but the trial still amplified the tension between Sufis and the mainstream theologians. Al-Jawzī (d.1201), a Hanbali scholar, sharply criticized them for their mystical expression and language of poverty. He was also critical of Al-Ghazālī in the same context. Ibn Taymiyya (d.1328), another Hanbali scholar, was known for his fierce criticism of the practices built around the Sufi masters such as visiting graves and seeking assistance from their spirit. The *madrassa-tekke* tension in the history of the Ottoman Empire took the form of open attacks to Sufis in some occasions.⁴⁷ Sufism especially was targeted in multiple fronts in the era of colonialism both by Muslim modernists and the members of the fundamentalist movements. They accused Sufism of distorting the original Islam and dismissed its mystical dimension as irrelevant and meaningless in the age of science and rationalism. Their perspective will be elaborated later in the chapter. Hence, it is fair to say that while a tension always existed between the Sufis and the orthodox scholars, it amounted to open hostility and attacks in few instances.

⁴⁶ Knysh, p. 11.

⁴⁷ John Curry, *The transformation of the Muslim Mystical Thought in the Ottoman Empire: The Rise of the Halveti Order*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, p. 78-79.

The most famous of such attacks was known as the Kadizadeliler movement led by Kadizade Mehmet Efendi (d. 1635), a preacher, who aimed to purify Islam from what they viewed as innovations. They particularly targeted Sufi groups; however, they did not last long and had little success. Curry argued that the incident had reasons not related to the tension between Sufis and *'ulama'*.

The efforts of scholar Sufis and Sufi scholars helped this movement gain a more positive reception in the Islamic communities. This process took place during the 10th and the 11th centuries as Sufism spread to the different parts of the Islamic world and a need arose to define what its core principles were. The literature that emerged during that period defined the major characteristics of Sufism, drew its boundaries, and brought it closer to the mainstream Islamic teachings. Some of that literature, including the monumental work of Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences), emphasized the practical aspects of Sufism, rather than its mystical elements, which helped it become more relevant to the average faithful. During that time, Sufi teachings were consolidated and became more uniform and organized.

Works appeared during that period discussed an overview of Sufi principles or the biographical information of the past Sufis or a combination. In the first category, the most well-known books included Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī's (d. 996) *Qūt al-kulūb* (The Sustenance of the Hearts), Abu'l Qasim al-Qushayrī's (d. 1072) *Risāla* (Treatise), and 'Alī b. 'Uthmān al-Jullābī al-Hujwīrī's (d. 1073 or 1077) *Kashf al-mahjūb* in Persian, (The Uncovering of the Veiled). The typical topics discussed in this genre included asceticism, *dhikr*, *samā'*, purification of the heart, states and stations, *khirqā* (robe), *tafsīr bi al-ishāra* (the Qur'ānic exegesis of allusion), pedagogical guidance of aspirants, pious commemoration of past masters, *karāmāt*, building solidarity among Sufis, and confident self-presentation via other groups competing for authority. The topics listed above demonstrated that the master-disciple relationship became an important aspect of Sufism by the 11th century. The most well-known works dealing with the biographical information were Abū 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī's (d. 1021) *Tabaqāt al-Sūfiyya* (The

Generations of the Sufis) and Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī’s (d. 1038) *Hilyat al-Awliyā’ wa-Ṭabaqāt al-Aṣfiyā’*⁴⁸ (The Ornaments of Allāh’s Friends and Generations of Pure Ones).⁴⁹ This genre included the biographical information of the pious individuals from the first three generations of Islam. This literature also contained abundant miracle stories associated with the past Sufi figures. The authors indicated that renunciation was the common type of piety among Muslims in the early centuries of Islam. Abū Nu‘aym, for instance, included Ahmad B. Hanbal (d. 855) and Imam Shāfi‘ī (d. 820) in his work even though they were not categorized as Sufis during their lifetime. It seems that these Sufi authors saw their path as the true Islamic path as practiced by the first generations of Muslims, and they tried to add more credibility to it by including the names of respected individuals from the early times. These authors came from different intellectual and jurisprudential backgrounds though they had Sufi affiliations. Their works aligned Sufism with traditional theological and jurisprudential circles. For example Abū Nu‘aym was a traditionalist (*hadīth* collector), al-Qushayrī was a member of Ash‘arite and Shāfi‘ī schools, al-Hujwīrī was a member of Hanafī and Māturīdī schools of thought, and al-Ghazālī had an Ash‘arite and Shāfi‘ī background. They brought a scholarly legitimacy to the group but they also asserted that the boundaries of Sufism should be drawn by scholars. For example, al-Hujwīrī indicated that certain practices present among some Sufi circles should be rejected and eliminated and listed incarnation and dance among such elements. Al-Ghazālī’s *The Revival of the Islamic Sciences* became the most

51 For a sample of hagiographical stories from these two books and the moral lessons present in each story, look at John Renard. *Friends of Allāh*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

⁴⁹ Karamustafa, p. 89.

popular Sufi book in the Arabic-speaking world while al-Hujwārī's *Uncovering of the Veiled* received great attention among the Persian speaking people. Both of these authors emphasized the daily practical aspects of Sufism, provided scholarly analyses of Sufi concepts, and tamed some of the excesses of this tradition in the light of the formal Islamic teachings. It is fair to say that while the elite Sufi *awliyā'* concerned themselves with the mystical dimension of this tradition, ordinary people paid attention to popular elements such as *baraka*, *dhikr*, and *sohbet*. The tombs of Sufi mystics became popular visiting sites, despite the warnings of scholars against them, and in some cases small towns were built around them. Also, many unorthodox practices emerged around the living and dead *awliyā'*, and such practices amounted to, as some called them, the cult of saints.

Major Characteristics

What differentiated Sufis from the rest of groups such as theologians was their emphasis on intimacy with Allāh and reliance on experiential mystical knowledge rather than rational arguments to prove the existence and the oneness of the creator. They wanted to see and experience Allāh here and now in this world which was a desire, they said, that arose due to spirit's yearning to go back to its source.⁵⁰ All the practices they developed such as *dhikr*, *samā'*, *awrād* (litany), the purification of the heart, and states and stations aimed to produce nearness to Allāh, taste the joy of being united with Him experientially, gain a new state of awareness, and live with it. The new consciousness that they attained in the mystical journey was summarized by many Sufis including

⁵⁰ Erik Ohlander, *Early Sufi Rituals and Concepts*, p. 56.

Junayd, al-Bisṭāmī, Ibn al-‘Arabī, and Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273) in the expression of “there is no real but the Real”. To them, the only entity that really existed was Allāh, and everything else did not have a real existence. Also, for them, Allāh was the only real actor in the universe who directed everything behind the veil of causes. Accordingly, they tried to see the face of the beloved in everything they witnessed in the world. They saw the manifestations of divine beauty in the cosmos. They claimed that existence had two layers: *ẓāhir* (exoteric, apparent, or outer) and *bāṭin* (esoteric, hidden, or inner) and argued that the knowledge of the latter could be attained only through *kashf* (unveiling and direct witnessing). They talked about the manifestations of the names and attributes of Allāh in the cosmos based on the insight they attained in the mystical experience.⁵¹ Accordingly, they emphasized the *tashbīh* (likeness or immanence) of Allāh as opposed to the theologians and philosophers who promoted the *tanzīh* (transcendence) of the divine.⁵² While the theologians and philosophers emphasized the transcendence of Allāh in greatly varying degrees,⁵³ the Sufis differentiated between the essence, the attributes,

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 58.

⁵² William Chittick, *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, p. 10.

⁵³ The Muslim philosophers such as al-Farabi (d.950) and Ibn Sina (d.1037) talked about Allāh as the first cause who made the first move without His choice to bring about the creation. The theologians accused them of turning Allāh into an essence without attributes and also a first cause without a will. For theologians, viewing Allāh as the first cause without a will was contrary to the Qur’ānic depiction of the All-Powerful and the All-Knowing Allāh who was actively involved in his creation. The theologians sought to affirm the attributes of Allāh without violating the principle of *tawhīd*. This group, while affirming Allāh’s attributes, rejected the attribution to Him of qualities associable with created beings for, in their view, there was nothing like Allāh and He was not in His creation and His creation was not in Him. Sufi oriented Ash‘arī theologians such as al-Ghazālī questioned the idea of free will and stated that even that entity was created by Allāh. For al-Ghazālī, the real agent in creating everything was Allāh and humans were agents in only the metaphorical sense, for they almost had nothing. Nursi manifested both Sufī and traditional theological influences in his speculations about Allah and the creation as illustrated in Chapter Three in detail. For a general discussion on Islamic theology,

and the names of Allāh and concluded that while Allāh was transcendent with His essence, He was immanent with His names and attributes. Hence, two types of literature arose among the Sufis describing the outcome of the mystical journey. One type described the joyful nature of that experience and the mystic's longing for reunion with Allāh and his love for the beloved. Among the Sufis that expressed the love of Allāh most successfully were Ahmad Al-Ghazālī (d. 1123 or 1126) and Rūmī (d.1273) from Khurāsān and Hafiz (d.1389) from Iran. In one of his poems Rūmī expressed his love for Allāh as follows:

You, the splendor of my being
The mover of my spheres
Send flour my dear as grist
To keep the mill from grinding to a halt and spinning free
No more will I speak,
Say this line and that is enough
My being melts in this desire
Befriend us, Our Allāh⁵⁴

The second type of literature looked at closely the concept of *tajallī*, the manifestations of the names and attributes of Allāh in the universe. It was Ibn Al-‘Arabī who probably most thoroughly elaborated this issue. His views on the subject influenced many other Sufis in the subsequent centuries. He spent several years in Malatya, located in Eastern Anatolia, and his ideas considerably influenced Ottoman-Turkish Sufi thought

look at Tim Winter. Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2008.

⁵⁴ Franklin Lewis, *The Life, Teachings and Poetry of Jalal al-Din Rūmī*. p. 339.

through the works of Sadreddin al-Qunawī, (d.1273), Abdurrazzāq al-Kashanī (d. 1329), Abdullāh al-Bosnawī (d. 1644), the first grand *mufti* of Ottoman Empire Dāwūd al-Kaysarī (d. 1350), and Niyaz al-Misrī (d. 1693).⁵⁵ Ibn Al-‘Arabī significantly shaped the Sufi Islamic thought in Anatolia where Nursi lived. In fact, Ibn Al-‘Arabī’s understanding of Allah and the cosmos greatly echoes with that of Said Nursi as illustrated in detail in Chapter Three. Accordingly, providing some detail of his ideas on the topic would be insightful for the overall purpose of my work.

Ibn Al-‘Arabī found Allāh in the creation and at one point indicated that the only *wujūd* (existence) was Allāh and the rest existed only in the metaphorical sense. He thought that the emphasis of the theologians on the transcendence of the Creator prevented humans from feeling intimacy and love for Allāh. In order to know, understand, and feel affinity with Allah, people should focus on His immanence, which was found in the cosmos. For Ibn Al-‘Arabī, the universe was a *tajallī* (theophany or manifestation) of Allāh. It was the place where all divine names and attributes exhibited their properties and traces. The material existence gave humans the knowledge of Allāh’s names and attributes, but Allāh in His essence remained forever unknown and totally transcendent. When it came to understanding how the names and attributes of the Divine worked and functioned in the universe, the rational arguments and formal proofs were inferior to unveiling and tasting as sources of knowledge due to the fact that the former was based on reasoning while the latter was based on experiencing and direct witnessing.

⁵⁵ Stephen Hirtenstein, *Visions of Plural Unity: Said Nursi and Muhyiddin Ibn Al-‘Arabī, and the Question of the unity of Being*, p. 287.

Accordingly, rational arguments were not immune from doubt while unveiling left no doubt in the minds of the faithful.⁵⁶

The language of Ibn Al-‘Arabī about the cosmos might lead one to conclude that the *shaykh* believed that all that existed was Allāh only. His understanding of the meaning of the word “to create” was illustrative to clarify his perspective. He maintained that to say that Allāh “creates” the universe was to say that Allāh disclosed Himself in the forms that were called creatures. “He employed the term to mean that Allāh showed Himself to the universe in as much as existence (*wujūd*) is present in all things, or in as much as His names and attributes display traces and properties in the cosmos; the configurations and the forms left by these traces and properties were then known as creatures.”⁵⁷ Surely, the description of the creatures as the traces of Allah’s names and attributes caused many to accuse Ibn Al-‘Arabī of incarnationism and pantheism. This was simply not true due to the fact that the *shaykh* elsewhere in his writings clearly indicated that Allāh was different from his creation. What was true; however, was that he differentiated between the real and the metaphorical existence. He said that the things that filled the cosmos were inherently non-existent which was to say that they did not exist on their own. The *wujūd* they possessed was loaned to them by Allāh. Accordingly, from one perspective they were real and from another perspective they were not. They resembled the reflection of an image in a mirror. “Affirmation of creation does not mean the affirmation of its *wujūd*, since *wujūd* belongs only to the Real. Hence to affirm creation is to affirm the fixed entities which were inherently non-existent.”⁵⁸ In his view,

⁵⁶ William Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of Allāh*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1989, p.1-12.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

there was nothing in the *wujūd* but He and no entity of any existent thing became manifest except through his constant self-disclosure. “In the same way, the possible things in the cosmos were like shapes in possibility. The divine self-disclosure imparts *wujūd* to the possible things. The mirror imparts shapes to them. Then, angels, substance, body, and accident became manifest, but possibility remains itself. It does not leave its own reality.”⁵⁹ In other words, the fixed entities needed the incessant manifestation of the Divine for their continued existence.

The divine names and attributes continuously manifested through possible entities. Because the names and attributes of Allāh were infinite, there was constant renewal and diversity in the creation. Allāh constantly created things and brought non-existence into existence moment by moment. Every entity was being re-created each moment. So, there were no two moments that entities were identical. Accordingly, the fixed possible entities could stay existent by Allāh’s recreating them incessantly.⁶⁰ While the fixed entities manifested divine names and attributes, they did not gain any trace of them and they did not become divine. They made no form manifest except through the divine names such as the Speaker, the Powerful, the Creator, the Provider, and the Life Giver. From Ibn al-‘Arabī’s perspective, everything in the cosmos named, signified, and proved Allāh and accordingly they were all good and praiseworthy. “There is no form in the cosmos that undergoes corruption without its very corruption being the manifestation of another form within those substances themselves glorifying Allāh, so that none of the engendered existence may be empty of the glorification of its creator.”⁶¹ From the

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 16.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 32.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 58.

perspective of the shaykh, there is nothing bad or evil in the universe since every occurrence is a display of one or multiple divine names.

Human beings occupied a special place in the cosmology of Ibn Al-‘Arabī. He said that Allāh created humans in His image and all divine names and attributes were manifested perfectly in humans. When the creator disclosed Himself to the cosmos or to specific creatures within it, he did so in term of his names and attributes. Thus, the properties that appeared within the created things such as life, knowledge, compassion, and wrath could be traced back to the divine attributes. While each creature manifested some names and attributes, human beings were able to manifest almost all of them. From the perspective of the *shaykh*, humans were the microcosm of the universe. He said that “the infinite possible things can be divided into ten things and they were all found in the perfect human being who is the all-comprehensive engendered thing, singled out for the all- inclusiveness of the All-Merciful Breath”⁶². In other words, humans possessed the potentials of all entities in the creation and they could be viewed as the sample of the universe. The role of this all-comprehensive being was a passive agent whose role was to reflect the divine names and attributes in his actions whether he willed it or not. In fact, Ibn Al-‘Arabī opposed the idea of free will for humans and argued that it was only Allāh who willed. “If the servant finds the desire for something in himself, the Real is identical with his desire, nothing else. In the same way you say that Zayd moved his hand, but the mover is only Allāh.”⁶³ This perspective is a corollary to his view about the nature of

⁶² Ibid., p. 77.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 59.

entities which, in his view, need Allah's constant renewal for every act they desire to commit even the desire itself.

The cosmos, for Ibn al-'Arabī, was also a veil preventing people from seeing the face of the divine. To him, humans often paid attention to the causes and they did not realize that Allāh was the real agent behind all causes and effects. "In as much as everything in the cosmos prevents seeing Allāh's face, everything is a veil... Given that a veil is anything that prevents seeing something's face or reality, the ever-renewed likeness that fill the cosmos were veils that prevent us from seeing the renewal of creation at each instant."⁶⁴ According to this view, the cosmos is both the veil and the face of the Divine. The ordinary folks see nothing but the veils. However, the situation was different for the Gnostics, the folks of unveiling. They had the certain knowledge of the true nature of cosmos based on witnessing and experiencing it unlike the folks of reason who would attain this realization only in the next life.

This passage from his *al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan Openings) was a good summary of his view of the cosmos:

Allāh has unveiled the covering of ignorance from the eyes of their insights and has made them witness the signs of themselves and the signs of the horizons. Hence it has become clear to them that it is the Real [the Qur'ān, 41:53], nothing else. So they have faith in Him, or rather, they know Him through every face and in every form, and they know that He encompasses everything [the Qur'ān, 41:54]. The Gnostics see nothing unless in Him, since He is the container that encompasses everything. And how should He not be? He has alerted us to this with His name Aeon, within which enters everything other than Allāh, so he who sees something sees it only in Him. That is why Abū Bakr said, "I see nothing without seeing Allāh before it," for he did not see it until it had entered into Him. Necessarily, his eye saw the Real before the thing, for he saw the thing proceed from Him. So the Real is the house of all existent things, because He is *wujūd*. And the heart of

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 104.

the servant is the house of the Real, because it embraces Him - that is, the heart of the one who has faith, none other.⁶⁵

While Ibn al-‘Arabī’s language almost implied monism, he stated in his book, *al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyya*, that the creation and the creator were two separate entities. It is fair to say that while Ibn al-‘Arabī emphasized the immanence of Allāh, he also acknowledged that Allāh was transcendent with His essence and could never be known.

Jalal al-Din Rūmī, a contemporary of Ibn al-‘Arabī, expressed similar views in Konya, the capital of the *Saljuk* Turkish Empire, located in the middle of Anatolia. He indicated that “the creation is the multiform manifestation of the single resplendent whiteness that is Allāh.”⁶⁶ Imam al-Ghazālī made similar remarks about the dependency of things on Allāh for their existence. For him, only Allāh was the real existent. The existence of other things was borrowed from Him. When the essence of anything other than He was considered in respect of its own essence, it was sheer non-existence. But when it was viewed in respect of the face to which existence flew forth from the First, the Real, then it was seen as existing not in itself but through the face adjacent to its Giver of Existence. Hence, the only existent was the Face of Allāh.⁶⁷ Al-Ghazālī also indicated that knowing Allāh was possible through *kashf* and it was beyond the capacity of the rational faculty.⁶⁸

Ahmad al-Sirhindī (d.1624), while severely criticizing Ibn Al-‘Arabī for the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd* (the unity of being), filled his book, *Makūtbāt-i Rabbānī*

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

⁶⁶ Lewis, p. 414.

⁶⁷ Abu Hamid Al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights*, p. 52.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 52.

(The Letters of Rabbani), with the descriptions of how the names of Allāh were manifested in the universe. He in fact said that he was the recipient of the divine name of *Zāhir*.⁶⁹ Ahmad al-Sirhindī accused Ibn Al-‘Arabī of denying the reality of the material world which was, in his view, contrary to the teachings of the *sharī‘a* (the formal teachings of Islam). Shāh Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī (d.1762), a well-known Sufi and a *hadīth* scholar from India, attempted to reconcile the views of Ibn Al-‘Arabī with those of Ahmad al-Sirhindī on this topic and concluded that both said the same thing in different expressions.⁷⁰ Al-Sirhindī and al-Dihlawī differed from Ibn Al-‘Arabī and many earlier Sufis in their emphasis on the urgency of adhering to the rules of *sharī‘a*. They also, particularly the latter, had a more measured approach toward the potential of human reason. His book, *Hujatullāh al-Bāligha* (The Conclusive Argument from Allah), was full of rational analyses of the teachings of the *sharī‘a*.⁷¹

The views of the Sufis mentioned above, Ibn Al-‘Arabī, Rūmī, al-Ghazālī, and al-Sirhindī, influenced the religious thought among Turks in Anatolia during the Saljuk and the Ottoman Empires.⁷² Al-Ghazālī was widely read among the people of Anatolia in the Ottoman Empire, Rūmī’s idea was preserved by his followers in the Mawlawī *tarīqa*, and al-Sirhindī’s thought became popular in the land beginning with the late 18th century through the works of the members of the Mujaddidiyya (renewalist) branch of Naqshbandiyya *tarīqa* which was founded by al-Sirhindī in India. This branch of

⁶⁹ Ahmad Faruk al-Sirhindī, *Mektubat-ı Rabbani*. Istanbul: Merve Basim-Yayın, 1997, Translated to Turkish by Abdulkadir Akçicek. Vol.1. p. 5-10.

⁷⁰ More information on Al-Sirhindī is provided in the second chapter.

⁷¹ Shāh Wālī Allāh al-Dihlawī, *Hujatullāh al-Bāligha*, Translated to Turkish by Mehmed Erdoğan. Istanbul: İz Yayincılık, 2001, p. 29-180.

⁷² Şerif Mardin called it “Anatolian Mysticism” without elaboration. The ideas of these Sufis greatly contributed to the Anatolian Islamic landscape.

Naqshbandiyya became dominant in Eastern Anatolia, where Said Nursi was born, by the second half of the 19th century. Hence, the views of these Sufis about the cosmos as the loci of the manifestation of the names and attributes of Allāh were incorporated into Islamic religious thought of Turkish and Kurdish people particularly of those with some Sufi affiliation.⁷³

It should be noted that Sufism evolved and incorporated new elements as it spread to the four corners of the Islamic world and blended with local cultures. The institutionalization and popularization added new practices and concepts centered on the rules of communal living in *tariqa* lodges, the relationship between master and disciples, and saintly practices.

Institutionalization

The initial Sufi communities formed around well-known figures such as Junayd al-Baghdādi during the late 9th and early 10th centuries. No formal membership was required at this stage for attending the circles of leading Sufis. The kind of people who frequented such meetings were usually merchants and artisans who lived in the cities.⁷⁴ These early communities dissolved after the death of the particular Sufi they were formed around. As Sufism became more prevalent and popular in the Islamic world, the permanent lodges began to appear during the 10th century and became very widespread in the 11th and the 12th centuries.⁷⁵

⁷³ Şerif Mardin, p. 54-55.

⁷⁴ Karamustafa, p. 114.

⁷⁵ Karamustafa, p. 109; Knysh, p. 171.

The first lodges with permanent disciples were founded and supervised by individual Sufi *shaykhs*⁷⁶ who used their own funds as well as the charities donated by pious individuals and the rulers. The first of such lodges appeared in Khurāsān, were built by Kāzarūnī (d. 1033), and then spread elsewhere in the Islamic world.⁷⁷ The name of these places varied depending on their size and the region such as *zāwiya* (smaller), *ribāt* (larger), and *khānaqāh* (very large).⁷⁸ The name *tekke* or *tekye* was used for these buildings in Anatolia.⁷⁹ Each lodge usually operated independently and the type of practices and learning varied based on the orientation of the founding Sufi figure.

Sometime during the 11th century the concept of *silsila* (chain) appeared which helped form a common identity among the students of a master which contributed to the institutionalization of Sufi groups. It denoted the spiritual connection between the disciples of a Sufi master and signified their sense of a community. This concept also referred to the connection of a master's teachings and lineage to the Prophet Muhammad.⁸⁰ The master-disciple relationship constituted the most essential part of living in these places. The issues such as the rules of communal living, correct manners, and obedience to the masters were increasingly underlined in Sufi books such as *Ādāb al-Murīdīn* (The Rules for Disciples) by al-Ansari (d.1089) and *Risāle* by al-Qushayrī'.⁸¹ The master-disciple relationship was over time solemnized through particular ceremonial practices including *bay'a* (initiation and allegiance) *ijāza* (certificate of graduation)

⁷⁶ The head of the lodges were commonly referred to as *shaykh*.

⁷⁷ Karamustafa, p. 109.

⁷⁸ Knysh, p. 174.

⁷⁹ Mustafa Kara, *Diyanet Vakfi İslam Ansiklopedisi*, <http://www.islamansiklopedisi.info/> vol. 40, p. 368-370. Accessed on 1/12/2016.

⁸⁰ Karamustafa, p. 118.

⁸¹ Ibid. p. 99.

which was accompanied by a *khirqā* (robe).⁸² These elements varied from one group to another and were not uniformly observed. For instance, some groups gave the graduating members a *sajjāda* (prayer mat) and *misbaha* (rosary).⁸³ Over the time, the leadership in these communities became often hereditary which in the long run contributed to the decline of Sufism. While Nursi incorporated many Sufi elements in his life, thought, and movement, he differed from traditional *tariqas* in the area of leadership as discussed in Chapter Three.

The lodges catered to the spiritual needs of the surrounding communities initially in the urban areas and later in all types of settings. The reasons behind the fast growth of Sufi groups included the increasing number of converts and the rapid urbanization.⁸⁴ New converts found Sufis readily available in their surroundings and city dwellers found solace and peace in Sufi circles in the materialistic climate of the urban centers. People attended the *sohbets* (gatherings for religious advice) of the Sufi masters for spiritual renewal. As Sufism became integrated into the social fabric, many people turned to Sufi masters for this and other worldly matters. Many myths and stories circulated around about the miracles these Sufi mystics performed, and more and more people visited them for *baraka* (blessing), protection, and possibly witnessing a *karâmât*. People often regarded them as mediators between themselves and Allāh.⁸⁵ As a result of the popular appeal of the saints and the practices formed around them, “Sufism ceased to be a form of piety that appealed almost exclusively to the urban middle and upper middle classes and

⁸² Karamustafa, p. 120.

⁸³ Knysh, p. 173.

⁸⁴ Karamustafa, p. 148.

⁸⁵ Şerif Mardin made this argument about how people in Anatolia particularly the Turks viewed saints as mediators.

began to spread through whole social canvas of premodern Islamic societies from the political elites to wage earners in urban centers to peasants and nomads in the countryside”⁸⁶ Accordingly, Sufi institutions were incorporated into the fabric of the Islamic communities increasingly during the 11th century and they existed side by side with mosques and madrasas.⁸⁷

The number of Sufi lodges proliferated during the 11th and the 12th centuries due to both their popular appeal and the support they received from the rulers. They usually had a cordial relationship with the political authorities and secured help and protection from particularly the Mamlūks, the Saljuk, and the Ottomans.⁸⁸ The fact that they mostly stayed away from politics and no one Sufi group gained a majority to constitute a threat to the political authority saved them from potential persecutions.

Even though the number of Sufi lodges from that time period is unknown, some groups survived beyond the death of the founding masters. Beginning with the 14th century, the name *tarīqa* (path or way) was used to designate each Sufi group. The disciples who studied under a master founded lodges in different areas and they all traced themselves to that master which gave them credibility and legitimacy. Even though the lodges were loosely connected, in many cases not connected at all, they were all referred to by the name of the founding master. Many *tarīqas* existed in the Islamic world since the 14th century and they displayed different characteristics depending on the local cultural surroundings. Among them, Qādiriyya, Suhrawardīyya, Shādhiliyya

⁸⁶ Karamustafa, p.134.

⁸⁷ Knysh, p. 191.

⁸⁸ Knysh, p. 174.

Naqshbandiyya, Mawlawiyya, and Khalwatiyya received large numbers of followers in different regions and they lasted until this day. I will briefly discuss the main tenets of these groups and then turn my attention to the Sufism in the Ottoman Empire. These groups made up the majority of the Sufi affiliation among Turkish and Kurdish inhabitants of Anatolia where Nursi spent his life. Accordingly, it would be helpful to briefly outline the main tenets of these groups to better situate Nursi in the larger Sufi tradition. Even though the presence of Sufism among Turks predated these *tarīqas*, they became very influential in Anatolia during Saljuk and Ottoman Empires and made great contributions to the art, the culture, and the religious thought of the land.

Major *Tarīqas*

Qādiriyya: This *tarīqa* was named after ‘Abd al-Kādir al-Jīlānī (d. 1166) who was originally from Persia but spent most his life in Baghdād. He was a member of the Hanbali school of law and studied *hadīth* and Hanbali jurisprudence in Baghdād. He worked as a preacher and at the same time administered a Sufi lodge and a Hanbali *madrassa* in the capital. He promoted practical Sufi teachings including piety and morality and refrained from discussing mystical elements. There is no indication that he intended to found a *tarīqa*; however, his teachings became widespread after his death probably through the efforts of his children and disciples. Though the early stages of its institutionalization are not clear, it spread to Iraq, India, North Africa, and parts of the Middle East beginning with the 14th century. The order is still popular in these areas. Many miracle stories about Al-Jīlānī circulated among the members of this group and they viewed him as the greatest saint of all. Ibn Al-‘Arabī considered him the *Qutb* (pole)

of his time.⁸⁹ By and large, each local *zāwiya* was independent and the relationship between them was very loose and even non-existent. They were united in their allegiance to al-Jīlānī. Leadership in each *zāwiya* was usually hereditary. The branches in North Africa actively fought against the French invasion of Algeria in 1830's. Overall, they stayed apolitical. The common elements in the group included *dhikr* with musical instruments, *khalwa* (seclusion), and *awrād*.⁹⁰

The Qādiri *tarīqa* was brought to the capital of the Ottoman Empire, Istanbul, by İsmail Rūmī (d. 1643) who founded the first lodge in that city during the 17th century and is said to have opened around 40 lodges in Istanbul area. It was introduced to Eastern Anatolia during the 18th by the Berzenci family from Syria and established a strong foothold in that region especially among the Kurdish people as result of the reach out activities of its members. The Berzenci family claimed to be the direct descendants of al-Jīlānī. This *tarīqa* dominated Eastern Anatolia and Northern Syria until the second half of the 19th century when Mujaddidiyya Naqshbandiyya gained great popularity among the Kurdish inhabitants of that area. The most famous Qādiri master in the Empire was Eşrefoglu Rūmī (d. 1469) in Iznik, who wrote several books about Sufism including *Dīwān* and *Muzekki'n Nufūs*. According to the official Ottoman statistics, this *tarīqa* had 57 *tekkes* in Istanbul alone in 1889. The population of the city at the time was under 600.000.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Knysh, p. 186.

⁹⁰ Knysh, p. 182-183.

⁹¹ Kara, p. 462.

Suhrawardīyya: Founded by Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (d. 1234) from Persia. He was a member of Shāfi'ī *madhab* (school of law) and a preacher. He was known for his close alliance with the politicians of the time including *khalīfa* al-Nasir. He offered his *futuwwa*⁹² groups to the service of al-Nasir and he also put the robe of *futuwwa* on 'Alā' al-Dīn Kayqubād (d.1237), the Saljuk sultan of the time, in an initiatory ceremony.⁹³

While his ideas included some mystic, gnostic and neo-platonist elements, the *tarīqa* over the course of its history emphasized piety, five daily prayers, and fasting during Ramadan and avoided mystical speculations, and extreme forms of austerity. They also refrained from using poetry, dancing, and music in their ceremonies. This *tarīqa* is currently present in India and has some following in Iraq.⁹⁴

Shādhiliyya: This *tarīqa* was attributed to Abu 'l-Hasan al-Shādhilī (d. 1258) from *Maghrīb* (Morocco). Even though the institutionalization of this *tarīqa* took place after the death of al-Shādhilī sometime during the 14th century, still the group was named after him. It began as an urban movement but eventually took root in rural areas in North Africa, Egypt, and Syria. Al-Shādhilī underscored the centrality of the observance of the *sharī'a*. He prohibited the use of music during *dhikr*. He was critical of the mystical speculations and played down the significance of the saintly miracles. He urged people to work for their sustenance and frowned upon living as monastics. The members of this group were known for their strict adherence to the laws of the *sharī'a*. This *tarīqa* has

⁹² This name had different meanings in different *tarīqas*. However, generally it meant bravery, generosity, and heroism. Süleyman Uludağ, *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*. <http://www.islamansiklopedisi.info/> Istanbul: 1996. Vol. 13, p. 259-261. Accessed on 1/12/2016.

⁹³ Knysh, p. 200.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

been socially and politically active and it often played a mediation role between political power and people in the communities in which it was present. It also organized resistance to the Portuguese invasion of Morocco in the 16th century. The *tarīqa* still has following in Egypt, Morocco, and Syria.⁹⁵

Naqshbandiyya: This order was named after its founder Bahā' al-Dīn Naqshband (d. 1389) from Tajikistan. It became popular among Turks in central Asia and played an important role in ensuring the attachments of Turkish people to the Sunni tradition. Outside the central Asia, the order spread to Anatolia, the Caucasus, and the mountain peoples in Eastern Anatolia and Northern Iraq where it became a factor in Kurdish nationalism beginning with early 20th century.⁹⁶ The group was introduced to Anatolia by Abullāh-i İlahī who opened the first Naqshī *tekke* in Istanbul in 1490. Like Qādiri order, it also grew quickly in the land and there were over 65 Naqshī *tekkes* in Istanbul alone in 1889.⁹⁷ The hallmark of this group was its insistence on following the Sunni teachings of Islam, focus on individual quiet *dhikr*, and avoidance of dance and music. The emphasis on the Sunni orthodox teachings made this order attractive to ordinary individuals as well as to the scholars who were critical of non-orthodox Sufi practices. This group also placed great emphasis on *sohbet* and some of the branches viewed it as the most important tenet of the *tarīqa*.⁹⁸ The elements of *sohbet* and *dhikr* played a very central role in the life and the movement of Said Nursi as discussed in detail in the third chapter.

⁹⁵ Knysh, p. 210-211.

⁹⁶ Trimingham, p. 63.

⁹⁷ Kara, p. 462.

⁹⁸ Nihat Azamat, *Qadiriyye. TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*. <http://www.islamansiklopedisi.info/> Istanbul: 2001, vol: 24, p. 131-136. Accessed on 1/13/2016.

Though Nursi's version of *sohbet* and *dhikr* was somewhat differed from that of Naqshbandiyya, the idea was basically the same.

The Mujaddidiyya branch of this *tarīqa* was founded by Ahmad al-Sirhindī who promoted a *sharī'a* based Sufism and social/political engagement for the reform of Muslim societies. His followers often courted the political elite and tried to recruit them into their orders. This branch was brought to Istanbul by Muhammad Murad Bukhārī (d. 1729), and it initiated into its membership several well-known high ranking officials including the grand *mufti* of the Empire, Feyzullah Efendi (d.1761).⁹⁹ This revivalist branch was introduced to Eastern Anatolia by the Mawlana Khalid Al-Baghdādī (d. 1827) and supplanted all other branches of Naqshbandiyya in the Middle East including Eastern Anatolia by the time of the birth of Nursi in 1878. This branch became closely associated with Kurdish nationalism over time in Eastern Anatolia, Northern Iraq, and Northern Syria. Ahmad Gūmūṣhanevī (d. 1894) from northeastern Anatolia was a well-known Sufī from this branch who actively fought against Russians in the Ottoman-Russian war of 1878.¹⁰⁰

Mawlawiyya: Sufism grew in Anatolia during the Saljuk Empire due to the efforts of well-known Sufis such as Rūmī (d.1273) who fled his hometown Khurāsān with many other Sufis as a result of the Mongol invasion and settled in the Saljuk capital Konya. The *tarīqa* was founded by the followers of Rūmī who built *tekkes* in Asia Minor, Balkans, Damascus, Jerusalem, and Cairo whose attendees were primarily Turks. The members of this order were known for their devotion to music and dance and they were often referred

⁹⁹ Knysh, p. 223.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. 227.

to as whirling *dervishes*. “From the close association of the founder with the *Saljuk* ruling authority, the order developed aristocratic tendencies and became a wealthy corporation. It played a considerable cultural role in Anatolia and helped in the reconciliation of certain types of Christians to Islam.”¹⁰¹ This order usually initiated the high ranking officials to its ranks and accordingly received their support and protection. The group opened its first branch in Istanbul in 1491 and was given a non-profit status by the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid II (d.1512). Some thought that by helping the expansion of the Sunni *tarīqas* such as Mawlawiyya, the Ottoman State aimed at countering the Shī‘ī Ṣafawids propaganda in Anatolia which was intensified in the 16th century.¹⁰² The good relations with the state made this order popular among the ruling elite, and sultans such as Selim III (d.1808) and Mahmud II (d.1839) helped open *tekkes* all around the Ottoman lands.¹⁰³ The Mawlawi *tekkes* were found all over Anatolia including small towns in rural areas. It is impossible to know exact number of them in the Ottoman Empire; however, there were 5 in Istanbul in 1889.¹⁰⁴

Khalwatiyya: Founded by ‘Umar al-Khalwati (d. 1397-8) in an area today known as Azerbaijan, it initially spread to Persia, Khurāsān, and Transoxiana. However, many Khalwatis left these territories during the Timurid invasion and settled in Anatolia in the Ottoman Empire beginning with the early 1400’s. Another wave of Khalwatis came to Anatolia during the 16th century due to the persecution they experienced in Persia under the Shī‘ī Ṣafawids regime, which viewed this Sunni group as a threat to its political and

¹⁰¹ Trimmingham, p. 60.

¹⁰² Tanrikorur, *Mevleviyye. TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*. <http://www.islamansiklopedisi.info/> Istanbul: TDV, 2004, vol. 29, p. 468-475. Accessed on 1/22/2016

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 468-475.

¹⁰⁴ Kara, p. 462.

ideological unity.¹⁰⁵ They usually had cordial relations with the Ottoman state and received support and protection though they were viewed with suspicion occasionally due to their Persian origins.¹⁰⁶ Sultan Bayezid II (d.1512) bestowed an old church in Istanbul on the al-Khalwati Shaykh of the time, Jamal al-Khalwati (d. 1499), who turned it into a mosque and used it for Khalwatī activities.¹⁰⁷ Sultan Murad II (d. 1451) developed close relations with Khalwati shaykh, Shujā‘ al-Dīn (d.?) and reported his dreams, mystical experiences, and fears to him. During and after the reign of this ruler, the members of this tarīqa attained some of the highest positions in the Empire.¹⁰⁸

The *tarīqa* had strong footing in the rural Anatolia in addition to the capital Istanbul as a result of the efforts of its members who often traveled to the countryside and became accessible to the general populace. Such outreach activities bore fruit, and it became the most popular group in the Ottoman Empire. It spread to the Balkans, Syria, North Africa, Sudan, and the Southeast Asia during the 16th and the 17th centuries.¹⁰⁹ Its expansion paralleled the expansion of the Ottoman Empire.¹¹⁰

The practices of this *tarīqa* included individual and group *dhikr* accompanied with music, *khalwat*, and recitation of *ilāhis* (hymns). The group *dhikr* and *ilāhis* were performed in the presence of public. The teachings of Ibn Al-‘Arabī, particularly *wahdat al-wujūd*, were widely popular among the members of this group. Niyaz-ı Mısrī (d.1693),

¹⁰⁵ Curry, p. 50 and 76.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 74.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 74

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁰⁹ Kara said that, according to the official counts, the tarīqa had 66 branches in Istanbul in 1840. p. 462.

¹¹⁰ Uludağ, p. 93.

the founder of Ahmadiyya sub-branch in Egypt, was known for his adherence to the teaching of Ibn al-‘Arabī.¹¹¹ Initially, Mīsrī served as the head of the khalwati branch in Bursa and wrote a book called *Dīwān* which was widely read among the members of this *tarīqa*.¹¹² It looks like what made this group very popular was their significant effort to reach out to the people who lived in the rural areas to provide religious services with their public *dhikr* and *sohbets*. They opened branches in every corner of Anatolia.¹¹³ They probably became the main source of religious information for the people in the countryside during the 16th and the 17th centuries in the Ottoman Empire in which religious education was provided in *madrasas* primarily located in the cities.

Sufism and Tarīqas in Anatolia

Sufism primarily came to Anatolia with the arrival of Turks during the 11th century.¹¹⁴ The Mongol invasion of the Eastern parts of the Saljuk Empire during the 13th c. brought more Sufis to the land who settled mostly in central and Eastern Anatolia. Another wave of Sufis arrived from Khurāsān during the 15th century due to the invasion

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 94.

¹¹² Kara, p. 214.

¹¹³ For a list of the cities with their branches, look Kara p. 190.

¹¹⁴ The presence of Sufism in Anatolia predates the establishment of the Ottoman Empire. The Sufis such as Ahmad Yesevi (d. 1166) played an important role in the Islamization of Anatolia which began in the second half of the eleventh century. In fact, the wandering dervishes of Yesevi traveled extensively in central Asia and spread Islam among different Turkish tribes before their arrival in Anatolia. “Although little is known about his life, Ahmad’s significance in the formation of a Turkish Islamic tradition is undisputed. The Yesevi tradition has many ramifications, religious social, and cultural; it played a role in the Islamization of Turkish tribes, in the adaptation of Islam to a Turkish nomadic milieu, and in the linguistic reconciliation through the poems of Ahmad and other dervishes from his tradition such as Yunus Emre (d. 1339). The members of this order did not build permanent lodges and emphasized the Sufi idea of *khalwa*, retreat or spiritual seclusion.” Spencer Trimingham. *The Sufi Orders of Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.61.

of Timur. Lastly, the Sufis who fled the *Shī'ī* Ṣafawids persecution found safe haven in Anatolia under the Ottoman Empire beginning with the 16th century. As a result of these migrations, Istanbul and Anatolia became the center of Sunni oriented *tarīqas* whose members contributed significantly to the religious, cultural, and social landscape in the Ottoman Empire. The *tarīqas* stayed mostly apolitical and thrived with the support and the protection of the state. In turn, they contributed to the Islamization of the newly-conquered lands and helped formed a common identity among the different ethnic groups in the Empire.¹¹⁵ Hence, the number of *tekkes* proliferated in different corners of Anatolia during the Ottoman era and Sufism deeply took root among its inhabitants. According to an official count, there were 307 *tekkes* in Istanbul alone in 1889.¹¹⁶

The *tekkes* produced the creators of the best examples of the Ottoman calligraphy, poetry, and music. It is fair to say that *tekkes* were the center of the Ottoman cultural life.

¹¹⁷The founder of the Ottoman school of calligraphy, Shaykh Hamdullah (d. 1520 in Istanbul) was a Sufi. Hafiz Osman (d. 1698) was another well-known calligrapher with a Sufi background. Mustafa Itrī Efendi (d. 1712) produced the best examples of the Ottoman poetry and music and he was a Sufi from the Mawlawi *tarīqa*. Mustafa İzzet Efendi (d. 1876) was a famous calligrapher and Ney (reed flute) player with a Sufi

¹¹⁵ One of the important roles that the *tarīqas* played in the Seljuki and the Ottoman eras was their contribution to the Islamization of the newly conquered lands. Beginning with the wandering dervishes of Ahmad Yesevi in the 11th century, the Sufis introduced Islam to the non-Muslim inhabitants of Anatolia. The members of the Mawlawi order converted many Christians in Anatolia beginning with the 13th c. The Naqshī *tarīqa* played a role in the Islamization of the Balkans, Bosnia, Caucasus, and Crimea after these lands came under the Ottoman rule. For more, look at Trimingham p. 61.

¹¹⁶ Kara., p. 462.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p.187.

affiliation. Shaykh Gālib (d.1798) produced the best examples of traditional Ottoman *Dīwān* poetry and he was a Sufi as well.¹¹⁸

The *tarīqas* also influenced the Ottoman Islamic thought significantly. The ideas of Ibn Al-‘Arabī and Rūmī about Allāh as an immanent being found some attraction among the members of some *tarīqas* particularly the Mawlawis and Khalwatis which in turn influenced the popular Islam. Mardin called it, without elaboration, “Anatolian mysticism,” whose elements included an idea of Allāh whose names and attributes were manifested in the universe.¹¹⁹ The more significant Sufi element in the popular Ottoman Islamic life was the treatment of Sufi masters as saints. People frequented the living and dead Sufis for spiritual guidance treated them as intermediaries between themselves and Allāh. The Sufi shrines filled Anatolia and became popular visiting sites.¹²⁰

The degree of the prevalence of Sufi groups in the Ottoman Empire was reflected in the membership of the elite in *tarīqas*. The well-known individuals from the state bureaucracy and scholars found their way to these groups throughout the history of the Empire. Such individuals included Dāwūd al-Kayseri (d. 1350) who founded the first *madrasa* of the Empire in İznik, Shaykh Edebali (d. 1326) who was the first *qāḍī* (judge), Zenbilli Ali Efendi (d. 1526), İbn Kemal (d. 1534), Ebussūd Efendi (d. 1574), Feyzullah Efendi (d. 1761), and Mekkizade Mustafa Asim (d. 1846), who were all grand *mufītīs* of the Empire and some of them were well-known scholars. A few of the sultans had close relationship with Sufi figures without becoming a member of their *tarīqas*. Sultan Osman

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 188-189.

¹¹⁹ Mardin, p.184-185.

¹²⁰ Ibid. Mardin said that Turkish Islam from the very beginning had this type of intermediaries and Sufi *shaykhs* filled this need in Anatolia during the Ottoman Empire.

Gāzi's (d.1326) relations with Edeballi (d. 1326), Sultan Bayezid I's (d.1403) with Emir Sultan (d. 1429), Sultan Murad II's (d.1451) with Hacı Bayram Veli (d. 1430), Sultan Fatih Mehmed's (d.1481) with Akşemsetdin (d. 1459), and Sultan Abdulmecid's (d.1861) with Ahmed Ziya al-Dīn Gümüşhanevi (d. 1893) were well-known and well-documented. Sultans Abdulaziz (d.1876) and Abdulhamid (d.1918) also had relations with Gümüşhanevi.¹²¹

Briefly, Sufism played an important role in the formation and the maintenance of the Islamic identity and culture of the inhabitants of Anatolia since the 11th century. The members of many *tarīqas* settled in the region and experienced growth and expansion as a result of the support they received from the rulers. In turn, they contributed to the religious, cultural, and social life of the communities they lived in particularly during the Ottoman Empire. The *tarīqas* attracted followers from the urban middle class merchants and artisans as well as from rural communities. Many scholars and bureaucrats found their way into Sufi paths. As a result, Sufi elements became an integral part of the religious and cultural identity among different ethnic groups in Anatolia. The members of the *tarīqas* developed and maintained generally good relations with scholars, rulers, and the community at large. Hence, the type of severe criticism that Sufi groups encountered elsewhere in the Islamic world particularly in modern times was largely absent in Anatolia and Istanbul. There was some criticism, both internal and external, particularly during the 19th and the early 20th centuries; however, it was more constructive, moderate and not as dismissive as it was, for instance, in India. The Sufi

¹²¹ Kara, p.70 and 319. Kara indicated that the last three *sultans* attended the *sohbet*'s of Gümüşhanevi.

elements continued to exist in Anatolia even after the abolishment of *tekkes* in 1925 and Said Nursi played an important role in the preservation of this heritage as illustrated in Chapter Three.

Sufism in the Modern Era

Sufism came under multiple attacks during the modern era. Muslim modernists and the members of the Islamic fundamentalist movements accused it of distorting Islam and causing the decline of Muslims. They considered its mystical teachings irrelevant in an age dominated by science and rationalism. The colonialists viewed the Sufi groups as a potential source of resistance and social mobilization against their occupation of the Muslim lands. To overcome these challenges, Sufi groups undertook internal criticism, reassessed their situation, and made some modifications to their teachings and practices. As a result, they reasserted their influence in Muslim communities in new forms and became a source of attraction to a growing worldwide audience.

While the Sufi response toward colonialists varied, they primarily participated in the fights and in some cases organized resistance against them. Sufi groups also played an important role in nation building in some places such as the Sanusiyya order in Libya. The members of the Qādiri *tarīqa* actively fought against the French invasion of Algeria in 1830's.¹²² The Shādhilī group organized resistance to the Portuguese invasion of Morocco in the 16th century.¹²³ Gūmūṣhanevi and his followers from the Naqshī order fought against Russian invasion of the Eastern territories of the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th century. Another Naqshī, Shaykh Ṣāmil (d.1871), led the fight against Russian

¹²² Knysh,, p. 190.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 215.

invasion of the Caucasus around the same time.¹²⁴ All *tarīqas* in Anatolia participated in the Turkish independence war and supported Atatürk whose correspondence with the head of some *tarīqas* was well-reported.¹²⁵

In the modern era, Muslim modernists generally had a negative attitude toward Sufism. Muslim modernists of different stripes generally underscored the urgency of incorporating Western scientific rationalist thought into the Islamic worldview. They promoted the modernization of the Islamic social and political institutions largely based on the European model. They were usually critical of the traditional Islam and called for a return to the fundamental religious sources namely the Qur'ân and *hadīth*. They were also either openly critical of Sufism or kept a distance to it for, in their view, it was greatly responsible for the distortion of the original Islam and the downfall of Muslims. They particularly found the mystical dimension of Sufism irritating and even harmful to the progress of Muslim societies. Hence, Sufism had no place in their formulations of Islamic thought.

Muslim modernists' view of Sufism, while having some common characteristics, varied depending on the background and the location of each individual. Early modernists usually appeared in India and they vehemently opposed Sufism. A pioneer of Islamic modernism was Sayyid Ahmad Khān (d.1898) who lived in British India and was active in educational and political work to revive Islam and to organize Muslims. He spent some time in the U.K. to explore its educational system. He in fact established Aligarh Muslim University as part of his modernist agenda. He called for the re-

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 227-228.

¹²⁵ Kara, p.360.

interpretation of the Islamic sciences such as *kalām* (theology) and *tafsīr* (Qur'ānic Exegesis) in the light of the discoveries of the modern science. To him, there could not be any contradiction between the teachings of Islam and the findings of the modern science since the Qur'ān was the word of Allāh and the science was based on the laws of nature which was the work of Allāh. He tried to bring rationalist explanations to the miracles in the Qur'ān and he denied the *karāmât* attributed to Sufi masters. Accordingly, mysticism or generally Sufism had no place in his vision of Islam.¹²⁶ Muhammad Iqbāl (d. 1938), another modernist from British India, spent time in Europe for advanced studies and became familiar with the works of Nietzsche and Bergson. He was convinced that the Islamic heritage should be rethought in the light of modern scientific and rationalist developments.¹²⁷ His attitude toward Sufism was negative and he argued that Sufism had “no solid and historical foundation in the original Islam”¹²⁸ He viewed Sufism as a quietist, a passive, and even a fatalistic component which should be eliminated from pure Islam.¹²⁹

One of the most influential Muslim modernists and revivalists was Jamāl al-Dīn Afghānī (d. 1897), born in Iran, who spent several years in India in his youth for education where he studied both Islamic and modern sciences. He also spent some time in Paris and published an anti-British journal in Arabic, *Al-Urwat al-Wuthqa*, with the help of the other famous Muslim modernist, Muhammad ‘Abduh. To Afghānī, Islam was

¹²⁶ Christian W Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology*. p. 170-173.

¹²⁷ Ernst, p. 201.

¹²⁸ Rajmohan Gandhi, *Eight Lives: A Study of the Hindu-Muslim Encounter*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1986, p. 55.

¹²⁹ Ernst, p. 202.

compatible with science and reason and it had the potential for the moral and the social reform. He called for a return to the way of the early generations, *salaf*, while not entirely dismissing the traditional Islam. Even though he was not completely rejectionist of a Sufi perspective, it did not influence his thought and it had no place in his vision of the faith. Al-Afghānī was a pan-Islamist and believed that the renaissance of Muslims was dependent upon their unity and solidarity around one leader, *khalīfa*, and called Muslims to mobilize around the Ottoman sultan in Istanbul.¹³⁰

An influential figure in the modern era, Abu 'l-A' lā Mawdūdī (d.1979), was a prominent Muslim modernist and revivalist from India who lived at a time when the Hindu nationalism was rising and the minority Muslim population was anxious about its future. He, like Nursi, founded a group to revive Islam among the faithful. Mawdūdī was afraid that Muslim identity would disappear and Muslims would lose their rights in an India ruled by Hindus. He thought that the traditional Islam was too weak to respond to the challenges in India and he formed a movement, which is called *Jamā'at Islamī*, to raise the religious awareness in the society through both political and non-political action. Mawdūdī was critical of both traditional scholars and Sufis whom he held responsible for the distortion of Islam. Even though he came from a family with Sufi connections, he considered Sufism harmful to the religious identity of Muslims in India. Accordingly, his organization reached out to Muslims in India through door to door visits, booklets, and newspapers and promoted an action oriented Islam based on the Qur'ān and the *hadīth*.

¹³⁰ Hayreddin Karaman, *TDV Islam Ansiklopedisi*. <http://www.islamansiklopedisi.info/> Istanbul: TDV, 1994, Vol: 10, p.458-466. Accessed on 1/13/2016.

Mawdūdī's attitude toward traditional Islam and Sufism softened over the course of his life as the Sufi influence was evident in his later poetry.¹³¹

Nursi's contemporaries such as Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā in Egypt had a friendlier attitude toward Sufism compared to those in India. Muhammad 'Abduh (d.1905), a native of Egypt, was a religious scholar, a jurist and a modernist who was often considered to be the founder of modern *salafi* movement. While it is true that he advocated a return to the way of the *salaf*, his overall perspective on Islam differed greatly from modern-day *salafis*. He spent more than two decades of his life in Egypt under British occupation and lived in Paris for few years. He received traditional education in *al-Azhar* and learned modern sciences through his personal efforts. Initially he was influenced by the ideas of Afghānī and, like him, promoted unity among Muslims to defeat the imperialists. However, he slowly distanced himself from his mentor and came to believe that only gradual social and institutional reforms would save Muslims. He believed that speculation about the nature of Allāh by the theologians and some Sufis was contrary to the practice of early generations. Accordingly, he argued that Islam was essentially about individual and social moral reform. He had some ties to a Shādhilī *shaykh* early in his life and accordingly had some sympathy for Sufism; however, he called for the elimination of some Sufi practices such as the veneration of saints, music, and dance. He pointed to the urgency of undertaking new *ijtihād* (individual reasoning to exert religious rulings) based on the Qur'ān and the *hadīth* in the light of modern developments to address the issues that Muslims faced. For example, he was in favor of

¹³¹ Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *Mawdūdī and the Making of Islamic Revivalism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, p.141-142.

representative governments and he justified that system based on the Islamic principles of consultation and public interest. He was sympathetic to the Western science and rationalism and incorporated them in his Qur'ân interpretations. He believed that the Qur'ân was the word of Allāh and did not contain anything contrary to science and reason.¹³² While 'Abduh thought that Islam was compatible with modernity and while he had a favorable attitude to Western science and rationalism, he was critical of the scientific materialism and the Western cultural influences among Muslims. His views reached a wider audience after his death by the efforts of his disciple Rashīd Riḍā (d.1935) and influenced the Islamist movements in Egypt and elsewhere in the Islamic world.¹³³

The founders of the well-known Islamic fundamentalist movements such as Wahhabi Salafism and the Islamic brotherhood rejected Sufi thought and practices and called for an Islamic revival based on the original Islam as practiced by the early Muslims. However, Hasan al-Bannā' (d. 1949), the founder of the Muslim brotherhood, admired the organizational strength of Sufism and incorporated it into his movement.¹³⁴ Even though his family background reflected some Sufi affiliation, he did not incorporate Sufi ideas or practices in his formulation of Islam. Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb (d.1792) founded what is known today as the Wahhabi movement, advocated a literal reading of the Islamic sources, and his views became the official creed of the Saudi state.

¹³² Elie Kedourie, *Afghani and 'Abduh: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam*, London: Frank Cass&Co. Ltd, 1966, p.13.

¹³³ M. Sait Ozarvarli, *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*, <http://www.islamansiklopedisi.info/>, Istanbul: TDV, 1998, vol: 1, p. 282-287. Accessed on 1/22/2016.

¹³⁴ Ernst, p.202.

He opposed certain Sufi practices particularly the cult of saints and viewed them as a violation of the Islamic principle of *tawhīd*. Some important figures in the fundamentalist movements had a friendlier attitude toward Sufism and tried to include some aspects of it into their Islamic practice as discussed later in the chapter.

While the sentiment among Muslim modernists was not very friendly toward Sufism elsewhere in the Islamic world, the general attitude toward the group in the capital of the Ottoman Empire was much more positive. The cordial relations between Sufis and scholars continued during the 19th and the early 20th centuries. Even though some of the scholars made accusations against Sufis, they generally had sympathy and few of them had even membership in *tarīqas*. The grand *mufti* Mustafa Sabri (d.1954) wrote a treatise on Ibn Al-‘Arabī and refuted his views on *wahdat al-wujūd*. However, he did not oppose the Sufi practices in general. Among the well-known scholars with Sufi affiliation at the time, İsmail Hakki İzmirli (d. 1946) and Ahmed Naim Efendi (d. 1934) should be mentioned. Said Nursi was known for his sympathy toward Sufism even though he was not a member of any *tarīqa*. The Ottoman state introduced some measures to oversee the *tarīqas* during the 19th century; nonetheless, they largely maintained their autonomous status. The Sufis in the capital acknowledged the need to make some changes and they, with the support of the state, opened a new school to improve the education of Sufi masters. The institution was called the *madrasa al-mashāyikh* (The School for the Masters).¹³⁵

¹³⁵ Kara, p. 359.

During the 20th century, among the members of the fundamentalist movements, there were those who tried to inject some Sufi elements to their practice of Islam. Abu ‘Alī Ḥasanī Nadwī (d.1999), who was affiliated with Tablīghī Jamā‘at in India, and Saïd Hawwa (d.1989), the head of the Muslim Brotherhood’s branch in Syria made an effort to incorporate Sufi spirituality into Salafism without mentioning the name Sufi. They used names such as *ihsan* (perfection, beautification), *‘ilm* (knowledge), *tazkiya al-nefs* (purification of soul), and *ijtihād* (striving).¹³⁶

As a result of the intense attacks of modernists and fundamentalist and the decline of Muslim societies, the Sufi groups undertook efforts for self-criticism during the modern period. Even though self- criticism was present in the Sufi circles throughout their history, they looked at their teachings and practices more carefully to understand the reasons behind the decline of Muslims generally and Sufism particularly. Accordingly, they made certain modifications to their ideas and practices to stay as a relevant source of spiritual renewal for Muslim communities. While the Sufi groups largely stayed quiet and kept a low profile during the 20th century, they never ceased to re-invent themselves in different forms and continue to be a source of attraction in a modern setting. The self-criticism in the modern period resulted in emphasizing particular aspects of traditional Sufism such as a stronger orientation toward the *sharī‘a*, increased militancy in some cases, a rejection of *bid‘a* (innovations), community service, and *sohbet* while de-emphasizing the mystical dimension.¹³⁷ Some called it Neo-Sufism; however, such a

¹³⁶ Martin van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell, ed., *Sufism and the Modern in Islam*, New York: I.B. Tauris&Co Lmt, 2007, p. 119-122

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10-11.

conceptualization overlooked the fact that an emphasis on these elements was present in Sufi groups since the beginning of the movement.¹³⁸

As a result of these adaptations, Sufism did not lose its place in the fabric of Muslim societies while it experienced some decline during the modern period.¹³⁹ Some recent studies indicated that the decline was not as great as many assumed or even did not happen. A study on Sufi groups in Egypt found that the number of Sufi lodges increased throughout the 20th century. It also found that the groups such as Shādhiliyya and Burhāniyya attracted successfully individuals from urban middle class.¹⁴⁰ Studies also drew attention to the significant resurfacing of Naqshbandiyya *tariqa* in Turkey, “where one branch of the order inspired the establishment of the first Islamist party and its various successors.”¹⁴¹ Globalization and technology helped the dispersed Sufi groups around the globe to form transnational communities. The members of the Mouride movement of Senegal are connected to each other through trade and international travel. Another example of transnationalism was the Naqshbandiyya Haqqānī order whose chief *murshid* (guide or leader) and his assistants are very mobile and they supervise their followers around the globe.¹⁴²

In the modern era, Sufism has a considerable presence in the West. In addition to the members of the Sufi groups who immigrated to the West, there are perennialists who view Sufism as the universal internal part of Islam and are interested in its mystical

¹³⁸ Ibid., p 10. Fazlurrahmān was one of those who used this concept.

¹³⁹ There were 307 tekkes in Istanbul in 1889 and their number went down to 254 in 1918. Kara, p. 462.

¹⁴⁰ Brunessen and Howell, p. 9.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 12.

aspects. However, they emphasize that to reach the internal part, one needs to practice the formal teachings of Islam. The most famous members of this group include Titus Burckhardt, Martin Lings, Hussein Nasr, and Frithjof Schuon.¹⁴³ The New Age thought, which include some Sufis, “encompasses a wide range of syncretic beliefs and practices which converge in the search for spiritual perfection in the universe and in the private self.”¹⁴⁴ The New Age thought incorporated mystical elements of Sufism. To the members of this group such as Idris Shah, Inayat Khan and Shaykha Farha Jarrahi, Sufism is separate from Islam. They view it as a universal religion.

Conclusion

Sufism in the Western literature was usually identified with mysticism and analyzed accordingly. While mystic experience was an important aspect of Sufism, such a perspective overlooked other characteristics which became part of the group over the course of its history. It also glossed over the fact that mystical dimension was not emphasized uniformly by all Sufi groups particularly in the modern era. From its humble beginnings in the 8th century, this movement incorporated many elements as it blended with new cultures and faced new challenges. Accordingly, the practices and priorities among Sufi groups at different points in history varied greatly which made it impossible to reduce Sufism to mysticism. It also made it difficult to talk about a normative Sufism by which other Sufi ideas and actions could be measured and examined.

¹⁴³ For the perennial Sufi thought, look at *Sufism: Love and Wisdom* edited by Michon and Gaetani. Canada: World wisdom Inc, 2006.

¹⁴⁴ Ridgeon, p. 227-228.

While the goal of Sufi practitioners was always to be near to Allāh, this ideal found diverse expressions among various Sufi groups in its long history. Sufism had its origins in the practices of some individuals who lived in Baghdād and upper Mesopotamia during the 8th century. They observed different stripes of asceticism and renunciation. They sought an inner closeness with Allāh through prayers, Qur’ān recitation, and contemplation. The early renunciation gave birth to a more uniform mystical expression during the 9th c. in Baghdād. The early Sufi mystical thought revolved around the idea of developing an experiential knowledge of Allāh and having a union with Him. Accordingly, they developed practices such as *dhikr* and *samā’* to facilitate the mystical experience which was considered to be a privilege of the few elect. They talked about the nature of mystical experience, its states and the stations, and also the joy of union with Allāh. Love of Allāh became a major theme in early Sufi literature. In this stage, Sufism catered to the middle class merchants and artisans who were dissatisfied with the materialist culture in urban settings. The members of this group stayed largely apolitical.

After Sufism became institutionalized from the 10th century onward, it added new elements including *silsila*, *adab*, *bay’a*, *ijāza*, and *khirqā*. Also, the rules of master-disciple relationship became a central concept in Sufi *tarīqas* whose lodges filled the Islamic lands with the support of the pious patrons and rulers. Accordingly, Sufi groups became much more service oriented and provided religious guidance to the surrounding communities through *sohbets* and visits. Also during that time, the Sufi teachings and practices became somewhat consolidated as a result of the efforts of some scholars such as al-Ghazālī and al-Hujwārī. The popularization of Sufism resulted in the proliferation of

practices usually referred to as cult of saints. People regarded the Sufi saints as intermediaries to Allāh and frequented their shrines in search of *baraka* and assistance. As a result, Sufism became deeply rooted in the social fabric of Muslim societies. Sufis served both the urban and rural communities as well as the new converts whose numbers rapidly grew due to the conquests. They particularly flourished in Anatolia under the protection of the Saljuk and the Ottoman *sultans*. They made significant contributions to the Anatolian Islamic and cultural life.

Beginning with colonialism and the decline of Muslim societies, many modernists and revivalists attacked Sufism and accused it of being the major cause of defeat. Modernists argued that the mystical experience was irrelevant in the modern age of science and reason. The revivalists called for a return to the original Islam in which, in their assessment, Sufism had no place. The Sufis experienced restrictions to their activities in some Muslim nation states. To overcome these challenges, the Sufi groups made some adaptations to their teachings and practices. In other words, they emphasized some aspects of traditional Sufism and de-emphasized others. They emphasized the formal teachings of Islam, the Qur'ān, the *hadīth*, community services, and *sohbets* while de-emphasizing the mystical experience, saintly practices, music, and dance. They also de-emphasized the superiority of experiential knowledge over rational arguments to know the existence and the oneness of Allāh, a hallmark characteristic of early Sufism. As a result, they continued to attract individuals from both rural and urban communities.

What made Sufism popular and successful throughout its history was its capability to adapt to new cultures and circumstances. The diversity of Sufi teachings and practices testified to this fact. It is fair to say that under the umbrella of Sufism, a variety

of ideas and practices existed. Since the time of early ascetics, the members of the Sufi path differed greatly about their understanding of this particular form of piety. Few defended complete withdrawal from society and reliance on Allāh for a living while others called for social activism and gainful employment. Some individuals and *tarīqas* persistently emphasized the formal teachings of Islam and paid little attention to mystical experiences and saintly miracles. Also, many *tarīqas* were more interested in the practical aspects of Sufism while some individuals loved to make theological speculations. Also, while early Sufi mystics gave superiority to mystical experience over reason to gain *ma'rifa*, many later Sufis had a more measured view of the potential of the human rational faculty. This diversity allowed Sufism to adapt to the modern circumstances and present itself in a way relevant to the current needs. Said Nursi was a good example of how Sufi ideas, particularly about Allah and His relationship with the cosmos, were rearticulated to relate to the modern rationalist, scientific, and individualistic age.

CHAPTER 2

A SURVEY OF SAID NURSI'S LIFE

The Childhood Milieu

Said Nursi was born into a Kurdish family in 1878 in the Ottoman province of Bitlis which was located in predominantly Kurdish Eastern Anatolia.¹⁴⁵ At the time of his birth, the province of Bitlis had a large population compared to the surrounding provinces of Van, Diyarbakır, and Erzurum. The inhabitants of Bitlis consisted of 254, 000 Muslims, 130, 000 Armenians, 6, 000 Syrian Jacobites, 2,600 Chaldean Catholics, 3, 862 Yezidis, 210 Greek Orthodox and 372 Copts. In this ethnically very diverse territory as in the rest of Eastern Anatolia at the time, the Turks were primarily the members of the state bureaucracy, the Armenians were villagers, merchants and town notables, and Kurdish speakers made up the tribal and village population. While some of the villagers owned their own land, many of them worked for the tribal leaders. Turkish was the language of administration officials and of city notables whereas Kurdish and Armenian were mostly the languages of the local population.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ There is some discrepancy about Nursi's date of birth. Şerif Mardin gave 1876, Şükran Vahide and Abdurrahman Nursi, Said Nursi's biographer nephew, put 1877, and Alparslan Açıkgenç, in *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi* p. 565 vol. 35 published in 2008, gave 1878. Açıkgenç indicated that Said Nursi provided, for his birth date, the year of 1295 in Islamic calendar in a document he presented to *Dârü'l-hikmeti'l-İslâmiyye*, probably in 1918. The year of 1295 in Islamic calendar corresponds to early 1878 in the modern calendar. So, it is plausible that Nursi was born in either late 1877 or early 1878. Note: *Daru'l Hikmeti'l Islamiye* was an official late Ottoman institution whose objective was to generally meet the religious needs of the public with various publications. Nursi served as a member of this organization in 1918.

¹⁴⁶Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, Albany: Suny Press, 1989, p. 45.

This part of Eastern Anatolia was conquered by the Ottomans in the 16th century and they granted a great degree of autonomy to the local elite which consisted of *ağas* (tribal leaders) and *shaykhs* (spiritual leaders). The title *shaykh* in the Eastern Anatolian context referred to people who combined two qualities: knowledge of Islamic sciences and possession of spiritual powers called *karâmât*. Accordingly, though this title was sometimes used for some village *imams* (prayer leaders) and some teachers, it was particularly used for the heads of Sufi orders whose primary role was leading the instruction in the Sufi institutions. They were viewed as holy man and became objects of popular devotion.¹⁴⁷ In some cases, they were also the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad which earned them great respect, charisma, and authority. Reputable figures sometimes combined both spiritual authority and political authority. “During the 19th century, local political leadership devolved increasingly to the *shaykhs*. This was a novel feature of local politics.”¹⁴⁸ Accordingly, the Sufi groups had considerable influence in both mundane and religious affairs of the local communities. The province of Bitlis historically had a religiously diverse population and the Christian missionaries regularly visited the area during the 17th and the 18th centuries, but only to proselytize other Christians, not Muslims. The establishment of the Catholic Armenian church in the region was a fruit of their work. Toward the end of the 19th century, many Protestant missionaries arrived in the region, and though they primarily catered to the local

¹⁴⁷ Martin Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shkaikh and State, The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*, New Jersey: Zed Books Limited, 1992, p. 205.

¹⁴⁸ Mardin, p. 52.

Christian people, their intense activities became one of the factors that disturbed the long “symbiotic” relationship between local communities.¹⁴⁹

Even though Bitlis was located in a mountainous territory, the communication from villages to the center and from the center to neighboring provinces such as Van was easy for two reasons. First, Bitlis became the provincial capital after the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-78 in which the people of Bitlis showed great heroism in their fight against Russians. The rank of provincial capital brought more government officials which in turn brought more investment including modern communication tools such as telegraph and a daily newspaper. Second, the province of Bitlis was known for its vibrant bazaar which was frequented by trade caravans for the most part of the year “For many centuries Bitlis had functioned as a gateway for the commerce of silk, and had never, therefore, as isolated as its mountainous configuration would lead one to believe.”¹⁵⁰ Hence, the inhabitants of Bitlis were well-aware of the developments in the Ottoman Empire and generally in the world.

During Nursi’s childhood, the social and political order in Eastern Anatolia including Bitlis was disturbed by several important developments. Beginning with the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire reformed the administration system as part of a comprehensive modernization project and adopted a more centralized type of governance which was largely based on the French model. The most encompassing of these reforms were called the *Tanzimat Fermanı* which was enacted in 1839.¹⁵¹ Other important

¹⁴⁹ Mardin, p. 45-46.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁵¹ Şükrü Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, p.72

developments included the Russian-Turkish war of 1878, the activities of separatist Armenian armed groups in Eastern Anatolia after that, and the domination of the Mujaddidiyya -Naqshibandiyya *tariqa* in the region.¹⁵²

The *tanzimat* reforms changed the local dynamics as a result of the centralization of power and education. The Ottoman state started appointing *walī* (governors) to each province that in turn formed local councils which made up of representatives from the state bureaucracy as well as from the local religious and ethnic groups. Bitlis province council, for example, consisted of the governor, the head of the religious affairs, the president of the civil and religious tribunal, the head accountant, the secretary general, two Muslim and two Christian notables, and the Armenian Gregorian bishop.¹⁵³ The state also opened modern secular schools in different parts of the Empire as part of its modernization project. In the late eighteenth hundreds, the center of the province of Bitlis had three *ruṣḍiyes* (secular middle schools) and five *madrasas* (Islamic seminaries).¹⁵⁴

Another important development that affected the region was the Russian-Ottoman war of 1877-1878. At the end of the war, the Ottomans ceded the territories of Kars, Ardahan, and Batum to Russia, which caused great anxiety among the Muslim inhabitants of Eastern provinces. That anxiety reflected itself negatively in the relationship between the Muslim and Armenian Christian residents of the area. “Rumors and fears that the European powers (mainly Britain, France, and Russian) whose great influence on the Ottoman administration did not pass unnoticed, were allying themselves

¹⁵² Mardin, p. 42-47.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p.46.

with the local Christian groups, led inevitably to an exacerbation of the tension between Kurds and Christian groups.”¹⁵⁵ The tensions caused the formation of local militia groups from all sides which led to mutual acts of violence for decades.

The Armenian revolutionaries were emboldened after the Russian-Ottoman war. In 1881, for example a secret Armenian group called The Protectors of the Fatherland was formed in Erzurum and uncovered by the Ottomans. Armenian militias attacked both the Ottoman government forces in the area as well as the Armenian residents who did not support their activities. The Empire established a local militia made up of Kurdish and Turkish tribesmen to repel such attacks. While the creation of the local militia brought some safety and stability, it did not stop the activities of Armenian revolutionary groups which became more organized and coordinated by 1893-1894. In an incident in Sason-a sub-province of Bitlis- during that time many Muslims were killed. In response to that, Muslim residents of the area started establishing local militia groups. “On October 1895 there was a panic riot in Bitlis in which 200 Armenians were killed. Much graver incidents with many killed occurred in Istanbul following an Armenian demonstration on August 24, 1896”¹⁵⁶ However, the conflict abated 1896-1914 because the Armenian leadership came to believe that their provocations would not produce the European intervention they desired. Of course, the First World War blew the lid off of things because the European Allies against Germany now intended to destroy and colonize the Ottoman Empire, so the Ottoman leadership was frightened by the likelihood of the physical annihilation of themselves and all the Muslims, which led them to take

¹⁵⁵ Mardin, p. 63.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 65.

extreme measures. The relationship between the ethnic and religious groups of Eastern provinces forever changed after this war.

The missionary activities in the region increased during the 19th century. Both Catholic and Protestant evangelizers frequented the area and opened institutions primarily for their co-religionists. For example, the American protestant groups had a school for girls which housed 100 students.¹⁵⁷ The missionary activity was a source of concern for both the state and the Muslim inhabitants of the area for they probably saw it as the penetrations of Christians in the land of Islam.

The last important development that affected the area during the second half of the 19th century was the arrival of Mujaddidiyya-Naqshbandiyya *tarîqas* in the region. This revivalist Naqshbandiyya branch had been founded by Ahmad al-Sirhindī (d.1624) to fight the eclecticism promoted by Mughal Emperor Akbar who chafed at the restrictions put on him by Muslim orthodoxy and was suspected of wanting to create a synthesis of Islam with Hinduism. Al-Sirhindī opposed Akbar's move and argued that such a synthesis would eliminate the distinguishing characteristics of Islam and turn Muslims into idol worshippers. Accordingly, he started a movement to fight this idea and called Muslims to adhere to the teachings of the *sharī'a*. Sirhindī promoted activism to reform society and rejected seclusion and renunciation of the world which were the hallmarks of traditional Sufism. Accordingly, he was critical of Ibn al-'Arabī who apparently taught that the material world was an illusion. Such a teaching, for al-Sirhindī, undermined the motivation of Muslims to take the affairs of the world seriously. While

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 61.

al-Sirhindī did not actively participate in politics, he sent letters to the rulers and advised them to stick to the Islamic principles.

This renewalist branch was introduced to Eastern Anatolia by Mavlānā Khālid al-Baghdādi, himself a Kurd, (d.1827) who was born in the predominantly Kurdish Süleymaniye, a city in the Ottoman province of Musul. He traveled to India, studied with the masters from revivalist Naqshbandiyya, and was initiated into the order. Al-Baghdādi put his stamp on this tradition with his emphasis on political mobilization. Accordingly, Khālidis became known for their fight against Westernization and the Western imperialism in the Ottoman Empire.¹⁵⁸ “Halidism became a force which confronted the expansion of Russia in the Caucasus in the 1830’s. It was to find a similarly anti-imperialistic foundation in Indonesia and in central Asia.”¹⁵⁹ Members of this group actively fought against Russians during the war of 1877-1878.

Until the time of al-Baghdādi, the Qādirī order was more popular in Eastern Anatolia.¹⁶⁰ However, the Naqshbandiyya group dominated the region, northern Iraq, and Syria with the efforts al-Baghdādi, who was able to convince some of the prominent Kurdish families in these areas such as the Barzani family to change over to the Naqshbandiyya. The influence of the Khālidis spread to Muş, Nurşin, Bitlis and Hizan, the sub-province where Nursi was born.¹⁶¹ “These were places where Said Nursi was to study with Naqshbandiyya *shaykhs*, some of whom were carrying the Halidi tradition.”¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ Mardin, p.60.

¹⁵⁹ Mardin, p.60.

¹⁶⁰ Van Bruinessen, p. 216.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 224.

¹⁶² Mardin, p.58.

While fast spread of Khalidi Naqshī group weakened the popularity of Qādiriyya, it did not completely eradicate it from this area. The dwellers of city of Erzurum, for example, stayed largely Qādiri even after the arrival of that tradition.¹⁶³ Also, the references that Nursi made in his books to al-Jīlānī, the founder of Qādiriyya, indicated the presence of Qādiri order in Eastern Anatolia. However, it is important to point out that the *madrasas* that Nursi studied in his adolescence primarily linked to the Khalidi-Naqshī order.¹⁶⁴ The Sufi *shaykhs* from this tradition exercised considerable influence in local affairs as well as in *madrasas*. The teachers in those schools were primarily connected to this *tarīqa*. “A diploma of religious studies could also be obtained in villages around Bitlis where teaching was carried by leaders of the Naqshbandiyya sect.” says Mardin.¹⁶⁵ Accordingly, the area residents came to contact with the Sufi discourse in many areas of life.

Nursi grew up witnessing and hearing about these important developments which significantly contributed to the formation of his ideas about Sufism, social and political activism, and modernization of education and administration, as illustrated later in the chapter. Accordingly, it is safe to assume that the revivalist Khālidi-Naqshī tradition, with its emphasis on activism, adherence to the Qur’ân and the *Sunna* (the exemplary life of the Prophet Muhammad), and criticism of Westernization, had significant influence on Nursi.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p.59.

¹⁶⁴ Hamid Algar, Sufism and Tarīqa in the Life and Work of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Journal of the History of Sufism*, Paris, 2001, vol: 3, p. 199-221.

¹⁶⁵ Mardin, p.52.

Education

Said Nursi was born in an area whose inhabitants were primarily Kurdish Sunni Muslims with almost always some Sufi affiliation. The local culture was replete with Sufi signs and symbols. The stories of great Sufi saints constituted part of the common idiom which people shared and internalized. The education in Islamic sciences was provided by institutions and teachers associated with Sufi orders. Also, Sufi *shaykhs* kept a high profile in the community, and people turned to them for spiritual and worldly matters for they considered them holy and wise. Nursi grew up in such an environment and received five years of education in the area *madrasas*.

Nursi narrated that at the times of difficulty people of his village including his family sought assistance from the spirit of *shaykh* Sibġatullah Arvasi (d. 1873), from Khālidi-Naqshī *tariqa*, who died three years before his birth. Nursi felt the spiritual presence of this *shaykh* intimately, “when, at the age of about twelve, he went to study for a while at the *madrasa* in the village of *Seyda*, the site of his shrine.”¹⁶⁶ Nursi also mentioned that while people in his village sought assistance from *shaykh* al-Arvasi, he evoked the spirit of al-Jīlānī sometimes even for trivial matters. He said that he invoked al-Jīlānī to find his lost objects in return for a recitation of the chapter of *al-Fatiha* in the Qur’ān to his spirit, and the *shaykh* always came to his aid. That bond with al-Jīlānī continued throughout his life as manifested in his books. It is possible that Nursi wanted to distinguish himself from the rest of his peers by his claim of having an exclusive bond with al-Jīlānī. In fact a sense of being special was present in his mind very early in his

¹⁶⁶ Algar, p.10.

life as was evident in a dream he had when he was about twelve years old. In that dream, the end of the world came and he saw all the Prophets including the Prophet Muhammad who told him to study the Qur'ân.¹⁶⁷ This dream became a motivating force for learning for Nursi who otherwise was reluctant to study.

The successor of *Shaykh* al-Arvasi, *Shaykh* Abdurrahmān Tāġi (d. 1887) had a more direct influence on Nursi. Initially a Qādiri, *shaykh* Tāġi became a *Naqshī* under the guidance of al-Arvasi, founded a *tekke* and a *madrasa* in the town of Nurşin, and became very influential throughout the south east Anatolia. “Thanks to a series of marriage alliances, he was also able to acquire political prominence as an arbiter of intertribal disputes.”¹⁶⁸ It was in this *madrasa* Nursi began his formal training, at the age of nine; however, he got himself in trouble with his teachers and his peers and was sent home, a cycle that repeated itself throughout his schooling in different *madrakas*. At the age of twelve, he went to the same *madrasa* again and was able to meet with al-Tāġi directly. The *shaykh* reportedly showed great care for the students from the village of Nursi for his belief that one of them would revive the religion of Islam. Another account suggested that he knew it was Nursi who would renew the faith and treated him with compassion and even respect. When at an unspecified point during his childhood the *shaykh* spotted him walking towards Nurşin, he went out, it is said, to welcome him and escort him to the *tekke*. He then told all of his followers to vacate the *tekke* in order to remain alone with the child. When the curious disciples peered through the key hole to see what was happening, they saw the venerable *shaykh* kneeling in a meditative state before the young

¹⁶⁷ Said Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati* (two volumes), Istanbul: Nesil Basim Yayin, 1996, p. 2123.

¹⁶⁸ Algar, p.11.

boy, who remained upright in front of him. Then he emerged and explained to his disciples: “In just the same way that Allāh has caused this child to traverse the stages of formal learning, He will also grant him swift progress in spiritual matters.”¹⁶⁹ Nursi’s nephew narrated this story and it points to the special place Nursi occupied among his peers even if there are some exaggerations in the narration. When the *shaykh* died, Nursi was fourteen years old; however, Nursi indicated that his spiritual connection with him continued even after his death. About a year after the *shaykh*’s death, Nursi fell sick and his friends took him to the successor of al-Tāġi for healing. At that point, Nursi had a vision of the *shaykh* himself, his nose began to bleed, but he got cured immediately.¹⁷⁰ Nursi spent some more time in this *madrassa* under the successor of Al-Tāġi, *Shaykh* Fethullah Verkanisi; however, there was no indication that Nursi finished the formal training completely. He indicated that he found the curriculum in the *madrassa* system too cumbersome and he studied the subjects of his interest instead of reading all required material.¹⁷¹ However, he also indicated that he developed great mastery of all the subjects taught in the school as a result of his private readings. He reportedly won all the debates in the *madrassa* and became an outstanding student. One of his teachers, *Mulla* Fethullah, tested his knowledge of Islamic sciences which Nursi passed with flying colors. Upon seeing this, *Mulla* Fethullah complemented him and said that Nursi combined both intelligence and memory which was, in his view, a rare thing.¹⁷² The author of his life, who was also his nephew, Abdurrahmān reported that some of Nursi’s teachers secretly

¹⁶⁹ Algar, p.13.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p.13.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p.13

¹⁷² Said Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, p. 2123.

began receiving instructions from him in Islamic sciences when Nursi was at the age of sixteen or seventeen.¹⁷³

Even though it is clear that Nursi had plenty of Naqshī-Sufi associations during his studies, there is no indication that he formally became a member of a *tarīqa*. “The Naqshbandiyya affiliation of the teachers in the madrasas was fully typical for their time and place; as Nursi himself recalled, “When I was eight or nine years old, everyone in our district followed the Naqshbandiyya *tarīqa*”.¹⁷⁴ Nursi did not formally subscribe to any of the Sufi groups even though they were ubiquitous in the area and he felt a bond with prominent saints such as al-Jīlānī.

When he was fifteen or sixteen years old, he saw al-Jīlānī in a dream, who instructed him to visit Mustafa Paşa, the chief of the tribe of Miran, and ask him to stop oppressing his people and start praying five times a day and shoot him if he did not listen. Nursi acted on this dream, took his pistol, visited Mustafa Paşa and conveyed the message of al-Jīlānī. The Paşa made clear that he would listen to him on the condition that he demonstrated his skills in religious knowledge in a debate with the scholars in his tribe. Nursi accepted the challenge, defeated all of Paşa’s scholars in an astonishing performance, and the Paşa kept his promise.¹⁷⁵ While there may be exaggerations in this report, it showed Said’s willingness, in his youth, to get involved in socio-political matters and became an advocate for social reform and religious revival. It also proved that he made some fame as an arbiter in the area and his reputation began to grow as a

¹⁷³Ibid., p.2123.

¹⁷⁴ Algar., p.16.

¹⁷⁵Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, p.2127.

man of knowledge, courage, and intelligence. Nursi's claim of having a direct spiritual link with al-Jīlānī probably served him well and earned him great respect, credibility, and legitimacy. Dreams like this played an important role in Nursi's entire life. In fact, it was a dream he had right before the World War I convincing him that he was given a mission of protecting the Qur'ān. Basically, Nursi's dreams and his relationship with al-Jīlānī provided him both personal conviction and social legitimacy about his mission of reviving Islam.

Nursi, in his books, touched on the reason why he avoided establishing a formal tie with a *tarīqa* and said that his preoccupation with formal knowledge prevented him from pursuing a Sufi path. In another place in his works, he explained that he did not want to content himself with an inward focus on the heart which was the case with the people of Sufi orders. Rather, he indicated, he wanted to find the truth with both heart and intellect.¹⁷⁶ Nursi came up with such explanations later in his life as he was reflecting upon his early education in a strongly Sufi environment. It is doubtful that he viewed Sufism poorly during his childhood and adolescence due to the fact that it was such an important component of the social identity in his hometown. It is also important to remember that Nursi had a temperament which made it difficult for him to submit to an authority. In fact, he often got into trouble during his studies due to his unwillingness to listen to his teachers. Hence, his nature probably made it difficult for him to undergo Sufi training which required absolute submission to a master.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 2116.

It is plausible that Nursi's resistance to formal Sufi membership, aside from the reasons listed above, stemmed from his awareness of the criticism directed to Sufism in the larger society during that time. Such criticism was plenty in the Ottoman Empire as well as in the Islamic world among intellectuals whose views probably reached the province of Bitlis and the *madrasas* that Nursi studied. In other words, Nursi probably had some knowledge of the debates in the Ottoman Empire about Islam, modernization, Western science and rationalism. Accordingly, while he had a very positive relationship with Sufism during his formative years, he nevertheless refrained from a formal initiation into an order.

Social Activism

As Nursi's reputation grew in the province of Bitlis and Eastern Anatolia, he was called *mulla* to signify his authority in Islamic sciences and he became a regular guest of Tahir Paşa, the governor of Bitlis.¹⁷⁷ He was probably about seventeen years old at the time. The governor needed his help to resolve social and tribal conflicts and Nursi did not hesitate to cooperate. After all it was typical for the men of religion to become an arbiter in conflicts in that region. Nursi did not talk much about that relationship; however, it looks like his association with the governor opened some doors for him in the region and later in Istanbul. From this time onward, Nursi spent many years of his life for social and political activism which took him initially to the neighboring city of Van and later to the different parts of the Ottoman Empire.

¹⁷⁷ Van Bruinessen, p. 209.

He arrived in the nearby city of Van in 1893 or 1895 upon the invitation of Hasan Paşa, the governor of the province of Van who soon was replaced by Tahir Paşa. Thereafter, this city became his base and he stayed there until 1925 with some intervals. Compared to Bitlis, Van was relatively a small town with no notable scholars at the time. Nursi said that the governor wanted to promote knowledge and learning in the city and invited him as part of that agenda. While this may be the case, it is also plausible that the governor wanted to use the reputation and arbitrary skills of Nursi for local politics which probably became more difficult to manage as a result of centralization reforms by the Empire, the growing Russian threat in the north, and the developing tensions between Muslims and Armenian Christians. Nevertheless, Van provided Nursi the opportunity to observe the impact of modernization programs undertaken by the Ottoman state. He was able to meet with the graduates of new secular schools, observe the degree of Westernization among the Ottoman ruling elite, and get fluency in modern sciences through self-training in the extensive library of the governor. It was during his stay in Van, Nursi also became more knowledgeable about the political and intellectual developments in the Islamic world. He met with the followers of al-Afghānī and read the ideas of Muhammad ‘Abduh. Similar to these modernists, Nursi became a believer in the educational and governmental reforms and the unity of Muslims to respond to the challenges of the time.

Even though keeping a close association with the ruling elite was discouraged by many of the scholars of traditional Islam and many Sufis, *Mulla Said*’s acceptance of the governor’s patronage probably stemmed from two reasons. One was the influence of Mujaddidiyya-Naqshī tradition whose founder al-Sirhindī sent letters to the political

leaders whose support in social-religious reform, he considered, was crucial. Accordingly, Nursi probably saw his friendship with the governor as an opportunity to promote social and religious revival. Also, specifically his friendship with Tahir Paşa served him well as the governor was a patron of learning, followed closely the developments in science, and had an extensive library. Whether the *Paşa's* patronage for Nursi was a personal decision or a part of a wider state policy is not clear; however, it is known that the *sultan* of the time, Abdulhamid II, had a policy of reaching out to scholars and Sufi orders to promote his pan-Ottoman agenda.

Tahir Paşa's residence was a favorite meeting place for government officials, the teachers of the new secular schools, intellectuals, and the elite to discuss different subjects of interest. Nursi participated in such discussions with the encouragement of the governor. It was through these conversations that Nursi observed the degree of the impact of the *tanzimat* reforms on the ideas of the intellectuals and the chasm between their worldview and those of the traditional scholars. He also realized that the education in traditional *madrasas* did not provide sufficient training for its students to respond to the challenges brought by modern sciences about Allāh, the cosmos, and religion. The curriculum in *madrasas* was given shape during the 16th century and consisted of courses in Islamic sciences in addition to classic philosophy and logic. The reformation attempts of its curriculum by the Ottoman state during the 19th century proved to be unsuccessful.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*, Montreal: McGill University Press, 1964, p.173.

Mulla Said, who was so reputable among the scholars with traditional education in the area, probably felt undermined among the elite due to his lack of knowledge of modern sciences. This prompted him to acquire the knowledge of all the branches of the hard sciences. “ Taking advantage of the governor’s library and the newspapers and the journals supplied to the governor’s office, *Mulla Said* embarked on the study of such subjects as history, geography, mathematics, geology, physics, chemistry, astronomy, and philosophy(probably natural sciences), as well as current affairs and developments in the Ottoman life and the Islamic world”.¹⁷⁹ As a result of this self-learning process, Nursi greatly improved his knowledge of the modern sciences which was unheard of a traditional scholar in Eastern Anatolia at the time. He narrated that he entered into a debate about a subject with a geography teacher which prolonged and they decided to finish it later. He said that he memorized a geography book that night and when they met the following day, he defeated the teacher in his own field. He also narrated a similar encounter with a chemistry teacher whom he defeated having mastered the inorganic chemistry in five days. He was extremely successful in mathematics and he was able to solve the most difficult questions immediately.¹⁸⁰ Nursi made use of his extensive knowledge of modern sciences in his discussions about Allah, the cosmos, and the humans in his expansive works he produced after he was 40’s. Sometime during his stay at the *Paşa*’s residence, he learned Turkish as well. It was his habit to go over the books he memorized periodically. He said that *Tahir Paşa* assigned him a room and every night before going to sleep he spent three hours going over the books he memorized. It would

¹⁷⁹Şükran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, Albany: Suny Press, 2005.

¹⁸⁰ Nursi, p.2129.

take him three months to go over the entire material. Nursi made use of his extensive knowledge of modern sciences in his discussions about Allah, the cosmos, and the humans in his expansive works he produced after he was 40's."¹⁸¹

Nursi got familiar with the views of the Muslim modernists through books and newspapers and probably realized that the problem in the locality of Eastern Anatolia was the same problem in the whole Islamic world. Muslims were lagging behind in science and technology and their territories were being occupied. Nursi, like other modernists, drew attention to the urgency of transformation of the traditional educational system to include the modern Western sciences in the curriculum. In fact Nursi was able to put his theory into practice when he opened his own small *madrassa* in Van most likely with the help of the governor. He combined both religious and modern sciences with the belief that positive sciences would corroborate the religious truths. Islam, for Nursi, was a religion of reason and there could not be any contradiction between the findings of science and the teachings of the Qur'ân. This idea also resonated with the views of modernists such as Sayyid Ahmad Khan, and 'Abduh. It looks like Nursi was well aware of the materialistic tendencies underlying the Western scientific thought and he was very critical of it while he was in favor of borrowing the scientific method.

Nursi enjoyed spending the summers in the mountains of Eastern Anatolia with the students in his small *madrassa*. He indicated that he loved the feeling of absolute freedom in the mountains and he was also able to ponder upon the nature which he considered to be the book of Allāh. The abundance of the natural philosophy in his works

¹⁸¹ Nursi, p.2129.

he produced later was probably inspired by the love he developed for nature during this time. “He had a close affinity with the natural world and its creatures”.¹⁸² He narrated that in one occasion he was sitting on a rock after performing the evening prayer, when a wolf appeared. After staring at Nursi for a while, the animal went its way without doing any harm.¹⁸³ Witnessing this and similar occurrences, the students of Nursi probably attributed him saintly powers; however, Nursi was more concerned about his madrasa and the development of its curriculum rather than talking about *karâmât*. He said that several of the important Sufi masters in Van tried to recruit him to their orders, and yet he refused.

After spending several years teaching in his small *madrasa*, Nursi was convinced that the curriculum he implemented should be generalized to all *madrasas* in Eastern Anatolia. The first step, he thought, was to open a sample high level institution in the region and prove the effectiveness of his method. He even came up with the name of the university he envisioned to found: Madrasa al-Zahra, after the University of al-Azhar in Egypt. “Mulla Said’s chief aim was to establish a university in Eastern Anatolia where this method would be practiced; that is, where the physical sciences would be taught together with the religious sciences and his other ideas applied.”¹⁸⁴ Nursi spend the many years of his life to materialize this dream.

He thought that such a project would be a remedy for social, cultural, and political problems in Eastern Anatolia. Nursi’s vision was primarily shaped by the realities he

¹⁸² Vahide, p. 30.

¹⁸³ Ibid, p. 30.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 29.

witnessed in the area and also what he knew about the challenges in the Islamic world. His priority at this point was to improve the conditions in that region. Nursi was able to witness the changes among the graduates of newly established secular schools. They produced the kind of people who thought and acted like Europeans. Nursi was greatly disturbed by what he saw and viewed it harmful to the Islamic cultural identity of Eastern Anatolia. He observed the clash of ideologies between the graduates of *madrasas* and those of *mektebs*. Nursi was also aware of the political developments in the region. The Russians continued to threaten Eastern Anatolia, and the Armenian militias fought to establish an independent state which would include areas with heavily Kurdish population. For Nursi, establishing a university with the curriculum he proposed would combat all these challenges. It would preserve the Islamic cultural identity, strengthen the ties between Muslim Kurds and Turks, and fortify the unity of the Empire. It would combat the economic backwardness in the region and raise competent religious scholars who could deal with the modern challenges. Hence, he felt great urgency to establish the university he planned and that sense of urgency took him to Istanbul to seek funds for his project.

It was most likely Tahir Paşa who encouraged Nursi to visit the *sultan* personally to get funding for such a large scale project that could not be funded locally. When Nursi arrived in Istanbul in 1907, he was around thirty years old. He had established a reputation in Eastern Anatolia and was known for his intelligence, great debating skills, social activism, profound knowledge of both Islamic and modern sciences, and concern for the safety of the Ottoman Empire. What he had planned as a short trip turned out to be a long stay in Istanbul due to the political turmoil in the capital. He rented a room in the

cultural district of Fatih, his fame quickly spread around, and he immediately became part of the intellectual and political activities. Beginning with March 1909, he also started writing a column in *Volkan*, a journal published by İttihad-ı Muhammedi Firkasi (The Muhammadan Union) whose Islamist founding members included Nursi.¹⁸⁵ The union defended modernization of the institutions of the Empire while staying faithful to Islam.

From 1907 until 1922, Nursi spent most of his life between Istanbul and Van. During that time, his priority was to secure funds for his al-Zahra project. He was also involved in political and intellectual activities to safeguard the well-being of the Ottoman Empire. When he arrived in Istanbul in 1907, he found himself in the middle of the constitutionalist movement. The participants of this movement were mostly secular and nationalist military members of İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti (The Committee of Union and Progress or (CUP)) and liberal intellectuals which included the Young Turks. They also collaborated with religious figures who supported their cause of constitutional reforms which called for the restriction of the authority of the *sultans* and the creation of a representative government. Nursi cooperated with them and advocated, like them, that giving more rights and representation to citizens including the minorities would preserve the unity of the Empire. Besides, Nursi argued that the progress in science and technology to ensure the survival of the Empire and catch up with the West could only be possible in a free and constitutional society.¹⁸⁶

Nursi spent his time in Istanbul from the fall of 1907 until the May of 1908 defending constitutionalism and freedom. When he finally presented his project to the

¹⁸⁵ Vahide., p. 65.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 33-36.

officials of the *sultan* Abdulhamid II in the May of 1908, he received a cold response. While the nature of the encounter is not entirely known, probably Nursi's forthright personality, his strange native outfit, and the somewhat critical language in his proposal produced confusion and even suspicion in the minds of the officials who referred him to a mental doctor who diagnosed him with insanity which led to Nursi's hospitalization followed by a short term of imprisonment. He was probably still in prison when Abdulhamid II finally agreed to the restoration of the constitution and the senate in July 23, 1908. He was released from the prison either as part of a general amnesty or by the efforts of his acquaintances in the CUP which formed the government after the first elections in 1908.¹⁸⁷

Nursi outlined the specifics of his project in the petition he presented which was later published in *Şark ve Kurdistan Gazette* (East and Kurdistan Gazetesi) in November 19, 1908. The full text of the petition provided great insight about his motivations, ideas, and ideals.

While, in order to be in harmony in progress with our other brothers in this world of civilization and age of progress and competition, the founding and construction of schools has been ordered as a government service in the towns and villages of Kurdistan- and has been witnessed with thanks- only children who know Turkish can benefit from them. Since Kurdish children who have learned Turkish consider the only mines of perfection to be the *medreses*, and the teachers in the mektebs do not know the local language, the children continue to be deprived of education. Their resulting uncivilized behavior and disorder invites the West to rejoice at our misfortune. Moreover, since the people remain in a primitive state, uncivilized and blindly imitating, they became prey to doubts and suspicions. It as though these three matters were preparing a ghastly blow for the Kurds in the future, which is a source of anxiety for those with insight. The remedy for this: three educational establishments should be set up in different areas of Kurdistan as examples to be followed, and as encouragement and stimulation... These should be known by the familiar name of *medrese* and should teach both the religious and the modern sciences. Each should have at least fifty students, and their means of

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 46-47.

subsistence should be provided by the illustrious government. Also, the revitalization of a number of other *medreses* would be an effective way of securing the future life, material, moral, and spiritual, of Kurdistan. In this way, the basis of education would be established and by making over to the government this huge force that is now being dissipated in internal conflict, it would cause it to be expended outwardly. It would also demonstrate that they (Kurds) were thoroughly deserving of justice and capable of being civilized, as well as displaying their natural ability.¹⁸⁸

Nursi talked about the details of his project in his books as well. Two of the details he provided were important for our purposes. Along with modern and religious sciences, Nursi also wanted to incorporate Sufi teachings in the program. Basically, his curriculum combined the education and the training in three different institutions: *Madrasa, Maktab, and Tekke*. “The people of the *medrese* accuse those of the *mektebs* of weakness in belief because of their literalist interpretation of certain matters, while the latter look on the former as ignorant and unreliable because they have no knowledge of modern sciences. Then the scholars of the *medreses* regard the people of the *tekkes* as followers of innovations.”¹⁸⁹ To reconcile the differences, Nursi proposed an integrated curriculum that reflected the training in all three branches.

Nursi’s inclusion of Sufi teachings and training in the proposed curriculum demonstrated that he saw the positive role that Sufism could play in the transformation of individuals and communities and also uniting people from different tribal and ethnic backgrounds. He was also probably aware of *sultan* Abdulhamid’s policies of Pan-Ottomanism and his promotion of Sufism as part of that agenda. Hence, it made sense for Nursi whose goal was to keep the unity of the Kurds and Turks to include Sufism in his

¹⁸⁸ Vahide, p. 43.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

project. In other words, he was interested in the social role of Sufism as much as its role in the personal spiritual perfection. In his approach to Sufism, Nursi differed from most of the Muslims modernists of his era who often viewed it as an obstacle to the well-being of Muslims.

The other detail that Nursi provided later about his *madrassa* was the language of instruction. He indicated that the instruction should be in three languages, with Arabic being compulsory, Turkish necessary, and Kurdish permissible. The instruction, to Nursi, should be provided by Kurdish scholars who were trusted both by the Turks and the Kurds and by non-Kurdish scholars who knew Kurdish and were familiar with the local customs of the region. This detail was insightful about his desire for the unity of Muslims. Having Arabic as the compulsory language highlighted his sensitivity for the unity of Muslims and having Turkish as the necessary language underlined his goal of cooperation between Kurds and Turks in the Ottoman citizenship. During his stay in Istanbul, Nursi's concerns evolved to address the plight of all Muslims along with his worries for his native territories.

After his release from the prison in late 1908, Nursi spent the next nine months propagating constitutionalism among the scholars, the *madrassa* students, the local leaders, and the people in Eastern Anatolia. It looks like Nursi firmly believed in the goodness of constitutionalism and representative government and thought that they would serve well to the Empire. He did not hesitate to work with people from different ideologies such as Young Turks who were secular and nationalists. He promoted these concepts through public speeches, the scholarly debates, and his articles in *Volkan*. Nursi collected his speeches and writings in a book titled "*Munazarat*" (Debates) which

illustrated his understanding of freedom, constitutionalism, progress, and the unity of Muslims.

Freedom, for Nursi, was the key to individual and national happiness and progress; however, it should be exercised within the limits of Islam. In other words, it is not based on individual desires as many Westernized Ottoman elite understood it to be. “O Freedom! ... I convey these glad tidings to you that if you make the *Sharī‘a* of Islam, which is life itself, the source of life, and if you grow in that paradise, this oppressed nation will progress a thousand times further than in former times”¹⁹⁰ Accordingly, Nursi’s understanding of constitution differed from that of the secular Ottomans such as Young Turks who advocated a constitution free from religious influence. For Nursi, only an Islamic constitution would maintain the unity of Ottomans and ensure happiness and progress. “...The doors of a suffering-free paradise of progress and civilization have been opened to us... The Constitution, which is in accordance with the *Sharī‘a*, is the introduction to the sovereignty of the nation and invites us to enter like the treasury-guard of Paradise.”¹⁹¹ Nursi listed five conditions for the nation to see the benefits of constitutionalism: The union of the hearts, the love of the nation, education, human endeavor, and avoidance of extravagance. For him, Islam played a very positive role in attaining these qualities. “Nursi predicts that unity, adherence to Islamic morality together with the successful functioning of the constitutional government, and genuine practice of the Islamic principle of consultation will result in the Ottoman nation soon “competing neck and neck with the civilized nations.”¹⁹² It is important to remember that

¹⁹⁰Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁹¹Ibid., p. 54.

¹⁹²Ibid., p. 54.

Nursi's promotion of these ideas occurred during the reign of Abdulhamid II whom was regarded by many of the Ottoman intellectuals including Nursi as an oppressive Sultan. It seems that Nursi really believed that the implementation of representative government based on a constitution would save the Empire; however, it only accelerated its fall.

Nursi warned against the view which regarded freedom as a license to commit sin and evil. Accordingly, he distinguished between Western science-technology and its culture. "We shall take with pleasure the points of Europe-like technology and industry - that will assist us in progress and civilization. However, we shall forbid the sins and evils of civilization from entering the bounds of freedom and our civilization with the sword of the *Sharī'ah*, so that the young people in our civilization will be protected by the pure, cold spring of life of the *Sharī'ah*."¹⁹³ The *sharī'ah*, for Nursi, should be the bases for freedom. "Since the Illustrious *Sharī'ah* has come from the Pre-Eternal Word of Allāh, it will go to Post-Eternity." For it is dynamic. The *sharī'ah* adapts and expands in relation to man's development. It comprises equality, justice, and true freedom with all its relations and requirements. The initial period of Islam is proof of this. Therefore, Nursi said, the present unfortunate condition results from four causes: failure to observe the *Sharī'ah*, arbitrary and erroneous interpretations of it, bigotry on the part of certain "ignorant externalist scholars", and fourthly, "abandoning through ill-fortune and bad choice, the virtues of Europe, which were difficult to acquire, and imitating like parrots or children the sins and evils of civilization, which were agreeable to man's base appetites."¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³Vahide, p. 54.

¹⁹⁴Ibid,p. 55.

Nursi viewed constitutionalism, freedom and representative government as values coherent with Islam. He believed that representative government was in accordance of the Islamic principle of consultation. His view of these concepts was deeply informed by his faith as illustrated by his statements. He was definitely aware of the arguments about the incompatibility of Islam with progress as voiced by the French thinker Renon and repeated by some of the Ottoman elite such as Abdullah Cevdet. For Nursi, it was Muslims that should be blamed and not Islam as it had the potential, in his view, to lead its followers to glory. Nursi cautioned against imitating Western lifestyle which became very prevalent among the educated in late Ottoman era. It was particularly rampant among the members of the military and the graduates of the medical school. He called attention to the case of the Japanese as a good example who, he argued, borrowed the Western science and technology while preserving their own traditional culture.¹⁹⁵

Nursi's understanding of constitutionalism, unity, and representation were very similar to those of the Muslim modernists such as 'Abduh and Afghānī. Nursi was definitely well acquainted with the views of these two activists during his life in Istanbul. In fact, Afghānī spent some time in Istanbul in the late eighteen hundreds and his call for the unity of Muslims around the Ottoman *sultan* of the time received a well reception among the scholars and activists in the capital. While Nursi did not study with 'Abduh personally, he referred to him as one of his masters and it looks like he was influenced by his ideas especially in the areas of constitutionalism and representative government. It is fair to say that Nursi's concerns evolved from his local Eastern Anatolia to the whole Empire to all Muslims as a result of his exposure to the views of other Muslim

¹⁹⁵Nursi, p. 1939-1958.

modernists as well as his experiences in Istanbul. Like Afghānī and ‘Abduh, Nursi traveled extensively to promote the idea of unity of Muslims. His sermon in Damascus was an important document to illustrate his view of this subject. The sermon was given in the Umayyad mosque in the spring of 1911 to a group of ten thousand people and hundreds of scholars, and it was printed in newspapers in Damascus.¹⁹⁶

In the sermon Nursi diagnosed six illnesses about Muslims and prescribed six cures. He listed despair and hopelessness in social life, the death of truthfulness in social and political life, the love of enmity, not being aware of the bonds that unite the Muslims, despotism that spreads like a disease among Muslims, and a focus on individual interests as the illnesses. His prescription for despair was hope based on the Qur’ānic verse “do not despair of Allāh’s mercy”.¹⁹⁷ For Nursi, the current status of the Islamic world should not cause despair because “the future shall be Islam’s and the Islam’s alone and the truths of the Qur’ān and belief shall be triumphant since the truths of Islam possess a perfect capacity to progress both materially, and in moral and nonmaterial matters.”¹⁹⁸ Nursi believed the current plight of Muslims came as a result of their abandonment of Islam and they will prevail if they return to the Qur’ān. Furthermore, he firmly held that in this age of reason, the followers of other religions will be drawn to Islam due to its rational references in support of its arguments.

We Muslims, who were students of the Qur’ān, follow proof; we approach the truths of belief through reason, thought, and our hearts. We do not abandon proof in favor of blind obedience and imitation of the clergy like some adherents of other religions. Therefore, in the future when reason, science and technology prevail, of a certainty that will be the

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 2133.

¹⁹⁷ The Qur’an, 39:53

¹⁹⁸ Vahide, p. 95.

time the Qur'ân will gain ascendancy, which relies on rational proofs and invites the reason to confirm its pronouncements.¹⁹⁹

For Nursi, it was the despair on the part of Muslims that caused their defeat.

Accordingly, Arabs and Turks should stand in true solidarity to stand up for themselves and take the light of the Qur'ân to the rest of the world.

For the third illness, not being aware of the bonds that united Muslims, Nursi argued that all Muslims were brothers and he called on his Arab audience to stand alongside with the Turks who provided great service to Islam for centuries.

Freedom in accordance with the *Sharī'ah* and the consultation enjoined by the *Sharī'ah* have demonstrated the sovereignty of our true nationhood. The foundation and spirit of our true nationhood is Islam. In so far as they have carried the standard of the Ottoman Caliphate and Turkish army in the name of that nationhood, the two true brothers of Arab and Turk were like the shell and citadel of the nationhood of Islam, and the sentries of that sacred citadel. Thus, through the bond of this sacred nationhood, all the people of Islam became like a single tribe. Like the members of a tribe, the peoples and groups of Islam were bound and connected to one another through Islamic brotherhood. They assist one another morally, and if necessary, materially. It is as if all the groups of Islam were bound to each other with a luminous chain.²⁰⁰

Nursi warned his Arab audience against laziness and called them to action to improve the circumstances surrounding the Muslims. He reminded them of their responsibility as the teachers of Islam who raised the greatest scholars and activists who conveyed the message of Islam to the whole world. “Especially the Arabs, who were esteemed, numerous, and either have been awakened or will be! First and foremost, I address you with these words. For you were our teachers and leaders, and the teachers and leaders of all the peoples of Islam, and you were the fighters of Islam. It was later that the mighty Turkish nation assisted you in that sacred duty.”²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 96.

²⁰⁰ Nursi, Saidnur.com. *The Damascus Sermon*. Accessed on 1/20/2016

²⁰¹ Ibid.

Nursi finally brought up the issue of consultation. He said that the success and the happiness of Muslims in this age were dependent upon consultation and establishment of a system based on this “Islamic principle”. He likened the Muslim community to a factory with machines. If one machine fails, he argued, the whole factory ceases to function. In the same way, all Muslims regardless of their ethnic background should collaborate for the betterment of the entire community. “In particular we await with great expectation from Divine mercy the different Arab groups entering upon exalted circumstances in forty to fifty years’ time, like those of the United States of America, and your being successful like in former times in establishing Islamic rule in half the globe, indeed, in most of it, which at the moment is in captivity. If some fearful calamity does not soon erupt, the coming generation shall see it, Allāh willing”.²⁰²

Besides Eastern Anatolia and Syria, Nursi traveled to Balkans to promote his ideas and ideals. He reaffirmed his position about the solidarity with Turks when some Kurdish nationalists, during The World War I, asked his support to create an independent Kurdistan in Eastern Anatolia. It was *Shaykh* Selim of Bitlis who approached him and cited the irreligious behavior of some commanders in the Ottoman army in the area as the reason for his rebellion. Nursi declined to support him and refused to draw sword against fellow Muslims. He indicated that the misbehavior of some commanders should not be a reason to fight against the whole Ottoman army in which “there were perhaps a hundred thousand saints”.²⁰³ Nursi maintained this attitude when *Shaykh* Sait approached him in 1925 and sought his support for his rebellion against Ataturk. Again Nursi refused and

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Vahide., p. 109.

indicated that he would not shed the blood of Turks who served Islam greatly for centuries.

By the time Nursi returned from Damascus, he had made great reputation among the scholars and the state officials in Istanbul. It was probably as a result of his contacts in CUP, he was able to secure a down payment for his school project. He promptly returned to Van, found a location, and started the construction process. Meanwhile he attended to his students in Van periodically and turned them into a militia for protection from the armed Armenian groups who attacked Muslim communities as part of their campaign for independence.

Even though the constitutionalist movement achieved its goals under Sultan Mehmed Reşad (d.1918), the reforms did not alleviate the crises that the Ottomans were facing. The tide against them was too strong as the foreign powers supported nationalist movements within the Empire to dismantle it. The situation was exacerbated by the CUP government's increasing Turkish nationalist rhetoric and the misrule which led to the end of the Ottomans in Europe with the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913. The Ottoman presence in Balkans ended by the end of the war in May 1913 and Bulgarians started threatening the capital, Istanbul. Also in 1912, the Empire lost Tripoli and Benghazi, parts of modern day Libya, to Italians.

Due to the multiple wars the Ottomans engaged in 1912-13 and also the ensuing world war, the funds promised to Nursi never materialized. He was able to finish only the foundations of the school with the down payment he received; however, the world war broke out in August 1914 and Nursi with his militia participated in it to defend the Eastern provinces against Russians and the Armenian militias. The Empire allied itself

with Germany and Austria-Hungary against the Britain, France, and Russia. Nursi and his militia. Nursi's first self-arming seemingly consisted of a few guns he acquired for himself and his students for self-protection after the revolt of Shaykh Selim in Bitlis in March-April 1914. He and his close assistant Molla Habib joined the Turkish army in Nov. 1914 and were posted to the Erzurum front. It was from there that he was assigned in Dec. 1914-Jan. 1915 to form a militia, which fought well on the Pasinler front, Pasinler being 40 km. east of Erzurum along with the Ottoman army defended Van and Bitlis areas for about two years until they fell and Nursi became a captive to Russians in 1916.²⁰⁴ After serving two years at the prisoners of war camp in the province of Kosturma in northeast Russia, he escaped by March or April 1918 and returned to Istanbul in June 1918.²⁰⁵ His escape route included St. Petersburg-Warsaw-Vienna-Sofia, and he was helped by the Germans to return.

Crises and Transformation

The following three to four years of his life was marked by crises and questionings which led to his transformation from "old Said" to "new Said".²⁰⁶ After his return to Istanbul in June 1918, he remained there apparently right up to Nov. 1922, the same time that the sultanate was abolished, as he was welcomed and honored in Ankara on 9 Nov. 1922. He left Ankara for Van on 17 April 1923 exactly.²⁰⁷

When he returned from the captivity, he was physically ill, mentally exhausted, and intellectually and spiritually in turmoil. Having lost everything he fought for, he wanted

²⁰⁴ Vahide, p.108-114

²⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 131.

²⁰⁶ Nursi originally used the expressions of old and new Said in his works.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 171.

completely to withdraw from society to seek some comfort in seclusion. However, his friends in Istanbul did not let him and he was appointed as a member of the newly established Daru'l Hikmeti'l Islamiye, an official institution whose objectives were to find solutions to the problems that Islam and Muslims were facing, promote Islamic morality in the society, inform the Muslim people of Anatolia of the internal and external dangers to their faith, and “to generally meet their religious needs with various publications.”²⁰⁸. He fulfilled his responsibilities in the institution, albeit involuntarily, while he also frequently took leaves of absence to attend to his physical and psychological ailments. During those years, Nursi became very anti-imperialist which was probably prompted primarily by the British occupation of Istanbul. Accordingly, he supported the nationalist independence movement in Anatolia lead by Ataturk.

The World War I brought the end of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman territory was distributed among the allied forces as the British controlled the capital, Istanbul, the French invaded Southeastern Anatolia, the Greeks occupied the Western parts, and the Italians took control of Southwest provinces. What was left from the Empire was central Anatolia with its primarily Turkish population. The picture for the overall Islamic world was not any brighter either for the most of the Muslim counties fell under the occupation of European powers. Such a defeat was unprecedented in the history of Islam. For Nursi who strove so much to preserve the safety and the unity of the Empire and of all Muslims, that defeat must have been catastrophic which partly explains his desire for withdrawal from society. Apart from the defeat, the trauma and the destruction, including the death of 25% of the prewar population of the area of present-day Turkey, the arrival

²⁰⁸ Vahide, p.136.

of a huge number of refugees, and the physical destruction of the towns and cities, especially in Eastern Anatolia, and most of all in Van, which was practically levelled, probably had devastating impact on Nursi. Surely these events profoundly traumatized Nursi and others. As other Muslim modernists and activists, Nursi questioned the reasons behind the defeat of Muslims. He, like other modernists, put the blame partly on traditional Islam, Muslims who abandoned their faith, and the aggressive Western civilization.

While he was always respectful for traditional Islam and never dismissed it completely, he was still critical of some aspects of it which he thought contributed to the demise of Muslims. He thought that over the course of the history, Muslims gradually shifted their attention from the Qur'ân to its commentaries which became a veil for the holy book. The Muslim philosophers incorporated foreign Greek elements into their understanding of the Qur'ân and the traditional scholarship paid more attention to formalities rather than the spirit of the Islamic scripture. Accordingly, over the time the books written to explain it obscured its message and almost replaced it completely. Nursi said, "If the Qur'ân had been shown directly in the fundamentals of religion, the mind would have naturally perceived its sacredness which urges conformity, is the rouser of the conscience, and is the Qur'ân's inherent property. In this way the heart would have become sensitive toward it, and it would not have remained deaf to the admonitions of belief."²⁰⁹ Nursi's emphasis on the Qur'ân reflects the common sentiment among the Muslim intellectuals in the capital.

²⁰⁹ Vahide, p.161.

Nursi extended his criticism to Ibn Al-‘Arabī and particularly the idea of *wahdat al-wujūd* which implied, for Nursi, that the material world did not really exist. For Nursi, such an idea distracted the minds of the believers from the realities of this world and caused them not to take the affairs of the world seriously. He also held Sufism responsible for the incorporation of *israiliyyat*, the stories borrowed from Judaic-Christian sources, into Islam. As a result of deserting the spirit of Islam, he argued, it concealed itself and “it had the right, for we mixed *israiliyyat* with the fundamentals of belief, and stories with the tenets of faith, and the metaphors with the truths of belief, and did not appreciate its value.”²¹⁰ From the perspective of Nursi, the remedy for Muslims was the return to the Qur’ân which had the potential for both spiritual and material progress. When Muslims adhered to the teachings of the Qur’ân in the history, they became prosperous and will be so again if they return to it as far as he thought. For Nursi, the future shall be Islam’s since it promoted solidarity, sharing, and spiritual progress and the Western civilization is doomed to failure due to its emphasis on selfishness, the love of flesh, and neglect of the poor.²¹¹

The role of the scholars, for Nursi, then “was to remove the veils of the Qur’ân and display it directly to the ordinary believers”, so that they could see the sacred, pure, and unmixed message. He narrated that after writing these ideas about the Qur’ân, he had a dream in which he saw the Prophet Muhammad who instructed Nursi on the Qur’ân. “Finally I related this dream to a righteous member of his community, and he interpreted it in this way: “It is a powerful sign and certain good news that the Qur’ân of Mighty

²¹⁰ Vahide, p.161-162.

²¹¹ Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, p.1989.

Stature will acquire the exalted position of which it is worthy throughout the world.”²¹²

The repeated dreams about the Qur’ân just reinforced Nursi’s sense of mission and entirely put his focus on its explanation.

While Nursi’s idea of the return to the Qur’ân got more crystallized during his crises in the aftermath of The World War I, it is fair to say that he held such a view since his youth. This may be attributed to his Mujaddidiyya-Naqshī upbringing as well as to his exposure to the similar opinions of other Muslim modernists. During his years in Van, he read a newspaper report of a speech in the British House of Commons by Gladstone, the Secretary for the Colonies. According to the newspaper, Gladstone said that as long as Muslims have the Qur’ân, the British would not be able to dominate them and suggested that the Qur’ân must be discredited in the eyes of the Muslims. Enraged by such an idea Nursi thought that his sole goal should be learning, understanding, and promoting the Qur’ân and use all the sciences he learned for that objective. He indicated that he was not able to do that for a while due to his preoccupation with social and political issues. Finally, he began writing a commentary shortly before The World War I and finished it sometime during the war. It is a relatively short commentary called *İşârat-ül İcâz* (Signs of Miracle) which focused on the beauty of the order of the words in the Qur’ân. The book demonstrated Nursi’s mastery of Arabic. After he began working on the book, he had a dream which convinced him of the rightness of his endeavor and also strengthened his sense of mission.

One time I had a dream. I was at the foot of Mount Ararat. The mountain suddenly exploded, scattering rocks the size of mountains all over the world, shaking it. Then a man appeared at my side. He told me: "Expound the aspects of the Qur’ân's miracle you

²¹² Vahide, p.163.

know, concisely and succinctly!" I thought of the dream's meaning while still dreaming, telling myself: the explosion here symbolizes a revolution in mankind. As a result of it the guidance of the Criterion of Truth and Falsehood will be exalted everywhere, and will rule. And the time will come to expound its miracle! When I awoke, I realized that a great explosion was due to occur and that after that explosion, which would be in the nature of revolution, the walls protecting the Qur'ân would be shattered. Thereupon, the Qur'ân would defend itself, and in the face of the attacks mounted upon it, its Allâh-given miraculous nature would encase it like steel armor. I further realized it would be given to one such as myself to demonstrate some part of that miraculous nature."²¹³

Nursi had to wait for several more years to put his focus entirely on the Qur'ân.

While it was clear that the idea of the return to the Qur'ân was present in his mind since his early years, the crises helped him clarify it. On the one hand he was looking for the answers for the defeat of Muslims while on the other he questioned his own life to find out why he failed and what he should do next. He often sought solitude in places away from Istanbul's crowd. He thought about his engagement in politics and his pursuit of modern science and philosophy to serve Islam. He realized that politics did not get him anywhere and his studies of modern science and philosophy became an obstacle to his spiritual progress due to their rationalist orientation. He said that while his intention in pursuing modern sciences was to use them in the service of Islam, this objective was not often achieved because of the philosophy behind positive sciences. Referring to some modernists, he said "They accepted unshakably some of their principles in the form of the positive sciences, and thus could not demonstrate the true value of Islam."²¹⁴ He was probably referring to the people such as Sayyid Ahmad Khân who attempted to interpret the miracles in the Qur'ân with rational explanations. "The spiritual darkness arising from the sciences of philosophy plunged my spirit into the universe, suffocating it.

²¹³ Said Nursi, *The Letters*, Istanbul: Sözlür Nesriyâ't, 1997. Translated by Şükran Vahide. p.433.

²¹⁴ Vahide, p.164.

Whichever way I looked seeking light, I could not find no light in those matters. I could not breathe.”²¹⁵ It looks like Nursi was longing for the spiritual environment in which he grew up where his bond with the Sufi masters provided comfort.

Nursi turned to al-Jīlānī and al-Sirhindī for guidance. He read *Futūh Al-Ghayb* by the former which prescribed him to smash his pride and ego to be able to fully submit to Allāh and experience the taste of faith.

Oh, you unfortunate! As a member of the *Daru'l-Hikmeti 'l-Islamiye* you were as though a doctor curing the spiritual sicknesses of the people of Islam, whereas it is you who is sicker than anyone. You first of all find a doctor for yourself, then try to cure others! So I said to the *Shaykh* al-Jīlānī: 'You be my doctor!' And I took him as my doctor, and read the book as though it was addressing me. But it was most severe. It smashed my pride in the most fearsome manner. It carried out the most drastic surgery on my soul. I could not stand it. I read half of it as though it was addressing me, but did not have the strength and endurance to finish it. I put the book back on the shelf. Then a week later the pain of that curative operation subsided, and the pleasure came in its place. I again opened the book and read it right through; I benefited a lot from that book of my first master. I listened to his prayers and supplications, and profited abundantly.²¹⁶ This narration showed that Nursi was evolving from reliance on rationalism and science toward mysticism for personal spiritual satisfaction and also for his understanding of Allah and the cosmos.

He then read the *Maktubat* of al-Sirhindī and found two letters in the book as if they were written to him. The inspiration he found in the letters was to take one person as his master and follow him and not to concern himself with anyone else.

It is strange, but in the whole of *Mektubat*, the word *Bediuzzaman* appears only twice. And those two letters fell open for me at once. I saw that written at the head of them was: Letter to Mirza *Bediuzzaman*, and my father's name was Mirza. Glory be to Allāh! I exclaimed, these letters were addressing me. At that time the Old Said was also known as *Bediuzzaman*. Apart from *Bediuzzaman* Hamadani, I knew of no one else in the last three hundred years famous with the name. Whereas in the Imam's time there was such a person and he wrote him these two letters. This person's state must have been similar to

²¹⁵Ibid, p.164.

²¹⁶Ibid, p. 165.

mine, for I found these letters to be the cure for my ills. Only, the Imam persistently recommended in many of his letters what he wrote in these two, which was: 'Make your *qibla* one.' That is, take one person as your master and follow him; do not concern yourself with anyone else.²¹⁷

The *qibla* or the direction that Nursi was looking for was the Qur'ân that Nursi aimed to serve since the early years of his life. It is important to note that he discovered his cure through the works of great Sufi masters which was indicative of the extent of Sufi discourse on Nursi.

He also looked at the works of great Sufis such as al-Ghazālī and Rūmī whom he thought approached the reality with both the heart and the mind. However, he was bewildered as to which to follow since each of them had different points of attraction. Then, it occurred to him that the head of all these great masters is the holy Qur'ân “the head of these various ways and the source of these streams and the sun of these planets is the All-Wise Qur'ân; the true single *qibla* is to be found in it. In which case, it is also the most elevated guide and most holy master. So I clasped it with both hands and clung on to it.”²¹⁸

This realization marked the completion of the transformation of Nursi from “old Said” to “new Said” which took place during 1921 and 1922 when he was about forty five years old. New Said now completely focused on the Qur'ân and dedicated himself to explaining its truths to an audience whose faiths were shaken by the challenges of the modern sciences. In the works he produced after his transformation, Nursi primarily dealt with the theological matters and tried to strengthen the belief of his audience about

²¹⁷Vahide, p.165.

²¹⁸ Said Nursi, *Letters*, Istanbul: Sözlere Nesriyâ'tı, 1997. Translated by Şükran Vahide, p. 419.

the existence of Allāh. Nursi tried to speak to both the hearts and the minds of his readers in his voluminous books titled *The Risale-i Nur* (The Epistle of Light) which he produced in exile. He made frequent references to modern sciences, appealed to human reason, and incorporated significant Sufi elements in his arguments as illustrated in the next chapter. While Nursi failed to open a school whose curriculum would incorporate the Islamic and modern sciences, Nursi combined them in the *Risale* and achieved his goal of religious revival. New Said abandoned politics and promoted Islam through a grassroots movement whose members helped him reach a wider audience across Turkey.

Years of Exile

Nursi seems to have started to annoy Kemal Ataturk with his reproachful circular of 19 Jan. 1923. Nonetheless, the assembly, including Kemal Ataturk, signed a bill to fund his school on 2 Feb. 1923, and Kemal Ataturk still talked with him. But by Sept. 1923, the bill was stalled in a committee, never to reemerge.²¹⁹ Nursi spent most of the second part of his life, from 1922 to 1960, in exile or in prisons under the Kemalist regime which regarded Nursi and his likes as a threat to its secular revolutionary project. Even though Nursi never supported a rebellion against the Turkish state, the *Shaykh Said* Revolt in 1925 gave the government the pretext to detain and put him in exile in April 1925. Nursi produced his voluminous work, the *Risale*, under the adverse circumstances of exile in the small towns of Western Anatolia.

The new Turkish republic was founded in 1923 by the members of the late Ottoman military who were secular and westernized. Under the leadership Ataturk, they

²¹⁹ Vahide, p. 169-172

initiated a series of reforms to create a modern Turkish state based on the European model. Secularism became the main ideology of the nation as in Western countries. However, Turkish version of secularism was much more aggressive and intrusive of religion. The state had the absolute control over religious institutions and religious training. The founders not only aimed to produce a modern state, they also wanted to overhaul the culture of the society. Accordingly, they enacted laws in the area of governance, law, economy, education, culture, and religion to create a positivist western Turkish society.

They abolished the office of sultanate and the caliphate and banished the members of the *sultan*'s family from the land. They closed the religious courts in 1924 and adopted new legal code largely based on the Swiss model. They centralized all types of education, religious and secular, in 1924 and closed all *madrasas* in 1926. With this reform, religious education was completely removed from the curriculum of public and private schools. The Western Gregorian calendar and twenty-four-hour clock was introduced in 1926. The adoption of Latin alphabet in place of Arabic took place in 1928. In accordance with this reform, all printing had to be done in Turkish. Accordingly, the Arabic call for the daily prayers was replaced with a Turkish one in 1932 and stayed in effect until its repeal by the Democrat party in 1952.²²⁰

Sufi groups were outlawed and their lodges were closed in 1925. A new dress code was adopted according to which all men and women were encouraged to wear the Western style clothing. For example all men were required to wear hats. Another reform

²²⁰Berkes, p. 479-500.

was enacted to eliminate the Arabic and Persian words from Turkish language in 1934. Also in 1934, the weekly holiday was moved from Friday to Sunday.²²¹

Kemalism was a top-down high modernist project whose aim was the creation of a Turkish society based on scientific positivist worldview in which religion had no place. Whether it achieved its goal is the topic of another discussion; however, it suffices to say that Kemalist ideology was largely espoused by the state officials particularly by the members of the military while it was resisted by the large segments of Turkish society.

The Kemalist reforms were resisted quietly by the war-tired Turkish public and were opposed openly by very few of the scholars. The newly established Kemalist regime cracked down on the opposing voices to show its determination about the secularization and Westernization project. For example, İskilipli Atıf Hoca was hanged in 1926 due to his rejection of the adoption of Western dress code. Some scholarly figures left the country while others stayed quiet out of the fear for their lives. Said Nursi was a figure who definitely attracted the wrath of the state in that respect. He expressed his disappointment with the new direction of the Republic to Atatürk when they met in Ankara in 1923. Nursi never adopted the Western type of dress and continued to wear his traditional clothing. Additionally, Nursi was a well-respected figure among the Kurds in Eastern Anatolia many of whom were unhappy with the Turkish nationalist overtones of the new republic. In fact, few tribal leaders approached Nursi and asked his support for a rebellion against the Turkish government. Nursi rejected such an idea and stated that shedding the blood of fellow Turkish-Muslim soldiers would be against Islamic

²²¹Ibid, p. 479-500.

teachings. Despite this stance, the government was determined to eliminate Nursi and figures like him to create the society they envisioned.

Along with other leading religious figures in Eastern Anatolia who were detained after the Shaykh Said revolt, Nursi was first taken to Istanbul and then was exiled to a small village called Barla in the city of Isparta in Western Anatolia. The government chose this small and remote village as a place of exile to virtually isolate Nursi from the public. At the time, this village had no road, electricity, or telephone. The villagers traveled to city of Isparta on foot and by donkeys or horses. The government “allowed him only the occasional visitor, and by spreading rumors and slander about him in the area of Barla they frightened the local people and tried to prevent them from approaching him; they had him watched, followed, and harassed continuously; and when in 1928 the government granted an amnesty to the other deportees, they denied him this right too.”²²² Nursi lived under such adverse circumstances in the gardens and the mountains of Barla for eight and a half years during which he produced a large part of the *Risale*. He lived a life of an ascetic and never married.

There is no doubt that the isolated living in the difficult conditions of Barla was very hard on a person like Nursi who loved action and the crowds. However, such a secluded life also gave him the opportunity to focus on his writings. He not only dedicated much time to his personal spirituality he also spent great amount of time in nature which inspired his writings. He lived in a small two-room house “Beneath it ran a stream, summer and winter, and in front stood a truly majestic pine tree. Nursi had a

²²² Vahide, p. 189.

platform or small tree house made among its great boughs, which he used in spring and summer as a place for contemplation and prayer. His students and the people of Barla used to say that he would remain there all night, neither rising nor sleeping, and at dawn the birds would flutter all around the tree as though drawn by the sound of his supplications, joining their songs to his prayers.”²²³ The scenery in Barla with its countryside, the mountains, and the lake was inspiring to Nursi. He spent much of his time walking and contemplating in this setting. He also loved to travel to Pine Mountain standing right next to the village. He sometimes spent weeks in that mountain in complete solitude. Here too he had tree houses made where he would write and also correct the hand written copies of the *Risale*.

The frequent references to nature in the *Risale* were indicative of the setting described above. In his solitary life of exile, he not only saw Allāh’s signs in his surroundings he also sought friendship with Him. Accordingly, every entity he came across in nature became a signifier of Allāh. The first piece he wrote in Barla was on resurrection and hereafter. He said that in a spring while he was walking through the orchards with almond trees all in blossom in Barla, suddenly the verse of the Qur’ān came to his mind which said “Then contemplate (O man!) the memorials of Allāh’s Mercy!- how He gives life to the earth after its death: verily the same will give life to the men who are dead: for He has power over all things”²²⁴ The meaning of this verse became very clear to him that day and he repeated reciting the verse in his head throughout the day. In the evening of that day, he wrote the piece of the *Risale* on the

²²³ Ibid., p. 196.

²²⁴ The Qur’an, 30:50.

resurrection of the dead in the next life in which Nursi used the analogy of nature which died in winter and came back to life in spring.²²⁵

The entire *Risale* tackled the issue of faith in Allāh and belief in hereafter. New Said regarded working on such issues more superior to politics which dominated the life of old Said. He thought that the foundations of belief were shaken among the people of Anatolia due to the impacts of scientific materialism. Accordingly, he indicated, his aim was to build the foundations of belief firmly for if they were strong the faith could be shaken by any currents. In order to strengthen belief, Nursi employed reflective thought which was called *tafakkur* in Islamic terminology. He often made references to logic and reason in his reflections and viewed the things in nature for the things they expressed or signified rather than for themselves. He refuted the arguments of the materialist philosophy which understood the nature based on the laws of causality. Making references to the scientific findings, Nursi argued that the order in the cosmos was indicative of Allāh. Also, belief in Allāh was the link among the entities in the cosmos and that link was the source of affinity and friendship among each entity and it also made them meaningful. Accordingly, without belief each entity in the universe was alone and the relationship among them was one of enmity. Nursi often used allegorical comparisons to make difficult topics easily comprehensible to his readers. Nursi argued that his method of reference to logic, reason, and science was inspired by the Qur'ân. It is plausible to argue that his method of explaining the existence of Allāh and the hereafter based on references to modern science and reason with allegorical comparisons made his writings readily available to people from all walks of his life both the educated and the

²²⁵Vahide, p. 194.

uneducated. It is also plausible that his charismatic personality and unending activism of his followers helped his thought gain a strong foothold among inhabitants of Anatolia.

Initially people in Barla and over the time many across Turkey viewed him as an authentic defender of their religion in the face of secularization which was being promoted by the state. Particularly the area of the city of Isparta was known for its *madrasas* during the Ottoman Empire and accordingly the population in that region was very sensitive about religious values.²²⁶ Watching Nursi in prayer and contemplation day in and day out, people probably attributed him some saintly powers too. Hence, the writings and the personality of Nursi made people attractive to his culturally-authentic ideas and many of them served his cause. “Under the watchful eye of the state he succeeded in writing and disseminating a body of writing that would eventually be the inspiration of a movement for the revitalization of belief.”²²⁷ Initially, only few people from the village of Barla became the regular attendees of Nursi’s speeches in the village mosque where he led the daily prayers. As his fame spread around, some people from nearby villages and the city of Isparta came to his visits. Some of these visitors became volunteers to write down and disseminate the copies of the *Risale* which were in Arabic. He would dictate and the scribes would write down as he dictated. Copies of the original were written out by hand and distributed. These were then copied and passed on to the others who would write out further copies. In this way, the *Risale* passed from one village to another and over the time from town to town and from city to city across Turkey. Due to the official ban on Arabic printing, thousands of copies of the *Risale* were hand-written

²²⁶ Mardin, p. 151.

²²⁷ Vahide, p. 192.

for years. It probably continued until 1950's when the restriction on Arabic was flexed under the Democrat party. Aside from the information on the matters of belief, the *Risale* also played an important role in keeping Arabic alive in Turkey. As the language of the Qur'ân, Arabic was more than just some letters for many Turks viewed it as the symbol of the Islamic-Ottoman heritage.

Nursi continually incorporated Sufi elements such as *tajallî*, *karâmât*, and *dhikr* into his work and his personal life. Nursi's frequent use of the Sufi elements occurred in his secluded life filled with intense spiritual practice. Besides, the sense of defeat and despair Nursi experienced after the world war and during the exile caused him mentally resign from the world and seek inner peace. Hence, both the emotional status of Nursi and the external setting were conducive to the growth of the Sufi thought.

Conclusion

The review of Nursi's life illustrated that his relationship with Sufism was largely positive. He grew up in a culture interwoven with Sufi elements. Sufi groups were very well-organized in his community and they exercised considerable influence on its social and political affairs. Their control of the religious and educational institutions in that part of Anatolia gave them the power to form, preserve, and produce individual and communal identity. It was an inherent part of the culture for people to turn to Sufi masters for arbitration, be affiliated with an order, and seek assistance from the spirits of the saints.

As a member of a community deeply penetrated by Sufism, Nursi internalized certain Sufi elements naturally. In his childhood, he witnessed people seeking assistance

from the saints in case of a drought. Accordingly, he picked al-Jīlānī as his protector saint and evoked his spirit when he was in trouble. It seems that Nursi's experience of Sufism in the early years of his life left a very positive image in his mind. Like in his childhood, throughout his life, he turned to the Sufi sources and the spirit of al-Jīlānī when he needed help, hope, and direction.

Despite his sympathy for Sufism, Nursi was reluctant to be formally initiated into a *tarīqa*. He cited his rebellious nature to submit to an authority figure and the intensity of his studies for his hesitation. However, they may partially explain the situation since he chose to submit to the authority of al-Jīlānī and he clearly did not take his formal studies very seriously. It is likely that a sense of election that he developed very early in his life prevented him from taking such a step. It appears that, beginning from his childhood, he believed that he had a special mission to fulfill. His personal qualities and prophecies he heard from a local *shaykh* probably created this sense of election.

Additionally, some of his dreams only strengthened his conviction that Allāh created him for a mission. Above all, Nursi's invocation of the spirit of al-Jīlānī while all his peers sought help from the spirit of lesser saints was an indication of how highly he viewed himself. In fact, Nursi's choice of al-Jīlānī as his spiritual guide despite the prevalence of Naqshī *tarīqas* in the area clearly demonstrated his sense of being special and his desire to distinct himself from his peers. From this perspective, it made sense for Nursi not to submit to the authority of any Sufi master. Nursi's claim of spiritual connection with the greatest saint himself and of receiving his guidance in his dreams probably gave him a lot of clout in his community. There is no doubt that such a connection proved to be very effective in his social reform activities. As illustrated in his memories, when he visited a

certain tribal leader to call him to justice, he justified it based on the instructions he supposedly received from al-Jīlānī in a dream.

Nursi's social and political activism was typical in Mujaddidiyya and Khalidi-Naqshī circles in Eastern Anatolia. In fact, social and political activism was the hallmark of that Sufi group. It was his desire for social and political reform which urged him to accept the invitation of the governor of Van, embark on a journey to Istanbul to meet the *sultan*, and travel extensively in the Ottoman Empire. Nursi's dreams, particularly the one he had before the beginning of The World War I, also strengthened his sense of activism and clarified it. He believed, based on his interpretation of that dream, that he was given the duty of protecting the Qur'ān. Nursi's emphasis on the Qur'ān was also deeply rooted in Mujaddidiyya -Naqshī tradition. Al-Sirhindī promoted an Islamic revival based on the original sources of the religion. He also called for a *sharī'a*-based Sufism. Needless to say that the social and political developments in his region, the Ottoman Empire, and the Islamic world fueled his activism.

Nursi's travel to Van introduced him to a new environment. As a guest of the governor, he became a regular attendee of the discussions taking place among the Ottoman state elite and intellectuals. Some of them were the graduates of newly established secular schools and others completed their studies in Europe. Having lived in the cosmopolitan province of Bitlis, Nursi was definitely aware of the social and cultural changes in the Ottoman society; however, what he saw in Van was an eye-opening experience which definitely added a sense of urgency to his activism. The prevalence of secularization, Westernization, and scientific rationalism among them was shocking and their indifference to or even disregard for metaphysics was perplexing to Nursi. His

knowledge of the traditional Islamic sciences and Sufism did earn him any respect in these intellectual circles. However, this negative encounter did not hurt Nursi's self-confidence and his respect for religion and Sufism. He decided to immerse himself in modern sciences and use it for the service of religion which he accomplished in the *Risale*.

What he witnessed in Van made him realize the urgency of modernizing the curriculum of *madrastas*. He thought that the overhaul of education was a must in order to deal with the challenges to religion from the modern developments and counter the current of cultural Westernization, It appears that beginning with his exposure to the intellectual circles in Van, Sufism somewhat faded away from Nursi's thought. He spent his time campaigning for educational reform as well as reading and debating the issues related to modern Western thought.

It was also during his stay in Van, he read newspapers frequently and followed closely the political developments in the world. He became acquainted with the views of well-known Muslim modernists and revivalists of the time who promoted political and educational reforms, the unity of Muslims, and a return to the original sources of Islam. While educational reform was his priority, Nursi promoted these ideas especially after his arrival in Istanbul in 1907. It seems that both Nursi and other activists made similar diagnosis and offered similar solutions to solve the problems that Muslims were facing. The fact that he referred Muhammad 'Abduh as his master was indicative of his influence on Nursi particularly on his thoughts about political reforms and the unity of Muslims. Additionally, their criticism of the traditional Islam including Sufism was probably partly responsible for his disinterest in Sufi affiliation during his youth. However, compared to

other Muslim modernists and revivalists, Nursi viewed Sufism much more positively. In addition to his upbringing in a Sufi environment, the prevalence of Sufi elements in Anatolian Islamic and cultural landscape contributed to his position. Also important to mention that generally the Ottoman scholars in Istanbul and Anatolia had sympathy toward Sufism in the modern era.

The atmosphere Nursi found in Istanbul in 1907 was not favorable to Sufi thought or practice. The idea of religion, let alone Sufism, was discredited among the intellectuals in the capital who were preoccupied with political reforms to stop the fall of the Empire. Nursi became part of such efforts and also traveled extensively calling Muslims to mobilize around the Ottoman *sultan* to preserve the Empire and ensure the well-being of all Muslims. Nursi's writings from that era primarily dealt with educational, social, and political reforms

It is fair to say that from his arrival to Van in 1893 until the end of The World War I, Sufism was not a significant element in his life or thought. However, his inclusion of Sufi training in the curriculum of his school project showed that he viewed it as an important source for individual and social transformation. In any case, Nursi never dismissed Sufism and eventually turned to the books of al-Sirhindī and al-Jīlānī for guidance when he was in deep despair and crises at the end of The World War I. He found hope and guidance in the works of great Sufi masters including al-Sirhindī, al-Jīlānī, Rūmī, and al-Ghazālī. During the years of exile, Sufi elements increasingly became part of his life and thought.

It is fair to say that the environment Nursi became part of during his youth affected his relationship with Sufism negatively. He was closely associated with

intellectuals and the elite who promoted scientific rationalism and were deeply skeptical of religious/metaphysical experience. To them, the only way for the Ottomans to catch up with the West was the adoption of Western scientific rationalist thought. The Muslim modernists of the time also expressed similar ideas. There was no room for Sufi mystical experience in their perspective. It seems that Nursi also was influenced by these ideas during his youth. However, it was not science, rationalism, or philosophy that offered a remedy to the despair and the devastation he experienced after The World War I. Rather, it was in Sufism where he found meaning, intimacy and affection. Accordingly, in the *Risale*, he incorporated the elements of modern science, rationalism, and Sufism. Nursi's ascetic life in the exile was conducive to the inclusion of Sufi discourse to his life and thought. In another words, the surroundings in the exile helped him rediscover the Sufi potential he cultivated during his formative years.

CHAPTER 3

THE SUFI ELEMENTS IN NURSI'S LIFE AND WORKS

Tashbīh and Tanzīh

Nursi's understanding of Allah and the cosmos resembled that of Sufis. The examination of the *Risale* illustrated that Nursi viewed the universe as the loci of the *tajallī* of Allāh's names. He also believed that the material existence was a veil hiding the face of Allāh and that the divine hand was the real determinant behind all the causes. He, like Ibn al-ʿArabī, called human beings as the microcosm of the creation for he thought that humans manifested all the divine names most perfectly. However, it is fair to say that Nursi promoted an immanent understanding of Allāh while also acknowledging that Allāh was totally transcendent. In emphasizing the immanence of Allāh, Nursi used a cautious language to eschew the accusations of being pantheistic or being in denial of the reality of the material phenomena. On the one hand, he stayed away from the approach of Muslims philosophers who reduced Allāh to a first cause and some Muslim modernists who gave all the power to causality. On the other hand, he refrained from using the language of Sufis such as Ibn al-ʿArabī who was accused of attributing divinity to the material existence and violating the fundamental principle of *tawhīd*. He tried to have a balance between immanence and transcendence like his spiritual master al-Sirhindī. From Nursi's perspective, Allāh's names were exhibited in the cosmos and humans may have a glimpse of the nature of the divine names based on their manifestation in the creation while Allāh's essence and attributes were totally unknown. Accordingly, he explored the universe to see how each divine name worked. He particularly talked about

how Allāh loved and created the universe and that it was love that was keeping the existence together.

In his method about exploring the existence, oneness, and immanence of Allāh, Nursi differed greatly from many Sufis who gave priority to the mystical experience over the rational inquiry. Nursi relied on rational arguments and scientific references while not denying the value and the validity of *kashf* to attain the knowledge of Allāh. He appealed to the reason and the logic of his audience and tried to show them the closeness of Allāh in an age when Allāh was becoming more and more distant. He made frequent references to positive sciences to support his arguments about the indispensable role of Allāh in the universe at a time when science was being used to prove that the cosmos was a self-functioning machine. Nursi also made references to Sufis including Niyaz-ı Mısri who was a well-known advocate of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought in Anatolia.

For Nursi, “Allāh was the pre-eternal embroider” and the existence was a divine art woven with Allāh’s names. The proportions and shapes of entities were based on the divine names that they exhibited. Each being or thing displayed various names depending on its capacity. While some creatures displayed few of them, others manifested as many as twenty divine names according to Nursi. For Nursi, there was nothing in the universe that did not display one or many divine names. This view is very close to that of Ibn al-‘Arabī; however, it is different from it in one important aspect. While Nursi primarily saw the universe as the exhibit of divine names only, Ibn al-‘Arabī viewed it as the display of both divine names and attributes. The implication of this is that while the latter really emphasized the immanence of Allah, the former was concerned about the transcendence of the creator. Nonetheless, Nursi’s approach still aligned him with Sufis

and reflected a clear Sufi influence on his perspective on this topic. The traditional orthodoxy refrained from using such a language out of their concern for comparing the creator to the creation. Hence, Nursi's understanding of Allah and the cosmos could be viewed as a significant Sufi influence on him rather than a just reflection of the general Islamic spirituality.

The All Wise Maker delimits, orders and gave determined proportions and shapes to all things, particular and universal, through the manifestation of His names. To paradise and this world, the heavens and the earth, plants and animals, men and jinn, angels and spirit beings. By doing this, He causes them to recite His names of *al-Muqaddir* (the Determiner), *al-Munazzim* (the Orderer), and *al-Musawwir* (the Giver of Form). He determines the limits of their general shapes in such a manner that He displayed His names of All-Knowing and All-Wise. Then, through the tabulation of knowledge and wisdom, He begins to form them within those limits. He does this in such a way that He displayed the meanings of craftsmanship and care and His names of *al-Sani* (the Maker) and *al-Karīm* (the Munificent).²²⁸

Once a particular being or thing was formed through the names listed above, the next step was giving the specific adornments or qualities to the members of that entity. The divine names of *al-Latīf* (the Gracious) and *al-Karīm* (the Munificent) “give the colors of beauty and adornments to the members of that form, whether a single human being or a single flower, like the eyes, ears, leaves, and stamens.”²²⁹ These names gave beauty to the particulars of all living and non-living beings. In case of earth, for instance, its members such as trees, rivers, minerals reflected beauty as a result of being touched by these names. In case of a tree, its leaves, fruits, and branches displayed beauty for the same reason. Accordingly, everything in the universe manifested and also mentioned the

²²⁸Said Nursi, *The Words*, Istanbul: Sözlere Nesriyat, 1992. Translated by Şükran Vahide, p. 657.

²²⁹Ibid., p. 657.

name or names of Allāh it displayed. "... those adorned beings and those illuminated artifacts became like embodied favors and incarnate munificence. They mention the names of *al-Latīf* and *al-Karīm*).²³⁰

What caused the names of *al-Latīf* and *al-Karīm* to display themselves was Allāh's desire of being loved and known by the conscious and animate beings. In other words, as a result of the divine names of *al-Wadūd* (the Loving) and *al-Ma'rūf* (the Known), the cosmos knew and loved Allāh as well as submitted to His will naturally. Each entity recited these names "by the very mode of their beings."²³¹ Nursi's view implied that the natural relationship between entities and Allāh and between the individual members of the creation was love. What kept the universe going was the reciprocal love between the creation and the creator. Also, it was love that kept everything together. It was interesting to note that, in Nursi's view, Allāh needed the creation to be known and loved while elsewhere he said that Allāh did not need anything. One of the ways that Allāh showed His love to the creation was providing bounties and sustenance through His names of *al-Mun'im* (the Bestower) and *al-Rahīm* (the Compassionate). Each entity "recites the names of Bestower and Compassionate and displays the manifestation of these two names behind the outer veils."²³² Acts of compassion by the animate beings occurred as a result of the work of this divine name; however, people were not able to see that due to the veil of causality. Nursi reiterated that Allāh's compassion and grace for the creation came as a result of his gentleness, love, and mercy and not as a result of a need. Along with these qualities, Allāh was also utmost

²³⁰Ibid., p. 657.

²³¹Ibid., p. 657.

²³² Ibid., p. 657.

perfection and beauty which had a desire to be known and loved. “Since a beauty that is at the utmost degree of perfection and a perfection that is at the utmost degree of beauty were loved and were worthy of love to the utmost degree, most certainly will they desire to see and to exhibit themselves through displaying their flashes and manifestations in mirrors, in accordance with the capacity of the mirrors”²³³

Nursi put the entities in a hierarchy based on their capacity to mirror the divine names. According to him, animate beings manifested more names than inanimate beings. Humans displayed more divine names than other animate beings. Among human beings, there were some people who reflected more names than others. In the end, each entity and occurrence in each moment manifested a divine name. Nursi likened the names to a person’s dress and argued that each creature had as many as twenty shirts one top of another or had enfolded them in twenty veils and He had inscribed on each shirt or veil different names. Accordingly, for Nursi, “the reality of beings is based on and relies on the divine names; rather, their true realities were the manifestations of those names and everything mentions and glorifies its maker with numerous tongues in numerous ways.”²³⁴ Like many Sufis, Nursi thought that Allāh was hidden in the intensity of His manifestation. This statement brought Nursi further closer to Ibn al-‘Arabī who viewed everything in the cosmos as the manifestation of the names and attributes of Allāh. In the final analyses; however, Nursi, unlike Ibn al-‘Arabī, did not negate the reality of the material phenomena or called it a metaphorical existence.

²³³ Ibid., p. 658.

²³⁴ Ibid., p. 658.

The topic of the oneness and the unity of Allāh received particular attention from Nursi. Accordingly, while he thought that all divine names exhibited themselves in the cosmos, *al-Ahad* (the Oneness and the Unity) manifested more comprehensively and encompassed all other names. In other words, all names fulfilled their function in the universe in an order and a harmony as a result of the effect of *al-Ahad*. It was as if all other divine names were concentrated in this one name. For instance, a fruit tree displayed many divine names such as *al-Jamīl* (the Beautiful), *al-Hakīm* (the Wise), *al-Razzāq* (the Provider), *al'Alīm* (Knowing), and *al-Rahīm* (the Merciful). The relationship between the fruit tree and the sun light, between its roots and its fruit and water in the soil, between the nutrition in the fruit and human need of that nutrition, between the taste of the fruit and human sense of taste, between beauty of the shape and the color of the leaves and human sense of beauty and many other aspects of that fruit tree and its relationship with the rest of the creation displayed the aforementioned divine names and many others in a coherent way due to the divine name of *al-Ahad*. The similarity in the creation also came as a result of this divine name. “Through the mystery of Divine unity, a thousand and one Divine names were concentrated in the furthest points and most scattered particulars of the sphere of multiplicity, in the tiny missives known as living beings, and were to be read most clearly. The All-Wise Maker multiplies the copies of them extensively.”²³⁵

From Nursi’s perspective, the cosmos functioned perfectly without falling into a chaos as a result of the constant manifestation of this name. The harmony and unity in

²³⁵Said Nursi, *The Rays Collection*, Istanbul: Sözlür Nesriyât, 1998, Translated by Şükran Vahide, p. 18.

the cosmos pointed to a single maker who was Allāh as far as Nursi concerned. Rejecting the existence of Allāh would disconnect the relationship between entities of the creation and they would lose their meaning. Denying the role of the single power behind the creation also required one to believe that each entity in the universe somehow knew how to act coherently with other entities. From Nursi's perspective, such an assumption was ridiculous and irrational, and people with logic and reason should understand and see the hand of Unity and Oneness in the cosmos. For Nursi, especially the people of science including chemists, biologists, physicists, and astronomers should affirm the existence of a single power due to their observation of the order in the cosmos. It was clear that Nursi was critical of scientific materialists who viewed the cosmos as a self-working machine. Nursi called them irrational and accused them of being disrespectful to the meaning and the display of each entity. "If not for the mystery of the affirmation of Divine unity, each particular fruit would remain on its own, and would show neither that sacred beauty nor its elevated perfection. Even the particular flash of beauty within it would be extinguished and vanished. It would quite simply become its opposite; from being a diamond, it would turn into a glass."²³⁶ Various divine names manifested in the universe in a concerted way with the indispensable effect of the Unity and the Oneness. Nursi elaborated on several of the divine names including *al-Fattāh* (the Opener), *al-Rahmān* (the Merciful), *al-Mudabbir* (the Disposer and Administer), *al-Rahīm* (the Compassionate), and *al-Razzāq* (the Provider) and their relationship with *al-Ahad*. It was interesting to note that for Nursi the divine name of *al-Ahad* was displayed in the universe most comprehensively while for Ibn Al-‘Arabī it was the only name that was not

²³⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

manifested at all in the creation. Nursi discussed this name more than any other and he differed from Ibn Al-‘Arabī in that respect.

Through the divine name of *al-Fattāh*, numerous and various forms of things and beings opened up in the universe from the same substance. The seeds, the flowers, the eggs, and the sperm opened up to bring about the diverse but similar creatures in a smooth process. Nursi cited the Qur’ānic verse which said that Allāh created humans in the wombs of their mothers in three stages.²³⁷ Nursi said that each stage that a conceived egg went through displayed the name of *al-Fattāh*. The universe was a big garden which exhibited this divine name in each instant. “According to the testimony of botany and biology, based on profound research, there is the opening and unfolding of forms, such comprehensiveness and artistry that other than a single and unique one, one absolutely powerful, able to see and do all things in all things, no one could undertake this comprehensive and all-embracing deed”.²³⁸ Through the manifestation of *al-Fattāh* and *al-Ahad*, the innumerable species of animate and inanimate entities gained their symmetrical, adorned, and distinct forms. Nursi’s reference to modern sciences to support his assumptions appeared throughout the *Risale*. In fact he argued that each branch of science and art was based on and relied on a divine name. The science of medicine was based on *al-Shāfi* (the Healer), geometry on *al-Muqaddir* (the Determiner), and the philosophy on *al-Hakīm*. Accordingly he said that each science came to an end in a

²³⁷ The Qur’ān, 39:6.

²³⁸Nursi, *The Rays*, p. 190.

divine name and the realities of all arts and sciences as well as of all human perfections were based on divine names.²³⁹

For Nursi, the earth was an arena where the divine name of *al-Rahmān* was displayed in many ways. As a result of this name, there were thousands of different kinds of food for each creature depending on their appetite. The mercy showed itself in different forms to each entity. Each being was nurtured and taken care of with a sustenance suitable for itself. The earth was like a big kitchen where everything served a purpose and nothing was wasted which was an indication of the work of divine mercy with divine unity. For humans, the existence of different foods to satisfy bodily appetite, of beauty to satisfy human eyes, of nice voices to satisfy ears, of knowledge to satisfy intellect were the manifestations of mercy within unity. In short, the nurturing of all animate beings that came into existence with the utmost care and the order without forgetting any of them particularly the needy ones demonstrated both divine mercy and unity. For Nursi, this name, along with the name of *al-Rahīm*, was one of the most comprehensive divine names whose manifestation was renewed constantly in the universe. Hence, among all the names, *al-Ahad*, *al-Rahīm*, and *al-Rahmān* played the most encompassing roles in the creation.

The divine names of *al-Mudabbir al-Ahad* showed themselves in the easy and smooth administration of this vast cosmos and innumerable entities in it without collision and confusion. The movement of heavenly bodies and the care of innumerable early beings with ease, “to administer them jointly with each other, to cause them help one

²³⁹Nursi, *The Words*, p. 656.

another, to take all the necessary measures concerning them, and to make this vast world like a perfect kingdom, a magnificent city, a well-adorned palace”²⁴⁰ were the work of these divine names. Nursi used the seasons as an analogy to demonstrate how these names functioned perfectly within the creation. He said that every spring four hundred thousand of species came alive after their death in autumn. The One unseen hand brought them to life in a period of few weeks with a profound order and discipline. A tree brought forth its blossoms, leaves, flowers, and fruits in a most beautiful order. The seasons repeated themselves each year and many species died and resurrected in regularity through the name of *al-Mudabbir*. Also each spring, through the manifestation of this name, the administer, Allāh provided these species their appropriate sustenance, their defensive weapons and distinctive garments, their duties, orders, and dismissal times, all the instruments they needed at the right time without a confusion and an omission. The repeated cycles of the seasons and the death and resurrection of many species in a regular way proved the work of *al-Ahad* and *al-Mudabbir* coherently. “It does proves its unity, oneness, uniqueness, and infinite power and boundless mercy within perfection of dominicality, sovereignty and wisdom, and writes with the pen of Divine Determining this proclamation of Divine unity on the face of the earth, on the page of every spring.”²⁴¹

While Nursi drew attention to the work of Allah’s names in the cosmos, he used a careful language to ensure that his words did not imply the multiplicity of the divine. His emphasis on the divine name of *al-Ahad* might be coming from this concern. He constantly reminded his audience of the comprehensiveness of this divine name and of

²⁴⁰ Nursi, *The Rays*, p. 193.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

the coherency between this and other names to convey the message that Allāh was one with his names and attributes.

One of the ways Allāh showed his mercy to the creation was his unending compassion and provision for existence. For Nursi, the divine name of *al-Rahīm* was the most encompassing along with *al-Rahmān* after the name of *al-Ahad*. In other words, the effects of these two names appeared clearly in the existence. Citing the Qur'ānic verses such as “For Allāh is He Who gave (all) Sustenance, Lord of Power, Steadfast forever”²⁴² and “There is no moving creature on earth but its sustenance depended on Allāh”²⁴³ Nursi argued that Allāh was the real provider for all creatures whose sustenance was guaranteed by *al-Razzāq* regardless of their will and desire about it. These verses guaranteed the sustenance for those who were weak and powerless creatures such as new born babies, animals, and the vegetation. Nursi said that trees needed sustenance but they did not have will or power to acquire it. They remained in their place and Allāh brought their needs to them through the divine names of *al-Rahīm* and *al-Razzāq* like He provided for new born babies, who were helpless and powerless, with their mother’s milk which contained all the protein they needed. Once the babies gained some will and power, the milk ceased. For Nursi, this showed that sustenance, at least basic sustenance, came from the *al-Razzāq* and human will and power played no role. Those who worshipped causes to acquire sustenance were unaware of the fact that Allāh was the real provider from behind the veil. Feeding all entities living on the face of the earth, in soil, underground, in air, in water “to all animate beings, especially those endowed with spirit, and among

²⁴² The Qur’ān, 51:58.

²⁴³ Ibid., 11:6.

them especially the impotent, the weak, and the young, all of their necessary sustenance, material and immaterial, in the most solicitous manner, driving it from dry and rude soil, from solid, bonelike dry pieces of wood, and in the case of the most delicate of all forms of sustenance, from between blood and urine, at the proper time, in orderly fashion, without omission or confusion” was a testimony to the work of the *al-Rahīm* and *al-Razzāq*.²⁴⁴ Throughout the *Risale*, Nursi explored the manifestation of divine names in the cosmos. He was a very keen observer and his solitary life in exile gave him the opportunity to detect the work of divine names in the nature. He was a man who loved spending time in the mountains watching the changes of seasons and natural elements. Nursi saw the invisible hand of Allāh at work behind all the causes and illustrated it in his works. In addition to the ones discussed above, there were few more names that Nursi examined for he considered them to be the greatest names of Allāh. A brief overview of those names was needed to reflect Nursi’s approach to this issue.

One of the greatest names of Allāh, for Nursi, was *al-Qayyūm* (the Holy) whose manifestation kept the universe and earth clean all the time. The universe, he said, resembled a constantly working factory and earth a guest house with many visitors. Naturally places like these were filled with filth, debris, and rubbish very easily. Accordingly, they needed to be kept and maintained in order to be habitable for their dwellers. The factory of the universe and the guest house of earth were clean and fresh and also there was nothing unnecessary or nothing without a benefit in them. This fact demonstrated that the owner of these places cared for them and tended to them very well. He swept and cleaned them diligently and continuously. Without the conscious and

²⁴⁴Nursi, *The Rays*, p. 194.

careful work of their owner, both the factory and the guest house were filled with dirt immediately. Without the constant cleaning, the corpses of the animals and the debris of plants would make earth uninhabitable for its residents. As a result of the manifestation of the divine name of *al-Qayyūm*, the cosmos was equipped with a cleaning system. The small creatures eating the corpses of animals, the wind blowing the dirt off of earth, the rain washing the face of earth, and water keeping all creatures clean displayed *al-Qayyūm*. “Thus, this single act, that is, making clean, which is a single truth, is a greatest manifestation of a Greatest Name, the Name of Most Holy, which showed itself in the maximum sphere, that is, throughout the universe. Like the sun, it showed directly to eyes that were far-seeing and broad-sighted the Divine existence and Unity together with the Most Beautiful Divine Names.”²⁴⁵

The divine name of *al-‘Adl* (the Just) kept a balance in the creation. Nursi likened the universe to a palace and earth to a city whose inhabitants changed quickly. The renewal, destruction, life, and death were taking place in each moment. However, it was quite astonishing that amid all these changes, there was balance and equilibrium showing that the things coming and going were measured, weighted, and balanced by a single being who had the measure of everything. If the changes were happening without the measure of *al-‘Adl*, the balance would be destroyed immediately by a fish laying thousands of eggs or by a flower producing thousands of seeds. Everything from the cells of the body, the amount of liquid in beings, the proportion and the relation between the

²⁴⁵ Said Nursi, *The Flashes*, Online Edition, <http://www.saidnur.com/en/>, Translated by Şükran Vahide, Accessed on 1/15/2015/

organs, to the amount of water falling on earth, and the duty of each entity both animate and inanimate were based on an order, a balance, and a measure displaying the divine name of *al-‘Adl*. The symmetry in the creation, the distance between the planets, the distance between sun and earth all testified to the manifestation of this name. Indeed, Nursi said that, the modern science was a manifestation of this balance and symmetry and accordingly of this divine name. According to the modern science, Nursi said, the earth rotated with a perfect speed without shaking or scattering its inhabitants. If its speed increased or decreased, it would throw off its inhabitants into the space. Without gravitation, same thing would happen. In Nursi’s view, the balance in the cosmos was being maintained by the incessant manifestation of the name of *al-‘Adl*. In other words, Allāh was constantly intervening in the creation. “

And especially the cells and blood-vessels in the bodies of animals, and the corpuscles in the blood and particles in the corpuscles, they have such a fine, sensitive, and wondrous balance that it self-evidently proves that they were being nurtured and administered through the balance, law, and order of a single All-Just and Wise Creator in Whose hands were the reins of all things, has the key to all things, for Whom nothing is an obstacle to anything else, and directs all things as easily as a single thing. The total justice in the universe proceeding from the greatest manifestation of the name of Just administers the balance of all things.²⁴⁶

The manifestation of the divine name *al-Hakem* (the Sapient) made the universe like a divine book whose pages contained numerous books, lines carried many pages, and letters displayed multiple and variety of lines. In another words, each entity in the creation showed its single creator and His multiple names. A tree was a page from the book of creation which blossomed, put forth its leaves, and produced its fruit.

Accordingly, it manifested many divine names including *al-Hakīm*, *al-‘Adl*, *al-Jamīl*, *al-*

²⁴⁶ Nursi, *The Flashes*, the 30th flash.

Razzāq, and *al-Hakem*. The fruit of that tree was a letter manifesting multiple divine names which pointed to its single inscriber and embroider. Hence, each entity in the universe exhibited multiple divine names and functioned together in the layers of one entity due to the name of *al-Hakem*.

The divine name of *al-Fard* (the Single) made the universe an indivisible whole. It put a seal of unity on every part of it. So, the *al-Fard* who made the entire universe made all of its particulars as well. Nursi again used the analogy of a factory whose machines worked together for the same goal. The parts of the machines supported each other to produce something. Another analogy Nursi used was human body whose organs worked in a cooperative manner. Like this factory or human body, universe worked like a finest machine whose things and beings supported each other, stood in solidarity, and completed each other's functions. They assisted each other in responding to their needs." This co-operation, solidarity, mutual response, and embracing one another forms the most brilliant supreme seal of Divine Unity."²⁴⁷ When the earth was resurrected in every spring, all animate and inanimate entities were given what they needed when they needed it without difficulty and confusion despite their great numbers and varieties. This showed that the one who created a piece of existence created the whole. Nursi said that humans' faces consisted of the same organs such as ears, a nose, eyes, and a mouth. The fact that all humans had the same organs and resembled each other pointed to the manifestation of the name of *al-Fard*. However, this single maker also made each human with a different look to prevent confusion. This showed the single maker's will, choice and volition,

²⁴⁷Ibid., the 30th flash.

while different, each bore the stamp of divine oneness. “They show that one who cannot create all men and animals, indeed, the universe, cannot apply that stamp.”²⁴⁸

Through the manifestation of the divine name of *al-Hayy* (the Ever Living, the Giver of Life), Allāh gave life to the living beings. For Nursi, this name was one of the greatest names of Allāh since the purpose of the whole creation was the living beings especially humans who should know and worship Allāh. For Nursi, life itself was the most perfect proof testifying to the existence of *al-Hayy*, Allāh. “It is also the most valuable and the most abundant, and the purest, most shining, and most meaningful embroidery of dominical art.”²⁴⁹ Life manifested the divine mercy which attracted inanimate things to serve the living beings. It was also the most comprehensive mirror of divine names. Life illuminated this dark and transient world and gave it a sort of permanence preparing it to go to the everlasting world. In Nursi’s view, anything that became the recipient of the names of the Eternal gained eternity. In his view, this world which was full with divine manifestations would turn into the everlasting world which would consist of heaven and hell. Allāh would not destroy this world, since it was touched with the divine names, and create a new one. He would rather transform it into a totally different world. Nursi followed a similar line of thinking when he discussed the issue of bodily resurrection. He said that the bodily resurrection would take place due to the fact that the human body manifested so many divine names which gave it a glimpse of eternity. According to Nursi, the divine name of *al-Hayy* was the only name that manifested itself without a veil while all other names were veiled. The reason for that,

²⁴⁸Ibid., the 30th flash.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., the 30th flash.

Nursi thought, was that life was all good and free of filth and ugliness. “For this reason, creation and the giving of existence look directly without veil to the power of the All-Glorious One. Even, since rain is a sort of life and mercy, the time of its precipitation has not been made subject to a regular law, so that at all times of need hands will be raised to the Divine Court to seek mercy. If like the rising of the sun, rain had been subject to a law, that vital bounty would not have been sought and asked for at times of need.”²⁵⁰ For Nursi, the purpose of creation was to love and worship Allāh and accordingly all entities praised Allāh in a way suitable to each.

The last of the greatest names Nursi analyzed was *al-Qayyūm* (the Self-Subsistent). For Nursi, Allāh subsisted, continued, and endured through His own power for He was free of a need and different from the creation even though His names were manifested in it. Nursi made it clear that even though the cosmos displayed the divine names, they did not gain divinity. There was nothing similar to Allāh in the creation even though Allāh had constant and continuous relationship with it. For Nursi, ignoring that relationship and treating nature as if it possessed a divine power was the way of the people of misguidance such as the scientific materialists. He said that while they saw the coherent and orderly work of the universe, they were unaware of the source of this coherency which was the constant manifestation of divine names. They instead attributed it to the lifeless matter and treated it as if each of its particles knew how to connect with each other and act in a concerted way. This assumption, for Nursi, was utterly irrational and ignorant and also it was utterly perplexing that such a view was coming from the people of science and philosophy who were supposed be rational. In Nursi’s view, “the

²⁵⁰ Ibid., the 30th flash.

universe is a divine art and not an artist, it is a great book and not a scribe, and it is an embroidery and not the embroiderer.”²⁵¹ Nursi was very clear about the role of Allāh in the cosmos. While Allāh was transcendent, He was also immanent and yet totally different from the creation. The entities were the exhibits of the beautiful names of Allāh, but they did not gain divinity since Allāh did not incarnate in them. Such a clear emphasis on the uniqueness and the transcendence of Allāh spared Nursi from the accusations directed to some earlier Sufis.

The beautiful names of Allāh, to Nursi, had innumerable manifestations. The diversity and constant activity in the universe arose from the variety of reflections. Because the divine names had infinite number of beauties, they needed to be displayed in the mirrors called entities. “The names require to be manifested in a permanent fashion; that is, they want to display their embroideries; that is they want to see and display the manifestations of their beauties in the mirrors of their embroideries; that is’ they want every instant to renew the book of the cosmos and missive of beings”²⁵². Like a pen, the names continued to write themselves in the book of the universe infinitely. Each moment in the universe was different as a result of the various combinations of the names displayed. There was no two identical moments in the cosmos. The trees and the fruits, Nursi said, renewed themselves each year and while their shape looked similar, they were all different. “The relative embodiments of this spring replace those of last spring with different embodiments in order to set forth the meanings of the functions of the divine

²⁵¹ Ibid., the 30th flash.

²⁵²Said Nursi, *Letters*, Istanbul: Sözlür Nesriyâ’t, 1997, Translated by Şükran Vahide, p. 114

names, whose manifestations were being constantly renewed.”²⁵³ This verse in the Qur’ân, for Nursi, pointed to this constant activity, renewal, and diversity in the creation: “Of Him seeks (its need) every creature in the heavens and on earth: every day in (new) Splendor doth He (shine).”²⁵⁴ Nursi’s view of the source of activity and diversity in the universe resembled greatly that of Ibn al-‘Arabî. The latter cited a different verse to support his view: “Say: “If the ocean were ink (wherewith to write out) the words of my Lord, sooner would the ocean be exhausted than would the words of my Lord, even if we added another ocean like it, for its aid.”²⁵⁵

The divine names were the light of the universe shining through entities and also the cause and the source of the resurrection in the hereafter. Since they were infinite, they needed an infinite world to continue to show their manifestations. Accordingly, they would display different forms of their beauty eternally in the next world. Again, the believers would continuously be satisfied in eternity watching a new manifestation of the names in each moment. For Nursi, each divine name required the existence of the next life in a different way. The names of *al-‘Adl* and *al-Qayyûm* necessitated it to reward those who believed and obeyed Allâh and punish those who rebelled and disobeyed. Through the names of *al-Rahmân* and *al-Karîm*, the needs of the believers were being taken care of in this world and they would not dismiss the grateful and worshipping people after a short life. They would rather end their worldly duties to give them more bounties and presents in a different place. For Nursi, the cosmos was designed by someone with a wisdom and it functioned based on a measure and an order. Human

²⁵³Nursi, *The Words*, p. 575.

²⁵⁴The Qur’ân, 55:29.

²⁵⁵Ibid., 18:109.

beings were given the faculty of memory which worked like a small library keeping the life stories and events. This faculty of humans was an indication that everything was being recorded and people would be held accountable for the wrongs they committed. The divine names of *al-Hakīm*, *al-ʿAdl*, and *al-Hakem* would not permit the injustices, oppressions, and inequalities to be equal in death. Accordingly, their manifestations in this world required the existence of the next life where things would be straightened out. The divine names of *al-Rahmān* also required the existence of immortality in the hereafter. The natural prayers of all creatures were answered and their needs were given by an unseen hand in this world which testified that there was someone who was listening and answering the prayers of those who sought assistance. The humans, who were the best fruit of the creation, and among them the Prophets and particularly the Prophet Muhammad constantly prayed for the eternal happiness. The divine name of *al-Rahmān* necessitated the acceptance of his prayers and the existence of the next life.

The divine hand worked behind the veil of causes and transformed the earth each year. He destroyed and resurrected so many beings and things in the alternation of seasons. Winter was the time of death and spring was the time of resurrection for many entities. All this change and transformation happened through the manifestations of the divine names of *al-Muhyī* (the Granter of life), *al-Mumīt* (the Dealer of death), *al-Hayy*, and *al-Qayyūm*. The death and the revivification of so many entities in an orderly fashion was an indication that, the divine hand can easily decorate another world where these names would continue to display different forms of their beauties.

According to Nursi, this vast world was a place of preservation. The preservation was one reflection of names of *al-Awwal* (the First), *al-Ākhir* (the Last), *Zāhir* (the

Evident or the Manifest), and *al-Bāṭin* (the hidden or the Inward). These names manifested in all the creation from the most particular to the most universal. A seed, as a manifestation of the *al-Awwal*, contained the entire program of a tree pointing to the extent of the divine preservation. Then, the fruit of that tree, manifesting the name of *al-Ākhir*, contained the “indexes of all the duties the tree has performed in accordance with its nature”²⁵⁶ pointing to the level of the divine preservation. The physical shape of a tree with its proportion and decoration displayed the divine name of *al-Zāhir* and became a witness to the power and the wisdom within the divine preservation. As a result of the exhibition of the divine name of *al-Bāṭin*, the internal system built into that tree worked like a perfect factory and served the purpose of its existence testifying to the wisdom within the divine preservation. For Nursi, this vast amount of preservation in the world was for a purpose since the divine hand did everything for a reason. The preservation in the creation, like the human memory faculty, would open up like a book in an eternal world. Thus, the manifestations of these four names in the forms of preservation required the existence of the permanent life in the hereafter. Nursi mentioned the Qur’ānic verses of “When the scrolls are laid open”²⁵⁷ and “He is the First and the Last, the Evident and the Immanent”²⁵⁸ in his discussion of these names and their manifestations.

According to Nursi, along with animate and inanimate beings, the occurrences and incidents displayed the divine names as well. In his answer to a question about the calamities and disasters and the reasons Allāh allowed such painful occurrences, Nursi used the analogy of a skillful craftsman who hired a model for a fee. The craftsman

²⁵⁶ Nursi, *The Rays*, p. 236.

²⁵⁷ The Qur’ān, 81:10.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 57:3.

dressed the model with beautiful garments. He shortened and trimmed them and put the model in different positions in that process. For Nursi, the model had no right to complain about the changes in the dress or the positions he was put into because the garment was not his and he was being paid for his role. Accordingly, the artist clothed humans with beautiful garments and adorned them with excellent faculties. In order to display the embroideries of His names, He allowed illnesses and tribunals. For instance, the divine name of *al-Shāfi* required illness, *al-Razzāq* needed hunger, and *al-Mumīt* (the Bringer of death) necessitated death and dying to show their manifestations. Nursi said that such afflictions and calamities contained benefits within them. They caused change and action helping people to make progress in their lives. Nursi indicated that life was purified and strengthened through some seemingly negative occurrences which displayed various names of Allāh. For Nursi, Allāh was the owner of life and He was using the creation to exhibit His divine names. Since He owned everything including the human bodies, he could play with it and change it as He wished and that people had no right to complain about it.

Nursi used the same analogy when asked about the constant death and destruction of animals, trees, plants, and flowers. He said that the Allāh used every sort of being as a model, clothed them with different dresses, and inscribed them with the pen of divine decree and determining. They demonstrated the manifestations of His names and in return they experienced pleasure in a form suitable to their nature. Accordingly, the lord of the worlds had free will and disposal over the creation. The entities should carry out their duties through praise and thanks for the life they were given. For example, minerals could not complain about being created as minerals and ask for being plants. Their right

was to offer thanks to Allāh for the mineral existence. “And plants may not complain asking why they were not animals; their right is to offer thanks, since they have received life as well as existence. As for animals, they may not complain that they were not humans; the right over them rather, since they have been given the precious substance of spirit in addition to life and existence, is to offer thanks. And so on.”²⁵⁹

The members of each species in the cosmos exhibited some names of Allāh and they worshipped Him according to the names they were inscribed. In his commentary to the Qur’ānic verse of “Seest thou not that to Allāh bow down in worship all things that are in the heavens and on earth,- the sun, the moon, the stars; the hills, the trees, the animals; and a great number among mankind? But a great number are (also) such as are fit for Punishment: and such as Allāh shall disgrace, none can raise to honor: for Allāh carries out all that He wills”²⁶⁰, Nursi argued that the worship of species varied depending on their capacity and the divine names they displayed. The four categories of creation consisting angels, animals, inanimate beings, and human were employees serving Allāh based on their capacity. Angels were created for specific duties and they took pleasure from their work while they had fixed stations and determined ranks. Their work did not earn them any progress or decline since they acted based on the program they were given by Allāh. Their worship was their work. There were so many different kinds of angels with different tasks and each of them manifested divine names related to the service each fulfilled.²⁶¹

²⁵⁹ Nursi, *The Letters*, p. 337.

²⁶⁰ The Qur’ān, 22:18.

²⁶¹ Nursi, *The Words*, p. 365.

Animals were created for specific duties and they possessed a soul and a will. Unlike angels, their work was not entirely for the sake of Allāh since they were motivated by their wills and souls. They performed their duties in return for a wage from their creator. The nightingales, for example, were employed to announce and acclaim the gifts of Allāh to animals and offer their thanks and praise. It also offered thanks and glorification inspired by the beautiful roses reflecting the divine name of *al-Jamīl*. Nursi implied and even stated that animals were consciously aware of the manifestations of Allāh and they took joy from watching them. Accordingly, each animal worshipped Allāh by fulfilling the duty it was created for and by consciously praising Him. Also, each animal manifested one divine name more comprehensively than others and the form of its worship varied accordingly.²⁶²

The plants and inanimate beings worked purely for the sake of Allāh since they have no soul or a will. Nursi thought that they still took a sort of pleasure from what they did as it may be perceived from their growth, development, pollination, and production of seeds and fruits. He said that because they had no will, their work was more perfect than that of animals. Among the animals, the work of beings like the bee, which were guided by revelation and inspiration, were more perfect than those who relied on their own will. They performed according to the natural program put into them by Allāh. Their potential became a form of prayer and asked Allāh to make them grow to proclaim Him in every corner of the earth and exhibit the embroideries of His most beautiful names and His wonderful art. “The Wise creator answers their silent prayer and bestows on the seeds of one species tiny wings made of hair: they fly away spreading everywhere. They cause the

²⁶²Nursi, *The Words*, p. 363-365.

divine names to be read in the name of their species.”²⁶³Because they provided their service sincerely and had a desire to display the names of Allāh abundantly, He put humans and animals to their service and allowed them to spread everywhere. Humans planted some of them due to their beautiful shape and/or pleasant fragrance. Animals spread their seeds over to a wide area. Some other plant species spread naturally so that through their different tongues they glorify their maker and recite His names.

Humans were the most comprehensive species among all the creatures from Nursi’s perspective. They resembled both animals and angels. Accordingly, they had the capacity to manifest more divine names than any other entity. They were created for worship, supervision, exploration, and accumulation of knowledge. They explored the universe to witness the great artwork of Allāh and see the manifestations of his names. Even though they were given the ability to achieve that purpose, they often failed due to the work of their appetite and weak willpower. Accordingly, they were subject to progress and decline. Humans resembled animals in that they sought pleasure in their service. Because of that, they were given two wages; one was this worldly and immediate and the second one was other worldly, angelic, and permanent. Since human beings had almost an infinite spiritual potential, they had the possibility of being the exhibit of all divine names. The Prophets were the ones who displayed the most divine names and among them the Prophet Muhammad manifested all divine names most perfectly since he was exposed to them all directly during his Night Ascension.²⁶⁴

²⁶³Ibid., p. 366.

²⁶⁴Ibid., p.367.

Regardless the level of progress, no human including the Prophets could reach the level of the divine and become co-creators. Nursi differed from Ibn al-‘Arabī on this point who thought that humans could reach a certain spiritual level where they manifested the divine names perfectly and they became the co-creators. Nursi’s position was closer to that of the traditional theologians who considered the Prophet Muhammad as the best of the creation. Also like the traditionalists he thought that humans had the potential to surpass the angels in rank since angels had fixed status. Nursi differed from the traditionalist in that he thought that the spiritual station of the Prophet Muhammad was still ascending as a result of the supplications of the faithful on his behalf.

While the names of Allāh were manifested in the whole cosmos, one divine name was dominant and others were subordinate in each sphere and in species, according to Nursi. The same held true for the individual members of each species. In each human being, for example, one name was dominantly displayed while other names were also present since that name was inclusive of others. The individual members of the other species also displayed one name more comprehensively than others. “That is to say, although the name in question is general and encompasses everything, it is turned towards a thing with such intention and importance that it is as if it is special to that thing alone.”²⁶⁵ Occurrences and entities praised Allāh with the dominant name they manifested. The earthquake praised Him with the divine name of *al-Jalīl* (the Mighty), small animals repeated *al-Rahmān*, the flowers offered thanks with the name of *al-Jamīl*, the skies called Him *al-Subhān* (the Glorious), and spring uttered the names of the *al-Latīf*, *al-Karīm*, *al-Musawwir* (the Giver of Forms), *al-Muzayyin* (the Adorner), and *al-*

²⁶⁵Nursi, *The Words*, p. 342.

Wahhāb (the Bestower). For Nursi, the universe was like an orchestra displaying, praising, and celebrating the divine names in an orderly and coherently fashion.²⁶⁶

The individual members of animate and inanimate beings were unique due to the different combination of the names each manifested, in the view of Nursi. That meant that there were no two entities that reflected the same combination of names. While the different combination of names produced variety and different forms of worship in the universe, they also caused variety among individual human beings. The names caused differentiation of humans in terms of their physical proportions, character traits, and inclinations. In Nursi's view, the reason behind different laws of the Prophets, different paths of mystical orders, and different ways of scholars was the dominant divine name they exhibited. For example, Jesus displayed the name of *al-Qadīr* (the Powerful) along with other names, according to Nursi. In the Sufi groups emphasizing the path of love, the divine name of *al-Wadūd* was more prevalent while in the groups following the path of contemplation and reflection, the name of *al-Hakīm* (the Wise) was more dominant. The individuals who were gentle, kind, and polite reflected the name of *al-Jamīl* while people who were known for their toughness, brevity, and anger were dominated by *al-Jaleel*. Nursi said that the divine names of *al-Rahmān* and *al-Hakīm* were predominantly manifested in himself and his works. It is fair to say that each human individual, believer or disbeliever, reflected some divine names and worthy of respect as far as Nursi concerned.

²⁶⁶Ibid., p. 370-371.

The human species was the most comprehensive mirror for the divine names and accordingly they played a central role in the cosmos. In one respect, Nursi thought, the universe subsisted through humans because they were the most excellent species manifesting the divine name of *al-Qayyūm*. In other words, the purpose, the wisdom, and the goal behind the creation of the universe looked to humans and were realized through humans' function, "it is as if the manifestation of Self-Subsistence in them is a support for the existence of the cosmos."²⁶⁷ To Nursi, the universe was created for humans' sake who were equipped with a comprehensive nature and faculties to explore, display, reflect upon, and take pleasure in divine names. No other species had such a capability. The tools that humans possessed enabled them to serve like a tiny index of the universe. Like Ibn al-‘Arabī, Nursi thought that humans were "microcosm" in the macrocosm due to their capacity to display constantly changing embroideries of the divine names. Differently from Ibn al-‘Arabī, Nursi also indicated that humans were similar to the cosmos because human body contained all the elements and also bodily organs resembled the parts of the universe.

Belief in Allāh, for Nursi, was required for humans, the antique work of art, to see the inscriptions of the divine names clearly. Belief functioned like a light illuminating the universe for humans to easily detect the divine work. Belief connected the creation to its creator and made apparent the divine stamp in each entity in the cosmos. The disbelief severed that relationship and threw all the meaningful work of art into darkness. Without

²⁶⁷ Nursi, *The Flashes*, p. 41.

belief, the miraculous order and harmony in the universe was hidden, and the existence was attributed to nature, causes, and chance.

From Nursi's perspective, the material phenomena was touched by the *tajallī* of Allāh's names and it bore some resemblance to the eternal abode as a result of being recipient of eternal divine names. In his answer to a question about the necessity of bodily resurrection, Nursi explained that human body was the richest and the most comprehensive mirror for the exhibitions of divine names. Also it was equipped with excellent tools, faculties, and instruments to detect, witness, measure, know, and even experience the contents of the divine names in the cosmos. For example, tongue was a tool measuring the content of some divine names such as *al-Razzāq* and *al-Rahīm*. Eyes were the instruments to witness and measure the content of some divine names including *al-Jamīl* and *al-Rahīm*. Reason was a faculty measuring the content of the divine names such as *al-Hakīm* and *al-Ahad*. Briefly, each human faculty and organ was an instrument to measure, appreciate, and praise the names displayed in corporeality. The eternal abode, for Nursi, was a continuation of this world in terms of the display of divine names. The corporeal beings gained some sort of permanency as a result of functioning as the mirrors for the eternal names. However, while their mirror capacity had limitations in this world, they would have unending capabilities to reflect the divine names in the hereafter. Accordingly, the other world would be more wonderful and more beautiful than this world. The inhabitants of the other world would maintain their enthusiasm and excitement without boredom due to the constant renewal of the manifestations of the divine names.

It is clearly understood from the disposition of the universe and man's comprehensiveness that the universe's Maker wants to make known all the treasures of His Mercy, and all the manifestations of His Names, and to make experienced all the varieties of His bounties, for sure, the abode of bliss, which is a mighty pool formed from the flood of the universe and a great exhibition of the textiles woven on the loom of the universe and an everlasting store of the corps produced in the arable field of this world, will resemble the universe to a degree. And it will preserve all its fundamentals, both corporeal and spiritual. And its All-Wise Maker, the Compassionate One, will give as recompense for the duties of the physical tools and instruments, pleasure worthy of them; and to His servants, as a wage and as a reward for the particular worship of each. Otherwise a situation would occur that was contrary to His wisdom, justice, and mercy, which is in no way fitting for the Beauty, of His Mercy and Perfection of His Justice, and in no way compatible with it.²⁶⁸

Nursi's view of the eternal abode somewhat differed from those of traditional theologians who emphasized the complete otherness of the hereafter. It was also different from that of Ibn al-ʿArabī who understood paradise as a state of closeness to Allāh and hell as a deprivation of His proximity. While Ibn al-ʿArabī argued that hell was not eternal and that everyone would eventually witness Allāh's beauty, Nursi was silent about it. One could infer; however, that Nursi might have inclined to agree with Ibn Al-ʿArabī on this issue based on the former's thought that each entity manifested divine names and would receive some reward for it in the hereafter. Accordingly, the disbelievers reflected some divine names even though their disbelief hindered them from seeing and acknowledging it.

An important issue Nursi discussed in the *Risale* was the role of causes in the universe and their relationship with divine names and power. Did causes have any real effect or was it the divine hand that decided everything behind the causes? Did human beings have free will to bring about the actions they desired? Were they merely passive agents whose role were to serve as means for the work of divine names? Surprisingly,

²⁶⁸Nursi, *The Words*, p. 514.

Nursi thought that causes were a veil preventing people from seeing the real actor behind them. It was Allāh who acted through them. There were several reasons why Allāh used veils to curtain His active involvement in the cosmos, according to Nursi. First, it was not befitting, in the eyes of humans, for Allāh to be associated with lowly, earthly, and material matters. Causes were placed so that the dignity of the divine was protected in the superficial view of human mind. The seemingly negative, lowly, and ugly occurrences in the view of the humans looked positive, meaningful, and beautiful from the perspective of the divine. However, humans were not capable of understanding the wisdom and the meaning behind them and accordingly they may have blamed Allāh directly if He did not use causes. “It is not incompatible with its dignity that; therefore, causes were purely apparent and in reality have no true effect.”²⁶⁹

Nursi narrated that the angel of death, Azrāil, said to Allāh that people would complain about him, blame him, and even curse him while he was carrying his duty of taking the spirits of the dying. Allāh, in response, said that He would place a veil of disasters and illnesses between him and his servants so that they would put the blame on them and not on him. For Nursi, Azrāil, was also a veil to divine power so that the criticism of some people for seemingly unkind states they experienced during dying was directed to him and not to Allāh. “Yes, dignity and grandeur demand that causes were a veil to the hand of power in the view of the mind, while Divine Unity and Glory demand that causes withdraw their hands from the true effect.” The cosmos is full of veils hiding the face of the divine.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁹ Nursi, *The Words*, p. 301.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

Even though Nursi thought that causes had no real effect, he nevertheless insisted that Muslims lead their lives according to the laws of nature because Islamic *sharī'a* required them to do so. Nursi was in total agreement with Ibn al-‘Arabī about the role of causes as veils in the cosmos; however, the former still put emphasis on the human action and the willpower to bring about positive changes in society. Nursi indicated that the faithful should look to the past from the perspective of the divine destiny and the future from the perspective of causality.

In the final analyses, the basic assumption of Nursi about the nature of material phenomena was similar to that of some Sufis such as Ibn al-‘Arabī, Niyaz-ı Mısri, Ahmad al-Sirhindī, and Rūmī. The analyses of the *Risale* showed that Nursi viewed the cosmos as the theophany of Allāh’s names. The diversity and renewal of entities in the universe came from the various manifestations of the names of Allāh in different combinations. While the entities mirrored the numerous divine names, they did not gain any divinity from their function. In other words, Nursi’s views did not connote monism or incarnation. The entities differed in terms of their capacity to display the diviner names. The humans had the most comprehensive capacity to exhibit the names and accordingly, for Nursi, they were the microcosm of the macro world. The causes functioned as a veil and many people including the materialist scientists and philosophers attributed power to causes even though in reality it was the divine hand that worked and determined everything.

Nursi; however, differed from the aforementioned Sufis in that he was in favor of the rational exploration of the cosmos rather than the mystical experience to see the divine hand at work. For him, modern humans needed rational objective proofs rather than *kashf*, which was based on subjective personal experience, to strengthen their belief

in Allah. His observation of the prevalence of the rational scientific inquiry in the modern society persuaded him to take the path of reason in the pursuit of exploration of the existence and Allah. Accordingly, he made frequent references to reason, logic, and the modern sciences. He used his expansive knowledge of the modern sciences and philosophy eloquently in the *Risale* and argued that the regularity and the order in the universe, which was shown by all branches of modern science, pointed to the one single maker, Allāh. For Nursi, it was irrational to deny the existence of the artist of this great art which was a display of the inscriptions and the embroideries of Allāh's names. For Nursi, the modern rational science was a great tool to look for the divine stamp in each entity in the cosmos. His frequent use of scientific references helped him relate to an educated audience especially among the youth. It is important to point out that Nursi's spiritual mentor, Ahmad al-Sirhindī, had a more balanced view of human rational faculty to know the existence and the oneness of Allāh. Accordingly, Nursi's emphasis on human reason had its roots in the Mujaddidiyya -Naqshī tradition in addition to his exposure to the views of Muslim modernists and the Ottoman intellectuals.

Unlike Muslim philosophers and some modernists, Nursi promoted a kind of creator who actively governed the existence. Contrary to theologians, Nursi explored the immanency of Allāh in the cosmos while emphasizing that Allāh was transcendent and totally different from His creation. Accordingly, while Allāh may be known to an extent through the manifestations of His names, He was totally unique and other with his attributes and essence. Nursi also differed from the modernists for he, unlike them, speculated extensively about the names of Allāh and how they exhibited themselves in the cosmos. This put Nursi closer to Ahmad al-Sirhindī who indicated that Allāh was

transcendent and the cosmos was touched by the shades of his names. Nursi's emphasis on the *tawhīd* of Allāh reflected the overall modernist/revivalist view of his time as well as his Naqshī background. Nursi saw the manifestation of the divine name of *al-Ahad* wherever he looked and argued that all other divine names found coherence and harmony in *al-Ahad*.

Karâmât

Nursi not only affirmed the possibility and the reality of *karâmât* he also narrated many of them that he witnessed in his personal life. His view of *karâmât* was consistent with his perspective about Allāh's relationship with the cosmos. He believed that Allāh created him for a mission and He, behind the veil of causes, directed the course of the events in his life to fulfill it. As far as Nursi concerned, Allāh used him for the service of the production of the *Risale* and He paved the way marvelously.

The concept *karâmât* has been a part of the general Islamic spirituality since the beginning of the faith. The members of the mainstream orthodox schools of theology affirmed the possibility of *karâmât* experienced by the righteous believers of Allah. They based their view on the Qur'ānic verses narrating the extraordinary powers of some individuals such as Mary who was provided sustenance miraculously. Both Ash'arite and Māturīdī schools acknowledged that such marvelous occurrences were gifts from Allah to the dedicated servants. They; however, warned the believers about the exaggerations in such stories and rejected seeking assistance from the spirits of dead Sufi saints. In Sufi circles *karâmât* was attributed to *awliyā'*, the elected few who experienced extraordinary occurrences usually during their mystical journey. Over the course of the Islamic history,

karâmât was identified primarily with Sufi masters. In popular cultures, displaying miracles became a sign for their spiritual status and sainthood. Many stories of *karâmât* attributed to Sufi saints since the formative years of this tradition and some authors collected them.²⁷¹ Nursi's position on this issues reflected those of both traditional theologians and Sufis. He not only reported many of such stories in his books, he also sought assistance from the spirit of deceased Sufi saints as illustrated in this chapter. Hence, Nursi's stance on this issue may be viewed as a reflection of a clear Sufi influence as well as a feature of the general Islamic spirituality. It seemed that Nursi's students viewed him as a saint and reported many *karâmât* that they witnessed or heard involving him.²⁷² Nursi included some of them in the *Risale*. Nursi differed from Sufis in his understanding of *karâmât* greatly in one respect. He did not claim ownership for the *karâmât* he experienced; rather he attributed them to his service to the Qur'ân through the *Risale* and to the sincere work of his students. In other words, it was the *Risale* and the collective body of his students which were the recipients of the miracles from Allâh and not himself. "If some of the customers for the sacred treasure regard the wretched servant as a saint and consider him to be exalted, certainly it is the mark of the Qur'ânic truth's sacred compassion to send them assistance, succor, and enlightenment from the divine treasury, without the servant being aware of this or intervening, in order not to shame him."²⁷³

The *karâmât* that Nursi witnessed and reported in the *Risale* can be put into four categories. The first type of *karâmât* was related to his personal life and manifested itself

²⁷¹ Abu Nu'aym al-Isfahani's (d. 1038) *Hilyat al-Awliya wa tabaqat al-Asfiya*.

²⁷² Mardin, p. 183.

²⁷³ Nursi, *The Letters*, p. 418.

in the form of the provision of sustenance, the care of his personal needs, and the control of wild animals. Nursi regarded such supernatural happenings as the divine interventions for his efforts to produce the *Risale*. He said that the same way the followers of a saint hoped for assistance of their masters when they were in need, his needs were taken care of on numerous occasions in ways that he had not expected. Nursi narrated several of marvelous incidents in support of this claim and pointed out that his mention of such stories arose from his desire to praise and thank Allāh not to promote himself.

In one occasion, a visitor called Süleyman came to him in the mountains. He wanted to spend one or two days with Nursi to pray together and receive some spiritual advice. Nursi had no food with him and asked the visitor to go and get some bread; however, the visitor was not able to find anything since there was no one living in the area. Later, for no apparent reason and no need, they started walking till they reached the top of the mountain. Nursi asked the visitor to make some tea while he sat under a cedar tree overlooking a deep ravine. He felt bad for the fact that he had a little bit of bread which will be enough for two of them only for that evening while they planned to stay in the mountains for two days. While thinking, Nursi turned his head “involuntarily” and saw a huge loaf of bread on the cedar tree in the branches. He shouted: “Süleyman! Good news! Almighty Allāh has sent us food”²⁷⁴ They took the bread, looked at it, and saw that no bird or wild animal had touched it. He said that it was a marvelous divine bounty since no one climbed to that mountain for twenty or more days. The bread was enough for them for two days.²⁷⁵

²⁷⁴Nursi, *The Letters*, p. 89.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

In another occasion, Nursi said that he needed to see a man to clarify some issues. However, he was in exile and his contact with outsiders was greatly restricted. At the same time, he also needed a part of his book which had been sent to a town called Niş. Then, after the morning prayer while he was sitting that person entered the room holding a part of a book in his hand. He inquired about it and the person said “I do not know. Someone gave it to me at my door saying that it had come from Niş; so I brought it to you.”²⁷⁶ Nursi said that he thanked Allāh for this bounty for it could not be a chance for this man coming from his house at this time of the day and this part of the book arriving from Niş. Nursi thought that “it was surely the saintly influence of the All-Wise Qur’ân gave a man such as this piece of paper such as that at the same moment and sent it to me, I exclaimed: All praise be to Allāh! One who knows the smallest, the most secret, the least significant desire of my heart, will certainly have compassion on me and protect me; in which case, I feel no obligation towards the world whatsoever.”²⁷⁷

In another marvelous occasion, Nursi reported that his nephew, the late Abdurrahman, had a high regard of him despite the fact that they parted ways for several years. Abdurrahman fell sick severely and wanted help and assistance from him. Nursi said that while he was not able to help him personally, the Qur’ân’s saintly influence came to his assistance. The section of the *Risale* about the resurrection of the dead came to his possession three months before his death. The treatise about death and resurrection cleansed him of his spiritual doubts and heedlessness, and “as though quite simply he had

²⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 421.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 421

risen to the degree of sainthood, he displayed three clear instances of wonder-working in the letter he wrote to me before he died.”²⁷⁸

Mulla Hamid, one of Nursi’s students, reported the following occasion demonstrating Nursi’s power over animals. One day, several visitors came to the mountains to visit Nursi and they wanted to stay overnight. Nursi sent *Mulla* Hamid to the neighboring village for some quilts. Because he was afraid of the dogs and other wild animals, which was plenty in the area, he wanted to cut a stick for himself; however, Nursi did not allow him saying that the dogs will not harm him. *Mulla* Hamid set off the road and, near the village, he came across with a flock of sheep and goats guarded by dogs. He saw the dogs laying on his path and as he approached them they moved away, making way for him. On his arrival to the village, the villagers expressed their astonishment and indicated that they could not come near the flock even as a group with sticks since the dogs were really wild. *Mulla* Hamid reminded them that he was sent by Nursi. “We can accept it then” they said. On his arrival back to the mountain, he was met by Nursi who asked him if he had been attacked by the dogs and told him to have courage and not be scared. “This was a lesson of courage for *Mulla* Hamid.”²⁷⁹ These *karâmât* took place numerous times in Nursi’s life and convinced him that he was under the protection of divine hand due to his work for the Qur’ân. These and similar stories narrated in the *Risale* and the works of Nursi’s students who were convinced that Nursi was a saintly figure.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 421.

²⁷⁹ Vahide, p.179.

The second type of *karâmât Nursi* talked about was related to the lives of individuals who worked in the inscription and the distribution of the *Risale*. In other words, they were about the students, disciples, and close confidants of Nursi who helped him in the production of the *Risale*. Nursi indicated that numerous supernatural incidents demonstrated clearly that the *Risale* was being protected from its adversaries by a divine intervention. These incidents, Nursi thought, also showed that those who wrote and disseminated the *Risale* were admonished if they loosened their hands and showed laziness in their work for the *Risale*. Interestingly, he saw the spiritual power of al-Jilānī along with the divine protection behind these *karâmât*. Nursi talked of the blows dealt by divine compassion that “his comrades in the service of the Qur’ân receive in consequence of the faults and mistakes they make as the result of human nature. A succession of extraordinary events proceeding from the service of the Qur’ân and an instance of *Gawth al-A’zam’s* (Al-Jilānī) wonder-working will be explained, who supervises this sacred service with Allāh's permission and assists it with his saintly influence and help—so that those who perform it may persevere earnestly in their service.”²⁸⁰

Even though there were plenty of *karâmât* within this category reported in the *Risale*, it would be sufficient to include few of them here. Nursi narrated that he had a close friend in the name of Hulusi bey who provided a sincere service to the Qur’ân. Finishing his military duty in the city of Isparta where Nursi was in exile, Hulusi Bey returned to his homeland where he loosened his hands from the Qur’ânic service and started enjoying worldly pleasure and happiness. He was reunited with his parents after long years of separation and he was also treated with honor and respect due to his service

²⁸⁰ Nursi, *The Flashes*, the 10th flash.

to the country as a high ranking official. Nursi said that the world was smiling on Hulusi Bey and appeared good; however, for those who work for the service of the Qur’ân either the world must abandon them or they should abandon the world so that they perform their service to Allāh with complete sincerity. Even though Hulusi’s heart had strong faith, due to his laziness and slackness for the Qur’ânic work, he received a compassionate slap from the divine hand. “For one or two years a number of dissemblers were set to pester him, who dispelled all his worldly pleasure. They made both the world vexed at him, and he vexed at the world. So in the true meaning of the word he embraced his duty earnestly.”²⁸¹ The difficulties and hardships arose in an extraordinary fashion and spoiled Hulusi bey’s worldly pleasures were a *karâmât* of the *Risale* which was being protected by the spiritual powers of al-Jilânî. While Nursi gave the credit to the *Risale* and al-Jilânî for these marvelous occurrences, without a doubt his students attributed them to the saintly powers of Nursi himself.

A sincere disciple of Nursi, Muhacir Hafiz Ahmed, reported a similar *karâmât*. It looks like he served as the imam of a village in Barla where Nursi was in exile. In accordance with the new law, he had to recite the Islamic prayer call in Turkish. However, Nursi opposed it and urged him to call it in Arabic. Ahmed was in a risky spot. On one hand he did not want to upset Nursi whom, he said, he loved more than his life. On the other hand, he had to obey the law in order to keep his job and avoid imprisonment. Apparently, Ahmed wanted Nursi to be moved to another village at least temporarily until the end of Ramadan of that year so that he could help people with their needs during the holy month without getting into trouble. Whether he talked to authorities

²⁸¹Ibid., the 10th flash.

about Nursi's removal to another place was not clear. Ahmed said, "I did not know that if he moved, or went to another region, it would cause a temporary lapse in my service of the Qur'ân."²⁸² Also if Nursi moved, the inscription and the distribution of the *Risale* might have been interrupted in that area. All of a sudden Ahmed fell sick with a severe illness, probably some sort of epilepsy, and he could not recover for three months. Both Ahmed and Nursi thought it was a compassionate slap from Allāh and also a *karâmât* of the *Risale*. "However, praise be to Allāh, according to what my Master said, it was imparted to him that we may hope from Divine mercy that each minute of the calamity is equivalent to a day's worship. For the mistake was not due to enmity; the wish occurred to me only because I was thinking of my life in the Hereafter."²⁸³

Nursi related a *karâmât* about Hakkı Efendi who worked as a lawyer and helped Nursi in scribing of the *Risale*. Nursi said that while Hakkı Efendi was carrying out his duties as a student of the *Risale*, a new governor came to his town who treated the servers of the *Risale* harshly. Out of the fear for himself and for Nursi, Hakkı Efendi hid the manuscripts he had written and he gave up serving the *Risale* for a while. Nursi said that suddenly "a court case was opened against him, bearing the meaning of a slap dealt by the divine compassion."²⁸⁴ He was being asked to pay a large amount of money in the lawsuit in addition to one year of imprisonment. Hakkı Efendi visited Nursi for advice and on his return he took up "the service of the Qur'ân and the duties of being a student of the *Risale*. Then the decree of compassionate slap was lifted and he was acquitted."²⁸⁵

²⁸²Ibid., the 10th flash.

²⁸³Ibid., the 10th flash.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., the 10th flash.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., the 10th flash.

Nursi said that at a later time, Hakkı Efendi was given a duty of writing the portion of the Qur'ân in a new way. Before completing the part he was responsible for, he took a court case due to his financially difficult circumstances. However, he received another compassionate slap and the finger he used to hold the pen was broken. "It was as though warning him: "This finger won't both write out a lawyer's case and the Qur'ân!"²⁸⁶ Nursi said that he was surprised by what happened since he did not know that Hakkı Efendi took up a court case without telling him. "Then it was understood that the sacred, pure service of the Qur'ân did not want to involve the fingers which were particular to it in other work."²⁸⁷ Nursi always reminded his students of their mission of serving the Qur'ân through writing and distributing the *Risale* and of the continuous divine intervention in the forms of *karâmât* to fulfil it.

The last *karâmât* in this category was about Bekir Efendi who helped Nursi print the *Risale* in Latin letters. Nursi sent a portion of the *Risale* as well as its printing cost to Bekir Efendi. He later sent additional pieces for printing and told him that he would send the payment later. Worried about the financial ability of Nursi, Bekir Efendi hesitated to pay the printing costs of four hundred liras out of his pocket. Nursi said, "It was not printed, and caused considerable harm to our service of the Qur'ân."²⁸⁸ Astonishingly, two months later nine hundred liras of Bekir Efendi was stolen and he received the divine compassionate slap. "Allâh willing, the lost nine hundred liras was like the giving of alms."²⁸⁹ As far as Nursi saw it. Both testimonies of Nursi and his students indicated that

²⁸⁶ Ibid., the 10th flash.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., the 10th flash.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., the 10th flash.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., the 10th flash.

due to frequent occurrences of such extraordinary incidents, they were compelled to believe that the incidents were not merely coincidences. Rather they were the *karâmât* of the *Risale* which was being protected by the spiritual power of al-Jīlānī.

The third type of *karâmât* was related to the *Risale* itself. Nursi reported that he and his students witnessed numerous miraculous occurrences during the compilation and distribution of the *Risale* which made them to believe that they were divine favors. The *karâmât* of this category included *tawafuqāt* (proportions or harmonies) in the script of the *Risale*, the easy explanation of the difficult matters, the acceptance and the embrace of it by people from various educational and social backgrounds, and the purposeful preparation of Nursi for the authorship of this book since his birth without his choice.

Nursi narrated several examples of *karâmât* in this category. He wrote that the section of the *Risale* about the miracles of Muhammad was sixty pages long. The phrase of *rasulullah* (Allāh’s messenger) was repeated two hundred times in that piece. Miraculously, each of these phrases in each page looked to each other perfectly. In other words, two hundred instances of this phrase proportionately fell on the same spot in each page. Moreover, this harmony occurred without the realization of the eight different scribes who wrote and copied that section of the *Risale*. This marvelous occurrence, Nursi indicated, demonstrated the degree of singularity of the *Risale* surpassing all other books. “It is understood from this that it is a sort of wonder of the miracle of the Qur’ân and the miracles of Muhammad which is manifested and represented in those mirrors.”²⁹⁰

²⁹⁰Nursi, *The Letters*, p. 437.

The second *karâmât* in this group Nursi related entailed the easy explanation of the difficult matters in the *Risale*. The fact that, for Nursi, the most difficult subjects of Islamic theology such as the resurrection and the divine determining and humans' free will were explained in the *Risale* in a brilliant fashion even to an average individual was a form of *karâmât*. According to Nursi, the Words, one of his books, explained perfectly the unity and the oneness of Allāh together with the truths of the proximity of Allāh to the creation and its limitless distance from Him. Briefly, for Nursi, the *Risale* proved without any doubt that this cosmos was the creation of one single being whose divine stamp was visible in each entity and that the universe needed His constant intervention for its continued existence. For Nursi, the eloquence of the *Risale* was a form of *karâmât* since it could not possibly be produced by a man like him. Although the truths of belief and the Qur'ân appeared in *Risale* through Nursi, it was "directly the work of the All-Wise Qur'ân's miracle and a manifestation of a dominical favor and a powerful sign from the Unseen."²⁹¹

Another manifestation of *karâmât* in the *Risale* was the speed at which it was written and its compelling and sound arguments. Nursi thought that it took a lot of research and study to write the treatises like the *Risale* while it was written with an extraordinary speed under difficult conditions and at times when he was sick and his mind contracted. For instance, Nursi pointed out, the large parts of the treatise on the miracles of Muhammad were written without referring to any book in the total of twelve hours. The part of the same treatise dealing with the finality of the Prophet Muhammad was written from memory in about three hours under the rain in the mountains. Nursi

²⁹¹ Ibid., p. 439.

said that most of the *Risale* was written under the similar conditions with an unexpected ease and speed from memory which was a demonstration of the divine favor. Particularly, his ability to explain the complicated matters with ease when he suffered under severe illnesses and a weak memory was a clear *karâmât* far as Nursi understood it. “If this was not a direct divine favor and dominical bounty and wonder of the Qur’ân, what is?”²⁹²

Nursi believed that his entire life was directed, outside of his will, in such a way to produce the *Risale* in the service of the Qur’ân. His education and experiences prepared him to explain the truths of belief in a way relevant to the modern audience. Even the life of exile, isolation from people, and solitariness in the villages and the mountains served the purpose of carrying out the duty of serving the Qur’ân. The ill-treatment he received from the state officials during the exile helped him focus on the production of the *Risale*. The fact that he was barred from having a collection of books served the purpose of having the Qur’ân as the only master. Furthermore, Nursi said, the great majority of the treatises were inspired to him instantaneously as a result of some need arising from his spirit. However, marvelously when he showed them to his visitors and friends, they indicated that they contained the cures for the spiritual ills of the time. Accordingly, they were disseminated across the country secretly and found a wide range of audience. Despite the close scrutiny of the state and the restrictions on his life, the success of the *Risale*, for Nursi, could only be attributed to the divine intervention. “I have no doubt therefore that the above-mentioned points and the course of my life and my involuntarily studying fields of learning opposed to normal practice, outside my own

²⁹² Ibid., p. 440.

will and awareness, were a powerful divine favor and dominical bounty bestowed to yield sacred results such as these.”²⁹³

Nursi lastly indicated that during the period of the production and the distribution of the *Risale*, he and his students witnessed hundreds of instances of divine favor and wonders. He said that Allāh provided them with sustenance in ways that they did not imagine. To Nursi, all these marvels were a sign that they were being employed by Allāh to serve the Qur’ān “both within the sphere of divine pleasure and divine favor.”²⁹⁴

Nursi cited several reasons in explanation of so many *karāmât* that he and his students experienced and witnessed. He recalled the dream he had before the beginning of The World War I in which the Mount Ararat was exploded. Nursi’s interpretation of that dream was that he was chosen to defend the miracle of the Qur’ān. Nursi thought that he fulfilled his duty with the *Risale* which successfully proved the truths of the Qur’ān to a modern rational and scientific-minded audience. “Since the miracle of the Qur’ān has been expounded to an extent with the Words, to set forth the divine favors received in our service of the Qur’ān, which were sorts of blessings and emanations of it, surely assist the miracle and pass to its account, and should therefore be set forth.”²⁹⁵

Nursi drew attention to another factor that he thought was the reason for the divine favors they received. He said that the success of the *Risale* in terms of explaining the truths of the Qur’ān eloquently to a diverse audience made him to acknowledge that he and his students were being employed by Allāh. He also thought that the *Risale* was

²⁹³Ibid., p. 442.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 442.

²⁹⁵Ibid., p. 443.

not his work, rather it was a work of *ilhām* (inspiration) and he was merely a transmitter. Nursi indicated that he was compelled to proclaim that “outside our knowledge and will, someone is employing us; we do not know it, but he is making us work. My evidence is this: outside our wills and consciousness, we manifest certain divine favors and facilities. In which case, we were compelled to shout out and proclaim those favors.”²⁹⁶

The fourth type of *karâmât* was about the predication and the praise of the *Risale* in the Qur’ân and other respectable Islamic sources. As part of the allusive exegesis, Nursi excessively used Jafr which was based on the calculation of the numerical value of the Arabic letters in a Qur’ânic verse. This type of exegesis was frequently used by Ibn al-‘Arabî who attributed a cosmic significance to Arabic letters and used this method to decipher the hidden meanings of the Qur’ânic verses.²⁹⁷

Being the eternal word of the All-Knowing Allāh, the Qur’ân included information about everything past and present, in Nursi’s view. He thought that each Qur’ânic verse had numerous meanings alluding to significant events and personalities in each century. In order to find these various meanings, one had to look at the structure of a verse including the word order, the endings, and the numerical value of each letter. Using that method, Nursi attempted to find allusions to the *Risale* in the Qur’ân and the poetries attributed to al-Jīlānī. He came up with numerous Qur’ânic verses alluding to it and its author, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 436.

²⁹⁷ Metin Yurdagür, *Islam Ansiklopedisi*, Istanbul: TDV, 1993. Vol: 7, p. 215-218.

In explaining why the *Risale* was worthy of the mention of the Qur’ân, Nursi said that it was a profound, a strong, and a sound proof of the truthfulness of the Qur’ân in this century. “It is inspired by the Qur’ân and it is a bright flash of its unearthly miracle.”²⁹⁸ Accordingly, it was natural for the Qur’ân to point to the value and the significance of the *Risale*. In other words, the Qur’ân was praising itself by predicting and praising the *Risale* many times in its verses. Nursi personally did not claim ownership for that praise since, in his view, the *Risale* was not his book. It was rather a work of inspiration. Thus, his responsibility was to thank Allâh in humility for being used in the production of such a magnificent book and not to be arrogant and proud.

Even though Nursi deciphered allusions to the *Risale* throughout the Qur’ân, it seemed that he found a particular connection between the verse of light in the chapter of light and the *Risale-i Nur* (the epistles of light). Among the many meanings and levels of this verse, he indicated, several sentences alluded to the *Risale* in ten different ways. The verse said, “Allâh is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The Parable of His Light is as if there were a Niche and within it a Lamp: the Lamp enclosed in Glass: the glass as it were a brilliant star: Lit from a blessed Tree, an Olive, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil is well-nigh luminous, though fire scarce touched it: Light upon Light! Allâh doth guide whom He will to His Light: Allâh doth set forth Parables for men: and Allâh doth know all things.”²⁹⁹

According to *Jafr* calculation, the sentence “The Parable of His Light is as if there were a Niche and within it a Lamp” made 998 which coincided exactly with the

²⁹⁸ Nursi, *The Rays*, p. 831.

²⁹⁹ The Qur’ân, 24:35.

numerical value of the phrase of *Risaletu'n Nur*. "The glass as it were a brilliant star" made 546 and coincided very closely with the value of *Risale-i Nur* which was 548. However, its figurative meaning pointed to the *Risale* precisely. "From a blessed tree" added up to 598 which was equal to the value of the phrase *Resaili'n Nur*. The sentence "Light upon light. Allāh doth guide whom He will to His Light" came to 998 which coincided exactly with the value of *Risaletu'n Nur* which has 998.

The value of the letters in "He wills" coincided with the letters of *Bediuzzaman* which was the title of Nursi. The sentence "The Parable of His Light is as if there were a Niche and within it a Lamp: the Lamp enclosed in Glass." came to 1349 which was the year of the inscription of the best parts of the *Risale*. "The Lamp enclosed in Glass: the glass as it were a brilliant star" alluded to 1345 which was the year during which the *Risale* became widespread, famous, and shiny. The piece "from a blessed tree" alluded to 1311, the year during which the author of the *Risale* started studying the Arabic letters which is the first step to studying the Qur'ân, "blessed tree" of the *Risale*.

Nursi extensively used this type of exegesis to support his assumption that the *Risale* was a work of divine inspiration and it was essential for relating the message of the Qur'ân to the contemporary readers. In his examination of the Qur'ân, Nursi found allusions not only to the *Risale* but also to his students and the significant events of the 20th century. The message he gave to his followers was that it was the *karâmât* of the *Risale* and of his followers that the Qur'ân made so many references to them and that

they would be triumphant despite all the difficulties and persecutions.³⁰⁰ Besides the Qur'ân, Nursi found plenty of allusions to the *Risale*, his students, and himself in the poetries attributed to al-Jīlānī and Ibn al-‘Arabī.³⁰¹ In his view, the number of such references was so many that they could be regarded as a solid proof demonstrating the *karâmât* of the *Risale*. Nursi's frequent references in this context to al-Jīlānī and Ibn al-‘Arabī illustrated their popularity in the Anatolian religious and cultural imagination. In fact, it was often Nursi's students who found an allusion to the *Risale* in the works of the past Sufis, particularly al-Jīlānī and Ibn al-‘Arabī, and wrote a letter to Nursi to share their joy and excitement. Nursi successfully incorporated these allusions into his works to promote the *Risale*.

Nursi's perspective of *karâmât* was consistent with his view of the cosmos. He found purpose, harmony, and regularity without any coincidence in the existence. He saw the divine hand actively shaping the events. He noticed the mysterious work of the Allāh behind all the veils. Similarly, he discovered and witnessed the same divine hand working in his life through causality. He came to believe that he was created for a mission and all the experiences in his life prepared him for it. His childhood, his studies, his social and political activities prepared him to serve the Qur'ân through writing and disseminating the *Risale*. The divine hand directing his life for that purpose also prepared marvelously all the necessary circumstances for its production. He provided Nursi with sustenance, sometimes miraculously, protected him from his adversaries, brought him the

³⁰⁰Said Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, (Vol. 1 and 2.) Istanbul: Nesil Basim Yayin, 1996. p. 982.

³⁰¹ Nursi collected all the allusions in a book titled *Sikke-i Tasdik-i Gaybi*.

students to produce and distribute the *Risale*, and made allusions to it in the Qur'ân which boosted the motivation of his followers. Differently from the traditional Sufis who attributed *karâmât* to a saint, Nursi attributed them to the *Risale* and his followers collectively. He urged people to read the *Risale* and popularize it rather than visiting him personally. Accordingly, he overcame the challenges and restrictions of exile and imprisonment and fulfilled his mission.

It seemed that Nursi's detection of the divine hand hidden behind the causes led him develop an intimacy with Allāh. He expressed his love and friendship with Allāh and also quoted famous Sufis voicing the same sentiment. He turned to Allāh to express his loneliness and suffering in the exile. "My Lord! I am a stranger, I have no one, I am weak, I am powerless, I am impotent, I am old; I am without will; I seek recourse, I seek forgiveness, I seek help from your court, Allāh!"³⁰² Nursi cried out. Suddenly, he felt peace and comfort with his belief in Allāh whose aid transformed the many layers of exile into friendly and familiar scenes. The sense of loneliness was eased through the comfort and friendship he found in the creator. His tongue recited the verse of "Allāh is enough for us, and He is the best disposer of affairs."³⁰³ His heart started reading the verse, "But if they turn away, Say: "(Allāh) sufficeth me: there is no god but He: On Him is my trust, He the Lord of the Throne (of Glory) Supreme!"³⁰⁴ He expressed what he felt in a poem in which he stressed the need to trust in Allāh and not to cry since it exacerbated the problem. In one section of the poem he said: "Find misfortune's Sender, and know it is a gift within a gift and pleasure. If you find Him not, know the world is all

³⁰²Nursi, *The Letters*, p. 43.

³⁰³ The Qur'ân 3:173

³⁰⁴ The Qur'ân 9:129

pain within pain, transience and loss. Trust in Allāh! Laugh in misfortune’s face; it too will laugh”³⁰⁵

For Nursi, the one who found Allāh had everything and the one who did not had nothing. Accordingly, it was Allāh who provided peace and comfort for Nursi who felt utterly poor and lonely in the multiple layers of the exile. Even though he was comforted with the company of Allāh, Nursi still found himself as a stranger in this temporary life. He cited a poem by Niyaz-ı Mısri to express his sorrow and his desire for Allāh.

Fleeing the world’s grief,
Taking flight with ardor and longing, Opening my wings to the void,
Crying with each breath, Friend! Friend!³⁰⁶

He wanted to know if his duties in this guest house were finished. If they were, with peace of mind “I can cast myself into a light-filled and pleasurable true exile and forget the world saying like Rūmī said: “Do you know what the *samā’* is? To become unconscious of existence, to taste eternity in absolute annihilation”. He referred to Rūmī as one of his masters and called him and other Sufis *ahl al-haqīqah* (the folks of the truth).³⁰⁷ It seemed that Nursi has a desire to completely dedicate himself to a spiritual mystical journey and experience *fanâ’* (annihilation). It looked like he even had the taste of such a journey and wanted to stay in that state more often for he found peace and comfort in the intimacy of and the friendship with Allāh. However, Nursi believed that his duties in this world were not completed. Accordingly, he did not pay attention to

³⁰⁵Nursi, *The Letters*, p. 43.

³⁰⁶Ibid., *The Flashes*, the 26th flash.

³⁰⁷Nursi, *The Letters*, p. 44.

mystical experiences, states, or stations. Again he turned to al- Mısrı. “In the manner of the poet Niyazı Misrî, we say:

Till this breath became the ocean,
Till this cage is smashed to fragments, till this voice is silenced,
I shall call: O Truth! O Existent! O Living One! Most Worthy of Worship! O Most Wise!
One Sought! Most Compassionate! All-Loving!
And I call out: There is no Allāh but Allāh, the Sovereign, the Truth, the Evident;
Muhammad is the Messenger of Allāh, faithful in His promise, Amen.³⁰⁸

Dhikr, Sohbet, and Service

One important Sufi element reflecting Nursi’s dedication to and friendship with Allāh was the amount of daily *dhikr* offered and supererogatory prayers he performed. His neighbors in Barla reported that Nursi had a small platform made on the tree in front of his house and he spent the night on it in summer and spring praying and reading supplications. Nursi read daily from *Majmuāt al-Ahzāb*, a book of *dhikr* compiled by Ahmad Gümüşhanevî, a Sufi master from Khalidi-Naqshî tradition. The book was about six hundred pages long and consisted of the supplications of well-known Sufi figures such as al-Jīlānī and Naqshbandī. The students of Nursi reported that he finished the entire book every two weeks. One of his frequent visitors and helpers during the exile in the city of Kastamonu was Mehmet Feyzi Efendi (d. 1989). He narrated that Nursi spent the entire night with worship and supplication. He maintained this habit both in winter and summer. He never omitted *tahajjud* (supererogatory nightly prayers) and his daily *dhikr*. During one Ramadan, Nursi became severely ill; however, he still observed his nightly prayers and supplications in addition to fasting. His neighbors in Kastamonu

³⁰⁸ Ibid., *The Letters*, p. 351.

testified that Nursi offered his supplications at nights with a sad voice and they were all amazed with his level of dedication.³⁰⁹

He also incorporated *Jawshan*, about twenty pages long, into his *dhikr* collection and read it over daily. For him, it was a very special supplication because he believed that it was originally brought to the Prophet Muhammad by the angel Gabriel.³¹⁰ For Nursi, it was the most eloquent of prayers “which looks both explicitly and allusively to a thousand and one Divine Names; is a wondrous supplication that in one respect proceeds from the Qur’ân; is superior to all the other invocations recited by those who advance in knowledge of Allâh.”³¹¹ He considered the *Risale* to be a ray from *Jawshan* which contained supplications like this one in a rhythmic form: “O You other than Whose Kingdom no kingdom exists; O You Whose Praise cannot be counted by His slaves; O You Whose Glory cannot be described by His creatures; O You Whose Perfection lies beyond the range of all vision; O You Whose Attributes exceed the bounds of all”³¹² Nursi believed that it was the *karâmât* of *Jawshan* and the supplication of Bahauddin Naqshbandi in *Majmuât al-Ahzâb* protecting him from the plots and poisons of his adversaries.³¹³

Following Nursi’s example and encouragement, his followers also incorporated *Jawshan* and *Majmuat al-Ahzab* into their religious lives. Recitation of *dhikr* became an

³⁰⁹Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, p. 2179.

³¹⁰ Historically, *Jawshan* was popular among the *Shī‘a*. It was mentioned in *Shī‘a hadīth* sources. For more on it, look at Mehmet Toprak, *Cevsen*, Diyanet İslam Ansiklopedisi. Istanbul: TDV, 1993. Vol 7, p. 462-464

³¹¹Nursi, *The Rays*, p. 686.

³¹² Nursi, *The Supreme Sign*, p. 24.

³¹³ Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*. p. 2188.

indispensable element of what became known as the Nur Movement. Differently from traditional Sufi groups, Nursi did not prescribe a particular form of *dhikr*. His followers had the flexibility of performing *dhikr* loudly, silently, individually, or in group. While Nursi practiced daily *dhikr*, he put much more emphasis on scribing and disseminating the copies of the *Risale*. The pieces of the *Risale* were written initially in Arabic and circulated around often in secret. The inhabitants of the area where Nursi was exiled offered their service to him for they viewed him as a saint trying to preserve the religious values of the land. Accordingly, the sections of the *Risale* found attraction both locally and nationally. A group of people with more religious sensitivity devoted themselves to this cause and popularized the *Risale* across Anatolia.³¹⁴ Nursi called them students and expected them “to feel as though the *Risale* was their own property written by themselves, and to know their vital duty, their life’s work, to be service and dissemination of them... A student is connected with my personality which has the duties of herald of the All-Wise Qur’ân and teacher.”³¹⁵ They formed reading circles and had *sohbets* on the topics discussed in the *Risale*. When the restrictions on religion was relatively eased after 1940’s in Turkey, the students of Nursi mass-printed the *Risale* in Turkish which made it available to a larger and younger audience. With the encouragement of Nursi, they opened *dershanes* (study house) to have *sohbet* and host university students. The activities in *dershanes* included *sohbet*, *dhikr*, and social activism to gain new members. Nursi, repeatedly reminded his followers to give priority

³¹⁴ The members of this circle included Abdulkadir Badıllı (d.2014), Hulusi Yahyagil (d.1986), Mustafa Sungur (d. 2012), Abdullah Yeğın (1924-), and Mehmet Emin Birinci (d. 2007). For details about them, look at Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, p. 189-201.

³¹⁵Nursi, *The Letters*, p. 404-405.

to read and serve the *Risale* rather than visiting him personally. He reiterated that the *Risale* re-articulated the eternal truths of the Qur'ân in a way relevant to the modern age. Accordingly, he argued, it would be more beneficial for people to read the *Risale* than visiting him.

The *Risale-i Nur* is not only repairing some minor damage or some small house; it is repairing vast damage and the all-embracing citadel which contains Islam, the stones of which were the size of mountains. And it is not striving to reform only a private heart and an individual conscience; it is striving to cure with the medicines of the Qur'ân and belief and the Qur'ân's miracle the collective heart and generally-held ideas, which have been breached in awesome fashion by the tools of corruption prepared and stored up over a thousand years, and the general conscience, which is facing corruption through the destruction of the foundations, currents, and marks of Islam which were the refuge of all and particularly the mass of believers.³¹⁶

Nursi did not establish a formal hierarchical order in his group. He saw himself as one of the ordinary members of the group who connected to each other in *uhuvvet* (brotherhood). For Nursi, he was not any superior to other individuals in the brotherhood. Nursi's effort to encourage each individual member in his circle to serve the cause without having a hierarchical order probably stemmed from two reasons. First, he was being closely monitored, particularly when he was in exile, and founding an organization would have attracted the wrath the state apparatus. Second, it seems that Nursi inherited a sense of individualism from the years he spent in Van and Istanbul among the Ottoman intellectuals and also his reading of the modern European philosophy. The sense of individual worth was evident in the letter he presented to the sultan's officials when he tried to secure funds for his school project. Thus, Nursi's formulation of the concept of *uhuvvet*, which implied equality of individual members, to describe the relationship

³¹⁶Nursi, *The Rays*, p. 200.

among the members of his followers may have had to arise from his familiarity with the idea of individualism.

And so, O *Risale-i Nur* students and servants of the Qur'ân! You and I were members of a collective personality such as that, worthy of the title of 'perfect man.' We were like the components of a factory's machinery which produces eternal happiness within eternal life... This is to imagine your brothers' virtues and merits in your own selves, and to thankfully take pride at their glory. The Sufis have terms they use among themselves, "annihilation in the *shaykh*," "annihilation in the Prophet;" I am not a Sufi, but these principles of theirs make a good rule in our way, in the form of "annihilation in the brothers." Among brothers this is called "*tafâni*," that is, "annihilation in one another." That is to say, to forget the feelings of one's own carnal soul, and live in one's mind with one's brothers' virtues and feelings. In any event, the basis of our way is brotherhood... It is not the means which is between father and son, or *shaykh* and follower. It is the means of true brotherhood. At the very most a Master [Ustad] intervenes. Our way is the closest friendship. This friendship necessitated being the closest friend, the most sacrificing companion, the most appreciative comrade, the noblest brother.³¹⁷

Nursi came up with a new name for the type of organization in which the members worked in brotherhood without any hierarchical order. He called it *jamā'at* (group) and indicated that the modern era was the time of the collective work and not the time of living around a Sufi master and expecting his blessings like in traditional *tarīqas*.³¹⁸ The *Risale* became the common link connecting the brothers of *jamā'at* who met in largely local and independent *dershanes*. Nursi advised his followers to live in the community among people to serve Islam without developing any attachment to the worldly things. He basically, urged them to feel the presence of Allāh each moment in their inner world, lead an ascetic lifestyle without leaving their communities. Even though he emphasized that they should give priority to serving Islam and relying on the community for their living, he also expected them to work at least minimally to make their living.

³¹⁷Ibid., *The Flashes*, the 21st flash.

³¹⁸Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*. p. 1416.

Whereas for those employed in service of the *Qur'ân*, either the world must be vexed with them, or they must be vexed at the world, so that they can perform that service sincerely and earnestly... Attaining a sense of the Divine presence through the strength of certain, verified belief and through the lights proceeding from reflective thought on creatures which leads to knowledge of the Maker; thinking that the Compassionate Creator is all-present and seeing; not seeking the attention of any other than He, and realizing that looking to others in His presence or seeking help from them is contrary to right conduct in His presence; one may be saved from such hypocrisy and gain sincerity... This nation has always nurtured respect for those who work for reality and the Hereafter, and assisted them. With the intention of actively sharing in their genuine sincerity and in the works they carry out devotedly, it has always showed respect by assisting them with material benefits like alms and gifts so that they should not become preoccupied with securing their material needs and wasting their time. But this assistance and benefit may not be sought; it is given. It may not even be sought through the tongue of disposition by desiring it with the heart or expecting it. It should rather be given when unexpected, otherwise sincerity will be harmed.³¹⁹

It should be noted that the concepts *dhikr*, *sohbet* and service are not necessarily uniquely Sufi and they are part of the general Islamic spirituality. Non-Sufi Muslims also perform *dhikr*, take part in *sohbets*, and provide religious service to the members of their communities. However, in the case of Nursi, the sheer amount of *dhikr* he daily committed and especially the type of *dhikr* he read and recited reflected an extent Sufi influence. The same argument could be made for the theme of *sohbet* as well. This concept was a central element of Naqshbandiyya group with which Nursi had affiliations in his formative years as demonstrated in chapter two. Accordingly, regular *sohbets* open to the public became a hallmark of the followers of Nursi as part of their religious outreach programs. Hence, Nursi became acquainted with this element through his Sufi connections and even if he adopted it as an extension of the larger Islamic spirituality. Lastly, the kind of service oriented ascetic lifestyle that Nursi expected from his students was the hallmark of early Sufism and historical Sufism. Even though this concept is a

³¹⁹ Nursi, *The Flashes*, The 10th and the 21st flashes.

component of the larger Islamic worldview, it was primarily associated with Sufi groups over the course of the history of Islam. Particularly, the Mujaddidiyya Naqshbandiyya branch placed great importance on community service programs as part of its religious revival agenda. Hence, it is possible to argue that the idea of community oriented religious service provided by ascetic minded individuals was indicative of some Sufi worldview in Nursi's life and thought.

Conclusion

It appears that Sufi elements became a significant part of Nursi's life and thought during the second part of his life. He made frequent references to the well-known Sufi figures in his writings and also incorporated Sufi elements in his daily life. Nursi's portrayal of the cosmos as an exhibition displaying the unceasing and various manifestations of the countless names of Allāh bore striking similarities to some Sufis. However, he used a very careful language to emphasize the transcendence and the oneness of Allāh along with His immanence. He elaborated on the divine name of *al-Ahad* and viewed it as the most comprehensive of all divine names manifested in the cosmos.

It is fair to say that Sufism played a very positive role in Nursi's personal transformation and his endeavor to relate to the members of the society he lived in. In the personal level, when Nursi was at a loss at some point in his life, it was the Sufi sources that provided him with some direction. When he felt purposeless and lonely, it was the intimacy and affection that he developed with Allāh as a result of intense spiritual life gave him purpose, hope, inner peace, fulfillment, and company. Despite all the adverse

circumstances, Allāh was sufficient for him, cared for him, and provided his needs in marvelous ways so that Nursi could fulfill his mission.

The Sufi perspective and language helped Nursi show the members of his society how the things and beings around them pointed to Allāh. He tried to help them see the constant work of the names of Allāh through the entities they saw daily. Accordingly, he accomplished the task of making Allāh relevant to their lives through the emphasis on His immanency which he witnessed in his life and experienced in his heart. It turned out that many people found his perspective relevant and they also found fulfilment and satisfaction in a spiritual life it entailed. Nursi constantly relied on Sufi concepts such as *tajallī*, *karâmât*, *dhikr*, and *sohbet* to get his message across. His message found warm reception among the Anatolian people whose culture was deeply woven with these terms.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Sufism began as an individual form of piety and changed greatly over the course of its long history. Even though the goal has always been to have a close relationship with Allāh, the expressions and the forms of that sentiment varied depending on the time and the place. The first ascetics focused on a personal and an inner relationship with Allāh and often expressed a concern about their fate in the next life. Over the time, the focus on the inner relationship with Allāh gave birth to mystical experiences which revolved around the themes of *ma'rifa*, union, *kashf*, and love. After Sufism spread to the different areas of the Islamic world, it incorporated new elements including practices around saints, *baraka*, and *karâmât*. As it spread, it also institutionalized and became more community service oriented. The Sufis provided religious guidance to an audience from different backgrounds with their *sohbet*, *dhikr*, and *samā'*. Initially, it attracted urban middle class artisans and merchants and over the time it took root in both urban and rural communities and became part of the social fabric in the Islamic society. The Sufi groups particularly flourished in Anatolia under the protection of the Ottoman Empire and deeply influenced its religious and cultural identity.

The ability of Sufism to change and adapt to the local cultures helped it reach a wider audience and also made it very diverse. The emphasis on the common Sufi elements including *ma'rifa*, *sohbet*, *dhikr*, *samā'*, *karâmât*, and sainthood varied from one group to another. Some groups included dance and music in their ceremonies while others refrained from them due to their sensitivity about following the rules of *sharī'a*.

The attitude toward human reason and the level of emphasis about the observation of the rules of *sharī'a* also differed among groups.

Even though Sufism was criticized in varying degrees in its history, it came under a heavy attack during the modern era. Muslim modernists viewed its mystical orientation as an irrelevant characteristic in the age of the scientific rationalist thought. The revivalists called for a return to the original Islam in which Sufi practices, in their view, had no place. The members of both group argued that Sufism had serious responsibility in the decline of Muslim societies. Their attitude toward it was not uniform and some individuals within both groups expressed sympathy toward Sufism and called for its integration, albeit under different names, to the Islamic practices. The Sufi groups, not uniformly, made certain modifications to their teachings and practices as a response to the challenges they faced. They attempted to re-invent themselves to stay relevant to the needs of the modern societies. Accordingly, they generally emphasized an adherence to *sharī'a*, community outreach activities, and *sohbet* while de-emphasizing the mystical dimension and the practices formed around Sufi saints. Even though they kept a low profile in many Muslim societies in the modern era, they continued to attract individuals from both rural and urban communities.

The case of Said Nursi may be viewed as an illustration of the adaptation of Sufism to a modern audience particularly in the Anatolian context. His articulation of Sufism was individually comforting, culturally authentic, and intellectually relevant. Nursi's social and educational background, close relationship with the Ottoman elite and intellectuals, exposure to the ideas of the Muslim modernists, and study of modern science and philosophy played an important role in shaping his thoughts. Besides, the

social and political developments he witnessed in his native land, the Ottoman Empire, and the Islamic world as well as the secularization project of Atatürk fueled his life-long activism.

Said Nursi spent many years of his life in exile. He lived a life of a wandering ascetic with many restrictions. He was never married and was often alone in the countryside. Having spent the first part of his life as a very social person, Nursi felt extremely lonely and expressed that sentiment in his writings. He established friendship with the entities of nature and contemplated upon them as the marvelous work of Allāh. He saw the hands of Allāh working actively in the universe and directing and determining everything behind the veil of causes. His life was filled with prayers, supplications, and contemplation which resulted in the intimacy and friendship with Allāh. This intimate relationship convinced him that his exile had a purpose and meaning which transformed his sorrows to joys. He found many *karâmât* in his life which demonstrated, to Nursi, that Allāh was using him for a cause and He will help him in marvelous ways to achieve it. His utter needs, poverty, and weakness made him more reliant on Allāh who came to his rescue in extraordinary ways. Nursi's mental resignation from the world as a result of the catastrophic defeat, loss, and destruction along with exile, motivated him even more to turn to Allāh to find satisfaction and peace. It looks like, at some point he completely wanted to withdraw from the world for the spiritual journey, but he never did it. He rather, filled his life with daily *dhikr*, supplication, and prayers and also continued working on his mission which was to serve the Qur'ân through the authorship of the *Risale*. It is fair to say that the circumstances in exile regenerated the Sufi elements that Nursi cultivated in his childhood. He was already familiar with the Sufi discourse due to

his exposure to it in his native land during his formative years. When he was confused and hopeless after The World War I, he turned to Sufi sources such as al-Gilani, Rūmī, and al-Sirhindī and found hope and peace in them. It looks like their influence stayed with him during the new Said years as it was evident in the *Risale*.

However, Nursi's reference to Sufism went beyond the personal aspect. He also aimed to preserve the religious identity of Anatolia and inspire a religious revival among its inhabitants. Accordingly, he frequently used the Sufi concepts and sources familiar to the Anatolian religious and cultural imagination. His appeal to Ibn al-ʿArabī and al-Jīlānī to provide legitimacy to himself, the *Risale*, and his activities illustrated it clearly. He repeatedly reminded his audience that he was under the spiritual protection of saint al-Jīlānī to fulfill his mission. Nursi's use of popular religious elements including *karāmāt* found a positive response and attracted people to his writings. Even though Nursi did not present himself as a saint, he was well-aware of the fact that people viewed him as such and he found it helpful to promote his cause.

Nursi differed greatly from traditional Sufi groups in terms of his understanding, emphasis, and application of some central Sufi concepts. He constantly drew attention to the formal teachings of Islam as articulated in the Qur'ān. Nursi's emphasis on the centrality of the *sharīʿa* reflected not only his Mujaddidiyya -Naqshī background but it also resonated with the modernists and revivalists of the era.

In his exploration of the Qur'ān and the cosmos and the existence of Allāh, Nursi relied on the human rational faculty while not opposing the value of *ma'rifa*, the mystical experiential knowledge. He often made references to the modern sciences to support his

assumptions. Nursi's appeal to human reason and science echoed the views of his contemporary modernists. Also, he saw the degree of secularization and Westernization among the educated elite in Anatolia. Accordingly, Nursi developed a language to relate to this group, counter secularization, and possibly bring about a religious revival among the members of the educated class. As part of this agenda, Nursi urged his followers to open *dershanes* to reach and host the students, a vision that worked well. It is also important to point out that his emphasis on human reason rather than unveiling resonated with his Mujaddidiyya -Naqshī background whose founder, al-Sirhindī, had a more measured attitude toward human reason.

Nursi prioritized the non-hierarchical group work to serve society for religious transformation. He called his followers to seek inspiration in his books and have *sohbets* in local *dershanes* rather than seeking *baraka* in his person. He attributed *karāmāt* not to his person but to his works and his group collectively. In these areas, he differed greatly from traditional Sufi groups in which the master occupied the central position in the hierarchy of the group. Hence, he empowered each individual member of his group to read the *Risale*, explain it to others in *sohbets*, and treat each other as brothers of one *jamā'at*. When the state officials isolated Nursi from society, they aimed to curb his efforts for a religious revival. Nursi still achieved it with the aid of his students who ingrained the *Risale* in the minds and hearts of the inhabitants of Anatolia. The *dershanes* replaced the traditional Sufi *tekkes*, the non-hierarchical collective work of *uhuvvet* in the *jamā'at* took the place of the charismatic Sufi master, and the informal *sohbets* and flexible *dhikr* were emphasized in place of ritualistic *samā'*.

Nursi asked his followers to lead Allāh-conscious lives without developing any attachment to this world. In other words, he exhorted them to practice inner-worldly asceticism and provide service to their communities with their hearts always oriented toward Allāh. Nursi tried to help his audience see Allāh through everything they witnessed in their daily lives. The Sufi perspective of Allāh proved to be very useful for Nursi to articulate it. He saw the divine stamp of unity in everything and expressed it in rational arguments supported with scientific references. The *Risale*'s popularity particularly among the educated youth illustrated the success of this perspective.

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GLOSSARY

- Adab: norm behavior, right interaction, right manners
- Awliyā': people divinely selected for the gnosis of Allāh
- Awrād: litany
- Baqā': Sufi spiritual station which signifies separation from Allah or self-subsistence
- Bāṭin: esoteric, hidden, or inner
- Dhikr: the constant remembrance and the mention of Allāh's names
- Fanā': Sufi spiritual station which denotes annihilation in Allāh
- Karāmât: marvels, saintly miracles
- Kashf: unveiling and direct witnessing
- Ma'rifa: gnosis
- Murāqaba: inner observation or contemplation
- Mutasawwif: Sufi
- Riyā': ostentation, hypocrisy, and showoff
- Samā': hearing, attentive listening, music, and dance
- Tanzīh: transcendence of Allah
- Tarīqa: Sufi order
- Tasawwuf: Sufism
- Tashbīh: likeness or immanence of Allāh
- Tawhīd: the oneness and the unity of Allāh.
- Tazkiya al-nafs: purification of soul
- Zāhir: exoteric, apparent, or outer