



# In the Light of Said Nursi

Turkish nationalism and the  
religious alternative

Camilla T. Nereid

In the Light of Said Nursi

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CAMILLA T. NEREID

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Turkish Nationalism  
and the Religious Alternative



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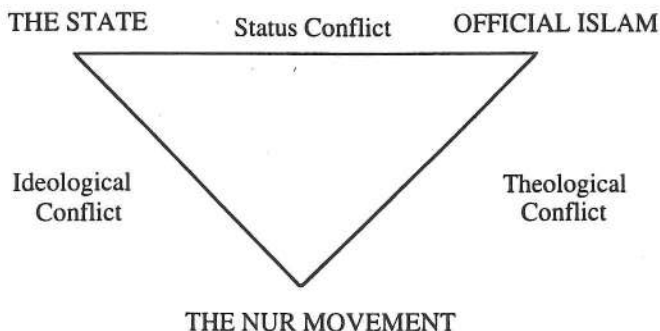
## PREFACE

Religion is not a human failing that was born in ignorance and that is dying in knowledge

Callum G. Brown<sup>1</sup>

This is a study of a Turkish Islamic movement, the Nur movement, and its founder, Said Nursi (1873-1960), who opposed the very principles of the Turkish Republic. A study of Said Nursi and his movement is important both because of its great influence on the Turkish society and because such a study can provide empirical material for the general discussion of nationalism, secularism and modernity.

The structure of the conflict between Said Nursi, the Nur movement and the Turkish state can be illustrated with a triangular model, in which each of the three sides represents a separate conflict:



This book, which is based on my 1994 Hovedfag thesis, is structured around these three conflict dimensions. Chapter

1 Restatement of a point made by J. Cox in *The English Churches in a Secular Society*, Oxford 1982.

One introduces the central problematics and places the subject matter in a broader historiographical perspective. Chapter Two presents contrasting biographical presentations of Said Nursi, giving special emphasis to how he legitimized his authority and how this authority was recognized by his followers. Chapter Three then discusses the relation between Said Nursi's personality and the characteristics of the Nur movement.

Chapter Four is on the conflict between Said Nursi and the Turkish state, how it appeared as a theological conflict between official and parallel Islam and between secularism and Islamism. It also discusses the controversy between the state and the official Islamic institution concerning the status of religion, and the reorganization of Islam as a part of the republican establishment.

Chapter Five places the ideological conflict in a historical context, nationally and internationally. It looks for the core of the conflict and thus seeks to answer the specific questions asked in Chapter One.

The conclusion, Chapter Six, sums up the general questions asked in the introduction, but also discusses Said Nursi's significance as an actor in the formation of a new religious movement.

For financial support I want to thank the International Secretariat at University of Bergen and the Turkish Ministry of Education (Türk Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı), which also opened a number of doors for me.

Thanks to Şenay Çakır and Gülser Akdoğan at the University of Ankara, Department of Turkish for Foreigners (Türkçe Öğretim Merkezi/Tömer), who went beyond their professional obligations in order to teach me Turkish. I am greatly indebted to Said Yüce, at the Nur movement's periodical *Yeni Nesil* in Ankara, who provided me with a small library of writings on and by Said Nursi, free of charge.

Dr. Knut Vikør, Director of the Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at the University of Bergen,

deserves mention for reading and criticizing the manuscript, thanks also to Professor Rex Seán O'Fahey, my *mürşid*, for inspiration, encouragement, and a thorough reading of the thesis.

Finally I want to thank my husband, Hakan, for his merciless criticism, and my children; Aurora, Alberte and Cengiz for their patience with an always absent-minded mother.

### NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

I have used modern Turkish spelling for all words of either Turkish, Arabic or Persian origin, with one exception; the Turkish 'Kuran', for which I have used the English 'Koran'. The following are the equivalent sounds in English or French:

- a: as *u* in fun
- c: as *j* in jackpot
- ç: as *ch* in chocolate
- e: as *e* in flesh
- g: as *g* in gamble
- ğ: with hard vowels, almost unpronounced but lengthens the preceding vowel; with soft vowels as *y*
- i: as *i* in cousin
- i: as *i* in innocent
- j: as the French *j*
- o: as *o* in dog
- ö: as the French *eu*
- ş: as *sh* in ship
- u: as in bull
- ü: as the French *u* in *tu*

In the text and footnotes, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı) is generally referred to as

'The Directorate'.

All translations from Turkish are mine unless otherwise indicated.

*Bergen, May 1997*

Camilla T. Nereid



## INTRODUCTION

The Turks are a human cancer, a creeping agony in the flesh of the lands which they misgovern, rotting every fibre of life ... I am glad that the Turk is to be called to a final account for his long record of infamy against humanity

D. Lloyd George, British Prime Minister.<sup>1</sup>

The fall of the Ottoman Empire was applauded by the Western world, and Mustafa Kemal, who established the Turkish Republic in 1923, was expected to cure 'the sick man of Europe' once and for all. But the therapy he prescribed, known as the Six Principles of Kemalism; Republicanism (*cumhuriyetçilik*), Nationalism (*milliyetçilik*), Populism (*halkçılık*), Etatism (*devletçilik*), Secularism (*laiklik*), and Revolutionism (*inkılapçılık*), had unexpected and, from the doctor's point of view, undesirable side effects.

The Kemalist principles were met with considerable resistance both within and outside the political system.<sup>2</sup> The most fundamental criticism of the Kemalist regime was articulated by the religious leader Said Nursi (1873-1960), who became the symbol of religious opposition against the secular Turkish nation-state.<sup>3</sup> His criticism focused on the state's implementation of secularism and nationalism.

- 1 From a speech 10 November 1914, H.W.V. Temperley (ed.), *A History of the Peace Conference of Paris*, Oxford 1969, VI, 24.
- 2 The political opposition is treated in a book by Erik Jan Zürcher, *Political Opposition in the Early Turkish Republic*, Leiden 1991.
- 3 The Kemalist government was also challenged by other groups such as the Kurdish nationalists under their leader *şeyh* Sait in 1925; see Chapter Five.



Said Nursi was committed to restoring the Islamic faith by renewing the understanding of religious knowledge as presented in the Holy Book. Thus Islam could become the framework for the encounter with the modern world. His methods were non-violent and individualistic in character, but the state responded with a persecution that lasted throughout his life. He was harassed by the police and the military and proclaimed a heretic by the Directorate of Religious Affairs. The actions against him were sanctioned by the legal authorities, who took him to court for violation of the Constitution and of the related Penal Code, including the crime of organized religious opposition.

One way of seeing the conflict between Said Nursi and the Kemalist authorities is as an expression of a general conflict between religion and secularism. Working on this basis, I expected to find that the Turkish state showed a similarly negative attitude towards all religious movements. But this turned out to be wrong. At the same time that Said Nursi and his followers were being persecuted, members of another religious group, the Nakşibendi brotherhood, held important positions in parliament and in the state bureaucracy of the Republic.

This contrast in the state's attitude towards Said Nursi's Nur movement on one hand and the Nakşibendi brotherhood on the other has not been focused on or discussed before.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in Şerif Mardin's monograph on the Nur movement, the most substantial to date, this theme is not discussed.<sup>5</sup> The present study will thus focus on this discrepancy. How was it that some religious groups were proclaimed enemies of the state while others were considered as allies?

4 A comparison between the Nurus and the Nakşibendis with respect to their relationship to the state cannot be found in any of the sources, primary or secondary, used for this study. The many Nurus interviewed during my stay in Turkey (Izmir, Ankara, Istanbul) were all unwilling to comment upon the question.

5 Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, Albany, NY 1989.

*Historiography*

This case study of Said Nursi and the Nur movement raises several questions of importance for the general understanding of the relationship between state and religion in an Islamic context; how was secularism and nationalism understood and practised by the Turkish authorities? What was the relationship between the two principles of secularism and nationalism, within the general framework of Kemalism? What were the results of Mustafa Kemal's secularist and nationalist policy; did it promote, prevent or create an Islamic revival?

During Mustafa Kemal's lifetime (1881-1938), presentations of early Turkish Republican history, both foreign (Allen, Armstrong, Webster, Kinross, Lewis) and Turkish, were dominated by a general sympathy for and belief in his policies. To foreigners, Kemalism appeared as more western, modern and democratic, and less threatening than the Ottoman Empire. The history written by Turkish historians themselves did most likely also influence the views of their foreign colleagues. It is therefore worthwhile to take a look at the major lines in Turkish historiography before discussing the reliability and limitations of the material used in this study.

In 1930, Mustafa Kemal established the Turkish History Association (*Türk Tarih Kurumu*) with the explicit aim of contributing to the establishment of the new Turkish identity by documenting its roots in the pre-Islamic history of Turks. This was the history writing of an anti-imperialist, secular, nationalist ideology, in contrast to the still influential Ottomanist approach exemplified by Namık Kemal's *Osmanlı Tarihi* ('Ottoman history') which had as aim to create an Ottoman identity by revealing the uniqueness of Ottomanness. Namık Kemal's book was a reaction against the official Ottoman historiography, which disregarded the pre-Islamic history of Turks and incorporated Turkish

history into the history of Islam.<sup>6</sup> But it was also a reaction against western Orientalism.

European Orientalist historiography (Rimbaud, Iorga and Gibbons) ignored the Ottomans' legacy of an Oğuz and Selçuk background and treated the Turks as if they were devoid of history before their meeting with the Byzantines. They saw Turkish history as the continuation and projection of Byzantine history in an Islamic context.

Kemalist historiography, which aimed at establishing a foundation for the Turkish nation, was based on the ideas of such writers as Ziya Gökalp (1876-1924)<sup>7</sup> and Yusuf Akçura (1876-1935). In the concept of Turkism presented in Ziya Gökalp's book *Türkçülüğün Esasları* ('The principles of Turkism'), it is conceded that religion has an important position in Turkish culture. Yusuf Akçura, on the other hand, opted for secular pan-Turkism.<sup>8</sup> Being one of the founders of 'Türk Tarih Tetkik Cemiyeti' (Turkish History Research Society, the predecessor of the Türk Tarih Kurumu), Akçura played a crucial role in defining the new nationalist paradigm of Turkish historiography.

Later, this tradition underwent a process of myth elimination as a result of the systematic empiricism of Fuat Köprülü (1890-1966). He combined historical data with the findings of complementary disciplines such as archaeology, literature and Turcology, and established empirically that the turning point in Turkish history was the turcification of Anatolia under the Anatolian Selçuks. Köprülü is thus considered the first convincing opponent of the western Orientalist paradigm. One of Fuat Köprülü's major works is *Türkiye Tarihi* ('The History of Turkey').

Thus, Turkish historiography went through several

6 Referring to the texts of the Ottoman *vakanüvis*, who were state officials paid to write the official history.

7 Ziya Gökalp's contribution to Turkish nationalism is presented in more detail in Chapter Five.

8 Akçura is the author of *Türk Tarihinin Ana Hatları* (The Major Lines in Turkish History) and *Türkçülük* (Turkism).



stages; from the official Ottoman version of Turkish history as being a part of Islamic history, through the stages of Ottomanism and pan-Turkism to the nationalist historiography of Kemalist Turkey.

Mustafa Kemal's leadership and authority was unquestioned in the country and was not criticised until long after his death in 1938. In fact, open criticism of his overall principles is taboo even more than fifty years later. The official version of Turkish history as sanctioned by Mustafa Kemal was based on a special interpretation of the Ottoman past, holding religion responsible for the lack of Turkish unity and the decline of the Empire.

The first step towards a revised version of early Turkish Republican history was to give a new presentation of its Ottoman past. The pioneers of this tradition were Ömer Lütfi Barkan (1902-1979) and Halil İnalcık who can be categorized as Ottoman particularists; they stressed the differences between Ottoman and European historical development, and thus the analysis of the former could not be conducted correctly with analytical tools developed for analyzing European history. They maintained that social and economic institutions such as feudalism, mercantilism and capitalism did not exist in Ottoman history in the sense they did in Europe, and that there were other types of social and economic organizations which were functional in the Ottoman context, different from but not necessarily less advanced than those of Europe.

Turkish Muslim intellectuals formed another group of writers who have contributed to a more nuanced view of early Turkish republican history. Writers such as Sadık Albayrak (1942-),<sup>9</sup> Kadir Mısıroğlu (1933-) and Bekir Berk

9 Sadık Albayrak graduated from İstanbul Yüksek İslam Enstitüsü in 1966. From 1970 he worked as an expert at İstanbul Müftülüğü Serî Siciler Arşivi, where he stayed for eight years. He started to work as a writer for the *Millî Gazete* in 1979. He has written more than thirteen books on religious topics. *Türkiye'de Din Kavgası* came in 1973 and is concerned with the status of religion as the Ottoman

(1926–) must be appreciated for the valuable factual information they give by including a vast amount of primary documentation such as telegrams, letters, parliamentary speeches and official but unpublished reports in their works. These sources are also used by Muslim propagandists who give a completely different view of the Kemalist revolution; presenting Mustafa Kemal as the dictator of a one-party state who ruthlessly enforced his ideology against the will of the majority of the population.

Marxist historians who had their roots in Ottoman historiography<sup>10</sup> became influential only after 1960, in particular among *mülkiyeliler* (graduates from the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Ankara). The important names of the initial phase of this tradition are Şefik Hüsnü, İ.H. Tökin and H.A. Sanda. They worked from the idea of a universal sequence of stages of development for all societies. Their main concentration was on the Kemalist, nationalist and etatist history of the Republic. This tradition shares the anti-religious and pro-nationalist sentiments of Kemalism, and because of this, some leftist writers were held in high esteem by the authorities, as for example Çetin Özek (1934–), one of the Nurcus' most ardent critics.

Some writers are more difficult to categorize than others, and the most influential of all Turkish scholars today, Şerif Mardin (1927–), is one of these. Mardin has a very broad approach to the development of modernity which he interprets as the emergence of a civil society, seeing modernization as a process of sequences leading to this end. Thus 'continuity' is a key concept in his approach.

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Empire changed into the Turkish nation-state.

10 The effects of Marxist methodology was reflected as a materialist approach to Turkish history in Ahmet Vefik Paşa's *Hikmet-i tarih*, Mustafa Celalettin Paşa's *Les Turcs: anciens et modernes*, and Süleyman Paşa's *Tarih-i alem* (Istanbul 1327 [1911]).

*The sources: Reliability and limitations*

The primary sources used for this study fall in three categories: The works by Said Nursi himself and his supporters; those who attack or criticize him, and the legal material they use against Nursi and his movement.

Said Nursi's own writings relevant to this study include the books *Lemalar* ('Sparkles'), *Mektubat* ('Letters'),<sup>11</sup> and *Şualar* ('Radiations');<sup>12</sup> as well as parts of the *Risale-i Nur* ('Treatise of Light'), which is Said Nursi's Collected Works.

The *Risale-i Nur* is a Koran commentary consisting of more than 6,000 handwritten pages. It consists of several independent texts on various topics, covering the existential problems of mankind as well as the special ones related to the challenges of the modern world. Some of them are diary notes, prayers, letters and resolutions. These pamphlets are written in Ottoman Turkish, spiced up with poetry and ornamented with metaphors and are thus somewhat difficult to grasp. Their formal features make them highly sensitive to interpretation; both negative and positive approaches to his work can be supported by quotations from the text. In order not to deviate from the fundamental ideas of Said Nursi, one must while reading keep in mind his life work with its clear line of continuity; the renewal of Islam by intellectual force. The *Risale-i Nur* was illegal to read, own, sell and publish until 1956, when all legal restrictions were lifted.

The many books written by his students, such as Safa Mürsel, Necmeddin Şahiner and Cemal Kutay are very helpful for a better understanding of Said Nursi's writings.<sup>13</sup> Further discussion by sympathizers of the movement can be found in four books containing interviews with Nureddin İsmail

11 Istanbul 1958.

12 Istanbul: Enver Neşriyat 1991.

13 See Bibliography for details.



Turkish intellectuals about Said Nursi and on various religious matters: the *Son Şahitler* ('Last Witnesses'), *Aydınlar Konuşuyor* ('Statements by intellectuals') and *Nurculuk Nedir?* (What is Nurism?), all edited by Necmeddin Şahiner,<sup>14</sup> and *Bediüzzaman'ı Gören Hanımlar* (Women who saw Said Nursi), edited by Nuriye Çeleğen.<sup>15</sup>

Of these, of particular interest is *Son Şahitler*. Şahiner, the editor, was one of the Nur movement's most prominent writers. He interviewed several hundred persons who knew Said Nursi, and published the interviews in five volumes. This is a very valuable source of information for a better understanding of Said Nursi's followers. However, the interviewees were not chosen randomly, so it cannot be used for a statistical analysis of the Nur members.<sup>16</sup>

Of the works attacking Nursi, one important example is the pamphlet *Nurculuk Hakkında* ('About Nurism') written by the Directorate of Religious Affairs, based on expert reports compiled from the many cases against Said Nursi and his followers, published in 1964.<sup>17</sup> Its aim is to show that Said Nursi in his actions and writings deviate from the true path of religion, and that they thus constitute heresy. The document gives no reliable information on the Nur movement itself, but provides us with an excellent statement of the official religious view on it.

The most important laws relating to the subject at hand are the Ottoman Constitution of 1876, the Turkish Constitutions of 1924, 1928, 1937 and 1961, and the Turkish Penal

14 Istanbul: Yeni Asya Yayınları 1988; Istanbul: Yeni Asya Yayınları 1979 and Istanbul: Yeni Asya Yayınları 1990, respectively.

15 Istanbul: Yeni Asya Yayınları 1987.

16 Nakşibendi sources is difficult to come by for an outsider. The Nakşibendi material used for this study is from Marc Gaborieau, Alexandre Popovic and Thierry Zarcone (eds.), *Naqshbandis*, Paris 1990, which gives valuable information about the brotherhood's relationship to the state; and the more particularist account in Ersin Gürdoğan, *Görünmeyen üniversite*, Istanbul 1991.

17 Ankara: Resimli Posta Matbaası 1964.

Code of 1934-36.

The Constitutions give information about the state élite's intentions for the basic principles for the state. The changes in the formulation of Article Two in the Constitutions of 1924, 28 and 37 show how Mustafa Kemal gradually downgraded the position of religion and imposed the six principles of Kemalism as the new foundation of the Turkish Republic:

1924: 'The religion of the Turkish State is Islam, the official language is Turkish, and the capital is Ankara'.

1928: 'The official language of the Turkish State is Turkish, and the capital is Ankara'.

1937: 'The Turkish State is republican, nationalist, populist, etatist, secular and revolutionary. The official language is Turkish, and the capital is Ankara'.

The changes in the constitution document how Mustafa Kemal increased his grip on the Parliament until there was no political opposition left. The Turkish nation equalled the People's Party ('Halk Fırkası')<sup>18</sup> that Mustafa Kemal founded in September 1923,<sup>19</sup> one month before the Republic was proclaimed and Mustafa Kemal appointed as its first president.

The Penal Code defends the principles laid down in the Constitution and indicates how far the state is willing to go to protect its values. With regard to religion, paragraph 163 is of special importance to our topic, since it deals with religious opposition to the state's secular character.<sup>20</sup>

18 Later called the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi), which continued to exist until the military coup of 1980.

19 'When we speak about the People's Party, we include not just a part of the citizens but the entire nation'; Mustafa Kemal in a speech on the day of the party's establishment, cited in Mehmet Y. Geyikdağı, *Political Parties in Turkey: the Role of Islam*, New York 1984, 56.

20 See Chapter Four, below. Other relevant paragraphs in the Penal Codes are those regarding the crimes against the freedom of



Additional information about the implementation of the law and the parliamentary discussions relating to it is given by Mehmet Celal in his book *Yüzaltmışüç* ('One Hundred and Sixty-three').<sup>21</sup>

In addition to the primary sources mentioned above, there are extensive secondary sources in Turkish. These, and especially those written by the Nurcus themselves, provide precious empirical data which would otherwise have been difficult to come by. In a sense, the information extracted from such sources can be treated as primary, as they include most of the original documents they are based on, including court documents from the trials against Nurcus, parliamentary discussions and debates on religion, secularism and nationalism; complete and without changes or abbreviations from the original texts. Three very influential examples are the works of Bekir Berk, Çetin Özek, and Şerif Mardin.

Bekir Berk was defence counsellor for Nurcu members for fifteen years; beginning in 1958, he was involved in hundreds of lawsuits and won more than a thousand acquittals. His book *Nurculuk Davası* ('The Question of Nurism'), published in 1971,<sup>22</sup> is based on his experiences in court and contains information about the Turkish Penal code and legal procedures in general and the cases against the Nurcus in particular. The 850 pages long book includes court decisions, speeches for the defence and expert reports. His aim is to show the lack of logic and consistency that dominated the legal authorities' attitude towards Said Nursi and his followers. The vast empirical data in the book and the author's profound judicial knowledge makes it an invaluable source of information.

Çetin Özek is a senior lecturer at the Institute for the Penal Code at the Law Faculty of Istanbul University. After graduating, he worked as an apprentice in the prosecutors'

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religion, §175-178, see Appendix A.

21 Istanbul: Fatih Yayınevi 1974.

22 Istanbul: Yeni Asya Yayınları 1975.

office for the Supreme Court. During this period he did his first research on the topic of 'The Nur movement'. The thesis was later published with the title *Türkiye'de Gerici Akımlar ve Nurculuğun İçyüzü* ('Reactionary currents in Turkey and the True Face of Nurism').<sup>23</sup> In the trials against the Nurus, Özek was responsible for several 'expert reports' aimed at proving the guilt of the accused. Özek wrote another two books on the Nur movement, *100 Soru'da Türkiye'de Din ve Siyaset* ('Religion and Politics in Turkey, in 100 Questions') and *Devlet ve Din* ('State and Religion').<sup>24</sup>

He maintains the same view on the Nur movement in all three books. Özek's approach to Said Nursi and his followers is utterly negative, a glance at the biography of Said Nursi as presented by Özek illustrates the point. According to him, Said Nursi was deceiving people and he had also lost his mind. Özek invites the reader to conclude from this that it would have been better if Said Nursi had been locked up in a mental hospital.<sup>25</sup>

Özek's books cannot be used as an unbiased source of information about the Nur movement. They can only function as documentation of the way the movement was viewed by the secular elite. However, in spite of his outspoken judgmental statements, Özek's books are in fact used as a primary source on the movement by such writers as Paul Dumont and Ursula Spuler.

Dumont is Professor of Social Anthropology and Turcology at the University of Strasbourg.<sup>26</sup> His negative views on the Nur movement strongly resemble those of Özek, and Dumont is again accepted as a reliable source of information by other scholars such as Fulya Atacan.<sup>27</sup>

23 Istanbul: Varlık Yayınevi 1964.

24 Istanbul: Gerçek Yayınevi 1968 and Istanbul 1982, respectively.

25 Özek, *Türkiye'de Gerici Akımlar*, 244.

26 A discussion of Dumont's works are to be found in Chapter Six.

27 Fulya Atacan, *The Cerrahi Tariqa in Turkey*, Istanbul: Marmara University 1990.

Ursula Spuler, a German Orientalist, has written several articles on the Nur movement. Her approach to the subject has changed from negative to positive during her twenty years of research. In an early article she gives an outline of the organizational structure of the Nur movement, however, the scant primary source material she bases her articles on suggests that they be used with caution.

Apart from the Nurcus' own writers, like Necmeddin Şahiner and Safa Mürsel, it is Şerif Mardin, Professor in Political Science and Chair of Islamic Studies at the American University of Washington, DC, who has written the most extensive work on Said Nursi and his followers. In his book *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, his main emphasis is on Said Nursi's Ottoman context, thus focusing on his formative years rather than those when his influence was greatest.<sup>28</sup>

Mardin has an empirical approach to the subject matter, spreading all the pieces of the puzzle on the table and then deliberately avoiding to reassemble them. This is probably because Mardin sees simplification as one of the major fallacies of our time, a trap into which one would possibly have to fall given the relative secrecy and lack of available primary sources concerning the relationship between state and religion in early Republican Turkey.

In addition to the sources mentioned above, a few words must be said about the only biography of Said Nursi in English, Şükran Vahide's *Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*.<sup>29</sup> Şükran Vahide (formerly Mary Weld) is an English convert to Islam who now works full time for the Nur movement. She gives

28 New York: State University of New York Press 1989. This aspect was criticized by David Commins in his review of Mardin's book; 'the most glaring problem with this work's substance is the imbalance between Mardin's lengthy treatment of Said Nursi's Ottoman phase and a cursory consideration of his Republican phase...'; *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, xxiii, 4, 1991, 631.

29 Istanbul: Sözlük Publications 1992.

an insider's account, thus in spite of all the true and valuable information contained in the book, her angle is too sentimental, giving the flavour of rather than the 'bare facts' about Said Nursi. It is a heroic narrative which may be labelled a hagiography.<sup>30</sup>

- 30 Hagiography is a *genre* within the biographical tradition. Its subject matter is to give an image of a major religious figure to make him stand out from his fellow saints or tradition in a way that certifies his authority. Hagiographies include personal stories, legends and heroic narratives.



## WHO WAS SAİD NURSI?

It is a Western conceit that profound influence must derive from originality.

Rex Seán O'Fahey<sup>1</sup>

Said Nursi was born in 1873<sup>2</sup> in the village of Nurs in eastern Anatolia/Turkish Kurdistan. He was trained in Nakşibendi seminars and obtained his Sufi diploma in 1888. He established his reputation as a learned scholar at an early age, and was regarded as *bediüzzaman*<sup>3</sup> (Wonder of the Age) by one of his teachers, Molla Fethullah Efendi, for his ability to memorize books. Said started to use this complimentary term as his title. After graduation he spent some years wandering about seeking knowledge from other scholars, but also worked as a conciliator in conflicts between the various tribes in the area. In 1907 he went to Istanbul where he tried to persuade the sultan, Abdülhamid II (1876-1909), of how important it was to improve living

1 R.S. O'Fahey, *Enigmatic Saint*, London 1990, 209.

2 Some sources give 1876. The information in this summary is mainly based on Şerif Mardin's *Religion and Social Change*, which has the most neutral perspective on the subject matter.

3 Some years later during a time of personal crisis, bewildered as to which master he should follow; İmam Gazali, Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi or İmam-ı Rabbani, Said Nursi came across the word *bediüzzaman* in a book by şeyh İmam-ı Rabbani Ahmed Sirhindi; the *Mektubat*. İmam-ı Rabbani was writing a letter to a man called Bediüzzaman Mirza, advising him to have but *one* master. Said Nursi took this as an omen; he understood it to mean to take only the Koran as his master; Şükran Vahide, *Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, Istanbul 1992, 166.

conditions as well as the education system in the east. The Sultan turned down his proposals, and in 1908 Said Nursi supported the Young Turks' coup against him.

Said Nursi participated in the First World War as a commanding officer, and was taken prisoner by the Russians and sent to a prisoner-of-war camp in Kostroma. He managed to escape and was by 1918 back in Istanbul. Upon his return he was appointed to the Dar-ul hikmet-i İslamiye, an Islamic academy, as the nominee of the Army. With the authority of this new position he opposed the British diplomatic occupation of Istanbul that followed Turkey's defeat in the war. He also opposed the *şeyh-ül-İslam* (the highest religious authority in the Ottoman Empire) who had issued a *fetva* (religious decree) proclaiming Mustafa Kemal to be an outlaw for his mobilizing people against the Greek occupation forces. After the War of Liberation, when the Republic was proclaimed in 1923, Said Nursi was invited to Ankara by Mustafa Kemal. But Nursi found it impossible to cooperate with the Kemalist government and returned to his native province in the east. This was a turning point in his life; he decided to withdraw from political activities. He would from this point refer to his experiences in the Ottoman period as the life of Old Said (*eski Said*).

The 'New' Said (*yeni Said*) was arrested, accused of participation in the Kurdish rebellion in 1925. He was not found guilty of the charges, but still exiled to the town of Isparta in western Anatolia. There he took up the profession of a teacher and soon began to gather followers. From this period, the Nur movement gradually emerged. He also started to write a commentary on the Koran in numerous books and articles; the *Risale-i Nur*. The authorities did not tolerate his activities, and both Said Nursi himself and many of his students were arrested on several occasions. Nearly all of the ensuing trials ended in acquittals, but Said Nursi was exiled to different places and kept under continuous strict surveillance until the end of his life. Said Nursi died in Urfa in 1960; the location of his grave is unknown.

*Said Nursi as saviour and betrayer of faith*

In the Islamic context, biographical material can be found not only in explicit biographical works but also in other types of writing, such as letters, poetry, prayers, chronicles, and local histories.<sup>4</sup> Such a plurality of available sources makes it possible to be selective, thus the material is necessarily manipulated according to the biographers' intentions. Below are two biographies of Said Nursi that differ dramatically in approach; one being hostile, the other hagiographic. The hostile account is written by Ali Gözütok,<sup>5</sup> the headmaster of a school for preachers and prayer leaders (*imam hatip okulu*) in Aydın; the hagiography is an English publication by the Nur movement's own publishing house, *Sözler Yayınevi*.<sup>6</sup>

*Hostile account*

Said Nursi was born in Bitlis in 1873, he studied at several schools; because of his bad temper and quarrelsome nature he could never stay long at the same school. Then with his insufficient knowledge (he claimed to learn in two weeks what others had to study for ten years), he started to look upon himself as a superior (*erişilmez*) scholar and to write books. He attached great value to his own writings and in addition to his self-admiration, he started to

*Hagiography*

Said Nursi was born in 1873 in a village in eastern Anatolia, Nurs, from which he received the name Nursi. He received his basic education from the best-known scholars of the district. The extraordinary intelligence and ability to learn that he showed at a very early age made him popular with his teachers, colleagues and the people. When he was sixteen years old, he silenced the distinguished scholars who had invited him to a debate. He later repeated this

4 Ann Lambton, 'Persian biographical literature' in B. Lewis (ed.), *Historians of the Middle East*, Oxford 1962, 141-51.

5 Ali Gözütok, *Müslümanlık ve Nurculuk*, Ankara 1971, 8-10 and 113-28.

6 *A Brief Biography of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, prepared by his students, and published by Sözler Yayınevi, İstanbul 1988, 3-14.



embarrass people by asking them arbitrary questions.

Then the visionary Saïd Nursi went to Istanbul in order to gain support for the university that he wanted to establish in the East. In Istanbul he became involved in politics and found his place among those who established the Society for Muslim Unity (İttihad-ı Muhammedi), and because of this he was later arrested and sent to mental hospital. Suspected of the uprising of 31 March, he was condemned and then became an opponent of all progressive steps, the Committee of Union and Progress (İttihad-ı Terakkî), the Young Turks (*jön türkler*), and Westernists (*batıya yönelenler*) and tried to create evil, cooperating with the religious side.

Believing that the aim of the War of Liberation was to save the caliphate he supported the war and defended the participants of the Anadolu movement. But when meeting Mustafa Kemal in Ankara, he realized the real aim of the war and departed for Van, where he started to write books full of nonsense (*saçmalık*). At the time of the Kurdish revolt Saïd Nursi was deported to Barla and later driven to Kastamonu and Emirdağ.

several times with various groups of scholars, and he thereby began to be called *bedi-üzzaman* (Wonder of the Age).

He went twice to Istanbul—once in 1896, the second time in 1907—where he sought to convince the Sultan to establish a university in Anatolia, that would teach the religious and modern sciences together. But the sharp words in his conversation with the Sultan caused him to be court-martialed, and during the trial, too, he did not hesitate to use the same sharpness. Alarmed by this, the military judges thought it was best to send him to a mental hospital, but the physician who examined him reported, 'If there is a grain of insanity in Saïd Nursi, then there must be no sane person in the whole world'.

In World War I Saïd Nursi served as a commander of a volunteers' regiment in eastern Anatolia, he struck terror into the Russian and Armenian forces and was highly admired by the generals of the Ottoman army including Enver Paşa, the Minister of War.

During the War of Liberation he attacked the invading British in his articles in daily newspapers. This made him a target for them but with the help of God he escaped their plots.



Loaded with rubbish he continued to write and started to be known as a Muslim hero among some naïve Muslims. In order to realize his dark wishes [plans] Said Nursi used our religion and lived as a hypocrite distorting the basic principles of religion until the end of his life. He used Islam, our dear religion, as a tool for himself. In order to take possession of our religion with his twisted ideas he especially exploited two groups: Those who are naïve and ignorant about the true meaning of Muslimhood. His thoughts were not that of a normal person, he was mentally disturbed, believing in his own miracles, and considering himself a prophet.

He died in Urfa in 1960 fearlessly claiming that his books were more pure [concise, *veciz*] and meaningful than some chapters of the Koran.

In 1922, upon the invitation of the government, which was repeated eighteen times, he went to Ankara. But he saw that most of the representatives were negligent in their religious obligations and returned to Van, where he entered the second part of his life, dedicated to the writing and dissemination of faith.

To be the object of accusations contrary to his aim and intention was an invariable feature of his fate. He was arrested six times, but always acquitted.

He departed from this world on 23 March 1960, leaving behind him a body of work that would illuminate this and the forthcoming centuries.

Ali Gözütok's version must be interpreted in light of his profession; as the headmaster of a school for preachers, he speaks as on behalf of 'official Islam', institutionalized through the Directorate of Religious Affairs (DRA).<sup>7</sup> The Directorate could not tolerate that an individual like Said Nursi with no position in the religious hierarchy should comment upon the Koran. But Gözütok's version is unable to explain how Said Nursi managed to attract any followers. He sees Said Nursi's followers as exploited naïve and ignorant Muslims; considering the number of followers that

7 The Directorate of Religious Affairs was established in 1924.

Said Nursi attracted this would present a scary picture of Turkey's 'brain potential'.

The Nurcus' own version, on the other hand, is simply 'too good to be true'. One is struck by the similarities to biographies of other religious figures of the time. Thus the hagiography of Said Nursi fails to show why and to what extent he was different from other leaders. How did Said Nursi manage to attract thousands of followers and be their leader in a spiritual warfare against the state establishment? For Said Nursi to attract followers, he had to be different from the already established religious leaders. However, he could not be too different, because certain minimum conditions had to be fulfilled for his authority to be recognized as legitimate. It was necessary to be traditional in order to renew the tradition. Said Nursi used the 'standard manual' to create an identity and establish a reputation as a religious man. His followers recognized this authority by giving him the attributes of a saint.

### *Creating an identity*

In the area where Said Nursi was born, religious teaching was carried out by leaders of the Nakşibendi brotherhood, which was the most influential Sufi order in eastern Turkey at that time. Said Nursi frequently attended their seminars but he was not the favoured pupil of his teachers; he had no patience and showed little respect. He complained about the schools' curriculum and constantly questioned the motives of his teachers. He claimed that their authority was inherited and not earned (in the case of *molla* Mehmed Emin Efendi, in the village of Tag), opposed the absolute authority of the teacher versus the students' right to have a say in their own studies (in the case of *şeyh* Mehmed Celali, in Doğu Beyazıt) and suspected their motives to be of a personal and rather this-worldly (that is, materialistic) character. As a result of this he was asked to leave school after school,

before obtaining his Sufi diploma in 1888.

Said Nursi thus did not succeed any established teacher and could not inherit any spiritual authority, so he had to establish his own from scratch. He sought to bypass the earlier Koran commentaries by going back to the Book itself, which would enable him to give it his own interpretation in the fashion he found most suitable for his purpose. Bypassing tradition in this way was justified on the one hand by a dream, on the other by adopting the epistemological view of the 'school of Illumination',<sup>8</sup> both traditional ways of gaining freedom of manoeuvre.

The dream was experienced a winter he stayed in his native village, Nurs.

It was the Last Day and the Resurrection was taking place. Said felt a desire to visit the Prophet Muhammed. While wondering how he could achieve this, it occurred to him to go and sit by the Bridge of Sirat,<sup>9</sup> because everyone has to pass over it. 'While the Prophet is passing', he thought, 'I shall meet him and kiss his hand'. So he went and sat by the Bridge and there met with all the prophets and kissed their hands. Finally, the Prophet Muhammed came, Said kissed his hands and asked for knowledge from him. The Prophet said: 'Knowledge of the Koran will be given to you on condition that you ask no questions of any from my community'.<sup>10</sup>

How then was this knowledge to be acquired? In this matter Said Nursi adopted the epistemology of the school of Illumi-

- 8 This school of thought was inaugurated by Yahyā Suhrawardī (d. 1192), but his work was a continuation of the project started by Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) to integrate Sufism with neo-Platonism; Julian Baldick, *Mystical Islam*, London 1989, 73 and Frederick Coplestone, *A History of Philosophy*, New York 1962, XI, I, 219.
- 9 The Bridge of Sirat, *Sirat Köprüsü*, is the bridge which the dead must pass over in order to go to Heaven. Those who have sinned will fall off into the pit of Hell.
- 10 Vahide, *Bediüzzaman*, 8. This bears a remarkable resemblance to Ibn Idrīs' statement, 'Know men through God, not God through men'; O'Fahey, *Enigmatic Saint*, 200.



nation (*işraki*). Knowledge in this tradition is something obtained in a flash of light infused by God into the heart of the Sufi, after a period of contemplation and asceticism. Illumination as a way to knowledge of course undermined the importance of formal learning, and thus enabled him to refuse the authority of the *şeyhs*.

Another important consequence of the doctrine of illumination is that it opens up to a new relationship between man and God; if the general process of the universe is a light flowing out from God and its existence a result of God's emanation, it means that God is reflected in all beings. Thus the gap between God and his creation is diminished. This view differs dramatically from the Nakşibendis' view of the universe as a shadow of the divine world,<sup>11</sup> but fits well with Said Nursi's view of science as a means to discover the omnipotence of God; all knowledge is knowledge of God.

There are several words for *light* in Turkish—*ışık*, *aydınlık*, *ziya* and *nur*—but only the last can carry the meaning of *holy light*. *Nur* is also the stem of the word *nursi*. Thus Said Nursi's name not only refers to his native village, Nurs, but also to the light of God.<sup>12</sup> This theme of light is also reflected in the title of his Koran commentary; the *Risale-i Nur* ('Treatise of Light') and in the name of the movement, *Nur Hareketi* (The Movement of Light).

### *Establishing a reputation*

Having thus denied the authority of his teachers, it was time for Said Nursi to build up his own reputation. There were

- 11 Johan G.J. ter Haar, 'The Naqshbandi Tradition in the Eyes of Aḥmad Sirhindi' in Garborieau *et al.*, *Naqshbandis*, 87.
- 12 Before the Kurdish rebellion in 1925, Said Nursi used to call himself Said-i Kürdi, but after the rebellion Kürdi became more than a description of which province one originated from, it became the name of a nationality. Said Nursi therefore took the name of Nurs, his home village, instead; Cemal Kutay, *Çağımızda Bir Asr-ı Saadet Müslüman, Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, Istanbul 1980, 294.

several ways to mobilize supporters; to possess charisma, to perform miracles, to get the last word in public discussions, or to work as a conciliator were the most common ways of establishing one's reputation.

Some stories from Said Nursi's life carry significant information about how he built up his public image:<sup>13</sup>

*Story One, in which Said Nursi provokes jealousy and is forced to carry a dagger while taking part in theological discussions*

After his graduation, Said wandered around visiting famous scholars of the area. One day he arrived in Siirt. When the new *medrese* teacher Molla Fethullah received the news of his presence, he immediately organized a special debate for Said Nursi in which he was examined by learned doctors of Islamic law. In this discussion, Said Nursi 'showed off' in a way that provoked the jealousy and anger both among the students and the *ulema*. A conspiracy was organized against him and the governor had to send the gendarmerie to protect him. After this incident he always carried a dagger with him.

*Story Two, in which Said Nursi makes Mustafa Paşa, the tyrannical leader of the Miran tribe, fulfil his religious duties*

After having worked for some time in Sirvan as a conciliator between the local families of *şeyhs* who were in conflict with each other, Said Nursi withdrew to Tillo for religious contemplation. Tillo was a place where the eighteenth-century Ottoman encyclopaedist and mystic İbrahim Hakki had studied for a time and where he is buried. While residing there, Said Nursi had a dream which proved to him that he was following the true path; Abdülkadir Ceylani [ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, the founder of the Kadiri/Qādiri brotherhood], appeared to him and ordered him to go to Mustafa

13 The four following stories are all based on information in Vahide, *Bediüzzaman*, 12-13, 14-17, 41-52 and 176-84.

Paşa, the chief of the Miran tribe, and summon him to the way of guidance, make him desist from oppression, perform the obligatory prayers and follow what was lawful.<sup>14</sup> Thus Said decided to pursue his vocation; he promptly went to the camp of Mustafa Paşa and gave him the message from the dream. The Paşa decided to set up a contest between Said and the religious scholars in Cizre. If Said was victorious, he would do as he said, otherwise he would throw him in the river. Said accepted the contest and won, upon which Mustafa Paşa started to fulfil his religious duties.<sup>15</sup>

*Story Three, in which Said Nursi is sent to the Toptaşı Asylum by the sultan*

Said Nursi went to Istanbul in 1907; his aim was to convince the Sultan of the importance of an upgrading of the education facilities in the east, to let the Kurdish-speaking children be taught in their own mother tongue, and to raise money for the building of a university there. He established himself among the *ulema* in Şekercihane, a kind of hostel which catered to the Muslim intelligentsia of the capital. On the door of his room he hung a note stating that: 'Here all questions are answered, none are asked'. Through his connection with Eşref Sencer Kuşçubaşı, whose father was Mustafa Bey, the imperial 'Birdkeeper', he managed to get audience at the palace. He put forward his proposals but also criticised the sultan's passivity as caliph and leader of the Muslims, telling him that the reason for the decline of the Empire was a result of the degeneration of faith and that only a reorganization of the educational system, combining the religious and the secular sciences could bring the Empire back on its feet. His frank behaviour was taken as a sign of madness and he was therefore sent to the Toptaşı asylum for observation, but during his interrogation it became evident that he was sane.

14 Vahide, *Bediüzzaman*, 15.

15 Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 73-5.



*Story Four, in which Said Nursi prefers a mountain cave to a seat in the National Assembly*

Due to his heroic effort during the War of Liberation<sup>16</sup> and because of his great appeal as a religious teacher, he was invited to Ankara by Mustafa Kemal in 1922. After having received eighteen invitations, Said Nursi finally accepted and left Istanbul for Ankara. He was given an official welcome in the Assembly and Mustafa Kemal offered him a seat in the Assembly, thereby seeking to ensure the support of the population by Said's functioning as a religious focus of loyalty. But Said Nursi was disappointed at the general lax and indifferent attitude of the deputies towards Islam and the religious duties. He turned down the President's proposal, refusing to be something he saw as only an alibi for a crime against the people. His aim was to restore the Islamic faith, not to make Islam a part of the state bureaucracy. After an attempt to influence the National Assembly to be true to Islamic values, he withdrew to the mountains around Bitlis for contemplation.<sup>17</sup>

From these stories, Said Nursi appears as a temperamental and clever person, towards whom it was difficult to be indifferent. One would either 'love him or leave him'. The stories above demonstrate how Said Nursi himself sought to legitimize his authority and establish his reputation, but how was he perceived by others?

- 16 In 1919 Said Nursi published a pamphlet in which he condemned the Greek occupation of Western Anatolia and the British policy that had made it possible. He supported Mustafa Kemal's Liberation War and protested at the *fetva* of *şeyh-ül-Islam* Dürriyade Abdullah who proclaimed Mustafa Kemal to be an outlaw. In Said Nursi's view the war was one between Muslims on one side and a mixed group of Christians and non-believers on the other. That Mustafa Kemal's interpretation was somewhat different became clear only after the war was over.
- 17 During this time of isolation he had a dream that became decisive for the rest of his life; he dreamt that he was at Mount Ararat together with his mother, when suddenly an explosion was heard from within the mountain, and a voice said to him: 'Interpret the Koran!' Then he woke up having realized that the Koran was threatened and that he had been chosen to build an iron wall of explanation around it.

## Şeyh Said Nursi

Miracles was a standard component of a holy man's biography, it was by his miracles that he distinguished himself from other people and his friendship with God was revealed. Said Nursi was described as a charismatic person by his followers, who also bore witness to many miracles worked by him,<sup>18</sup> in spite of his own rejection of miracles as superstition and irrationality: 'To enter through the window when you are standing in the doorway, is against reason; we do not look for miracles!'<sup>19</sup> He allowed no miracles to be mentioned in his official biography, but in other biographical sources they figure frequently.<sup>20</sup> Thus these supernatural events were ascribed to him by his followers in their attempt to legitimize their choice of leader. Since miracle stories are very difficult to falsify, there really was not much he could do to prevent his students from doing so.

Miracles are divided by Gramlich into three categories; *Zeichenwunder* (*ayet*), *Machtwunder* (*mucize*) and *Huldwunder* (*keramet*).<sup>21</sup> The first category are the signs of God's existence; the creation itself. The Koran is among these signs, and the Turkish word for Koranic verses, *ayetler* (or *ayât*, from Arabic *āyāt*) also means signs. Given the paradigm that God is the creator of all things natural, the signs of God's existence do not conflict with people's

18 The miracles ascribed to Said Nursi all fit into the typology worked out by Richard Gramlich, *Die Wunder der Freunde Gottes*, Stuttgart 1987.

19 Necmeddin Şahiner (ed.), *Son Şahitler*, Istanbul 1988, IV, 80.

20 According to Gramlich, friends of God—in contrast to prophets—were not supposed to show off their good relationship with the divinity; to legitimize their authority by referring to miracles they had worked was considered to be against the will of God; *Wunder der Freunde Gottes*, 43-4. This might explain Said Nursi's attitude in this matter, but his general aim; to replace the authority of the messenger with that of the message, would also push him to deny the reality of the miracles ascribed to him.

21 Gramlich, *Wunder der Freunde Gottes*, 13-74.



understanding of the 'natural'; thus the miracles belonging to this group are not supernatural, that is, they are not recognized as miracles. This distinguishes them from the two other categories of miracles which are perceived as supernatural.

The difference between the *Machtwunder* and the *Huldwunder* is that the former is an attribute of prophets, that is, to claim to be the originator of a *Machtwunder* means to claim prophethood. The *Huldwunder* group is by far the largest, and all the miracles said to have been worked by Said Nursi belong here.

One witness to Said Nursi's miracles was İsmail Dayı. He was interviewed by Necmeddin Şahiner in 1988, contributing to the collection of testimonies given by Said Nursi's followers about the impact he had on their lives. At the time of the interview, İsmail Bey was a deputy member for the Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi), representing Balıkesir, a city in Western Anatolia, halfway between Istanbul and Izmir. İsmail Bey owned a publishing house; an ordinary man who believed in the extraordinary. This is his story:

In 1953, I went to visit Said Nursi, together with a friend of mine from the university, Said Mutlu. Said Nursi was staying at the Marmara Hotel in Beyazıt [on the European side of Istanbul]. Said Mutlu was planning to get married at the time, and without him telling it, Said Nursi's first words were about his planned marriage: 'Do not marry now, seek knowledge and serve religion for a while; wait with the marriage until you have reached the age of 35, then marry', he said. Said Mutlu followed his advice, studied, became a pharmacist and showed respect to his religion. On his 35th birthday he died.<sup>22</sup>

İsmail's story is but one of many in which Said Nursi was attributed the ability to predict the future and see the unseen. This kind of miracle was expected from a holy man. Predic-

22 Şahiner, *Son Şahitler*, IV, 345-6.

tions of death, another's or one's own, are among the most common types of miracles in Gramlich's typology; Said Nursi is also said to have predicted his own funeral. According to Mehmet Çalışkan, 'Said Nursi wrote in a letter just before dying, "my grave will be known to no more than four or five of my brothers, I do not want to be reduced to the level of those whose graves are worshipped". And yet more than 200,000 people came to his funeral and thus saw his grave. But on 27 May the same year [1960] his words came true, on that day his grave was opened by the soldiers and his remains were buried in an unknown place in the mountains of Isparta.'

Şükran Çalışkan, who was responsible for washing Said's clothes, also experienced a miracle; 'it was impossible to see if his clothes were dirty, and all his "dirty" clothes smelled like the perfume of a rose.'<sup>23</sup> This resembles the medieval Christian belief that when a religious man (a monk, priest or hermit) died, his holiness would be revealed by the smell of his dead body;<sup>24</sup> the body of a holy man did not decay and thus did not smell.

### *The dangers of charisma*

Another kind of miracle that was ascribed to Said Nursi concerns events which were caused by his spiritual powers. These miracles could function as guidance or protection. Çaycı Emin told these two stories,

One night I was trying to find a solution to the problem of finding Said Nursi guilty, then suddenly my stomach started to swell, it came

23 *Ibid.*, 58.

24 Dostoevski gives a very fine description of this in *The Karamazov Brothers*, telling how the young student watches over the dead body of his teacher, trying to neglect its unpleasant smell which would deprive his teacher of his holy status. The scene is frequently represented in Italian medieval paintings, one of which (by an unknown painter) can be enjoyed in Santa Maria Novella, in Firenze.

to the limit of exploding. I understood that I had been wrong, and turned away from my plan. My stomach immediately regained its normal size,

and

Two policemen, who were especially bad towards Said Nursi caught an unknown illness and had to go to Ankara for treatment. Both the policemen recovered while in Ankara, but on their return to Kastamonu the same illness caught them again.<sup>25</sup>

Köken Umut told that,

In the house where I grew up, Bediüzzaman's name was on everybody's lips. My little brother, who was then five years old, one day ran around the house shouting; 'Always Bediüzzaman always Bediüzzaman, I am sick and tired of hearing about him'. That night my little brother had a scary dream and woke up screaming; 'I did not say anything about Bediüzzaman; I like him!'<sup>26</sup>

All three stories tell how wrong behaviour was being corrected, as Said Nursi's spiritual powers made them realize the error of their ways.

### *Blessings*

Once Said Nursi participated in a horse race, but he was given a wild and nervous horse so that he should lose the competition. The horse was impossible to control, and when it ran into a group of small children it struck one of them, the son of a tribal leader, between the shoulders with its forelegs. The child fell to the ground as though dead. Said Nursi mounted his horse, took the child in his arms and plunged him into cold water. The child opened his eyes and smiled.<sup>27</sup>

One of Said Nursi's enforced resident places was Kastamonu. He

25 Şahiner, *Son Şahitler*, IV, 285-6.

26 Nuriye Çeleğin, *Bediüzzaman'ı Gören Hanımlar*, İstanbul 1987, 105.

27 Vahide, *Bediüzzaman*, 17.

stayed there for eight years, and when he left in 1943, the area was hit by an earthquake. Stones fell from the city castle and demolished a nearby house, killing seven peoples. Tosya, a village in the same area, lost 600 people in the same way. Thus, as long as Said Nursi stayed in the area it was under divine protection; upon his departure the area was left unprotected.

When Said was to be released from the prison in Afyon, a great crowd had gathered outside the police station and when he came out, they started to kiss his hands. A public prosecutor who witnessed the event was irritated and shouted to the policemen that they should not allow it. Said Nursi got so angry that he lost his turban and shouted back. The prosecutor wanted to make trouble, and kicked one of Said's followers in the leg. But even though the blow was so hard that his leg turned blue, he felt no pain.<sup>28</sup>

Miracles, courage and intellectual achievements all functioned as a basis for Said Nursi's authority. He tried to unite the qualities of mind, heart and will, and devoted all his life to Islam, in order to be an example to his fellow beings. Thus he possessed all the qualities required for a man to become a religious leader.



## THE NUR MOVEMENT

Until the proclamation of the secular Turkish Republic, Said Nursi's Islamic ideology was but one of three equally acceptable ideological alternatives; Ottomanism (*osmanlıcılık*), Turkish nationalism (*türkçülük*), and Islamism (*islamicılık*). Then it suddenly became illegal. While there was a continuity in Said Nursi's world-view, the world around him changed and it was because of this change that the religious scholar became the leader of an opposition movement. It was only after 1925, when the authorities banned public expressions of religion and Said Nursi was exiled for the first time, that Said Nursi started to gather followers and transform his ideology into a movement.

Even though the political channel for voicing the Islamic alternative was closed (until 1950), there were of course several ways to express opposition to the regime. Historically the repertoire of collective action includes tax rebellions, food riots, vendetta and other options.<sup>1</sup> In Republican Turkey as well, the opposition to the regime found different expressions. Some members of the Nakşibendi brotherhood were involved in serious violent crimes, including murder, and the Ticani order<sup>2</sup> specialized in destroying statues of Atatürk.

- 1 Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, New York 1978, 153.
- 2 The Ticani (Tijānī) brotherhood was established by the North African Sufi, Aḥmad al-Tijānī (d. 1815). It was introduced in Turkey in 1930 by Kemal Pilavoğlu. In Turkey the brotherhood 'died out' in the 1950s, but it is one of the major brotherhoods of Muslim Africa today.

Said Nursi, in spite of his revolutionary goal, chose to be disobedient in a civilized manner. His Islamization policy followed democratic principles; he did not wish an Islamic 'take-over' before the majority of the population gave their support to it. Non-violence was a characteristic of the Nur movement, newspapers, books and pamphlets were considered more effective than violence in fighting state officials.

### *Push factors*

Said Nursi and his followers did not necessarily have the same goals. While Said Nursi's aim was to strengthen and renew Islam in such a way that it could function as a meaningful reference for the twentieth century, his followers gathered around him in order to create meaning in their own private lives. These had been affected by measures taken by the Kemalist regime to further their secularist policy. In the Ottoman era, virtually all Turks had a religious group affiliation of some sort, and a common characteristic of such groups was that they had a leader who interpreted both spiritual and material matters for the followers and gave them advice for their everyday problems. After the Kemalist takeover, all religious brotherhoods were closed down by law, and each individual was thus left on his own. In addition to this intended personal loneliness there was also an unintentional communal Turkish loneliness, because the new secular history books failed to give people a feeling of continuity with the past; 'the metaphorical content of time had been lost'.<sup>3</sup>

When the Republic made the Gregorian calendar compulsory in 1928, the unity offered by the Muslim way of measuring time (the *hicrî* calendar) was erased. The new state redefined time, and the new time became an inescapable reference for its citizens. In the Ottoman

3 Ahmet Haşim, cited in Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 196-8.

Empire, the day had been ordered around the prayer times prescribed by Islam; now people were forced to work when they had used to pray. Friday, which had been the weekly holiday for the Muslims, became an ordinary working day.<sup>4</sup> The development of strong states in Europe was marked by increasing state control over time; the particularized, weak times of the population was replaced by a strong and generalized time by the state.<sup>5</sup> In the Turkish case, the picture was somewhat different, since the strong and generalized Muslim time was replaced with another strong and generalized time, Mustafa Kemal wanted to weaken the Turks' unity with the Islamic world and replace it with an attachment to Europe. As a consequence of this, the unity within Turkey was broken, the secular elite and the common people, more religiously oriented, grew apart also in the experience of time.

In the same year the National Assembly passed a law that replaced the script based on Arabic with a Latin alphabet.<sup>6</sup> This was a reform that eventually made all literature written before the Republic unreadable for most people. Said Nursi continued to use the Arabic script, though he permitted his writings also to be copied with Latin letters.

Against the background of Mustafa Kemal's secularist policy as presented above, it is tempting to draw the conclusion that, 'Bediüzzaman's disciples were drawn to him by the feeling that a key element had been driven out of the social structure in which they were immersed...'.<sup>7</sup> There is evidence indicating that Mustafa Kemal was virtually allergic towards religion, but one must not forget that allergy

4 Proclaimed by law (2739) 27 May 1935.

5 Charles Tilly, preliminary presentation of his book *The Time of States*, in a lecture at the University of Bergen 1993.

6 The Turkish population in the USSR had decided to adopt the Latin alphabet as early as 1926; Mete Tunçay, 'Der Laizismus in der Türkischen Republik' in Jochen Blaschke and Martin van Bruinessen (eds.), *Islam und Politik in der Türkei*, Leiden 1989, 79.

7 Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 14.



is not a contagious disease. Religion was and had been a major part of the Turks' identity for centuries. It had shaped their complete mentality. It was therefore unlikely that any attempt to destroy this mentality and replace it with a nationalist ideology would have immediate success.

That is not to say that the secular state was without influence in the religious sphere. The religious networks, which had used to function as a channel for communication between the state officials and the people, were deprived of all functional linkage to the state. But the networks continued to exist; some with a harmonious relationship to the state, like the Nakşibendi brotherhood, others in outspoken opposition to the regime, as articulated by the Nur movement through their leader Said Nursi. The Kemalist regime sought to establish alternative social networks to those of religion, such as *halkevleri* and *köy enstitüleri*. The *halkevleri* ('folk-houses') offered entertainment, arranged popular meetings, and organized courses such as folk dance, theatre, and classical Turkish music. The *köy enstitüleri* (village institutes) were a kind of agricultural teaching centres in the villages, and also intended to promote a sense of local community among the villagers. These institutions, which were completely secular and soaked with national patriotism, could not manage to compete in popularity or loyalty with the religious associations, and thus did not replace them.

Said Nursi became famous not only because of his writings and the propaganda made by his students, but also because of the attention he got from the mass media and the authorities. As a matter of fact, the time of his first arrest coincided with the period he first started to gather followers. The imprisonment and exile of Said Nursi did not prevent the movement from growing, on the contrary, there can be no doubt that the persecutions against him increased his symbolic significance and attracted more people to his movement. In order to become a Nurcu it was necessary to speak with Said Nursi in person and get his acceptance.



Since he was under constant surveillance by the authorities, visiting him involved the risk of being arrested.<sup>8</sup> The government's repression of Said Nursi made the cost of following him high. But in spite of the dangers involved, the Nur movement grew. People were used to the guidance of a religious leader, and their need for such leadership was especially urgent in times of great changes. (Ahmed Ramazan tells how he, immediately after finishing his military service in 1947, went out to find a *şeyh*.)<sup>9</sup>

Said Nursi established a network of followers by way of written correspondence; he kept in contact with his students when he was in prison or transferred to another location of enforced settlement. A special courier system was established for this purpose; dubbed the 'Nur postal service' (*Nur postacıları*). The students were again organized into study circles in which they studied the *Risale-i Nur* and made handwritten copies of it.<sup>10</sup> Out of these study circles, schools emerged (*Nur dershaneleri*). Beyond this, there is no evidence to support that a strict organizational structure (as described by Ursula Spuler) was built during Said Nursi's lifetime.<sup>11</sup>

8 See Figure 1.

9 Ahmed Ramazan was refused by Said Nursi who pointed out to him that he was not a *şeyh* but a *hoca* (teacher); Şahiner, *Son Şahitler*, IV, 257-8.

10 Various Nurcu sources claim that more than 6,000 copies were made this way.

11 At least not in sources available to be me. According to Spuler, the Nurcu movement has a hierarchical structure consisting of four layers; apprentices (*talebeler*), brothers (*kardeşler*), friends (*dostlar*), and lovers (*sevgililer*) with different duties: apprentices must give all their time to religious studies at Nurcu's own institutions; they must learn Arabic, participate in discussions, and drink tea(!). It is preferable that the apprentices remain unmarried for at least five years after having joined the movement. Upward mobility in the hierarchy is very difficult; it depends on the relationship between each member and his fellow members, his respectfulness and respectability. Although not institutionalized, internal control is effective; the atmosphere among the members is said to be that of

*A Nurcu member: Hamza Emek*

All age groups and a wide range of social classes were represented in the Nur movement, teachers, soldiers, bureaucrats and state officials, lorry drivers and housewives. What they had in common was beyond the material conditions of life. The story of Hamza Emek (1922-) is a representative one and can give an idea of what kind of a person could become a Nurcu and how a Nurcu could become involved in politics:

I first heard his [Said Nursi's] name in 1944, when I was in my last year at high school. The word said that a great Islamic scholar had come to Emirdağ. Even though Emirdağ is my hometown I had not had the opportunity to meet him. I had to go to Istanbul for my final examination and I stayed at the Reşadiye Hotel. In the hotel I became acquainted with a man; he asked me where I came from and when I told him, he immediately asked if I had met Said Nursi. He then told me to go and visit Said Nursi the next time I was in Emirdağ: 'Go to him, kiss his hand, and greet him from me, Ömer from the town of Şam (Damascus)'. On my first day in Emirdağ I went to the central mosque, Said Nursi was already there. When the ceremony was over, he came by my side and I kissed his hand and greeted him from Ömer. Said Nursi then asked about my family background and left me with the words: 'You are welcome'. Soon after I went to see him in his home. I met Ceylan Çalışkan on the way and he told me that my visit would not be accepted, but I didn't listen to him and ran

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competition in perfection. The next step up the ladder is that of Brothers; their duties are to read and study like the apprentices, but in addition they write books and articles. The heart of the organization is the Friends; they work fulltime within the movement as teachers, administrators and publishers. At the top we find the Lovers, they were Said Nursi's personal friends and constitute the soul of the movement. They have absolute authority in matters of ideological dispute. Since new recruitment is impossible at this level, their function is likely to pass over to the Friends; Ursula Spuler, 'Zur Organisationsstruktur der Nurculuk-Bewegung' in H.R. Roemer *et al.*, *Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Vorderen Orients: Festschrift für B. Spuler*, Leiden 1981, 423-42.

upstairs. Suddenly Said Nursi screamed to me in anger: 'What are you doing here at these hours?'. I was so scared that I forgot why I had come, and left the house in tears. The day after Ceylan came with a message from the Master [Said Nursi], 'Little brother, I don't receive anyone at that time of the day'. I was accepted as a Nur student.

One day the Master came to me and asked me to enrol as a Democratic Party member on behalf of him and the *Risale-i Nur*. Later I was asked by the local party organization to be their president. Since Said Nursi was out of town, I asked for some time to think it over. I wanted to seek counsel from my Master, he advised me to accept the position and so I did.<sup>12</sup>

### *The status of women*

Equality between the sexes was no more a fact in Said Nursi's time than it is today. However, Said Nursi as a representative of parallel Islam was more willing to accept active women, taking them into his movement, than the state administered official Islam was.

One of the main differences between Mustafa Kemal and Said Nursi is that the latter based his ideology on an already established mentality; that is, Said Nursi's writings—in addition to revealing his own opinions—give information on the real (not necessarily ideal) status of women in the Turkish society.

By replacing the old Family law, based on the *şeriat*, with the Swiss Civil Code (17 February 1926), Mustafa Kemal improved the legal status of women enormously; polygamy was forbidden; men and women were given the same right to demand divorce; both parents had custody of the children; the bride had to be present at her own wedding for the marriage to be valid; one woman's testimony was made equal to that of one man, and men and women were equally entitled to inheritance.<sup>13</sup> As to education, equality

12 Şahiner, *Son Şahitler*, IV, 259.

13 Nermin Abadan-Unat, 'Turkish Women and Social Change' in



between men and woman was already laid down in the Educational Bill of 1924 (*Tevhid-i Tedrisat Kanunu*), but religious schools were excluded from this rule when they first opened in the late 1940s. But the same law also defined the husband as the head of the family; the wife was obliged to adopt the husband's family name,<sup>14</sup> and the wife had to obtain the consent of her husband if she wanted to take up a profession or work outside the household (Turkish Civil Code of October 1926, art. 159).<sup>15</sup>

Laws are important as a source for understanding the (intended) official policy of a state, but in the matter of women's liberation, the impact the laws had on the status of women in society has to be assessed with caution.<sup>16</sup> Laws are prescriptive not descriptive.

According to Said Nursi, men and women have different roles in society and a woman's first and foremost duty is to be a good wife and mother. The wife is the husband's female companion (*refika*), she is his friend (*arkadaş*) and eternal ally (*ebedi dost*).<sup>17</sup> By these words, used to describe an ideal relationship between husband and wife, it becomes quite evident that he did not perceive segregation as equal to subjugation. A wife must be loyal to her husband, and if she is, it is the husband's duty to treat her with respect and tenderness. Thus, the respectability of a woman is related to how she performs her duties as a wife and mother.

If one compares Said Nursi's views with those of the

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Nermin Abadan-Unat (ed.), *Women in Turkish Society*, Leiden 1981, 5-37.

14 This was changed in 1991. As a curiosity; the husband of the 1996 Prime Minister of Turkey, Tansu Çiller, is the only man in Turkish history who has taken his wife's family name.

15 This article was still in force in 1988.

16 According to Binnaz Toprak, the real aim of the emancipation of Turkish women during the Kemalist period 'was to strengthen the goals of the Kemalist Republic rather than a revolutionary redefinition of sexual roles'; Binnaz Toprak, 'Religion and Turkish Women' in Abadan-Unat, *Women in Turkish Society*, 289.

17 Said Nursi, *Lemalar*, Istanbul 1959, 190-1.



Directorate on this matter, the similarity is obvious: according to the Directorate, 'Women need the protection and direction of men, and men need the love and affection of women. Because of the different tasks that men and women are responsible for in society, they are created different from each other. Men have to face the hard conditions of public life (*dış hayat*) and they are therefore created stronger, bolder and more resolute (than women). But with respect to value and legal rights there are no differences between men and women'.<sup>18</sup>

As to polygamy, Said Nursi claimed that it was not appropriate in our time. Even though there are many examples in the Sacred Books of men who have more than one woman, Said Nursi chose to see them in a historical rather than a universal light. For example,

When the Tradition [of the Prophet Muhammed] says that in the Golden Age (*ahir zamanda*) one man had forty women, this can have two meanings, either it is a warning to men, telling them that if they run away from their legal wife they will be the shepherd of forty unfortunate ones. Or it reflects the historical conditions of that time; perhaps there was a surplus of women as a result of all the men who died in wars or perhaps the women of that age were so free that each man was tempted and conquered by forty women, as a result of the women's strong and natural lusts.<sup>19</sup>

And when the *şariat* allows a man to marry four women, Said Nursi gave the following explanation, 'This law was not written in order to increase the number of wives from one to four, but to decrease it from nine to four'.<sup>20</sup>

He insisted that women cover their hair with a headscarf (*tesettürlörtü*) while taking part in social life; lest they

18 Diyanet Gazetesi, 1 July 1973, cited in Sadık Albayrak, *Türkiye'de Din Kavgası*, 5th edn, Istanbul 1991, 307-17.

19 Said Nursi, *Şualar*, Istanbul 1991, fifth *şua*, 586.

20 Said Nursi, *Münazarat*, 74-5, cited in Safa Mürsel, *Bediüzzaman Said Nursi ve Devlet Felsefesi*, Istanbul 1975, 505.

should encourage immorality (*fuhşa teşvik*). Only by hiding their external beauty can they reveal the beauty of their morality. To hide their external beauty was thus considered to be to their own advantage, because a marriage based on the attraction of carnal desire is ruinous to family life.<sup>21</sup> The Directorate stated that, 'the headscarf is for the women's own benefit, for them to be protected and remain pure'.<sup>22</sup> As for infidelity, Said Nursi claimed that if a woman discovers that her husband has been unfaithful, she must try to turn him away from evil to good but not deprive him of his security or neglect her domestic duties in order to punish him.<sup>23</sup> For unmarried men and women we find the same inequality regarding sexual behaviour: 'Because for a man eight minutes of pleasure might cost him eight lira, but for a woman eight minutes of pleasure can lead to eight [*sic*] months of heavy burden'.<sup>24</sup>

The way Said Nursi spoke about the 'women's strong and natural lusts' and the women's potentiality to 'encourage immorality' gives some support to Fatima Mernissi's theory that women in Islam are regarded not as the weaker sex but rather as lusty and deceitful creatures who represent a danger to (innocent) men. But Said Nursi made no causal linkage between strong sexuality and inferior intellectual ability. He regarded education as equally important and meaningful for both men and women.

In spite of his traditional (and commonly held) perception of women,<sup>25</sup> the cause for which he was fighting, an Islamic renewal, necessitated a mobilization of all forces, including women. Thus, the segregation which he theoretically favoured was modified by practical considerations.

21 Said Nursi, 'Emirdağ Lahikası', 212, cited in Mürsel, *Said Nursi*, 143.

22 Albayrak, *Türkiye'de Din Kavgası*, 307-17.

23 Said Nursi, *Lemalar*, 191.

24 *Ibid.*

25 Said Nursi's theoretical foundations on women are gathered together in a small book called 'the Women's Guide' (*Hanımlar Rehberi*).

Official Islam on the other hand, even though it was a part of the secular republican establishment, never allowed women a place in its hierarchy. Women were not accepted as students in the religious schools; women were not allowed to teach religion at any level and they were not allowed to participate in communal prayers in the mosques, apart from on some special days where severe measures of segregation were taken.

In the Nur movement, women seem to have taken part from the very beginning. These women either took contact with Said Nursi directly, that is by way of correspondence or during open air meetings, or they were introduced by family members already involved in the movement. Said Nursi never looked into the women's eyes and they were not allowed to look at his face; nor could they kiss his hand as was the custom of male Nuncus. Some of these women did practical work for the Master himself, like cooking his food or cleaning his clothes and his house. Others took part in the daily activities of the Nur students; studying the *Risale-i Nur*, making handwritten copies of it and distributing them afterwards.

One such was Hatice Soylu from the village of Sav. Her father, Ahmet, was a Nuncu and thus Hatice became acquainted with Said Nursi's writings already as a child.<sup>26</sup> She started to write copies of the *Risale* when she was eleven years old. The written copies were sent to Said Nursi for correction, and he would then certify the copies by writing a prayer on the verso of the last page. She refers to this writing process as a duty (*vazife*).<sup>27</sup>

Female Nuncus also faced the danger of imprisonment. Zehra Dilek who was involved in the distribution of Said Nursi's writings told the following story,

26 According to Hatice Soylu, 500 scribes were writing for Said Nursi in Sav at that time.

27 In Çeleğin, *Bediüzzaman'ı Gören Hanımlar*, 116-19.



One morning a woman neighbour and I were on our way home after having studied the *Risale-i Nur* all night long at my sister's place. Then suddenly a policeman stopped us and said that we were wanted at the police station. We went there; I was not afraid even though my bag was full of *Risales*. The commissioner asked if there were any *Risales* in my bag; and I confirmed it. He took them up, sighed and said, 'These have all been declared legal by the court, what shall we do?' I said, 'Put them back', and so he did. Afterwards he drove us home.<sup>28</sup>

In short, Said Nursi's view on women is neither especially radical nor reactionary; women were allowed an active role in the movement's internal matters but they did not participate in the public discourse on behalf of the movement. In recent years, though, female signatures have occurred in the *Yeni Asya* (the Nurcu's daily newspaper). The movement also publishes a periodical for women, the *Bizim Aile* (Our Family) which, compared with the Nakşibendis' parallel magazine the *Kadın ve Aile* (Women and Family), gives a more intellectual and reflective view on women's situation, duties and rights taking part in the general discussions of feminism in Turkey.<sup>29</sup> The Kemalist regime, on the other hand, encouraged equality between the sexes through its legislation (with some exceptions, see above) but also limited the liberty of women through the Directorate of Religious Affairs. Both Said Nursi and the Kemalist regime had double standards in this matter; in Said Nursi's theoretic-

28 *Ibid.*, 72-7.

29 An example of the magazine's stand on one such 'modern' issue is that of 'domestic violence': 'If being beaten is a women's problem, beating is men's. Women should not be beaten, but men should also not beat. The way to achieve this is to develop the individual's personalities; to work for the acceptance and implanting of basic human rights in a democratic system through education and persuasion'; quoted from Zehra Zeybek, 'Elele'de bir açık oturum', *Bizim Aile*, March 1988, in Feride Acar, 'Women in the Ideology of Islamic Revivalism in Turkey: Three Islamic Women's Journals' in Richard Tapper (ed.), *Islam in Modern Turkey*, London 1991, 293.



cal considerations, women were given a subordinate position whilst in practise they were active participants in the Nur movement. The 'Kemalist woman', on the other hand, was caught in a net of contradictory messages.

A fitting example is a letter written to Said Nursi by Naile Eren in 1959. She was only sixteen years old when she, together with four other girls, wrote this letter in which they asked to be accepted as his students (*talebeler*),

To His Excellency, the most honoured and beloved *üstad*,  
for whom our hearts are filled with limitless and yet unspeakable  
love,  
our Master.

Now during the noble Ramazan with which we are honoured, we  
congratulate you and beg you to accept us as your humble students  
while we apologize for our mistakes.

Oh (you) spiritual nourishment, eternal torch of our hearts, and the  
remedy to our material and spiritual sufferings!

Oh (you), who translates the highest truth to all mankind in the  
world, by the greatness of the sparkling and pure light that springs  
from the Koran,  
our Master!

Asime, Fatma, Leman, Ayşe, Naile.<sup>30</sup>

Said Nursi lived as a celibate all his life.

### *Scripturalism and textual community*

The Nur movement has been characterized as a fundamentalist movement by Western scholars (such as Nancy and Richard Tapper and Paul Dumont).<sup>31</sup> But the term funda-

30 Çeleğin, *Bediüzzaman'ı Gören Hanımlar*, 132-3.

31 Nancy Tapper and Richard Tapper, 'Aspects of Fundamentalism in a Turkish Town' in Lionel Caplan (ed.), *Studies in Religious Fundamentalism*, London: Houndmills 1987, 61 and Paul Dumont, 'Disciples of the Light : The Nurju Movement in Turkey', *Central Asian Survey*, V, 2, 1986, 34.

mentalism is virtually absent from the Turkish discourse.<sup>32</sup> Fundamentalism was originally a Christian Protestant movement which originated in the second decade of the twentieth century. It was a reaction against the rationalism and worldliness of the American Protestant church, and its aim was to restore the Bible's universal authority.<sup>33</sup> The definition of fundamentalism made by James Barr, where he considers scripturalism to be its basic component, is based on its Christian Protestant origin.

The historicity of a concept does not necessarily limit its validity to the period and place in which it emerged. Its semantic field can be extended in two ways, by minimizing or maximizing its reference. Both methods have been used as the Christian term fundamentalism was transferred to the Islamic world. The term which originally was 'a name they called themselves'—that is it was used to *describe* 'us' as different from (and better than) 'them', the other Christians—became a concept for *defining* 'them' as different from (that is, more primitive than) 'us'. This transfer led to the concept being used more widely and today there is no generally agreed definition of the concept. But the various usages are all influenced by Barr's definition, that is, scripturalism is regarded as an analytical component of fundamentalism.

Barr mentions the following three points in his definition of fundamentalism,<sup>34</sup>

- (a) a very strong emphasis on the inerrancy of the Bible; the absence from it of any sort of error,
- (b) a strong hostility to modern theology and to the methods, results and implications of modern critical study of

32 Critics of movements like the Nur movement refer to them as reactionary forces.

33 Steve Bruce, 'The Moral Majority' in Caplan, *Studies in Religious Fundamentalism*, 179.

34 James Barr, *Fundamentalism*, London 1977, 1.

the Bible,

- (c) a belief that those who do not share their religious viewpoint are not really true Christians at all.

This kind of scripturalism stands in sharp contrast to the hermeneutic rationality encouraged by Said Nursi, through his organization of the Nur movement as a *textual community*. This term, which was introduced by Brian Stock in his study of eleventh-century heresy in Christianity, denotes,

not a new methodology but a more intensive use of traditional methods, and, in particular, their use by groups hitherto dependent on oral participation in religion ... within the textual community, texts were steps by which the individual climbed towards perfect understanding of God. The group's members associated voluntarily; their interaction took place around an agreed meaning for the text. Above all, the members had to make the hermeneutic leap from what the text says to what they think it means; the common understanding provides the foundation for a changing thought and behavior.<sup>35</sup>

In contrast to the embedded elitism of scripturalism, it was one of Said Nursi's main concerns to make religious knowledge available to everybody. Said Nursi stressed the importance of education, both as a way to fully grasp the universal meaning of the sacred books and as a means to acquire the technology and science of the twentieth century. By studying the *Risale-i Nur*, which itself was based upon Said Nursi's view of the sacred books, as having both literal/historical and an inner/universal meaning. Said Nursi wanted his students to develop the necessary intellectual techniques for grasping the changes in the society by linking it to a language which they already knew; that of Islam.

It was never Barr's intention to use the definition as a general term,<sup>36</sup> and the major limitation of Barr's definition

35 Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy*, Princeton 1983, 522.

36 According to Barr, only Protestant Christianity could produce full fundamentalism as defined above, because the other religions,



is that it applies better to orthodox Islam than to the *oppositional* Islamic movements of today. Later definitions have tried to compensate for this, two extreme definitions may be that,

- (1) Islamic fundamentalists seek to 'renew the faith', to return to pristine origins, to shed the accretions of time and clime, and to recapture the vigour and simplicity of the prophetic times. At the core of this movement there is a strong component of emotional faith and scripturalism.<sup>37</sup>
- (2) The fundamentalists refuse all western and modern influences, their aim is to implement the religious law *shari'ah* (*shariat*), which incorporates practically all spheres of life, in its strictest sense. Violation of this law leads to punishments such as amputation (for stealing) and stoning (for adultery).<sup>38</sup>

The problem with the first definition is that it functions as a catch-all label rather than a clarifying model; all Muslims are fundamentalists in the respect that they want to renew the faith, build society on Islam and believe in the Koran as the literal word of God. But when it comes to defining the content of these concepts a general agreement would be difficult to establish; how should the faith be renewed, what are the pristine origins to which one should return and what

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Judaism, Islam, Roman Catholicism and Greek Orthodoxy, 'were modified by other factors that were present: for instance, by the presence of a developed and explicit philosophical theology, by the use of allegorizing exegesis, by the acceptance of the authority of tradition in the synagogue and the church'; *Fundamentalism*, 182. Tapper and Tapper read Barr in a way that in contrast to my findings supports the similarities between the above-mentioned religions regarding fundamentalism; Tapper and Tapper, 'Aspects of Fundamentalism', 56.

37 Leonard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism*, London 1988, 170.

38 This definition is found implicit in Lars Gule, *Islam og demokrati*, Bergen 1991.



does the Koran actually say? There is no central authority in Islam to lay down once and for all what the Islamic truth is. Thus, to speak of Muslim fundamentalism in this sense 'is to employ an empty tautology'.<sup>39</sup>

The latter definition, which is also the most popular one, not only refers to the *şariat* and the *hudud*<sup>40</sup> punishments as if there was universal agreement as to what they mean and is based on the erroneous—but frequently stated—assumption, 'made by both Islamists and their non-Muslim and some of their Muslim critics ... that the *sharī'a* is a "Code of Law" in the same sense as a civil or criminal law code'.<sup>41</sup> In addition it explicitly defines fundamentalism as the opposite of modernity. If this definition of fundamentalism is applied on the Nur movement, which encouraged literacy, education and science as means to mobilize its members politically and thereby stimulated the development of a participant society, only secularism is left for modernity. Thus, it is difficult to use the concept of 'fundamentalism' to describe the Nur movement.

### *Nurcus in the political arena*

In the period of one-party rule (1925-45), the religious issue was not a topic for legitimate political discourse. In 1945 President İsmet İnönü<sup>42</sup> decided to permit the formation of opposition parties, and 15 new parties were founded in

39 Baldick, *Mystical Islam*, 7.

40 *Hudud* means border or limitation, but it also refers especially to those punishments that are laid down by the Koran.

41 R.S. O'Fahey in a lecture on the *şariat* and human rights in the Sudan, given at Chr. Michelsens Institutt, Bergen, 15 April 1994.

42 İsmet İnönü, born in 1884, graduated from the artillery school as a staff captain in 1905, defeated the Greek army at the Battle of İnönü (hence his surname) in 1921, and was sent to Lausanne to lead the delegation to negotiate peace. He served as Prime Minister for long periods up to 1937, when he resigned. After Mustafa Kemal's death in 1938, İnönü became the new President.

1945–46, including an Islamic party.<sup>43</sup>

The major opposition party was the Democratic Party (Demokrat Parti), which was founded on 7 January 1946 by four former members of the Republican Peoples' Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi); Celal Bayar,<sup>44</sup> deputy from Izmir and former Prime Minister under Atatürk; Adnan Menderes, deputy from Aydın, Fuad Köprülü, deputy for Kars and professor of history and literature, and Refik Koraltan, deputy for İçel. Their official aim was to make the Turkish state more democratic, instead of 'rule on behalf of the people' they wanted 'rule by the people'.

Secularism was the clearest topic of difference in interpretation between the parties. This is evident when one compares the declaration of secularism expressed during the Seventh Congress of the Republican People's Party, 2 December 1947, with Article Fourteen in the Democratic Party programme from 1946. The former states that; 'Our party considers that [all laws] must correspond to the requirements of modern civilization ... and that the exclusion of religious ideas from the secular affairs of government and politics constitutes the main factor of success, progress and development'.<sup>45</sup> The Democratic Party on the other hand, '... rejects the erroneous interpretation of secularism that has led to a hostile attitude towards religion, we advocate a clearer separation between religion and public affairs

43 İslam Demokrat Partisi, see Şahiner, *Son Şahitler*, IV, 318.

44 Celal Bayar, born in Bursa in 1884, was a member of the secret political Young Turk organization and the Committee of Union and Progress (together with Mustafa Kemal), he took active part in the national struggle in Izmir and became the deputy for Izmir in the assembly and minister for reconstruction in the 1924 cabinet. The same year he founded the Business Bank of Turkey (Türkiye İş Bankası) and in 1932 he was appointed minister of national economy. In 1937 he replaced İnönü as Mustafa Kemal's last Prime Minister. After Mustafa Kemal's death in 1938 Bayar resigned and next appeared as the leader of the dissident faction in the ruling RPP; Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey*, London 1993, 64, 68.

45 Cited in Geyikdağı, *Political Parties in Turkey*, 74.

so that the government will not interfere in religious activities'.<sup>46</sup>

Following the victory of the Democratic Party in the 1950 parliamentary elections, a general amnesty was proclaimed and Said Nursi was released from surveillance, that is, the restrictions on his movements were lifted. After the election Said Nursi sent the following telegram of congratulations to the new President, Celal Bayar, 'We offer our congratulations. May the Almighty God accord you every success in the service of Islam, and the country and nation. In the name of the Students of the *Risale-i Nur*, and one of them, Said Nursi.' He received the following reply: 'I was exceedingly touched at your cordial congratulations and offer my thanks. Celal Bayar'.<sup>47</sup>

When in position, the Democratic Party made immediate changes to the earlier reforms concerning religion. On 16 June 1950, a law was passed allowing the call to prayer (*ezan*) once more to be in Arabic, from 7 July the same year Koran recitations were broadcast by Radio Ankara both in Arabic and Turkish, religious courses again became a part of the curriculum—with one important exception, the military schools, which from 1939 until the present have been kept completely free from religious studies. Information from other Islamic countries became more easily available, seven schools for preachers and prayer leaders were established in 1951 and nine more by 1954-55. Financial support was given to those going on pilgrimage to Mecca. In 1956 all legal restrictions on the *Risale-i Nur* were lifted and a new generation of Nurcus could print and publish Said Nursi's writings on modern presses in the new script.<sup>48</sup> Between

46 Cited in Tanık Zafer Tunaya, *Türkiye'de Siyasi Partiler*, 1952, III, 663.

47 Vahide, *Bediüzzaman*, 334.

48 The Nur student Tola Tahsin was a Member of Parliament for the DP in this period and the lifting of the ban of printing the *Risale* can be accredited to him. Tahsin Tola later became the editor of *Bediüzzaman's* authorized biography which was printed in 1958.



1950 and 1960, 15,000 new mosques were built, the budget of the Directorate was increased and the religious personnel were shown greater respect in general. 'More significantly, the revival of religious orders and fundamentalist religious movements, too, were tolerated.'<sup>49</sup>

The first Turkish Penal Code states that instrumental usage of Islam, that is to use Islam as a means to gain political power, is forbidden, and Said Nursi fully supported this. He feared and banned any instrumental usage of religion.<sup>50</sup> For this reason, he did not support the Nation Party (Millet Partisi), even though this party had a clear anti-secular profile and wanted to go further than the Democratic Party in pro-Islamic measures.<sup>51</sup> Said Nursi did not want Islam to be defined for him by 'ignorant people' (ignorant in religious matters as a result of the miserable situation of religious education) and certainly not by politicians; he wanted to define it himself and for this he needed the tolerance of the Democratic Party rather than the control of the Nation Party. The fact that the Nation Party, its successor party, the National Salvation Party (Milli Selamet Partisi) and its successor again, the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi), have all been dominated by members of the Nakşibendi brotherhood<sup>52</sup> offers an additional explanation for his preference for the Democratic Party.<sup>53</sup> Many Nurus

49 Ali Yaşar Sarıbay, 'The Democrat Party, 1946-1960' in M. Heper and J. Landau (eds.), *Political Parties and Democracy in Turkey*, London 1991, 128.

50 Safa Mürsel, *Said Nursi*, 332.

51 An additional reason for preferring the Democratic Party over the Nation Party might be its attitude towards communism. Both parties were against communism but while the Democratic Party chose to cooperate with the Western countries in order to fight it, the Nation Party turned to the Islamic Countries for support. The same distinction is present between the two parties' economic policies.

52 Hamid Algar, 'Political Aspects of Naqshbandi History' in Gaborieau *et al.*, *Naqshbandis*, 83-94.

53 The Welfare party won several local elections in 1994, and in 1996-97 headed a coalition government in Turkey.



were involved in grassroot politics, even as members of the party, and contributed to the repeated victories of the Democratic Party in the elections of the 1950s.

With the Democratic Party in government, and in view of their many reforms in favour of religion, one might expect that the arrests of Nurcu students came to an end. But this was not the case. Between 1950 and 1960 more than sixty Nurcus were charged because they were Nurcus (Figure 1).

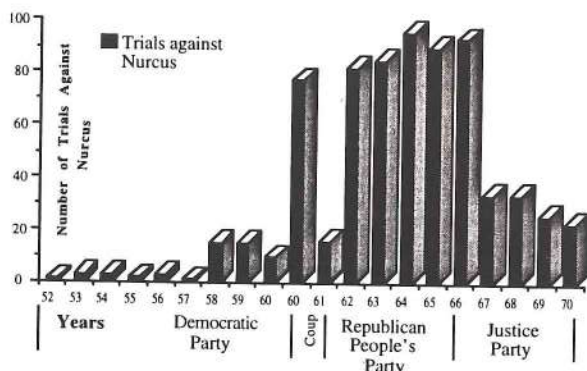


Figure 1: Trials against Nurcus between 1952-70 ending with acquittal or dismissal. Compiled from Bekir Berk, *Türkiye'de Nurculuk Davası*.

After the military coup in 1960, however, this number more than doubled in less than one and a half year. The number remained high during the following period of Republican People's Party government. After the elections in 1965, which brought the Justice Party to power, the number of prosecutions decreased.<sup>54</sup>

54 The figure has to be read with some caution, the numbers presented refer only to cases that ended with acquittal or dismissal, i.e., the number does not necessarily equal the number of charges or arrests. Neither is there a necessary correlation between the date (year) of an acquittal and the date of the arrest, the fact that there were extremely many acquittals and dismissals just after the military coup does not necessarily mean that the coup resulted in an increase of arrests/

Said Nursi himself was persecuted until the last days of his life. In 1960 he was staying in a hotel in Urfa; 87 years old, he was weak and ill but receiving visitors *en masse* (this time everyone who came was received). Suddenly two civilian policemen arrived and told him to leave for Isparta. The students made a fuss, and soon the news reached the President of the Urfa branch of the Democratic Party. He acted immediately, bringing a doctor who examined Said Nursi and pronounced him unfit to travel. Said Nursi died the next morning.<sup>55</sup>

Both the policemen's and the politician's actions in this event must be ascribed to a lack of a generally accepted hierarchical authority structure. The explanation for this is that the opposition party, the Republican People's Party, still had many of their people in important administrative and executive positions. As the struggle between İnönü and Menderes grew more intense, the Republican People's Party stepped up their campaign against the government and to this end even the misuse of positions in the bureaucracy may have taken place, 'not only the political elites, but, sometimes from behind the scenes, sometimes more openly, the bureaucratic and the military elites too have wished to play a significant role in politics ... clinging onto their concept of rationalist democracy, the state elites expected political party leaders to place primary emphasis on the general interest, as the state elites themselves have defined it ... during the

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charges against Nurus. This is further supported by the fact that legal systems in general work rather slow. But there are equally strong evidence in favour of the interpretation given above; (1) a high number of acquittals and dismissals necessarily means a previous high number of arrests and charges, (2) the Supreme Court had already in 1949 proclaimed the innocence of Said Nursi's writings with respect to violation of the state's principle of secularism, acquittals was thus to be the expected result of any trial based on the same charges, and (3) the aim of the coup was to restore the Kemalist principles to which the Nurus was perceived to represent a threat.

55 Vahide, *Bediüzzaman*, 372.

1950s, for instance, the state elites insisted on strictly secularist policies'.<sup>56</sup> Turkey has always been ruled by more than one elite, in the 1950s both the political and bureaucratic as well as the military elite had their hand on the till. And in the case of the Nur movement these elites ruled at the same time, but not together.

While in government, the Democratic Party adjusted—unofficially—the way the constitution introduced by the Republican People's Party was applied, to suit their own policies. But as time went by, the military elite found it impossible to tolerate the Democrats' liberal interpretation of the constitutional laws, they demanded that the intention of the Kemalist law-makers should be equally binding as the law itself. On 27 May 1960 the military elite overthrew the government; the Democratic Party was forbidden and the Prime Minister Adnan Menderes and two of his ministers were hanged after a long trial. Between the coup and the date of the free elections that took place on 15 October 1961, more than 120 Nurus came before court.<sup>57</sup>

The Republican People's Party came out of the 1961 elections as the biggest party, but did not obtain a majority in the Parliament with only 173 out of a total of 450 seats.<sup>58</sup> They had to form a coalition government with the successor party of the Democratic Party, the Justice Party (Adalet Partisi), 'the fact is that the Justice Party only agreed to participate in the coalition government because of pressure from former Democratic Party members and families who believed that only an İnönü government could grant a general amnesty to the convicted members with no reaction from the military'.<sup>59</sup> The coalition lasted until December 1963, when the Republican People's Party formed a new

56 Heper in Landau and Heper, *Political Parties*, 3.

57 See Figure 1.

58 Geyikdağı, *Political Parties in Turkey*, 93.

59 Avner Levi, 'The Justice Party, 1961-1980' in Landau and Heper, *Political Parties*, 138.



coalition, this time with independents.

The Nuncus loyally supported the Justice Party<sup>60</sup> and its leader Süleyman Demirel, who won the elections in 1965 and stayed in power until the military intervened again in 1971.<sup>61</sup> The Nur movement was still considered controversial and the opposition tried to make the most out of the Justice Party/Nurcu relationship. In 1966, a journalist confronted Demirel with the following question:

İsmet İnönü has said that the Justice Party is playing with a dangerous weapon. As far as I understood that weapon is similar to the Nuncus. It is also said that a group of administrators are protecting the Nuncus and agreeing with their cause. I have been to Isparta where I found some written documents verifying this, which I am going to publish. There was also a rumour that members of your family are involved in this. Is there anybody in your family that protect Nuncus?

Demirel replied:

Publish and publicize whatever you want, but don't forget that there are laws, courts and justice in this country. Besides that, why are you confronting me with this (are you trying to threaten me?)

When asked about this incident by Şahiner in 1989,<sup>62</sup> he commented in a relaxed way that:

His [İnönü's] aim was to make me look like an ignorant reactionary. To make me fall, especially in the eyes of the intellectuals. But I had

60 The symbol of the Justice Party (*Adalet Partisi*) was an open book with the letters A and P, according to a religious interpretation the book symbolized the Koran, the A stood for *Allah*, and the P for Prophet (*Peygamber*). The True Path Party has the white horse of the Democratic Party as their symbol.

61 Süleyman Demirel was Prime Minister in Turkey October 1965–November 1969, November 1969–March 1970, March 1970–March 1971, March 1975–June 1975, November 1979–September 1980, and was elected President of Turkey in 1992.

62 Necmeddin Şahiner, *Nurculuk nedir?*, Istanbul 1990, 111–20.



stated officially and proudly in 1965, 'I am a Muslim, and as such it is my most natural duty to protect the freedom of belief and the freedom of worship, and to fulfil the duties of Muslimhood'. İnönü's speech was influential, but I still cannot know to what extent. Be that as it will be, I have never gone back on my word, may God forbid!'<sup>63</sup>

After the end of the single-party era, Said Nursi could have established his own political party, but he refrained from doing so because he wanted the Nur movement to be an alternative to rather than a part of the state establishment. The Nur movement and the Democratic Party/Justice Party overlapped in their interpretation of secularism, and as a result the Nurus gave them their votes and the Democratic Party/Justice Party gave the Nurus better 'living conditions'. But the dream of the Nurus was to create an Islamic world empire; to realize this, the first step was to make all Turks into good Muslims, accepting Said Nursi as *the* spiritual renewer of Islam, and the *Risale-i Nur* as the Koran commentary for the twentieth century. And for this purpose, according to Said Nursi, politics could only play a minor role,

This denial of the primacy of politics, and the stress he placed on social mobilization, is possibly that aspect of his theories which caused the greatest apprehension among the rulers of the Republic.<sup>64</sup>

63 See interview in Appendix B.

64 Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 102.

## SECULARISM

The state's definition and implementation of secularism can be characterized by the expression 'double communication'. Double communication is a concept used in psychology to describe a communicative situation in which one or all participants intentionally or unintentionally send inconsistent or contradictory messages.<sup>1</sup> Machiavelli was familiar with this method and he described it as a most effective method for a prince to control his subjects.

Until the family name law of 1934, Mustafa Kemal used the title *gazi*<sup>2</sup>—Muslim warrior—thus making use of religious symbolism,<sup>3</sup> but at the same time other religious symbols were forbidden. Thus the Hat Law of 1925 made the usage of traditional headgear such as the *fez* and the *türban* illegal and prescribed that all men should wear European-style hats. Mustafa Kemal himself wore a Panama hat.

But the secularist policy had other and more serious consequences. Said Nursi, who was one of the few people who recognized the state's double communication, could not avoid being one of its victims. The state tried to bring him down both by way of the judicial system, accusing him of

- 1 Frank J. Bruno, *Dictionary of Key Words in Psychology*, New York 1986, 63.
- 2 This is the title he used in an interview with Mr. Macartney of the *Times* in December 1924; Zürcher, *Political Opposition*, 155. See also Feroz Ahmad, *Making of Modern Turkey*, 63.
- 3 'Gazi is a general term used in Islam for someone who has scored an impressive success on the battlefield. A *gazi* is not only a courageous and able fighter but, even more important, a fighter for the faith...'; Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 4.

violating the secular principles of the state, and by way of the Directorate, which accused him of heresy.

To what extent did the Turkish state guarantee the security of its citizens, that is; did the law protect people from state terrorism, and what kind of religion did the authorities want?

*The status of religion in the early Turkish Republic*

Turkey has always found itself caught between Eastern and Western ideology. In 1921, from the point of view of Mustafa Kemal and his associates, the security requirements of the new political system necessitated Westernization and the adoption of the values of contemporary Western civilization. The East represented their cultural enemy. But the West was also their enemy, as capitalists and imperialists. Thus, westernizing Turkey went hand in hand with combating the Western powers. After the enemy had been beaten, its ideology was to be adopted.

For Said Nursi, it was impossible to understand or accept the enemy's ideology as something different from the enemy itself, one being the cause of the other. Thus the difference between him and Mustafa Kemal on this point illustrates the difference between pragmatism and idealism. As far as the revolutionaries were concerned, the conflict between Turkey and the European forces was simply a practical one. This innocence is well illustrated by the fact that there was little, if any, doubt among the ruling elite that the fall of the Ottoman Empire was due mainly to an *internal* aspect, namely its theocratic system. Religion was seen as the major reason for the Ottoman rulers' inability to develop a bond of loyalty between themselves and their subjects based on Ottoman citizenship.<sup>4</sup> Islam was seen as

4 The Islamic superstructure of the Ottoman Empire guaranteed a high degree of autonomy to the various religious communities, which enabled them to keep a separate identity and eventually made them



the cause of the divided identity of the Turkish population.

In 1921 Mustafa Kemal was not interested in restoring the empire; his aim was to establish a Turkish nation-state. And for this purpose (paradoxically) Islam was used with great success. Apart from the *şeyh-ül-İslam*, who issued a *fetva* in favour of the occupation powers, Said Nursi and religious men all over Turkey supported Mustafa Kemal.<sup>5</sup> Even though secularism was seen as necessary in order to reach the ultimate goal of creating a Turkish nation-state, Ankara was keen not to lose the support of influential religious leaders too soon, and the constitution of 1921 therefore confirmed the authority of God at the same time as it accepted the sovereignty of the people.<sup>6</sup>

When the Western powers admitted defeat in 1923, two invitations were sent for a peace conference, one to Mustafa Kemal in Ankara and one to the last Grand Vizier, Tevfik Paşa in Istanbul. This provoked the parliament into action. Many members of parliament were religious leaders, but that did not cause any serious conflict on this subject, as it was generally agreed that Sultan Vahdettin had betrayed Turkey and Islam during the occupation. The sultanate was abolished on 29 October 1923.

Officially the sultanate was abolished because of the conduct of the man holding the position, but behind the act was a real wish to eliminate the religious institutions as such. Since the positions of sultan and caliph were held by

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receptive to nationalist winds from the West. According to the constitution of 22 December 1876, art. 11: 'The religion of the Ottoman state is Islam. Without violating the morals and manners of the general public, the diverse religious communities are given privileges under the protection of the state.'

- 5 100 *müftüs* in Ankara issued counter-*fetvas* overruling the authority of the *şeyh-ül-İslam* who had issued a *fetva* against the nationalists.
- 6 The constitutional acceptance of the sultanate's and caliphate's existence was modified by a circular signed by the National Assembly 9 June 1920 which nullifies all decisions made by the Ottoman authorities after 16 March the same year.



the same person,<sup>7</sup> something had also to be done about the caliphate. Now that the sultanate, the political executive organ of the caliphate, was gone, could there be a caliph without a sultan? The Parliament split in three on this issue:

- (1) Those in favour of keeping the caliphate as a personal office above the state.
- (2) Those who wanted religion to be a governmental responsibility.
- (3) Those who opted for an abolition of the caliphate.

Said Nursi thought that the caliphate as an institution of the twentieth century would function better as a part of the governmental system, not as a personal office. He also saw the caliphate's existence as a security symbol providing mutual support between the Islamic countries and a common identity/public spirit (*hamiyet*) to their inhabitants.<sup>8</sup> 'This shift of emphasis from the leader of Islam to the Islamic community as such was only gradually accepted in other Islamic societies.'<sup>9</sup> In his speech to the Assembly in November 1923, Nursi took a clear stand against important responsibilities being laid on one man's shoulders:

The present is the time of Community. The collective personality of a community, which is its spirit, is firmer and more capable of carrying out the ordinances of the *seriat*. If a collective personality, the spirit of a community, is righteous, it is more brilliant and perfect (than that of an individual). But if it is bad it is exceedingly bad. Both the goodness and the badness of an individual are limited.<sup>10</sup>

7 At first the problem was solved the traditional way by appointing a new caliph, Abdülmecit. He soon revealed that his true ambition was to become a new sultan; Çetin Özek, *Türkiye'de Gerici Akımlar*, 40.

8 Said Nursi, *Mesnevi-i Nuriye*, 95-6, cited in Safa Mürsel, *Siyasi Düşünce Tarihi Işığında Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, Istanbul 1980, 282-8.

9 Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 101.

10 Said Nursi, *Mesnevi-i Nuriye*, 1980, 92-3, cited and translated by

The third group was outnumbered by the others, but both the President, Mustafa Kemal and the Prime Minister, İsmet İnönü, belonged to it. According to them the caliphate was a remnant from the past that divided the population's loyalty and in the epoch of nation states was nothing but an insult to the state leaders of the Middle East.<sup>11</sup>

The President was keen on continuing his revolutionary programme of Westernization, but since it would be difficult to persuade the parliament of the dangers of religion, he contacted the army and secured their support before presenting the proposal to the National Assembly, 'İsmet Paşa and Kazım Paşa, Minister of War, arrived in İzmir for the "exercises". Fevzi Paşa, Chief of the General Staff was already there. We agreed about the necessity of suppressing the caliphate. We had decided at the same time to suppress also the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Evkaf and to unify public instruction.'<sup>12</sup> The abolition of the caliphate was proclaimed on 2 March 1924. Officially this was done in order to rescue the Islamic faith which had been abused for centuries.<sup>13</sup> Those who did not share this opinion were proclaimed as enemies of Turkey and the Muslim world.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time the Ministry of Religious Affairs<sup>15</sup> and the *evkaf* was abolished and unification of education was ensured by transferring all educational institutions in Turkey (including religious schools) to the Ministry of Public Instruction. The immediate result of this was that religious

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Şükran Vahide in Vahide, *Bediüzzaman*, 179-80.

11 Özek, *Türkiye'de Gerici Akımlar*, 36-42, Mustafa Kemal, *A Speech*, Ankara 1981, 698 and Kadir Mısıroğlu, *Kurtuluş Savaşında Sarıklı Mücahitler*, İstanbul 1990, 391-430.

12 Kemal, *A Speech*, 700.

13 *Ibid.*, 702.

14 In fact, some of the deputies who stood up and defended the continued existence of the caliphate soon after resigned and were in addition declared to be adversaries of National Turkey and forbidden to remain in Turkey; Kemal, *A Speech*, 702.

15 Not to be confused with the Directorate of Religious Affairs, which was established in 1924 as a replacement of this Ministry.

education was removed from the curriculum. What in theory was meant to be a unification of education, that is a combination of religious and secular subjects as the curriculum, in practice became a one-sided secularization.

The constitution of 1921 was not in harmony with these changes and was therefore in 1924 replaced by a new one, which marked a further step on the way to the proclamation of a secular republic.<sup>16</sup>

### *The organization of religion in Turkey*

The potential of religion for mass mobilization and its social importance was well known to the Turkish authorities and it was therefore of vital importance for them to be able to control it.<sup>17</sup>

In the Ottoman Empire, the religious institutions had been responsible for the complete educational system and had also functioned as the state's judiciary.<sup>18</sup> The abolition of the caliphate, the unification of education under the Ministry of National Instruction and the introduction of the Swiss Civil Code swept away the official Islamic institutions of the Ottoman Empire. In 1925 the institutions of parallel Islam were also forbidden.<sup>19</sup> And finally, the article stating

16 The constitution of 1924 contained some paragraphs, § 2, 16, 26 and 38, admitting some influence to religion in state affairs. For a discussion of these articles see Harald Fischer, *Die neue Türkei und der Islam: Eine religionsrechtliche Studie*, Nürnberg 1932, 36-9.

17 According to Dumont, the state did not want to control Islam but to modernize it; Paul Dumont, 'Islam as a Factor of Change and Revival in Modern Turkey' in Sabri M. Akçural (ed.), *Turkic Culture*, 1987.

18 This was changed by Sultan Selim III (1789-1807) who, in order to modernize the state, divided the education system by separating religious and secular education. The same change was made in the judicial system where the religious institution's authority was limited to that of civil law.

19 The religious brotherhoods (*tarikats*) and all their activities were banned.



that Islam was the state religion of Turkey was omitted from the constitution in 1928.

In spite of these measures it is wrong to think of religion in Turkey as something separate and independent from the Turkish state. The Kemalist government did not wish for an autonomous religious institution to develop, so, in parallel with the above mentioned changes, they re-established religion as a part of the state administration.

The Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Reisliği/Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı) was established in 1924 together with a Directorate for Pious Foundations (Evkaf Umum Müdürlüğü/Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü). The new religious administrators were chosen from the last generation of Ottoman *ulema*, preferably members of the Nakşibendi brotherhood because of their supine attitude towards the state and their orthodox interpretation of the *sünnet*. The first leader appointed was a *muftü*, Rıfat Börekçi, who according to Sadık Albayrak was an unambitious man of modest achievements with a character of spiritual insignificance.<sup>20</sup> The leader of the Directorate was appointed by a Ministerial Council on the recommendation of the Prime Minister and approval by the President. He was a state official and had to obey the instructions of the Prime Minister and the National Assembly. He was the organizational head of all religious servants; he appointed them and could replace them, and had authority to decide on spiritual disputes in conformity with the principles of Kemalism.<sup>21</sup> The Penal Code prescribes double penalties for religious servants who in any way express criticism or oppose these principles, including that of secularism.

Before the ban of all religious instruction in 1939, several religious textbooks aimed at reconciling Islam with Turkish nationalism were printed. According to these books, the duties of a good Muslim was to be a good Turk. In the

20 Albayrak, *Türkiye'de Din Kavgası*, 224.

21 Compare with their view of women, as stated in Chapter Three.

*Askerlere Din Kitabı* (Manual of Religion for Soldiers), written by Ahmet Hamdi Akseki—the later President of the Directorate—and printed in Istanbul in 1928, the recruits were told that: 'Islam prescribes love of the fatherland, obedience to rulers, zealous work, strict compliance with military rules, respect for the Turkish flag ...'<sup>22</sup>

The task of organizing Islam as a loyal instrument of the Turkish nation-state was not easy, and in spite of the control mechanisms applied by the state in choosing religious administrators and similar, a conflict soon arose between the Directorate and the National Assembly on the question of the status of religion. This conflict manifested itself in an argument concerning the wages of religious servants in 1925. These officials were in a terribly difficult situation and were unable to provide for their families. In order to make their situation known they wrote a letter of complaint addressed to the National Assembly. The Assembly responded that an increase in wages could only be achieved by a decrease in the number of religious servants. Rıfat Börekçi did nothing to support his subordinates.<sup>23</sup> Thus there was also a conflict within the Directorate itself.

It is important to note here that these lower officials were genuinely committed religious men, less secular in their outlook than the elite level of the Directorate who was, apparently, completely in line with the official view on religion.<sup>24</sup>

The religious life of the Turkish Muslims was organized as a part of the state administration; all religious personnel were state officials; religious ceremonies were performed under state control and protected by its laws.<sup>25</sup> Mustafa

22 Quoted by Dumont, 'Islam as a Factor of Change', 3.

23 The letter of complaint and the reply is given in Albayrak, *Türkiye'de Din Kavgası*, 225-6.

24 A most illustrating example of this fact is that this Directorate was the first to use the Latin alphabet in their official writings; Fischer, *Die neue Türkei und der Islam*, 71.

25 Articles 175-178 in the penal code, see Appendix A.

Kemal created a 'one-way system' in which the state was separated from religion but not *vice versa*, a Turkish redefinition of secularism.

*Official Islam versus Sufism:  
The Directorate of Religious Affairs and Said Nursi*

Islam has always been pluralistic in its expressions, and a main distinction is that between theory and practice, and between theology and Sufism (mysticism). In the Ottoman Empire, Islam was institutionalized as a part of the state bureaucracy, and theologians developed an official version of Islam in order to legitimize the rulers' right to rule. One basic difference between official and parallel Islam (including Sufism) lies in their attitude towards the Koran. While the former is engaged in a rational analysis of the external (*zahiri*) meaning of the Koran, and especially its moral imperatives, the latter devotes itself to exploring the Koran's esoteric (*batini*) layer of wisdom. In official Islam, religious knowledge is the privilege of a small elite. The official Islamic institution has a clear hierarchical structure and the individual's religious obligations are of a collective and formal character. There are five fundamental duties laid down in the Koran; the confession (*şahadet*): 'There is but one God and Muhammed is His messenger', prayer five times a day (*namaz*), almsgiving (*zekat*), fast during the Ramazan (*oruç*), and pilgrimage to Mecca (*hac*). Of these five, only the confession (*şahadet*) is an absolute requirement for calling oneself a Muslim.

Parallel Islam, on the other hand, requires a complete personal commitment. The individual must seek to reach an individual experience of God's existence, in which education plays an important role. One must understand in order to believe. Manners, social and professional conduct, and ideological conviction must be pervaded with the truth of religion. But these requirements stopped being valid for *all*



Sufis as mystics started to gather followers, eventually organizing them into brotherhoods. From that time—the thirteenth century—on, only those Sufis who were properly initiated by their masters could fulfil the classical Sufi requirements for the experience of God.

The Sufi brotherhoods differed from each other in many respects but outwardly had the following features in common:

- The initiator of the brotherhood (*tarikāt*) had a holy charisma which was inherited by the successive leaders.
- Brotherhood members must respect the spiritual qualifications of the religious leaders (*ṣeyh*),<sup>26</sup> and accept the authority of the leader as legitimized by his spiritual qualifications.
- New members are initiated through a special ceremony which often includes a vow.
- The brotherhood has a hierarchical organization structure.
- They perform special rituals, known as *zikir* (remembrance of God).
- The brotherhood leaders are often proclaimed saints, either by themselves or by their followers, and are identified as such both because of their philosophical innovations and because of the miracles they work.

Thus, religious knowledge which in classical Sufism was open to all who were willing and able to follow the mystical way, now became a property of the leader.

The Sufi brotherhoods remained an alternative path to salvation (this-worldly and other-worldly) throughout the

26 According to van Bruinessen, the primary roles of a *ṣeyh* are that of a holy man, an object of popular devotion and a leader-instructor in mystical brotherhoods; Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State*, London 1992, 210.

Ottoman era, accepted by the sultans.<sup>27</sup> This changed dramatically in 1925, when Mustafa Kemal, as president of the Turkish Republic, abolished all the brotherhoods. But making official Islam the only actor on the stage did not make parallel Islam less popular among the audience. The earlier contrast between official Islam and Sufism now reappeared as a theological conflict between the Directorate of Religious Affairs and Said Nursi.

In 1964 the Directorate of Religious Affairs published a pamphlet containing reports compiled earlier in connection with the trials against Said Nursi and his followers. The pamphlet was published, according to the Directorate, because of the vitality of the Nurcu influence, in order to warn Muslims and to guide them on the right path. As far as the Directorate was concerned, Said Nursi was not an Islamic reformer, but a heretic.

The Directorate based its criticism mainly on the writings of Said Nursi's students and concentrated on formal rather than factual aspects. The document's information about the Nur movement cannot be considered objective, but it does give genuine information on the state's view on religion in general.

While evaluating their arguments, one must keep in mind that the lack of an authoritative church and generally accepted dogma in Islam makes it virtually impossible to pronounce any Islamic sect heretical on theological grounds. It is hard to define what would constitute a minimal definition of Islam that would be acceptable to *all* Muslims, beyond the statement that Muhammed is God's Prophet and the Koran God's word. Nevertheless, the Directorate did make such a pronouncement in order to prevent Muslims from turning Nurcu, something that in turn would destroy

27 The state policy towards the Sufi brotherhoods differed from cooperation (while conquering new areas) to hostility (closing down lodges and arresting the Sufi leaders), but in general, one must say that the sultans respected the Sufis.

the religious and national unity of the Turks.

Said Nursi himself was well aware of the accusations against him and his followers, and in his work *Şualar* he explicitly refutes the 90 most common misunderstandings concerning the content of the *Risale-i Nur*.<sup>28</sup> Following are the Directorate's arguments contrasted to counter-arguments from Said Nursi's work.<sup>29</sup>

- (1) The Nurcu interpretations of the Koran are without any religious or scientific value with respect to the Islamic principles, because they extract meaning by way of the *ebcet* number system (*ebcet hesabı*)<sup>30</sup> and *tevil* (esoteric

28 Said Nursi, *Şualar*, 14th şua: '90 hatalar ve cevapları', 405-27.

29 The DRA arguments given here are a summary based on the criticism against Said Nursi and his followers as presented in Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, *Nurculuk Hakkında*, Ankara 1964, 5-24.

30 The main principle in the *ebcet hesabı* is that each number is represented by an Arabic letter whose place in the alphabetic order corresponds to the value of that number. For example, the number '1' is spelled with the first letter (*elif*) in the Arabic script, and the number '2' with the second, *bâ*. After '10', which is represented by the tenth letter, 'yâ', '11' is spelled with two *elifs*; '20' is spelled with the eleventh, '30' with the twelfth, '40' with the thirteenth letter, 'a hundred' is spelled with the nineteenth letter (*kaf*) in the script, and so on. All other numbers can be spelled following this formula, if one knows the order of letters in the Arabic script. Now the most crucial and striking point is that both in Arabic, Persian and Turkish culture, *ecbet hesabı* (*ecbet* calculation) had been used to register events and their dates. This numerical representation system led gradually to the Muslims beginning to consider words and sentences as having 'numeric values' in addition to their hermeneutic quality. For example: In an interpretation by Molla Câmi (quoted in *Elmalı Tefsiri*, 3956) of Koran 34:15, the expression 'it is a nice town' (*belde-tün tayyibetün*) is interpreted as the message by God that Istanbul would be conquered (by Turks) in 1453. The sum of the numeric values of all the Arabic letters in the above sentence is *bâ* (2) + *lâm* (30) + *dal* (4) + *te* (400) + *tî* (9) + *yâ* (10) + *bâ* (2) + *te* (400) = 857, which is the date (according to Islamic *hicrî* calendar) when Istanbul was taken; Yeni Lügat, *Osmanlıca-Türkçe*, Istanbul 1992, 112.



interpretation). According to the Directorate, only *tefsir* (exoteric interpretation) is in accordance with the science of religion, and is therefore the only true method for Koranic interpretation.<sup>31</sup>

There are examples of the *ebcet hesabı* being used in the *Risale-i Nur*, but it is not the dominant method.<sup>32</sup> Said Nursi, in his work *Şualar*, made it clear that his preferred method was that of *tefsir*;<sup>33</sup> he then continued by giving a definition of the word in such a way that it covers both *tevil* and *tefsir*: According to Said Nursi, there are two kinds of *tefsir*, one is to explain the sentences (*ibareler*) of the Koran, the other to demonstrate and support the universal truth of Koranic beliefs with strong arguments, and it is *tefsir* in this latter meaning which is used in the *Risale-i Nur*. When a *tevil* interpretation is given in the *Risale-i Nur*, it is nothing but *tefsir* in its most valuable sense.

- (2) The Koran is the guide showing the true path to all humanity. Even with all the works done by theologians of Islam, they have not managed to interpret the Koran perfectly. Each and every scholar has contributed to understanding it proportionally to his capacity and speciality, but outside their area of specialization, scholars have shortcomings. Considering this situation, to regard the *Nur* pamphlets as perfect interpretations of the Koran is nothing but ignorance of God's words that contain everything before and after the Day of Judgment.

31 *Tevil* is to extract meaning from the verses by exploring the secrets in them hidden behind the curtain of words. One of the many possible meanings after exploration is attributed to the related verse. *Tefsir* is to extract meaning from a verse by referring to the specific reason for its origin and to the linguistic/semantic qualities of the words in it.

32 For example, Said Nursi, *Şualar*, Eleventh *şua*, 270.

33 Said Nursi, *Şualar*, Fourteenth *şua*, 425-6.

The Nurcus do claim that the *Risale-i Nur* is the perfect Koran interpretation of our time, and the Directorate did not deny its superiority concerning its content. The Directorate insisted that religious knowledge was a scientific matter, the interpretation of which should be restricted to a small elite of religiously educated people; the officials in the Directorate did, and Said Nursi did not, belong to this elite.

- (3) The Nurcus attribute religious sacredness to the *Risale-i Nur* by giving it a status equal to holy religious objects, and they describe Said Nursi as a *mehdi* and his works as miracles.

One can hardly open a *risale* without finding Said Nursi refusing the exaggerated praise bestowed upon him by his followers. He explicitly forbade any miracle attributed to him to be mentioned in his official biography, and his preferred title was that of teacher.

- (4) Nurism is factionalism (*hizipçilik*) that destroys religious and national unity: Although they claim not to be a *tarikât*, they consider themselves as a separate faction/class under the name '*Nur talebeleri*'. It is observed that they have appropriated the ways and traditions of Sufism. Nur pamphlets explain the principles of Islam not from a perfect religious view, but with expressions that are Sufi, experimental, inspirational, and furthermore with mystic (*batinî*) expressions that deviate into the direction of *hurufîlik*.<sup>34</sup> Nurcus thus distinguish and separate themselves from the Muslim community. Is it not to isolate oneself, when one forms factions called '*Nur talebeleri*', refuses to read other works, and recognizes those works (the *Nur* pamphlets) as atonement for sins?

34 *Hurufîlik*; Islamic sect that sees cabalistic meaning in the letters of the Koran.

There are strong traces of Sufism in Said Nursi's writings but Sufism is as old as the faith itself; Islam was both fertilized and spread by the Sufi brotherhoods; thus Sufism is an inseparable component of Islam. With this theological and historical background, it is absurd to blame Said Nursi as a Sufi for factionalism. Moreover the Nurcus claim their school of thought is inclusive, not exclusive.<sup>35</sup>

- (5) The *Risale-i Nur* contains statements encouraging Kurdism, and this is the worst example of their factional attitude. It is wickedness to give such an impression of a people that finds peace in living together, by asserting that [only] three-tenths of the population in Turkey is Turkish. While in the Koran and *hadiths* all believers are invited to unite in order to gain happiness in this and next world, Said Nursî is addressed by his students 'Kürdî' or 'El-Kürdî'. Furthermore, Said Nursî's favourite student, Ahmet Feyzi, has revealed his lack of respect for our Prophet and shown the importance Said Nursi gave to Kurdishness by using *ebcet hesabı* [numerology] to show that the word 'El-Kürdî' is equal to two 'Muhammeds' with *şedde*<sup>36</sup> and the word 'Bediüzzaman' is equal to two 'Muhammeds' without *şedde*.

According to Said Nursi such a conclusion cannot be drawn by way of the *ebcet* method. Ahmet Feyzi therefore committed a scholarly error but not a political crime. As to his own stance on the Kurdish question, he was engaged in improving the conditions of his native province and never ceased to work for the establishment of a university in eastern

35 It is possible for a Muslim to be both a Nakşibendi and a Nurcu at the same time.

36 *Şedde* is a sign in the Arabic script to indicate a double consonant; it is not a letter.



Turkey.<sup>37</sup>

- (6) The Directorate concluded that: the Nurus' beliefs and views have formed a creed that does not comply with the rules and formulas in the Koran and Sunna of Islam. In addition to intolerably extreme abuse and exploitation of religious matters, Nurism represented a mentality which is destructive to the idea of unity in national and social matters. In the Nur pamphlets, even purely religious expressions have been twisted to give meanings that cast shadows on the true faith, destroying our spiritual and national unity by use of extreme *tevil* and arbitrary views. Those who read these pamphlets have looked down upon other Muslims, regarded only Nurus as qualified for Heaven, regarded the Nur pamphlets as atonement for sins, and eventually they have come to the limit of reading *Nur Risale* as an act of worship.

The pamphlet was published because the Directorate 'found it necessary to show the real identity of Islam'. The Directorate tried to prove that Said Nursi's teachings were contrary to true Islam, and by those arguments they wished to establish a theological rejection of Said Nursi and the Nur movement. But their conclusion clearly reveals a purely political motive for doing so. The Turkish Republic did not need an Islamic reform movement; it had established its own religious institutions in order to secure religious conduct as a routine, a mere formality without social or political potency. They wanted Turkish Muslims to draw a line between their religious and their social life. With this background, Said Nursi, with his emphasis on personal commitment and his effort to make the religious truth available to everybody, was regarded as an heretic.

37 It is of course possible that he worked for Kurdish nationalism under cover of Islam but there are no evidence in his actions or writing to support the idea.

*Secularism and Paragraph 163*

The Directorate tried to undermine Said Nursi's authority by giving an interpretation of 'true Islam' incompatible with the *Risale-i Nur*. In addition to this, the state sought to put a stop to Said Nursi's activities by having him convicted for violation of secularism, the state's tenet which was protected by the Penal Code. Already the 'Law concerning Betrayal of the Fatherland' of 1925 (*Hiyanet-i Vataniye Kanunu*), states that an instrumental usage of religion is treason.<sup>38</sup>

In 1934 a new article 163 was added to the Penal Code. This deals explicitly with the principle of secularism versus religious activities. It deemed as illegal the exploitation of religious sentiment for the purpose of organizing a political party. It was also illegal to 'incite people or organize a society that can disturb the security of the state'.<sup>39</sup>

In 1949, at the end of the single party era, this article was taken up in parliament. The article was opposed in general by some members of the Democratic Party, however, the outcome of the discussion was a revised version with a more precise formulation concerning the 'security of the state'. The revised version also differentiates the punishment according to the position of the guilty

38 Article 1: 'It is forbidden to use religion as an instrument in order to organize political societies aimed at changing, destroying or disturbing the state. Those who organize or spread such societies are considered as traitors of the state.' This law was mainly intended as a safeguard against elements who worked for a reestablishment of the caliphate.

39 The Turkish Penal Code of 1934, article 163: 'To use religion, religious sentiments or things known as sacred in religion, in order to incite people or organize a society that can disturb the security of the state is illegal. Religious ideas and sentiments must not be used as a base for establishing a political party. Those who spread or organize such societies are guilty of breaking the law. The punishment for these crimes is imprisonment during from six months til five years.'

person.<sup>40</sup>

The public prosecutors, whose mission was to protect and defend the constitution and the laws, again and again brought charges against Said Nursi on the basis of this article. Indeed, there was no doubt that he violated the spirit of the law, but it was another matter whether he also violated its letter.

The paragraph reads:

A person who establishes, constitutes, organizes, incites or administers a society (assembly) aimed at changing the state's social, economic, political and judicial system on the basis of religion and belief, in opposition to secularism,<sup>41</sup> is to be punished with 8 to 15 years of imprisonment.

– Those who join or invite others to join such societies are given from 5 to 12 years of imprisonment.

– A person who uses religion, religious sentiments or things known to be sacred in propaganda aimed at changing the state's social, economical, political and judicial system on the basis of religion, or with political intent, or in order to win political advantage, in opposition to secularism, is punished with 5 to 10 years of imprisonment.

– A person who uses religion, religious sentiments or things known to be sacred as tools in propaganda aimed at ensuring a personal advantage or in order to increase his own personal influence is

40 'The punishments for the acts mentioned in the sub-sections mentioned above are increased by 1/3 if the accused person is working in an office of the state, municipality or in an organization, syndicate, trade union, school or institution of higher education which partly or solely is financed by the state, or is related to any such bureaucrat or employee. The punishment for the acts mentioned in sub-sections 3 and 4 is increased by 1/3 if the crime is committed by means of publication.'

41 In the Turkish discourse the word laicism (*laiklik*) is used for secularism, i.e., it is not a question of not allowing clergy to be state officials or of opposing religious leaders' involvement in politics, it is a principle meant to separate religious and state affairs. The meaning of the reference is actually 'secularism' and I will therefore use 'secularism' when the Turkish sources use 'laicism' (*laiklik*).



given from 2 to 5 years of imprisonment.<sup>42</sup>

The crucial concept here is secularism. Without a clear definition of this term, one cannot decide what is its opposite. Said Nursi, who was blamed for violating the principle of secularism, could easily defend his actions by referring to the same principle, because there was no commonly agreed definition of 'secularism'. This absence was certainly an advantage when secularism first was introduced into the constitution. Since everyone was free to interpret the word according to his own conviction, there was no cause to oppose it. But it was also this lack of an agreed definition that made it virtually impossible to convict anyone for violating paragraph 163 without breaking the Penal Code's first paragraph, which states that: 'No one can be punished for actions which are not explicitly defined as illegal within the framework of the law'. Secularism is stated in the constitution as one of the fundamental principles of the Turkish Republic, but the concept is not defined in the Constitution or in the Penal Code.

Among the religious groups, secularism was understood as a declaration of neutrality, something that guaranteed equal rights to believers and non-believers of every kind. The authorities, on the other hand, while defining secularism as the freedom of belief and the end to an instrumental usage of religion, also gave the concept an ideological value. In their opinion, the meaning of secularism as a political principle was to make religious belief a private matter, after the European model, so that Turkey could reach the civilizational level of contemporary Europe.<sup>43</sup> Because of Islam's traditional political role in Turkey, it was considered necessary to place religion under state control.

It must be remembered that secularism was part of a revolutionary package. To define it merely as 'freedom of

42 The 1949 version.

43 Özek, *Türkiye'de Gerici Akımlar*, 52.

belief' would not make it significant in this context, as freedom of belief had already been practised in the Ottoman Empire and was laid down in the Ottoman Constitution of 1876. Secularism, on the other hand, was introduced by the Kemalists as a protection against reactionary movements they expected would be formed by members of the old religious establishment. Secularism cannot however be seen as the establishment of a new ideology; it was rather the negation of Ottoman political culture.<sup>44</sup> Nationalism, which was to be the new ideology of Turkey, was incompatible with the ethnically all-embracing character of Ottoman culture.<sup>45</sup>

The differences in opinion on the meaning of secularism became evident during the parliamentary discussions on paragraph 163.<sup>46</sup> According to Osman Nuri Koni, a representative from Istanbul, the paragraph was undemocratic because it only applied to Muslims, not to the members of other religious communities. He claimed that secularism had turned into atheism in this country.

Şemsettin Günaltay, the Prime Minister, replied that everyone was free to choose their religion or not to have a religion. Muslims were a special case in Turkey, he said, because they received money from the Turkish state. He then defined the meaning of secularism as that 'the foundations of the state's basic laws do not refer to other sources than the authority of the Great National Assembly'. This definition can be seen either as an allusion to the Ottoman constitution,<sup>47</sup> or simply as a rhetorical closing of the issue. He then referred to the fact that he had reintroduced

44 A list of the laws constituting the secularist policy of the state is given in Appendix C.

45 Here defined as people sharing the same culture and language for a considerable length of time.

46 The complete report of the parliament discussion is given in Mehmet Cemal, *Yüzaltmışıç*, Istanbul 1974, 27-71.

47 The Ottoman state legitimized its authority by reference to its Islamic source.

religious education in the primary schools and that he himself was a Muslim. At that point Osman Nuri Koni shouted, 'Liar, cheater!'

Many Democratic Party members also opposed paragraph 163, among them Muammer Alakant. He argued that paragraph 163, which was meant to protect the constitution, actually was unconstitutional since the freedom of religion and the right to perform the religious duties, along with the freedom of conscience, speech and so on, had all been consolidated in the constitution of 1924.<sup>48</sup> Freedom of religion was also a statutory provision of the Penal Code.<sup>49</sup>

After the Democratic Party won the 1950 elections, the question of paragraph 163 came on the agenda again in 1953, this time in connection with a 'new' law concerning the Freedom of Conscience and the Right to Assembly (*Vicdan ve Toplanma Hürriyeti*), but it was not abolished before 1989. During the 55 years this law was in force, more than 800 people were prosecuted for violating it, among them Said Nursi.<sup>50</sup>

*The cases against Said Nursi:  
Prosecutions and acquittals*

Said Nursi was charged and sentenced several times during his lifetime and once after his death.<sup>51</sup> Being one of the

48 The Turkish constitution of 1924, article 70, states that: 'All Turks are granted the right to and freedom of conscience, thought, speech, publication, movement, marriage, partnership, property, assembly and personal security'. Article 75 states that: 'No one must be censured or criticised because of his religious or philosophical convictions, and that all kinds of religious ceremonies can freely be performed as long as it does not disturb the social order or contravenes the authority of the law'.

49 Articles 175-178 of the Penal code deals with this issue, they are all included in Appendix A.

50 For a list of names, dates and places see Cemal, *Yüzaltmışüç*, 309-31.

51 It is actually forbidden, according to Turkish Law, to convict a deceased person.



founders of the Society for Muslim Unity (İttihad-ı Muhammedi), he was accused of participation in the incident of 31 March 1909 (13 April in the Gregorian calendar), a revolt aimed at overthrowing the Young Turk regime. But the military court acquitted him.

In 1925 he was accused of participation in the Kurdish Revolt. He was acquitted by the Court of Istanbul, but nevertheless exiled to Isparta in western Anatolia and then to Barla, an isolated mountain village. In 1932 he was arrested for having given the call to prayer (*ezan*) in Arabic, but released without trial. The authorities felt provoked and threatened by the great number of followers he attracted and in 1934 he was arrested together with 120 of his students, and transferred to Eskişehir under military escort for trial. The main accusation against him was violation of paragraph 163, but he was also charged with forming a Sufi brotherhood, and accused of breaking the laws concerning 'civilized' dressing.

Said Nursi acted as his own counsel in court. His defence can be summarized in five points:<sup>52</sup>

- (1) On the instrumental usage of religion, his answer was: 'As the Sun is not a tool for the moons even though their existence depend upon the Sun, religion cannot be a tool for political action'. He supported his argument by pointing to his refusal of the offer Mustafa Kemal made to him in 1923 to work with the new regime. He said that from that date he had withdrawn from politics.
- (2) On the charge of organizing a secret society aimed at overthrowing the regime, and how and by whom this organization was financed, Said Nursi pointed out that there were no documents that implied the existence of such an organization. In Isparta ninety-nine percent of the population became his spiritual brothers, 'whereas a

52 The defence speech is given in Bekir Berk, *Türkiye'de Nurculuk Davası*, Istanbul 1975, 365-72.

society or organization is the alliance of a minority within the majority'.

- (3) On the question of secularism, he argued that by interfering with his and his students' affairs, the state was itself in fact breaking with the principle of secularism. 'Secularism is intelligible and sensible, it means neutrality. The principle of freedom of conscience, which is applied to non-believer, must apply also to the pious.'
- (4) On the matter of organizing a Sufi brotherhood, Said Nursi replied that many have gone to Heaven without affiliation to a brotherhood, but none without faith. Sufism is the fruit of Islam, but what the people need now is bread. Said Nursi pointed out that he replaced the old Sufi rituals with those of reading and writing copies of the *Risale-i Nur*, and he refused to be an intermediary between the individual Muslim and God.<sup>53</sup> These are all facts that disprove the accusation.
- (5) On the question of Islamic dressing, Said Nursi admitted to having written some short treatises in which he expounded Koranic verses on the Islamic dress, but these pieces were written before the establishment of the Turkish Republic and he had suppressed them when the new laws were passed.

It is very important to notice here that Said Nursi did not give a normative speech of defence calling upon divine authority. He defended what he considered to be his rights in a democratic society; he refused the legitimacy of the prosecutor's interpretation of secularism and called upon the state's obligation to protect the individual's freedom of conscience.

The Court cleared him of the charges relating to paragraph 163 and of organizing a Sufi brotherhood, but sentenced him to eleven months of imprisonment for

53 Nor did he appoint a spiritual leader to take over the leadership of the movement after his own death. See Chapter Three.

breaking the laws concerning 'civilized' dressing. After having served the sentence he was exiled to Kastamonu, at the Black Sea coast.

These punishments did not have any reformative effects on him personally, nor a preventive one for the public. On the contrary, he continued his activities and his message spread geographically and socially. Alarmed by these developments, the authorities again arrested him in 1943 and charged him and 126 followers with violating paragraph 163.

The trial took place in Denizli. This time a committee of experts was called in to evaluate his writings; the committee consisted of Yusuf Ziya Yörükhan, professor of religious instruction and member of the Directorate's Counsel Committee; Necati Lügal, professor at the Institute for Oriental Studies at Ankara University and Yusuf Aykut, a board member of the Turkish History Association (Department of the Islamic book collection).

In their report which included many quotations from the *Risale-i Nur*, they unanimously concluded that the object of the *Risale* was to give an interpretation of the Koranic verses and the *hadiths*. 'It is sincere and respectful and does not deviate from either the way of science or the foundations of religion ... it is clear that no proof of instrumental usage of religion, incitement to forming a secret society or violating the security of the state, can be found in these writings ...' 54

In accordance with this report, Nursi was acquitted by the Denizli Court on 15 June 1944. The decision was appealed by the public prosecutor, but the Supreme Court rejected the appeal, concluding that the acquittal made by the Denizli Court was correct both in procedure and content. Despite the acquittal he was exiled to Emirdağ where he had to live under strict surveillance.

Then in 1948 he was arrested again, on the same

54 The report is given in Berk, *Türkiye'de Nurculuk Davası*, 1-2.



charges as before.<sup>55</sup> The hearing of the case began four months later, and lasted for six and a half months; he was found guilty by the court and stayed in prison for another ten months. Said Nursi was then seventy-five years old. The sentences given by the Afyon Court were annulled by the Supreme Court on 4 June 1949, but the Court of Afyon did not officially declare his innocence until eight years later.

The Turkish constitution of 1928 and the Penal Code protecting it were close to being a political manifest. But as a result of the internal disagreements between the parliament and the government, especially in the matter of secularism, these documents were written in rather general formulations, and thus it became difficult to execute them according to the intention of the Kemalist lawmakers. Said Nursi was accused of violating the laws concerning secularism but because of the lack of an agreed definition of the concept secularism, he was able to defend himself successfully, and deny that he had violated any law. As long as the spirit and not the letter of the law had been abused, the court did not find it possible to proclaim him guilty.

There were obvious similarities between the cases; following almost every trial he was exiled, although there is nothing in the sources to indicate that exile and surveillance were part of the official conviction. Nor is exile mentioned in the law as a possible punishment for violating the Penal Code's paragraph 163, but paragraph 1 in the same law clearly states that, 'No other punishments than those mentioned by the relevant law can be given'. The only possible explanation is that he was exiled on direct orders from Ankara, that is the state went outside its own laws in order to create a criminal.

Given the nature of the cases against Said Nursi as described above, it may be suggested that Said Nursi's

55 After the Denizli acquittal more than 700 cases were opened against the Nurettin on the same charges, for a complete list see Berk, *Türkiye'de Nurettin Davası*, 833-51.

opposition against the regime was a case of civil disobedience. Civil disobedience is often defined as an individual's conscious violation of the law, for a good more general than the law. Thus there is an ethical aspect required for the concept.<sup>56</sup>

Said Nursi's aim was to renew Islam, which he saw as a remedy for the loss of harmony and peace both at the individual and societal level, a typically moral revolt.

But in cases of civil disobedience there is supposed to be a basic agreement between the rulers and the ruled; the illegal action is not aimed at overthrowing the establishment of the state as such but to influence the authorities in one particular case. The legitimacy of the authorities' right to rule is not questioned. Mustafa Kemal had promised an Islamic revival as the reward of a victory in the war against the Greek army. Thus many were disappointed to experience the repressive secular policy the Kemalists put into effect as soon as the war was over. Therefore, Said Nursi did not consider the Kemalist government legitimate, in his opinion the state could expect neither loyalty nor obedience from its subjects since it did not base its authority on identifying with the population but on the idea of a Turkish nation state.

56 Once when the American anarchist Henry David Thoreau was in prison for a civil disobedience action, a friend of him came to visit and asked: 'Why are you here, David?'; upon which Thoreau answered: 'Why are you *not* here?'; Henry David Thoreau, preface to *Walden and On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, New York 1965.

## NATIONALISM

Happy is the one who calls himself a Turk!

Mustafa Kemal

*The Nakşibendi Brotherhood versus Said Nursi  
and the Nur movement*

Both the Nakşibendi brotherhood and the Nur movement are Islamic movements who aim to replace Turkey's secularist orientation with an Islamic one. If secularization had been the only real motivation behind the state's policy towards religious movements, there would have been no reason why the Nakşibendis should be less persecuted than the Nurus.<sup>1</sup>

- 1 I have mentioned how Said Nursi refused the authority of his Nakşibendi teachers and differed from the Nakşibendi's epistemological view by adopting the School of Illumination (Chapter Two). He also explicitly rejected the idea of establishing a Sufi brotherhood in general (see Chapters Three and Four). In addition to that, Hamid Algar, who is himself a Nakşibendi and has written several articles on Nakşibendi history, does not consider Said Nursi as a Nakşibendi. Hamid Algar has said that 'for the Nurus the moon shines brighter than the sun' referring to Nurus' description of the *Risale-i Nur* as the Moon of the Koranic sun; Hamid Algar, 'Said Nursi and the *Risale-i Nur*: an aspect of Islam in Contemporary Turkey' in Khurshid Ahmad and Zafar Ishaq Ansari (eds.), *Islamic perspectives: studies in honour of Mawlana Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi*, Leicester 1979. All this seems to question Şerif Mardin's categorization of Said Nursi as a Nakşibendi figure in 'The Nakşibendi Order in Turkish History' in Tapper, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 132, as well as Trimmingham's presentation of the Nur movement; 'A recent Naqshabandi group in eastern Turkey is that of



But while the Nakşibendis have most of the time been a part of the state establishment<sup>2</sup> and also had pan-Turkist aspirations, the Nur movement was a clearly anti-establishment organization that rejected the idea of Turkish nationalism.

The difference in outlook between Said Nursi and the Nakşibendi brotherhood was obvious already in the Ottoman era. While Said Nursi opted for constitutionalism and co-operated with the Young Turks (*jön türkler*), the Nakşibendis supported and were supported by Sultan Abdülhamid II, he used Nakşibendi *şeyhs* to undertake diplomatic missions and representations abroad, and in return gave economic support to the Nakşibendi lodges.<sup>3</sup>

During the last decades of the Ottoman Empire, Ottomanism, Islamism and Turkism were proposed as ideologies to prevent the empire from complete destruction. Turkism was promoted and stimulated by Turks who had immigrated to Turkey from Russia because of Russia's harsh assimilation policy towards minority groups. These immigrants achieved security and a new status in their new country. Having been treated as a distinct ethnic group in Russia, these Turks were more conscious of their Turkishness than the Turks living in the Turkish Fatherland (Anatolia), and this group, which included many Nakşibendis, acted as 'midwives' for Turkish nationalism.<sup>4</sup>

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the "Followers of Light", the Nurus or Nurculars, founded by a Kurd, Sa'îd Nûrsî'; J.S. Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders of Islam*, Oxford 1971, 254 n. 2.

2 According to Hamid Algar, the Nakşibendi watchword of 'solitude within society' (*khalwat dar anjuman*) is relevant for understanding their long political record, the word is interpreted to mean: 'being inwardly alone with God and concentrated on His reality while outwardly immersed in the transactions and relationships that sustain Muslim society'; Hamid Algar, 'Political Aspects', 152.

3 Grace Martin Smith, 'The Özbek Tekkes of İstanbul', *Der Islam*, lviii, 1, 1980, 131, 138.

4 Mustafa Kara, *Din, Hayat, Sanat Açısından Tekkeler ve Zaviyeler*, İstanbul 1980, 75 and David Kushner, *The Rise of Turkish Nationalism 1876-1908*, London 1977, 9-14, 46-9.

Thus, unlike Said Nursi, some Nakşibendi *şeyhs* became the promoters of Turkism. A Nakşibendi *tekke* in Istanbul, the Özbek *tekke* in Üsküdar, was among the first to underline the uniqueness and importance of the Turkish language. The *şeyh* of this *tekke*, Buharalı Süleyman Efendi, published a book entitled *Lugat-i Çağatay ve Türki-yi Osmani* (The Chagatay Language and Ottoman Turkish) in 1882. The book introduced Ottoman readers to Chagatay, the literary language of Eastern Turks. It included poems and proverbs in addition to a dictionary. Mehmed Sadık also published a Chagatay-Ottoman dictionary in 1897.<sup>5</sup> The Ottoman language, a mixture of Arabic, Persian and vernacular Turkish, written with Arabic letters as the official script language of the empire was now being challenged by vernacular Turkish. Language became the most important instrument in promoting Turkish nationalism.<sup>6</sup>

The Nakşibendi brotherhood had (and has) a network of *tekkes* all over Central Asia and during the last decades of the Ottoman Empire it became inspired by Pan-Turkist aspirations. Among the religious movements in Turkey, it was the Nakşibendis who opened up for a nationalization and Turkification of Islam. During the War of Liberation *şeyh* Ata Efendi of the Üsküdar lodge assisted the revolutionaries, İsmet İnönü, Celalettin Arif, and Adnan Edip were all said to have taken refuge in the lodge for some days. Ata later on went to Turkistan on a mission from Mustafa Kemal himself.<sup>7</sup>

The Nakşibendi brotherhood continued to exist and grow even after all religious brotherhoods were officially closed down in 1925. And their relationship with the secular Republic was not always one of co-operation. Members of

5 The same *tekke* fostered a *Turan* (Pan-Turkist) association as late as in 1946; Smith, 'The Özbek Tekkes', 139.

6 For information on the general relationship between language and nationalism, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London 1983, 67-82.

7 Smith, 'The Özbek Tekkes', 137.

this brotherhood have been involved in several criminal acts aimed at overthrowing the secular order of the state.<sup>8</sup> The most famous one is the *şeyh* Said rebellion in eastern Turkey in 1925. The leader of the revolt, *şeyh* Said, was a member of the Nakşibendi brotherhood, but also a Kurd. Turkish scholars do not agree upon the primary orientation of the 1925 revolt: Was it an expression of Kurdish nationalism, religious opposition to the state, or was it a planned provocation aimed at legitimizing certain measures against religion?<sup>9</sup> Martin van Bruinessen concludes that 'Die Planer der Rebellion scheinen in erster Linie nationalistisch und möglicherweise auch durch persönliche Ambitionen motiviert gewesen zu sein'.<sup>10</sup> Mustafa Kemal made the parliament vote on the Law for the Maintenance of Order (*Takrir-i Sükun Kanunu*) which gave the government absolute power and prohibited all kinds of actions aimed at disturbing the inner security of the country. The same day The Courts of Independence (*istiklal mahkemeleri*), which functioned during the War of Liberation, were re-established. The Turkish state was quite clear in its judgement; this was a Kurdish separatist revolt under the cover of religion. *Şeyh* Said was arrested and although he claimed in his defence to have acted on behalf of religion against the secularism of the Turkish state, he was executed for leading a Kurdish separatist rebellion.

- 8 According to Hamid Algar, only the *şeyh* Said revolt in 1925 was a Nakşibendi-led revolt. As for the Menemen incident he thinks that it was staged or at least exploited by İsmet İnönü (the prime minister) as a pretext to attain various political purposes; to think otherwise is to accept uncritically the quasi-official historiography of the Turkish Republic. See Hamid Algar, 'A Brief History of the Naqshbandî Order' and 'Political Aspects of Naqshbandî History' in Gaborieau *et al.*, *Naqshbandis*, 34-5, 142.
- 9 Özek, *Türkiye'de Gerici Akımlar*, 174-5 and Rafet Ballı, *Kürt Dosyası*, İstanbul 1991, 60
- 10 Martin van Bruinessen, 'Vom Osmanismus zum Separatismus: Religiöse und ethnische Hintergründe Rebellion des Scheich Said' in Blaschke and van Bruinessen, *Islam und Politik in der Türkei*, 162.



The state's resolute reaction to the Kurdish revolt did not put a stop to revolts led by Nakşibendis. In 1930 occurred in the town of Menemen what became known as the Kubilay incident, when the Nakşibendi *şeyh* Esat incited a riot and murdered a young nationalist school teacher and warrant officer, Jr. Lieutenant Kubilay. The government sent a military force to restore order, taking Sufi brothers into custody all over the country. Here too death penalties followed.<sup>11</sup> Then in Siirt in 1935, *şeyh* Halit revolted and one year later another Nakşibendi *şeyh*, Ahmet Kalaycı, incited an anti-secularist uprising in İskilip. There were similar riots incited by Nakşibendi *şeyhs* also in Bursa in 1933 and 1957.<sup>12</sup> These actions did of course lead to arrests, imprisonment and severe punishments, but in contrast to the Nur movement the Nakşibendi brotherhood was never victim of persecutions on a purely ideological basis. Some Nakşibendis were in favour of Kurdish nationalism and some were against the secular policy of the state, but no Nakşibendis were against nationalism as such.

It is a well known fact in Turkey that Nakşibendi members continued to hold positions in the state bureaucracy also after the establishment of the Republic, the first National Assembly contained a number of Nakşibendi *şeyhs*; such as *şeyh* Hasan Fevzi Efendi (d. 1924), *şeyh* Şemsettin Efendi (d. 1962), *şeyh* Servet Efendi (d. 1962). And Turkey's first ambassador to the United States, M. Münir Erteğün, was also a Nakşibendi.

The Nakşibendi participation in the state establishment has continued until the present, including the former president of Turkey, Turgut Özal, who was part of the circle

- 11 According to Mehmet Hayrettin, who is the oldest son of the last *şeyh* of the Buhara (Nakşibendi) lodge, Abdurrahman (d.1953), İsmet İnönü came to the lodge at the time of the Menemen incident and stayed there in order to protect the people there; Smith, 'The Özbek Tekkes', 138.
- 12 Özek, *Türkiye'de Gerici Akımlar*, 185 and Mehmet Özey, *Islamic identity and development*, London and New York 1990, 119.

around Mehmed Zahid Kotku Efendi and his successor (*khalīfa/halife*) Dr. Esat Coşan.<sup>13</sup> The Nakşibendis are virtually everywhere, one can probably find them as members in all political parties. Ersin Gürdoğan openly tells how he in 1968 got a job in the Devlet Planlama Teşkilatı (the State's Central Planning Office) by way of his Nakşibendi affiliation.<sup>14</sup>

Nakşibendis were not prosecuted because of their membership in the Nakşibendi brotherhood; they were punished because of crimes they had committed. The Nurcus on the other hand were arrested simply for being Nurcus. In the court documents *nurculuk* (being a Nurcu) is listed as the charge on which they are prosecuted.<sup>15</sup> *Nurculuk* was interpreted as being contrary to the state's secular principles, violating paragraph 163 of the Penal Code. Between 1944 and 1971 more than 700 Nurcu students were arrested. They were generally held for months, sometimes years, in prison waiting for their case to be tried, but all were eventually acquitted.

13 Mehmet Zahid Kotku Efendi was born in Bursa, but his parents had emigrated from Russia in 1897. After the First World War he moved to Istanbul, where he became a student of Ömer Ziyaeddin Efendi. He then returned to a village near Bursa, İzvat, where he took over his father's position as a mosque teacher (*camii hocası*). In the period 1945-1952 he held the same position in the Üftade mosque in Bursa, appointed by the Directorate of Religious Affairs. In 1952 he was called to succeed Abdülaziz Bekkine, who had taken over the secret leadership of the Nakşibendi in Istanbul. Kotku's new position was that of *imam* of the Ümmüğülsüm mosque. In 1959 we find him as a teacher and adviser (*yol gösterici*) in the İskenderpaşa mosque in Istanbul. In 1972 he emerged as one of the initiators of the National Salvation Party. Esat Coşan, a Professor at the Faculty of Theology in Ankara, was Kotku's son-in-law, and is also the editor of the popular periodical *İlim ve Sanat* (Science and Art); Hamid Algar, 'Political Aspects of Naqshbandi History', 142-3, and Şerif Mardin, 'Naksibendi Order in Turkish History', 133.

14 Ersin Gürdoğan, *Görünmeyen üniversite*, 29-34.

15 Berk, *Türkiye'de Nurculuk Davası*, 770-824.

As told by Sahiner, the story of Mehmet Oğuz<sup>16</sup> shows to what extremes the state's general attitude towards the Nurus could lead. Mehmet Oğuz was a Nurus who owned a small shop in Nazilli. In April 1958 he was arrested on the charge of reading and selling Said Nursi's books. *Hürriyet*, a newspaper loyal to Kemalism, speaks of Oğuz as 'an enemy of the revolution'.<sup>17</sup> Upon his arrest, three other Nurus, Ahmet Feyzi Kul, Mehmet Yavuz and Yusuf Özdin, sent a letter to Prime Minister Adnan Menderes (from the Democratic Party). In the letter they explained the arrest as a result of the Republican Party's 'take-over' in Nazilli. They referred to an article in the newspaper *Madram*, in which some Republican Party members proclaim war against 'reactionaries', promising to make them red (with blood) like the communists.

Mehmet Oğuz was acquitted two and a half years later, and the confiscated literature was to be returned to him. He went to the deposit office in Aydın, got his belongings and started his way home to Nazilli. But on the way he was stopped by the Nazilli chief of police, Commissioner M. Şükrü Gündoğmuş, who wanted to send him back to the prison. Oğuz protested by referring to his acquittal, but was taken back to prison by force. In the prison he was hit violently by the commissioner, his screams could be heard on the street. After a while Mehmet Oğuz begged to be taken to a hospital, but the torture continued until he finally fell into a coma. At this stage a doctor was called for, but there was nothing he could do to save Mehmet's life. Commissioner Gündoğmuş was arrested but released two months later.

The discrimination of the Nurus compared with the Nakşibendis can only be understood in light of the difference between their ideologies, because it was this difference that determined their position with respect to the establishment,

16 Sahiner, *Son Şahitler*, IV, 307-17.

17 *Hürriyet*, 4 April 1958.



to Kemalism and Said Nursi's rejection of Mustafa Kemal. By briefly comparing the state's relationship to Nakşibendis and Nurcus, the main dimension of the State-Nurcu conflict can be detected; and this dimension is very clearly not the religious content of the Nur movement. The Nurcus and Nakşibendis differed in one major aspect in their relation to the state establishment: in their views on and attitudes towards Turkish nationalism, the basis for the state's legitimacy. While the Nakşibendis contributed to the rise of Turkish nationalism, Said Nursi refused the idea outright. In his opinion Islam was both incompatible with and superior to nationalism.

With the core of the conflict thus identified, one may analyze its content. In order to do so it is necessary to look both at the historical context and the theoretical content of Turkish nationalism, and Said Nursi's rejection of it.

### *Historical context*

During the First World War, in which Turkey fought on the side of the Central Powers (Austria-Hungary, Germany and Bulgaria), four secret agreements<sup>18</sup> were made between the Entente powers, Britain, France and Russia, on how to divide the Ottoman Empire in case of victory. These agreements, made to harmonize their aims and secure the unity of the Entente, would, if put into action, deprive the empire not only of its Arab territories but also of most of Anatolia, including the loss of Istanbul.

Of the four, the Constantinople agreement must be considered the most dangerous one from a Turkish point of view, as this agreement 'seemed to indicate for Russia a possibility of realizing her traditional ambitions in

18 The Constantinople agreement, 18 March 1915, the Secret Treaty of London, 26 April 1915, the Sykes-Picot agreement, 16 May 1916 and the St. Jean de Maurienne agreement, 17 April 1917; Temperley, *History of the Peace Conference of Paris*, VI, 1-22.

Constantinople and the straits'.<sup>19</sup> Not only did Russia desire Anatolian territory but it would also, if victorious, be able to enforce the agreement, because of Russia's geographic and strategic position.<sup>20</sup> As a result of the 1917 revolution, Russia withdrew from the war and nullified all agreements made by the Czarist government, but Italy and later Greece took over the Russian claims on Turkey.

Mustafa Kemal's victorious fight against the British navy and army at Çanakkale prepared the grounds for his rise as a national hero in Turkish opinion. However, on 30 October 1918 Turkey signed the Armistice, meaning the complete surrender of all Turkish forces and an allied occupation of all necessary strategic points. France and Britain supported the Greek claims on Izmir, in spite of this area having been assigned to Italy in the St. Jean de Maurienne agreement.<sup>21</sup> On 15 May 1919 their decision was put into effect; Greek forces with the support of British and French warships commenced the occupation of Izmir and its hinterlands, an occupation that led to massacres of the Turkish population.

The Greek occupation of Anatolian territory was legitimized by the fact that the region had belonged to the Hellenic culture in antiquity and by the existence of a Greek minority population in the area. Actually the 'freeing of the populations subject to the bloody tyranny of the Turks' had been an Allied war aim. This aim was in sharp contrast to Part 4, article 149 in the treaty of Sèvres of 1920 concerning protection of minorities, in which the Allies ask for the continuation of the Ottoman *millet* system.<sup>22</sup>

19 *Ibid.*, 4.

20 *Ibid.*, 42.

21 This Agreement had never obtained the consent of Russia which was necessary for making the Agreement valid; Temperley, *Peace Conference*, 22.

22 In the Ottoman Empire the rights and duties of the inhabitants were defined first of all with respect to the religious community they belonged to, i.e., the major division was that between Muslims and

The Turkish Government should confirm and uphold in their entirety the prerogatives and immunities of an ecclesiastical, scholastic, or judicial nature granted by the Sultans to non-Muslim races in virtue of special orders or imperial decrees, as well as by ministerial orders or orders of the Grand Vizier.<sup>23</sup>

The treaty of Sèvres further confirmed the Greeks' right to the occupied areas and in addition gave them Western Thrace. Armenia was to be an independent state and Kurdistan was to have an autonomous government which in due time, upon a Kurdish request, could be granted the right of independence. As to Turkey's finances, they were to be completely under the control of a Financial Commission representing the British, French and Italian governments.<sup>24</sup>

The Treaty of Sèvres was never signed by Turkey; on the contrary the Turks responded with a full war against the Greeks, called the War of Liberation. A new government was formed in Ankara under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal and the National Pact of Angora (Ankara) was adopted in 1920-21. Parts of this pact were published in *Resmi Gazete* (The Official Gazette); it states that the future of the Arab provinces of the empire must be decided by the votes of their inhabitants and opposes any restrictions inimical to their political and financial development. The minorities will enjoy the rights as defined in the Treaties concluded between the Entente Powers and their enemies, relying on the belief that the Muslim minorities in neighbouring countries would benefit from the same rights.<sup>25</sup>

The Turkish authorities thereby repudiated the *millet*

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non-Muslims. The non-Muslims were further divided according to religion and later ethnicity. This system is known as the *millet* system.

23 Temperley, *Peace Conference*, 102.

24 The pre-war Ottoman Empire was also in the hands of foreign creditors, but these creditors were private individuals, while the Treaty of Sèvres replaced private with public finance control.

25 Temperley, *op. cit.*



system in the same document as they abandoned their role of being an imperial people ruling over alien majorities. It was the National Pact of Angora (Ankara) that laid the groundwork for the final peace treaty; the treaty of Lausanne, 24 July 1923.

*One war; two interpretations*

The First World War may be considered as the culmination of nationalism in Europe; it was in many ways a struggle for national survival. Countries sharing the same religion were fighting each other with the help of their former enemy number one; the Muslims, causing a brief improvement in the relationship between Christians and Muslims.

But the War of Liberation between Turkey and Greece, even though conceived as a pure nationalist conflict by Mustafa Kemal, was interpreted by the majority of the Turkish population as a war between Christians and Muslims. Islam was the major unifying principle of the Turkish soldiers and people.<sup>26</sup> Holy War was proclaimed by many religious leaders, and the leader of the independence movement, Mustafa Kemal, fully realized the strength of loyalty to religion as a resource. He therefore did nothing to show his true aim with the war, restricting the liberation from the West to mean military and economic independence. In a cable to the people of Turkey in 1921, Mustafa Kemal urged the people to fight for the caliphate, the sultan and the nation.<sup>27</sup>

Mustafa Kemal was fighting for the ideology of Turkish nationalism by recruiting his manpower from another ideology, Islam. The 'turbaned warriors' saw the War of Liberation as a step towards restoring the lost glory of the Ottoman Empire and free Turkey from Western influence in the realm of values and mentality.

26 Mısıroğlu, *Kurtuluş Savaşında Sarıklı Mücahitler*, 22.

27 The text of this cable is included in Appendix D.

When the war was over, the victory was thus credited to opposing ideas, and the unity between nationalists and Islamists could not be maintained given the gap between the ruling elite and the population on the conception of what the foundations of the new state should be. They had united under the slogan of 'people's sovereignty' as the only valid legitimation for the state. Populism was emphasized as a basic foundation of the new political system and it became one of the six principles of Kemalism, the founding ideology.

But the principle of populism was soon to be overshadowed by that of nationalism. Nationalism became the regime's political justification. And as Turkish nationalism under the guidance of Mustafa Kemal was a purely secular ideology, many people found it hard to accept as their new identity. In the first 25 years of the nation-building phase (1920-45), little room was found for democracy. The Turkish people continued to be a non-dominant majority. How then was Turkish nationalism defined?

### *Turkish nationalism*

The basis of Turkish nationalism is quite different from European nationalism, because it rests on the feasibility of drawing a complete distinction between civilization and culture. For six centuries Turkish culture had been a forgotten part of the Islamic civilization. Mustafa Kemal wanted to retain and develop Turkish culture, and at the same time integrate Turkey into Western civilization. Contrary to the West European nation-building process, which lasted for centuries and went hand in hand with the development of a civilization based on a blend of capitalism and democracy (or maybe more correctly, a blend of coercion and capital),<sup>28</sup>

28 These terms are used as in Charles Tilly's theory on European state and nation-building in *Coercion, Capital, and European States*, Cambridge 1990.

the Turkish nation-state was the direct result of a revolution.

The Ottoman Empire was multi-ethnic and multi-religious, and the separate identity of these different population groups was protected by the empire's Turkish administrators through the *millet* system. European nationalism spread to the empire's European provinces and eventually led to their independence. During the First World War, the minority groups in Anatolia were encouraged by the Europeans to rebel against their rulers and thereby dissolve the empire from within.<sup>29</sup>

The Turks were the last to define themselves as a distinct nationality group in the Ottoman Empire. Actually the term 'Turk' was more of an insult than a compliment for the Ottoman Turks: 'in the Imperial society of the Ottomans the ethnic term Turk was little used, and then chiefly in a rather derogatory sense, to designate the Turcoman nomads or, later, the ignorant and uncouth Turkish-speaking peasants of the Anatolian villages'.<sup>30</sup> The first example of the designation 'Turk' being used in a positive sense can be found in a poem written by Mehmed Emin (Yurdakul) in 1897: 'I am a Turk, my faith, my race are sublime ...' (*Ben bir Türküm, dinim, cinsim uludur...*). Before Mustafa Kemal, no one worked politically for the implementation of Turkish nationalism as the ideology of the state.

After the fall of the empire a debate arose on the cause of its fall. Both sides in the debate sought a single explanation. The nationalists maintained that it was due to the strong position of Islam in the empire. Because of its Islamic character, the Christian minorities did not identify themselves with the state. These Christian minorities constituted the bourgeoisie of the empire and as they also were protected by the European countries, they had no special reason for being loyal to their Ottoman rulers.

29 The same policy was applied in the Empire's African provinces, e.g., Arabic nationalism.

30 Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, London 1968, 1.



Those in favour of an Islamic state, on the other hand, argued that the fall was caused by nationalism, imposed by the West. In their view, the cosmopolitan character of Islam made it far superior to nationalism. While nationality was something given by birth, Islam was a religion to which every individual could convert, thus the religious community was inclusive to an extent that nationalism could never be.

Mustafa Kemal's nationalist policy was to a great extent based on the writings of Ziya Gökalp (1876-1924), an Ottoman intellectual and Durkheimian sociologist who is considered in Turkey as the 'father of Turkish nationalism'. Gökalp was a member of the committee which prepared the Constitution of 1924, and the clauses related to freedom of conscience and thought and to secularism are said to be his contributions.

According to Gökalp, nations are not artificial creations, they all have an ethnic basis to which they must return in order to become conscious of their nationality. The nation consists of definable elements but cannot be reduced to them. Nations arise after the dismemberment of universal states (empires) and universal religions.

During the time of subjugation the original ethnic units change; they lose their own aristocracy and thereby become more homogenous and democratic communities. A nation is a combination of racial, ethnic and religious elements, unified by a common culture. Culture is not a biological structure but is something acquired through education. Shared education and ideals are essential to nationality.

Gökalp ends his discussion by defining a nation as: 'a group of men and women who have gone through the same education and acquired the same religious, moral and aesthetic sentiments ... everyone who calls himself a Turk is a Turk'.<sup>31</sup> Culture and not race or ethnicity became the fundamental component in the definition of Turkish nation-

31 Ziya Gökalp, *Turkish Nationalism and Western Civilization*, London 1959, 137-8.

ality, and as a consequence of this, the borders of Turkey are not the borders of Turkish nationality. This may lead to the conclusion that the rejection of pan-Turkism was merely political, not ideological. And it is a fact that the dream of the big 'Turan'<sup>32</sup> is still dreamt by some Turks today; for example the *bozkurtlar* (Grey Wolves).

According to Gökalp, it was of vital importance that education was given in the Turkish language, and that Turkish be made as pure as possible. Mustafa Kemal strongly supported Gökalp in this matter, and immediately after the establishment of the Republic he set down a committee with the mandate of purifying the Turkish language. Its measures, replacing Arabic and Persian words with Turkish equivalents and the Arabic script with the Latin alphabet, passed into law on 1 November 1928. The school system, which had been divided in secular and religious institutions, was now standardized. New history books that emphasized pre-Islamic Turkish history, including the Hittite period and Cengiz Khan, were written. Atatürk used historians as a means to enforce his nationalist policy.<sup>33</sup>

But Mustafa Kemal differed from Gökalp on one very important issue, that of religion. While Gökalp included Islam as a component of Turkish culture and was in favour of Islamic reform and Turkification, Mustafa Kemal wanted to make religion a private matter, disconnected from the Turkish collective identity. In this respect they represented two alternative models for modernizing the country; one with, the other without religion.<sup>34</sup>

Islamic identity was to be replaced by Turkish nationality through secularism at the temporary cost of horizontal

32 'The fatherland of the Turks is neither Turkey nor Turkestan; their fatherland is the vast and eternal Turan'; Ziya Gökalp, *Kızıl Elma*, Istanbul 1941 (first published in 1911 in the Salonica newspaper *Rumeli*).

33 The historiography of the early Turkish Republic is treated in more detail in Chapter One.

34 Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society*, Cambridge 1981, 58.

democracy. In the Republican People's Party program of May 1931, it was stated that 'any citizen within the borders of the Turkish Republic, who speaks Turkish, is brought up with the Turkish culture and accepts the Turkish ideal, is a Turk regardless of religion or sect'.<sup>35</sup>

Thus Mustafa Kemal was not in favour of extreme nationalism<sup>36</sup> nor was he especially undemocratic. He was, first of all, a war hero of a lost war who accepted the borders of post-war Turkey, was realistic enough not to pursue the pan-Turkist ideas of Gökalt and to keep a peaceful relationship with the new USSR. He sought to implant a patriotic feeling in the population in order to restore the country and make it a nation-state; for him the nation was 'a source of ultimate values and goods for the society'.<sup>37</sup> The ultimate goal, but not the method, was a democratic state equal to those in Western Europe in economic and technological standards. He saw a strong Islamic identity as an obstacle to this and therefore took steps to minimise its importance.

### *Said Nursi's view on nationalism*

Until today, and by many also today, the nation-state has been seen as the most modern (and the best) way to organize a community. The question of Islam's compatibility with the modern world has very much boiled down to whether or not Islam is compatible with the idea of the nation state and nationalism. At the dawn of Turkish nationalism, Islam was found not only incompatible with, but also the major obstacle for, the building of the Turkish nation-state.

Said Nursi rejected the subordination of religion to

35 Geyikdağı, *Political Parties in Turkey*, 58.

36 Jacob M. Landau (ed.), *Atatürk and the Modernization of Turkey*, Boulder, CO 1984.

37 Heper and Landau, *Political Parties and Democracy in Turkey*, editors' introduction, 1.



nationalism, being of the view that Islam was not an opinion but a fundamental part of the people's consciousness. He rejected the unifying quality of nationalism, saying that, 'we are Muslims; for us religion and nationality are united in the person, religion is the life and spirit of nationality. If you look at the concepts of nationalism and religion separately you see that while the public spirit of religion includes that of nationalist patriotism, nationalism is limited to those who have sacrificed personal benefits for the nation'.<sup>38</sup>

In his opinion religion was superior to nationalism both because of its inclusive character and because the ethical level of nationalism is low in comparison to the respect for human rights contained in Islam. Theoretically, Said Nursi's view on nationalism was based on his interpretation of the following Koranic verse: 'Men, We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you might get to know one another'.<sup>39</sup> In his commentary, he explained it as,

'I have created you group by group, nation by nation, and tribe by tribe. For you to know each other, and understand the reasonability of others' social life. Help one another. You were not created as different people in order to treat each other in an uncivilized way, with hatred and enmity' ... the social order of Islam is great; it is not divided into tribes and nations. It is an habitual direction of unity. The prophets are one, we pray in the same direction; our books are one, and our country is one. ... In such a brotherhood, love and unity is a requirement. We have been created different from each other, like the Koranic verse describes, in order to become acquainted with one another and be of mutual aid. We must not live in feigned ignorance of our neighbours.<sup>40</sup>

Nationalism, in Said Nursi's opinion, was a threat both to a state's internal peace and to its international relations, that

38 Said Nursi, 'Hutbe-i Samiye', 61-2, cited in Mürsel, *Said Nursi*, 301.

39 Koran 49:12.

40 Said Nursi, *Mektubat*, Istanbul 1958, 329.

is, he saw both national and international dangers connected to it. The peace treaty of Sèvres indicated the possible establishment of an independent Kurdish state. Said Nursi, being himself a Kurd, has repeatedly been accused of supporting Kurdish nationalism,<sup>41</sup> but as can be seen from his writings, he was not in favour of the idea,

Let us give our courage and strength to our famous Turkish fathers. We have been united under the same flag for more than six hundred years. We have benefited from their [the Turks'] knowledge and intelligence, and we have given them strength. Together we are good people. We will not rebel against them, and this decision will be a lesson to other races. Let us be good heirs. Remember, there is strength in unity, life in harmony, happiness in brotherhood and peace in obedience.<sup>42</sup>

This does not lead to the conclusion that Said Nursi was uninterested in the Kurdish question;<sup>43</sup> on the contrary it was his concern for the Kurds that made him go to Istanbul in 1908 to inform the authorities about the miserable conditions the Kurds were living under and to persuade them of the importance of improving the situation. Throughout his life he gave special emphasis to the need for better education facilities in the east; Kurdish-speaking teachers in the primary schools and the establishment of a university.

The neglect of the eastern provinces continued after the establishment of the Republic. Said Nursi argued that if the

41 Çetin Özek, the Directorate of Religious Affairs, and the Supreme Court all held him guilty for destroying national unity, and encouraging Kurdish nationalism. Paul Dumont also implies that Said Nursi was rightfully punished because of the *şeyh* Said rebellion in 1925, see Chapter Four.

42 Said Nursi, 'Nutuk', 20, cited in Safa Mürsel, *Siyasi Düşünce Tarihi*, 320.

43 Kurdish writers praise Said Nursi for his involvement in the Kurdish question and seem to agree that his not taking part in the *şeyh* Said rebellion was rather a matter of method; Rohat, *Unutulmuşluğun Bir Öyküsü: Said-i Kürdi*, Istanbul 1991, 56-8.

eastern provinces were left behind, what had started as a request for improved education and a decent standard of living could easily turn into a long-lasting conflict in which lives might be lost on both sides. What Said Nursi feared, in other words, was that a national awareness among the Kurds, which combined with poverty might form a unified breach<sup>44</sup> between Turks and Kurds, could easily develop into extreme nationalism. Said Nursi rejected Turkish nationalism because of its non-religious character and the racial element that he saw in it,

The Turkish nation became rich as a part of the Islamic world. Turks are Muslims independently of where in the world they live. Contrary to other races the Turks did not split into Muslims and non-Muslims. A Turk who has left his religion is not a Turk. Watch out, Turkish brother! There is no division in Islam, separation means destruction. All the historical objects of pride have one source, Islam. No power can erase them from the earth, so do not you erase them from your heart with Satanic anxiety! ... Our country has been submitted to immigration and changes since early times, and when the country became the centre of the Islamic world, all these different people (other races than Turks) began to look upon this country as their fatherland. It is therefore both meaningless and harmful to build a society on racial purity.<sup>45</sup>

According to Said Nursi, Turkishness could never come before Islam as a focus of either personal or collective loyalty. He continued to fight against the 'negative' aspects of nationalism all his life. In 1950 he wrote a 'letter of warning' to the president and the prime minister, in which he says:

The idea of nationalism has gone far beyond its limits. The deceitful European tyrants caused a nationalist awakening among the Muslims, in order to split them [the Muslim society] into smaller parts that

44 The term 'unified breach' has been used as in Stein Rokkan's terminology; Stein Rokkan, *Stat, Nasjon, Klasse*, Oslo 1990.

45 Said Nursi, *Mektubat*, 332, 334.



could be swallowed [by the Europeans]. There is a taste of ignorance and spitefulness in nationalism; its strength is inauspicious, like an evil omen. That is why you cannot tell the people (those who are active in social life) to leave this idea. Nationalism is divided into two (*iki kısım*), one of them being negative, inauspicious and harmful, its intention is continuous enmity. It causes war and great confusion. In Islam there is no fanaticism; Islam does not accept the cruel appearance of nationalism and racism. The positive and sacred Islamic community satisfies all needs. Which race counts three hundred and fifty millions?<sup>46</sup> If you replace the idea of racism with that of Islam you will be rewarded with well mannered brothers. Indeed, the history of nationalism is utterly destructive.<sup>47</sup>

The interpretative tradition started by Said Nursi continued to develop within the Nur movement after his death, so that two of the movement's chief ideologists today, Safa Mürsel and Cemal Kutay, differ on the question of nationalism; and both their views are again contrary to Said Nursi's. While Cemal Kutay sees the historical context as an explanation for Said Nursi's rejection of nationalism,<sup>48</sup> Safa Mürsel sees it rather as an excuse. Cemal Kutay maintains that Said Nursi realized completely the necessity of nation states, and therefore when Said Nursi speaks of Islamic unity he really means a *spiritual* unity and not a political one.

Safa Mürsel on the other hand, in his large book on 'Bediüzzaman Said Nursi and his theory of the state' (*Bediüzzaman Said Nursi ve Devlet Felsefesi*), first presents nationalism from a general point of view, in which he quotes Said Nursi's commentary on the Koran, *sura* 49. Then Mürsel divides the topic into positive and negative nationalism. According to Mürsel, Said Nursi speaks of two kinds of nationalism; one negative and one positive. But the actual word used by Said Nursi is *kısım*, which is often translated

46 This figure is supposed to be the estimated population of the Islamic world in 1930.

47 Said Nursi, *Mektubat*, 330-1.

48 Safa Mürsel, *Siyasi Düşünce*, 94 and Kutay, *Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, 95-8, 295.

to mean 'part' or 'component'.<sup>49</sup>

Now, whether there are two kinds of nationalism or whether nationalism consists of two parts/components is of course of fundamental importance. Either there are two ontological entities both labelled nationalism, or nationalism is one ontological entity which has both negative and positive aspects. In light of Said Nursi's writings on nationalism, quoted above, it is reasonable to conclude that it was his view that if one accepts the idea of nationalism, one cannot have its positive aspects without having the negative ones. This led Said Nursi to reject nationalism, be it Kurdish or Turkish.

49 According to the Ottoman-Turkish dictionary *Yeni Lügat* (1992) the word *kısım* means *component*. The Oxford Turkish-English dictionary (1984) translates the word *kısım* as *part*.

## CONCLUSION: SAID NURSİ AND THE NUR MOVEMENT

Would there be a Nur movement without Said Nursi?<sup>1</sup> This question might seem as interesting as the discussion of 'which came first, the chicken or the egg', but it actually pinpoints the conflict between two modes of explanations; is reality best explained as the mechanism of structural factors or should individual actors be given primacy? In the case of the Nur movement one cannot explain the movement without looking at its emergence. All actuality was once mere potentiality, but that does not mean that there exists an automatic causal relationship between potentiality and actuality, that is, all eggs are potential chickens, yet some become omelettes.

Paul Dumont claims that the Nur movement is the result of an ideological trend and that it could have evolved, under a different label, 'even if Said had never existed'.<sup>2</sup> His argument contains several contradictions, particularly in regard to his aim of showing Said Nursi as a symbol and a pretext rather than a guide.<sup>3</sup> As an example: he characterizes the Nur movement before and after Said Nursi's death (in 1960) almost as two different things. Until 1960, he says, 'the Nurju movement was against all Kemalist innovations, it was anti-Republicanist and oriented towards the past, but after 1960 it became respectful to Republican values, and scientism rather than obscurantism marks its present ideolo-

1 Would there be Islam without Muhammed, Christianity without Jesus?

2 Dumont, 'Disciples of the Light'.

3 *Ibid.*, 43.



gy'.<sup>4</sup>

Surely if such a change took place as the result of Said Nursi's death, he must have had an immense influence on the movement while he was alive. But then again, if Dumont's description of Said Nursi as an eccentric personality, an 'unbalanced person who took advantage of the poorer classes to pass himself off as a messenger of the Divine Spirit' and who possessed many traits specific to the illness paraphrenia,<sup>5</sup> 'megomania, a persecution mania, an inclination for the fantastic and the supernatural, a tendency to live in an imaginary world',<sup>6</sup> is correct, it seems unlikely that Said Nursi could have been able to gather any followers at all. And if he was so clearly deranged, why did not the authorities send him to hospital?

The starting point for this book was the striking difference between two Islamic groups, the Nur movement and the Nakşibendi brotherhood, in their relationship to the secular Turkish Republic. The analysis of how the state unsuccessfully tried to pacify Said Nursi through the judiciary and the Directorate of Religious Affairs, and the comparison between the two religious groups' views on Turkish nationalism, revealed that the cause for the disfavour of the Nur movement was not the state's secularism but the Nurcus' refusal of nationalism.

On this background, the principles of Kemalism, stated in the constitution to be the qualities of the Turkish state without any difference in importance or function, must be reinterpreted. The principle of secularism was subordinate to and had a different function from that of nationalism. Secularism was a *means* to destroy the Ottoman theocratic system and eliminate the religious identity of the Turkish society,

4 *Ibid.*, 45.

5 Paraphrenia is a kind of paranoia, marked by megalomania, persecution mania and aggression; Einar Kringlen, *Psykiatri*, Oslo 1990, 363.

6 Dumont, 'Disciples of the Light', 42.

which was seen as the major obstacle for achieving the *goal* of nationalism.

Said Nursi's negative views on nationalism were of course fundamentally related to his experiences of nationalism during the last decades of the Ottoman Empire. The First World War, the Armenian incident, the Turkish-Greek 'population exchange' and the *şeyh* Said rebellion all took place during the formative years of Said Nursi's life. As to the peaceful existence of nation-states, Said Nursi argued that they would remain peaceful only to the extent that they did not follow a nationalistic policy. An evaluation of the relevance of Said Nursi's thoughts ultimately depends upon how representative of nationalism *per se* one considers the nationalism of the early twentieth century to be.

Nationalism being the core of the conflict between Said Nursi and his followers against the Turkish state, one may get the impression that the struggle against Turkish nationalism was the *raison d'être* of the Nur movement. But that was not the case, the Nur movement neither emerged as a reaction against, nor as a part of, Mustafa Kemal's modernization process. Said Nursi and the Nur movement were elements of continuity between the Ottoman past and modern Turkey. The Nur movement was above all a movement of faith, aimed at securing a common ethical standard between the state and its citizens. The movement's commitment to that aim was clearly demonstrated by Said Nursi and the many Nur members who never gave up the attempt to solve their conflicts with the state by rational arguments. In doing so, they differed not only from other religious movements such as the Ticanis and the Nakşibendis,<sup>7</sup> but also from the Turkish state itself, who went beyond its own laws and court decisions and gave the Nurcus a harsh treatment including illegal arrests and torture.

From the outline given above of Said Nursi's life, his individual preferences, ethics, motives and teachings—

7 See above, Chapter Five.

which in turn became a set of behavioural procedures for his many followers—it would appear that the importance of Said Nursi was equal to that of an institution.<sup>8</sup> He became committed to a very special cause at an early stage of his life, and in order to pursue his mission he was forced to and was able to adapt his methods to the changes that took place around him. He changed his function from that of a national hero to an opposition leader, as the state replaced its ideology of religious universalism with that of Turkish nationalism. And moreover he was able to do this without losing his integrity, he was loyal to his ideals, which were a rather complex set of philosophical and social beliefs, and he preferred to stay outside the political system instead of compromising with the state establishment.

Adaptability, autonomy, coherence and complexity<sup>9</sup> are concepts used in order to describe the qualities of an institution as contrasted with those of individual actors, but they can be read, at a personal level, as flexibility, independence, consistency and sophistication and if they are, one might conclude that Said Nursi had the qualities required for an individual to have a long lasting impact on his surroundings, despite the varying circumstances under which he lived, just like an institution.

It was the compatibility of Said Nursi's ideology that made the Turkish authorities proclaim him dangerous to the internal security of the state, a scapegoat on whom they could blame their inability to and demonstrate their will to modernize Turkey; thus to see religion as a static tradition which necessarily diminishes as modernity progresses, can be called into question.

8 Dale Eickelman has said that in the Middle East 'social structure can be conceived with persons as the fundamental units of social structure'; *Moroccan Islam*, Austin, TX 1976.

9 Samuel P. Huntington, 'Political Development and Political Decay' in *Political System and Change*, Princeton 1986.



*Epilogue*

Five years after Said Nursi's death, on 20 September 1965, the Criminal Counsel of the Supreme Court, saying that 'in order to understand the content and essence of *nurculuk* it is necessary to know Said Nursi's personality, and to examine in detail the content of the (social) order he wished to establish through his life', passed the following judgement on him:

1. Bediüzzaman [Said Nursi] was an illiterate who by writing newspaper articles incited and provoked people before and during the 31 March [1909] revolt.
2. Bediüzzaman was against science and progress and encouraged the ethnic movements.
3. Bediüzzaman was against republicanism and was a danger for the unity and integrity of the country.
4. Bediüzzaman behaved in a manner that destroyed the civic peace (*asayiş*).
5. Bediüzzaman attempted and worked in order to seize the political power.
6. Bediüzzaman established organizations against secularism.
7. Bediüzzaman implemented an instrumental usage of religion in the political arena.
8. Bediüzzaman's works break the law, so they are forbidden.<sup>10</sup>

But the Nur movement continued to exist and is one of Turkey's largest and most active religious groups today (one million members has been suggested), bypassed only by the Nakşibendi brotherhood. The movement owns and runs several teaching centres, publishing companies and newspapers (dailies and periodicals). It has branches all over Turkey including the Kurdish areas, and is also established abroad, in Iran, Iraq, India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, England, Germany and California.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> This document is given in Berk, *Türkiye'de Nurculuk Davası*, ix-x.

<sup>11</sup> 'Osmanlı'dan Günümüze İslamcı Hareketler ve Şiddet', in *EP (Ekonomi Politika)*, 11 July 1993.

On 27-29 September 1992 an international conference was arranged by the İstanbul İlim ve Kültür Vakfı ('İstanbul Science and Culture Foundation') and held at the Atatürk Kültür Merkezi ('Atatürk Cultural Centre'); the topic was 'The Reconstruction of Islamic Thought in the Twentieth century and Bediüzzaman Said Nursi'. The event was given due interest by Turkish newspapers, among them *Gündem*, where Mehmet Aktaş wrote an article under the headline, 'Said Nursi'yi düzenle barıştırma sempozyumu' ('Said Nursi "peace conference"').<sup>12</sup> According to Aktaş, 'all of Said Nursi's old enemies; the Minister of Education Köksal Toptan, Minister of State Ekrem Ceyhun, Minister of Agriculture Necmettin Cevheri, Minister of Culture Fikri Sağlar, Minister of Tourism Abdülkadir Ateş, the old Minister of Education Hasan Celal Güzel, the president of the Welfare Party Necmettin Erbakan, the president of the Directorate of Religious Affairs M. Nuri Yılmaz, the leader of İslahatçı Demokrasi Partisi Aykut Edibali, Nakşi şeyhs ... were either present at the conference or had sent their telegrams of congratulation.'

This rather surprising developement could not be predicted on the background of the information compiled in this book, thus one is free to speculate if the Nurcu's have 'gone Turk', or the Turks have 'gone Nurcu'.

12 Aktaş Mehmet, 'Said-i Nursi'yi düzenle barıştırma sempozyumu', *Gündem*, 29 September 1992.

## APPENDIXES

### A

#### § 175-178 OF THE TURKISH PENAL CODE

##### *Article 175*

(1) A person who violates or prevents the performance of rites/ceremonies, worship or the fulfilment of religious duties related to one of the religions, is given imprisonment for 6 months to 1 year.

(2) If the accused in addition has used force, violence, threats or insults, the punishment is imprisonment for 1 to 2 years.

(3) A person who insults, mocks, abuses or makes fun of God, the religions, the prophets of the religions, the religious books and schools or the people who avoid the religious prohibitions and perform the religious deeds is to be punished with imprisonment for 6 months to 1 year.

(4) If the crimes mentioned in sub-section 3 are committed by way of the press or publication, the punishment is doubled.

(5) If the crimes mentioned in sub-section 1 are committed by way of the press or publication, the same punishment is given.

##### *Article 176*

(1) A person who abuses, destroys or harms in any way a religious place of worship or a grave considered as holy in a religion is to be punished with confinement for 1 to 3 years.

(2) If such a crime is committed by religious officials in the course of their duties, the punishment is increased by



1/6th.

*Article 177*

(1) A person who spoils or destroys the places of worship, their surrounding buildings, their decorations, the graves or the inscriptions on graves is to be sentenced to imprisonment for 1 to 3 years.

(2) A person who makes the above mentioned objects dirty in any way is to be punished with imprisonment for 3 months to 1 year.

*Article 178*

(1) A person who insults or abuses a dead body or a skeleton or illegally takes a dead body or a skeleton is to be punished with imprisonment for 3 months to 1 year.

(2) A person who trades a body or parts of a body or without permission opens a grave and takes the body out is to be sentenced to imprisonment for 2-6 months.

(3) If the above mentioned crimes are committed by cemetery personnel, the punishment is doubled.

Translation by the author

## B

### INTERVIEW WITH SÜLEYMAN DEMİREL LEADER OF THE JUSTICE PARTY

*by Necmeddin Şahiner*

*Şahiner:* What are your thoughts and opinions about Said Nursi?

*Demirel:* The late Said Nursi has been the object of much discussion. Many people have a lot of prejudices against him. Bediüzzaman Said Nursi made himself a guide to the Koran and the Prophet, but never tried to replace them. Hostility arose against him, but this never scared him. He and his students were taken to prison hundreds of times but could not be found guilty according to the Turkish Penal Code. In spite of this, he was constantly persecuted and exiled in his own country. Nobody helped him and nobody could make him go astray from his path. According to Said Nursi, truth is above everything, and he spent a lifetime fighting for what he found true. In his writings he always advised people to be virtuous and keep away from evil. He made a very valuable interpretation of the Koran. It is not in everyone's capacity to understand and interpret the Koran.

*Şahiner:* Did you ever have time to read parts of the *Risale-i Nur*?

*Demirel:* I have the complete works of Said Nursi in my library, and I have read them quite well. They are filled with truth and advice.

*Şahiner:* Did you ever see Said Nursi in person?

*Demirel:* Yes, I saw him once in 1955, he was passing by in a car. I greeted him and he returned my greeting, with-

out knowing who I was, and then he drove off. This was in Barla.

*Şahiner:* Was your father or any close relatives ever in contact with Said Nursi?

*Demirel:* Yes, my father met him several times in Barla. Both my father-in-law and my father were religious people; they had been to Mecca. The 1930s were very bad years; secularism was almost understood and applied as atheism. In my childhood I took Koran lessons given by Hafız Ali Ergun [a later Nur student who was imprisoned in 1943]. He was an exceptional person, very innocent and good. My uncle Mehmet completely changed his personality after he began to visit Said Nursi in Barla. He became a good Muslim. In my home village, İslamköy, the *Risale-i Nur* was copied by hand and distributed. It was a Nur centre.

*Şahiner:* In a speech in 1966, İsmet İnönü said that, 'Demirel is the successor [or assistant, *halife*] of Said Nursi'. How did you evaluate this then and today?

*Demirel:* His aim was to make me look like an ignorant reactionary. To make me fall, especially in the eyes of the intellectuals. But I had stated officially and proudly in 1965, 'I am a Muslim, and as such it is my most natural duty to protect the freedom of belief and the freedom of worship, and to fulfil the duties of Muslimhood'. İnönü's speech was influential, but I still cannot know to what extent. Be that as it will be, I have never gone back on my word, may God forbid!



## C

### SECULARIST REFORMS

1. The abolition of the sultanate in 1922 by a decree of the Grand National Assembly (prior to the establishment of the Turkish republic).
2. The abolition in 1924 of the caliphate, which had symbolized the unity of the Muslim *umma*. The origins of the caliphate went back to the period after the death of Prophet Muhammed; Ottoman sultans had assumed the title of caliph in the sixteenth century.
3. The abolition in 1924 of the office of *şeyh-ül-İslam*, the highest religious authority in the administration of the Ottoman Empire.
4. The abolition in 1924 of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Pious Foundations (*şeriye ve evkaf vekaleti*).
5. The abolition in 1924 of the *şeriat* courts, religious courts based on Muslim law.
6. The abolition in 1924 of the *medrese*, which had been important centres of religious learning in the Ottoman Empire.
7. The banning of religious brotherhoods (*tarikât*) in 1925, and the ban on all their activities.
8. The passage of a law in 1925 outlawing the fez in favour of the Western hat; the republican regime also discouraged the veil for woman, although it did not outlaw it.
9. The adoption of the Gregorian calendar in 1925, replacing the lunar (*hicri*) and the solar (*rumi*) calendars.
10. The adoption of the Swiss Civil Code in 1926, giving equal civil rights to men and women.
11. The adoption of European numerals in 1928.

12. The change from Arabic to Latin script in 1928.
13. The deletion in 1928 of the second article of the 1924 constitution, which stated Islam to be the state religion.
14. The foundation of the Turkish History Association (Türk Tarih Kurumu) in 1930.
15. The granting of political rights to woman, first in municipal elections in 1930, later in national elections in 1934.
16. The creation of the Turkish Language Society (Türk Dil Kurumu) in 1931, starting the ongoing process of elimination of words of Arabic and Persian origin from the Turkish language.
17. The adoption of the metric system in 1931.
18. The adoption of family names in 1934.
19. The change of the weekly holiday from Friday to Sunday in 1935.

## D

### DECLARATION TO THE PEOPLE BY THE GRAND NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

We, the Grand National Assembly, constituted by representatives from every corner of Anatolia, on the background of what has happened, see the need to inform the people of some truths. Those traitors, who have sold themselves to the English have been telling lies in order to deceive you. By using the name of the sultan and the caliph, pretending to be their defenders, the enemy is trying to destroy the unity of the Turkish and Muslim brothers who have taken up arms against them. The National Assembly is working to unite Anatolia, and recapture the capital from enemy hands.

We, your representative, swear in the name of God and the Prophet that this is not a rebellion against the sultan and the caliph. Do not believe in the lies of those English spies who want to make our sacred country defenceless and deserted. They are trying to turn you against your brothers who gave their lives for the honour of their country and religion. If you help them, religion will lose its last homeland, and our nation its freedom. We have proclaimed war against them.

May God curse those traitors who help the enemy, and may His praise be upon those who strive to save the caliph and the sultan, the Nation and the Fatherland.

On behalf of the Grand National Assembly

President  
Mustafa Kemal  
(1921)



## GLOSSARY

*Ahırzaman*: The Golden Age, the time when Prophet Muhammed was alive.

*Atatürk*: Father of Turks, adopted as surname by Mustafa Kemal, after the family name law in 1934.

*batını*: Esoteric, the meaning behind the literal words of sacred texts.

*Bediüzzaman*: The Wonder of the Age, Said Nursi's nickname earned as a result of his outstanding intellectual achievements.

*cami*: Mosque.

*dershane*: Classroom, private school.

*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*: The Directorate of Religious Affairs, established in 1924.

*ebcet*: The numerical values of the letters in the old Arabic script.

*ebcet hesabı*: To interpret or extract meaning from words by their numerical values.

*ezan*: Call to prayer.

*fetva*: Formal, religious juridical response, given by a *müftü*, to a particular question or situation.

*gazi*: Muslim warrior in a fight for faith, used as a title by Mustafa Kemal until 1934, when he took the surname Atatürk.

*hac*: Pilgrimage to Mecca.

*hatip*: Muslim preacher.

*hicri takvim*: The Islamic lunar calendar, starting from the time of the Prophet's migration from Mecca to Medina in AD 622.

*hoca*: Schoolmaster, teacher, Muslim leader.

*imam*: Prayer leader in the mosque.

*medrese*: A Muslim higher religious school, college, seminary.

- molla*: Great scholar, student of theology.  
*müftü*: Religious scholar authorized to promulgate a *fetva*.  
*namaz*: Worship, prayer five times a day.  
*nur*: (holy) Light.  
*Nurcu*: Light-carrier, light-addicted, light offering person;  
member of the Nur movement.  
*nurculuk*: Nurism, of the Nur movement.  
*Nur-hareketi*: The Nur movement.  
*oruç*: Fasting, especially during Ramazan.  
*örtü*: Cover, headscarf.  
*paşa*: The highest rank (general/admiral) in the Ottoman  
military and, later, also the civil hierarchy.  
*Ramazân*: The month of fasting.  
*risale*: Pamphlet, treatise, letter, small book.  
*Risale-i Nur*: 'Treatise of light', the title of Said Nursi's  
complete writings.  
*şahadet*: The confession that 'there is no god but God, and  
Muhammed is the messenger of God'.  
*şeriat*: The path to be followed, Islamic Law, Muslim obli-  
gations based on the Koran and the doings and sayings  
of the Prophet.  
*şeyh*: Leader of religious brotherhood, holy man.  
*şeyh-ül-İslâm*: The highest religious authority in the Ottoman  
administration.  
*tarikât*: Religious (Sufi) brotherhood.  
*tefsir*: Exoteric interpretation.  
*tekke*: Lodge.  
*tevil*: Esoteric interpretation.  
*üstâd*: Master.  
*zahiri*: Outward, external.  
*zekat*: Almsgiving.

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Said Nursi (1873-1960), the founder of one of the most important religious movements of modern Turkey, was throughout his life faced with opposition and distrust from the Kemalist state. He was presented as a madman, a Muslim fanatic and a Kurdish nationalist. While other religious groups were persecuted when they incited revolts, the Nurcus were taken to court simply for being Nurcus. Yet Said Nursi, an early supporter of Mustafa Kemal, had come to accept many of the tenets of the new state. He only gave his own interpretation to such concepts of secularism, seeing it as the state's withdrawal from the religious arena, rather than a change to religion itself. He did, however, reject the concept of nationalism, both in its Kurdish and Turkish form. This was his main intellectual challenge to the new state, and the reason his movement was targeted for harassment more than the Nakşibendis and other religious groups who accepted the idea of a Turkish nation.

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