

THE INFLUENCE OF MODERN SCIENCE ON BEDIUZZAMAN SAID NURSI'S THINKING

Serdar Doğan

It has recently started to be debated that Enlightenment thought in general and the premises of modern science in particular influenced Bediüzzaman Said Nursi's thinking significantly. While this influence showed itself first as an exegesis project, it later turned to the formation of a new school of thought and spirituality in the form of a book, the *Risale-i Nur* school. Despite the fact that Nursi's views were brought under scrutiny from different perspectives, the impact of the contact with modern philosophy and modern science on Nursi was rarely brought into attention and linked to a broader intellectual context. To fill this gap, this paper deals with the relationship between Nursi's adoption of the premises of modern science in the context of Enlightenment thought and the emergence of the *Risale-i Nur* as a new school whose founder saw it as an alternative to the traditional schools of Islamic thought and spirituality.

Keywords: Bediüzzaman Said Nursi; *Risale-i Nur*; Islam and Science; Scientific Exegesis; Science and Religion; Islamization of Science; Modernism; Scientism; Modernization of Education in the Muslim World.

Today the *Risale-i Nur* collection is mistaken for a Qur'ānic exegesis.¹ This is likely due to the fact that Nursi considered it as a kind of work which came to existence through the grace of the Qur'ān.² However, the *Risale-i Nur* collection is not an exegesis, at least in the ordinary, classical sense of the term.³ According

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1. M. Hakan Yavuz, "Towards an Islamic Liberalism?: The Nurcu Movement and Fethullah Gülen," *Middle East Journal* 53, no. 4 (1999), 586.
 2. See Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı 2* (İstanbul: Nesil Basım Yayın, 2006), 1277.
 3. See Colin Turner and Hasan Horkuc, *Said Nursi: Makers of Islamic Civilization* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 2.
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This paper is based on Serdar Doğan's Master's thesis. Email: serdaramail@gmail.com

to Nursi, it is a new school of thought and spirituality, a path⁴ which in his view represents Islamic thought and spirituality in its most genuine form.⁵ Nursi linked this distinctiveness to its being “an alliance of reason and the heart,”⁶ and claimed that the *Risale-i Nur* path replaced the need for the traditional Islamic schools of thought and spirituality in modern times.⁷

This serious and far-reaching claim demonstrates the importance Nursi ascribed to his work. Yet, regardless of the true importance and impact of the work, Nursi made this claim not merely due to *Risale*’s emergence as a new school.⁸ He was also convinced that the traditional Islamic schools of thought

4. See Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı 2* (İstanbul: Nesil Basım Yayın), 1277-8; Ahmet Akgündüz, *Risale-i Nur Hareketi Tarikat mı, Cemiyet mi, Cemaat mı?*, online version at www.nur.org; Şükran Vahide, “A Survey of the Main Spiritual Themes of the Risale-i Nur,” in *Spiritual Dimensions of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi’s Risale-i Nur*, ed. İbrahim M. Abu-Rabi’ (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 6.

5. Vahide, “A Survey of the Main Spiritual Themes of the Risale-i Nur,” 6-7. In the new Said period, the coinage “the legacy of prophethood” (*veraset-i nübüvvet*) replaced the term which Nursi adopted for his exegesis method (*Miraj-ı Qur’ānî*). Inspired by the Indian Sufi Sirhindi (d.1624), it came to identify the path Nursi established. The term “legacy of prophethood” was chosen by Nursi to distinguish his path from Sufism. Yet, it has other connotations too. It is implicitly present in the term that it has the potential to show the Truth as it is, “without adding it a color.” Also, by virtue of being a legacy of prophethood, it is inherently protected against the degenerating influences of time. In this respect, it seems that the term was not chosen to indicate merely a categorical difference between the traditional schools and Nursi’s path, but also a qualitative difference concerning their proximity to the legacy of Islamic truths as represented by the first generations of Muslims, despite the time which had elapsed. See also Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 176; Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, *The Reasonings: A Key to Understanding the Qur’ān’s Eloquence*, tr. Hüseyin Akarsu (Somerset: Tughra Books, 2008), 41.

6. Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı 2*, 1277-78; Şükran Vahide, *Islam in modern Turkey: An intellectual biography of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. İbrahim M. Abu-Rabi’ (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 167; Miriam Therese Winter, “Spirit and Spirituality: Linking the Lives of Two Twentieth-Century Pioneers,” in *Spiritual Dimensions of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi’s Risale-i Nur*, 360.

7. See Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı 2*, 1304, 1599.

8. While Nursi’s intention in writing the *Risale-i Nur* symbolizes the attempt of “returning to the origins,” the way he propounded it compels one to think that Nursi considered the *Risale-i Nur* collection as a new school.

and spirituality had degenerated, and they had to be replaced with a new one.⁹ In Nursi's eyes the *Risale-i Nur* collection came to fill this gap, and he believed that it succeeded in this to a great extent.

Nursi's views on the practice of Sufism in modern times¹⁰ conform to this line of reasoning, and to a certain extent they explain his claim to have synthesized thought and spirituality in a single body of work. But they do not provide a satisfactory answer to the question of why he came to consider the traditional schools as having degenerated. A series of statements on the relationship between the emergence of modern science and the (lack of) efficacy of the traditional schools reflect the fundamental premises of Nursi's thinking during the old Said period, and provide important clues regarding his intellectual legacy as it extends from the old Said period to the new Said period.

The most salient feature of these statements is the positive tone infused in them regarding the emergence of the scientific revolution. Nursi depicts the scientific revolution as an exceedingly important turning point in the history of human intellectual endeavor, and concludes that its fruits set the standard for the intellectual and scientific activities in modern times, including the domain of religion. Such reasoning was in line with the belief that religion in general, and Islam in particular, could not remain oblivious to "intellectual inquiry," to the act of knowing,¹¹ and therefore modern science should be integrated into the domain of Islamic thought. Taking this as a departure, Nursi formulated his own theory of integration, a new exegesis of the Qur'an to be written, almost exclusively, in light of the findings of modern science, and tried to put it into practice with a great vigor.¹²

9. See Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 107. Nursi does not literally mean that the same level of degeneration applies to Islamic philosophy (*hikmah*) as well. Yet, since he does not consider *hikmah* to be as objective as modern science is, he places it within the same category with *kalām* and *tasawwuf* in terms of their lack of efficacy in modern times (see footnote 123). See also Şükran Vahide, *The Author of the Risale-i Nur: Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (Istanbul: Sözler Neşriyat, 1992), 9-10, 251.

10. Such as, "it is not time to practice Sufism." See Vahide, *The Author of the Risale-i Nur*, 5.

11. On why religion cannot remain oblivious to knowledge, see Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 141.

12. For a list of those who attempted to write a scientific exegesis See Ibrahim Kalin, "Three Views of Science in the Islamic World," in *God, Life, and the Cosmos: Christian and Islamic Perspectives*, eds. Ted Peters, Muzaffar Iqbal and Syed Nomanul Haq (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2002), 71. See also Abasi Kiyimba, "Islam and Science: An Overview," in *Islamic Perspectives on Science: Knowledge and Responsibility*, ed. by Ali Ünal (New Jersey: The Light Publishing, 2007), 14-16.

He defined this project as *Miraj-ı Qurʾān* (Qurʾānic ascension), and presented it as one of the acknowledged methods of approaching the Truth alongside the three traditional strands of Islamic thought and spirituality: Sufism (*tasawwuf*), Islamic philosophy (*hikmah*), and scholastic theology (*kalām*). In fact, Nursi considered the method of *Miraj-ı Qurʾāni* even more authentic and efficacious than these three schools, and claimed that it sets the standard for approaching the Qurʾān for all times.¹³ He was convinced that it reflected the normative reading of the Qurʾān during the first generations of Muslims,¹⁴ the only difference being that modern science was now available as a means of attaining precision and clarity in interpretation, in addition to what the first generation utilized – reason, in his view. What was needed was the integration of the findings of this new science into the method of *Miraj-ı Qurʾāni*, and the interpretation of the Qurʾānic verses in their light.

Nursi's source of inspiration for this exegesis was his acceptance of the "objectivity and universal validity of modern science."¹⁵ Yet, in a more sophisticated fashion, Nursi tried to explain this "degeneration" through human interventions and the ever-accumulating commentaries of intellectual tradition and concluded that these factors obscured the original meaning of religious texts by creating ambiguity. The appearance of modern science with its claim to "objectivity and universal validity" rendered the traditional schools ineffective, and subsequently it became the chief authority in approaching the truths of the Qurʾān.¹⁶

Yet, regardless of it being well-devised or not, this project never materialized as Nursi intended it to, and it gave way to a different project. The *Risale-i Nur* project came to light as a continuation thereof, though different in kind, while also claiming a high level of authority relative to the religious literature preceding it. Therefore, as it replaced the exegesis project, in the eyes of its author, it also replaced the traditional Islamic schools with its claim to being the path of modern times. Instead of relying on the findings of modern science¹⁷ and composing this project in the form of a systematical

13. See Nursi, *Reasonings*, 107.

14. *Ibid.*, 41. See also footnote 5.

15. See Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 25, 107; Kalin, "Three Views of Sciences in the Islamic World," 52.

16. *Ibid.*, 21; 107, footnote 123.

17. There are various views on this issue. In addition to my own reading of *Risale-i Nur*, I used Nursi's statements criticizing his own conception of modern science as formulated during the new Said period for my departure point. Yet, since they do not imply a total discarding of the findings of modern science, especially inventions, it also does not follow that Nursi composed his work with a full awareness of the premises of modern science. The references in the *Risale-i*

exegesis, Nursi preferred to rely on his inspirations which reflected his “close reading of the Qur’ān.”¹⁸ However, since he did not lay out a comprehensive and systematical critique of modern science which could dismantle its shortcomings on a philosophical level, Nursi’s intellectual transition did go unnoticed.¹⁹

Modernizing Education

Nursi’s ideas led to the largest and most influential religious movement in modern Turkey²⁰ where, beside his rebuttal of positivist and atheistic currents of thought and his disapproval of the practice of Sufism in modern times, he is known chiefly for his project of reforming the Ottoman *madrasah* system, which sought to establish new schools that would teach Islamic and modern sciences within the same curriculum.²¹

The main objective of this project was to extend the modernization efforts

Nur to the findings of modern science regarding some specific explanations do not contradict the thesis concerning the evolution of Nursi’s intellectual perspective which tended to downplay the findings of modern science in the interpretation of religious texts. See Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words*, tr. Şükran Valide (İstanbul: Sözler Neşriyat, 1998), 260-76.

18. M. Hakan Yavuz, “Nur Study Circles (Derşhanes) and the Formation of New Religious Consciousness in Turkey,” in *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and thought of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi’ (Albany: SUNY, 2003), 299, 314.

19. Contrary to what has been considered so far, the *Risale-i Nur* collection did not emerge as the immediate product of the line of reasoning which ascribed modern science a central place in Nursi’s thinking, but rather as the fruit of a breakdown in his intellectual undertakings which started to conceive modern science as “spiritually deceptive,” and almost as degenerated as the traditional schools. Yet, since he came to this stage by ascribing modern science a central place in the old Said discourse, the totality of his intellectual activities have generally been considered as the fruit of this positioning, even by those who followed in Nursi’s footsteps. It should also be noted that Nursi’s ambiguous statements on the issue may well be the main source of the current confusion. Yet, there are recent attempts to reconstruct Nursi’s scientific perspective by relying on his critique of modern science as expressed during the new Said period. See Yamina Mermer and Redha Ameer, “Beyond the ‘Modern’: Sa’id al-Nursi’s View of Science,” *Islam and Science* 2, no. 2 (Winter 2004): 119-160; Metin Karabaşoğlu, “Bilime Nasıl Bakmalı?: Sahibinden Kaçmış Bir Kölenin Öyküsü” *Köprü*, Kış 1996.

20. See Yavuz, “Towards an Islamic Liberalism?: The Nurcu Movement and Fethullah Gülen,” 586.

21. See Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyatı* 2, 1955.

of the Ottoman Empire to Eastern Anatolia. The belief that modernization was necessary had already taken hold in the Ottoman territories, and a series of changes on an institutional level ranging from the modernization of the army to the modernization of the education system had already started. A significant number of schools that taught modern sciences were opened, and in the eyes of the public they became a center of attraction.²² Yet, contrary to what Nursi had proposed, they were not teaching Islamic sciences. Nursi hoped to change this system, and he tried to bring about harmony between Islamic sciences and modern sciences.²³

Despite the picture depicted in *Muhakemat* (“The Reasonings”) according to which the traditional Islamic schools of thought and spirituality were obsolete, Nursi spent a great deal of effort for the realization of his school project.²⁴ He even gained an audience with Sultan Abdul Hamid II,²⁵ in which he asked for the latter his support. However, his views were not favored by the Sultan, and he returned to Eastern Anatolia, where he continued his intellectual activities without his support.

Later in his life, Nursi was given the chance twice by Sultan Reşad and Said Halim Paşa to initialize his school project, “but it was not to be.” With Sultan Reşad’s support, he laid the foundations of his school, *Medresetü’z-Zehra*, on a site on the shores of Lake Van at Edremit, but with the outbreak of the First World War shortly afterwards, the construction was halted and never resumed.²⁶ Said Halim Paşa’s offer came after the war ended and while Nursi was working for the empire as a member of *Dar al-hikmah* (House of wisdom). However, this was a transition period from the old Said to the new Said, and Nursi did not accept the offer.²⁷ Nonetheless, he kept writing about the religion-science “dichotomy”, and became one of the most prominent figures in the discussion, especially in Turkish lands.

Thus, Nursi could not succeed in completing his modernization project, but neither could the Ottoman Empire. The early modernization project existed concurrently with the imminent collapse of the Empire, and in 1923 the secularist Turkish Republic replaced the Ottoman Empire, with modernism as its central ideology. Expectedly, such a vision created a negative impact on Nursi’s activities and pushed him out of the political arena. Thereupon, he preferred to withdraw from public life and dedicated himself to his intellectual

22. See Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 108-9.

23. See Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyatı* 2, 1956.

24. *Ibid.*, 1956-1957.

25. It is not certain that he talked to the Sultan. The commonly accepted view is that he talked to his advisors.

26. Vahide, *The Author of the Risale-i Nur*, 153.

27. *Ibid.*, 165.

and spiritual activities, the totality of which now constitutes his voluminous *Risale-i Nur* collection.

Nonetheless, this separation did not preclude him from being a most important political figure in the Republic of Turkey. He had to deal with the problems he inherited from the old Said period as well as the accusations leveled at him for his intellectual activities during the new Said period. The disapproval with which the Republic viewed him led to long periods of imprisonments, house arrests, and according to his memoirs, even attempts on his life.²⁸ Despite all of these, he passed away in 1960 at the age of 83, just before the first *coup* of the Turkish Army.

Adoption of the Premises of Modern Science

Like many other Muslim scholars of his time, Nursi started his intellectual life by receiving a *madrasah* education. His preoccupation with modern science came much later, mainly during the time he spent in the courts of Van governors, Hasan Pasha and Tahir Pasha.²⁹ This period lasted approximately fifteen years, and it played an important role in his further intellectual and political activities.³⁰ The knowledge he attained during this period came to form the basis of his intellectual perspective and significantly contributed to his reputation.

Unlike the study period in Van, Nursi's *madrasah* education was quite troublesome.³¹ He entered into frequent conflicts with his teachers, and this prevented him from completing his education in a single *madrasah*.³² In order to graduate he had to attend different *madrasahs*. Even then, according to some accounts, his official *madrasah* education did not exceed three months.³³ The only transmitted science he learned in a systematic way during this

28. There is no consensus among the scholars concerning the source of this friction. According to one argument, it was "...because Bediüzzaman was a threat to Republican nationalism that he was isolated by the state." Another argument states that this friction resulted from the type of the modernization project that Nursi had proposed and which sought to "adopt Enlightenment values within an Islamic outlook rather than within Kemalist positivism." See Esat Arslan, "Social and Ethical Thought of Bediüzzaman Said-i Kürdi" (MA diss., Sabancı University, 2004), 5.

29. Ibid., 22; Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 75.

30. See Vahide, *The Author of the Risale-i Nur*, 153.

31. See Turner, *Said Nursi*, 5-6.

32. See Vahide, *The Author of the Risale-i Nur*, 7.

33. During my interviews with Nursi's followers they stated that his total *madrasah* education lasted three months. Colin Turner writes that this period corresponds to his early *madrasah* education. See *Said Nursi*, 6.

education period was Arabic.³⁴ He acquired the knowledge of other sciences taught in *madrasahs* through self-study, and passed the examinations designed for him by his teachers. Despite all these obstacles, he managed to complete his *madrasah* education successfully and received his teaching license (*ijazah*) at a young age.³⁵

There is no doubt that his exceptional memory and ability to learn quickly was a great asset for him. He was able to complete his *madrasah* education in a very short period of time and was given the epithet *Bediüzzaman*, “Wonder of the Age”, by one of his teachers, Molla Fethullah Efendi. However, this could not prevent him from adopting the philosophical premises of modern science. Since he studied modern science in the same way as he studied Islamic sciences, that is, through self-study,³⁶ and not by developing a systematic “metaphysical and philosophical approach”³⁷ to modern science, he could not avoid absorbing its philosophical premises into his thinking.³⁸

In other words, despite the fact that Nursi was an intellectually gifted person, the study method he employed during his *madrasah* education and his interest in modern science worked against him. This method minimized the influence of scholarly help from teachers and from the commentaries he generally preferred to ignore,³⁹ which in the long run led him to adopt the

34. *Ibid.*, 6.

35. Reportedly before he was sixteen. See Şükran Vahide, “Toward an Intellectual Biography of Said Nursi,” in *Islam at the Crossroads*, 3.

36. In his memoirs, Nursi relates this characteristic of not being prone to external assistance to a dream he had in his childhood. In his dream, he was told by the Prophet that he was going to be given knowledge of the Qurʾān (*ʿilm*) on the condition that he would ask no questions to anyone in his community. He followed this advice and preferred to reduce the level of external assistance. Vahide, *The Author of the Risale-i Nur*, 8.

37. Kalin, “Three Views of Sciences in the Islamic World,” 47.

38. Ghazzālī had a similar experience with philosophy which he studied without the help of a master, and this affected his negative stance towards philosophy to a great extent.

39. Nursi was not very fond of commentaries. He is known to have ignored traditional commentaries during his studies. When he was asked by his teachers as to why he was studying in this manner, he is said to have replied: “I am not able to read and understand this many books. But they are all caskets of jewels, treasure chests, and the key is with you. I only implore you to show me what is in them so I can understand what they are discussing, and then I shall study those that are suitable for me.” When his teacher asked him again “Which subject, and which of the sciences you studied are suitable for you?” Nursi’s response was “I cannot distinguish these sciences from each

philosophical premises of modern science. The attempt to create a combination of modern science and Islamic sciences was one of the consequences of this adoption, and it ruined a significant proportion of his intellectual efforts during the old Said period.

One can rightly object to this explanation on the basis of Nursi's *madrasah* experience that his study method worked well in the acquisition of knowledge of the Islamic sciences. Otherwise, his teachers would not grant him an *ijazah*. Therefore, factors other than his study method should have been considered as more important in his embracing of the modern scientific outlook. However, it is crucial to emphasize that while Nursi was studying Islamic sciences, he was dealing with a body of knowledge that had a millennium-long history. Despite the study method he employed, he acquired adequate and coherent knowledge of Islamic sciences, at least to the extent of reaching a required level to attain his *ijazah*. Nevertheless, when it came to the knowledge of modern science, even if we accept that he mastered it adequately, it is difficult to say that he acquired it in the proper manner, that is, with full awareness of its philosophical premises. Therefore, he integrated them to his intellectual perspective inadvertently and suffered from its consequences.⁴⁰

Nursi admitted this lapse in the later stages of his intellectual life, and held it to be an error: an error he once defined as “polishing Islam” (*saykal al-Islam*).⁴¹ He stated that:

The Old Said and certain thinkers in part accepted the principles of human and European philosophy, and contested them with their own weapons; they accepted them to a degree. They submitted unhesitatingly to some of their principles in the form of the physical sciences, and therefore they could not demonstrate the true worth of Islam. It was quite simply as though they were grafting Islam with the branches of philosophy, the roots of which they supposed to be very deep; as though strengthening it. But since this method produced few victories and it reduced Islam's worth to a degree, I gave up that way. And I showed in fact that Islam's principles are

other. I either know all of them or none of them.” Vahide claims that deep-down in his heart, this was a call for a reform in the *madrasah* system. See Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 10.

40. In his work *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* Gilson states that “...the history [of philosophy] is to the philosopher what laboratory is to the scientist; it particularly shows how the philosophers do not think as they wish, but as they can, for the interrelation of philosophical ideas is just as independent of us are the laws of physical world. A man is always free to choose his principles, but when he does he must face their consequences to the bitter end” (x).

41. Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 5

so profound that the deepest principles of philosophy cannot reach them; indeed, they remain superficial beside them. The Thirtieth Word, Twenty-Fourth Letter, and Twenty-Ninth Word have demonstrated this truth with proofs. In the former way, philosophy was supposed to be profound and the matters of Islam, external; it was supposed that by binding itself with the branches of philosophy, Islam would be preserved and made to endure. As if the principles of philosophy could in any way reach the matters of Islam!⁴²

Despite this clear confession, Nursi's discontent with modern science never turned into a systematic critique thereof. The issues raised in the passage above went unaddressed and the problem of dealing with modern science was left to future generations.⁴³

As for the details of the adoption process, it was primarily the claim of objectivity, that is, the claim of "providing certitude on the level of phenomena,"⁴⁴—a sort of certitude Nursi could not find among the "lengthy commentaries" he preferred to ignore during his *madrasah* education—had misled Nursi in his pursuit of modern science.⁴⁵ Since he took this claim for a given, he did not think that the study of modern science could constitute a

42. Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Letters*, tr. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sözler Neşriyat, 1997), 516. In this excerpt, by philosophy Nursi means modern science. See also Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 205.

See also Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Flashes*, tr. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sözler Neşriyat, 2000), 305.

43. Although Yamina Mermer considers this as a resolved issue, it is difficult to say that this is the case. Nursi did realize some of the shortcomings of modern science, but this does not reflect a comprehensive critique thereof. For example, he concluded that modern science is not interested in meaning, but it is lost in dealing with the details of the material reality. He also realized the fact that modern science is literalist, but instead of relating this literalism to the quantification of science, he identified it with material causality. See Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı I*, 49-50. It is also important to emphasize that in writing the *Risale-i Nur* collection, Nursi's purpose was not to compose a systematical work which would deal with subjects on a theoretical level. Therefore, it is paradoxical to search for a systematic treatment of modern science in the *Risale-i Nur* collection as it pertains to the intellectual tradition. See also Vahide, "A Survey of the Main Spiritual Themes of the *Risale-i Nur*," 5.

44. Edwin A. Burt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science* (New York: Dover, 2003), 67.

45. See Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), v; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (Chicago: ABC International Group, 1991), 25; Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 325.

problem in the formation of his intellectual perspective. Rather, he approached it with a deep admiration, believing that modern science could provide a solid ground upon which he could build his further intellectual studies, including his exegesis. As a consequence, he adopted its premises without demonstrating any sign of critical evaluation.

This can be deduced from the paragraph in which Nursi shared his confession about the inaccuracy of his approach in using the findings of modern science for the purpose of “strengthening the Islamic principles.” Yet, in order to show his trust in the objectivity of modern science during the time period he defended this perspective, several other paragraphs can be quoted as below:

...Since in the past philosophy was polluted with superstition because of ignorance, blind imitation, and the narrow capacity of minds, the scholars of earlier generations urged that philosophy be avoided. However, philosophy embedded in and informed by transmitted knowledge based on the Divine Revelation, and which also takes into account scientific developments, will surely bring more good than evil,⁴⁶

and,

If you are a free thinker, see how ancient philosophy and science have imprisoned minds within the walls of some errors and thrown them into abjection. However, the new scientific approach has brought down the walls of that prison. It is clear that the key to the treasure of the aspects of miraculousness in the Qur’ānic verses is the eloquent language of the Qur’ān. It is not to be searched for in Greek philosophy.⁴⁷

Also,

For sure the greatest obstacle, which causes us to suffer misery in the world and the Westerners to be deprived of happiness in the Hereafter, and which causes the sun of Islam to be eclipsed, is the supposed conflict between some outer aspects of Islam and certain established scientific facts. This is strange, to say the least, for how can something be in conflict with the very phenomenon that has given rise to it? For it is Islam which has shepherded the sciences, and even given birth to many of them. Yet the fallacy of conflict between Islam and science continues to prey on our minds, driving many to hopelessness and serving to close the doors of knowledge and civilization to many Muslims..⁴⁸

46. Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 25. Compare to Seyyed Hossein Nasr in conversation with Muzaffar Iqbal, *Islam, Science, Muslims, and Technology* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2009), 183.

47. Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 74-75.

48. *Ibid.*, 4.

In addition to the claim of objectivity, one should mention another important premise which influenced his intellectual perspective in a just as important manner: the linear conception of scientific progress.⁴⁹ Nursi approached this premise in an equally uncritical way, and he adopted it into his intellectual perspective, again without showing any sign of critical evaluation.⁵⁰ Therefore, while the traditional schools came to be seen by him as inefficacious, modern science gained the privilege of being *the* science of modern times. In his own words,

Something theoretical in the past may become evident and established in the present or in the future. It is a self-evident fact that creation has an innate tendency towards perfection, and it is through this that creation is bound to the law of development or gradual perfection. Included in creation, human life has a tendency towards progress that arises from this tendency towards perfection. This tendency toward progress becomes possible through opinions and theories being built upon one another over centuries. Opinions and theories develop by means of the results attained—facts; then axioms or principles become established, and means to implement the principle learnt are invented. Established facts and principles impregnate the seeds of science that emanate from the “ribs” of creation in the womb of time, where they grow through experience and experimentation.

It is for this reason that many of the matters known to all today were only theoretical or even incomprehensible in the past. We clearly see that many matters of geography, astronomy, physics, chemistry, and other sciences are no longer unknown to the children of today, due to the facts and principles that have been established, the means that have been invented, and the opinions that have gained strength from one another. They were unknown even to Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and thinkers and scientists like him, although such people had a greater capacity and were far better versed in philosophy and sciences than many of their contemporaries. The deficiency lies not in Ibn Sina and his contemporaries, but in the time they lived in; we are all children of our times.⁵¹

As can be inferred from the quote, Nursi did not consider the evolutionary

49. See Kalin, “Three Views of Sciences in the Islamic World,” 51.

50. In many places in his works, especially in those composed during the time of old Said, we can clearly see the traces of this influence. The primary example of this is found in “The Reasonings” (*Muhakemat*). It is a kind of work dedicated to the explication of the Islamization of modern science as Nursi understood it and how this Islamization can help Muslim world “progress” faster.

51. Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 14-15.

element behind the linear, progressive conception of science, according to which no intellectual endeavor could qualify as a science “unless it quantifies itself.”⁵² Other, non quantifiable “sciences” could be given credit only for their contribution to the emergence of modern science, which sets the limits of their validity in the domain of scientific inquiry.⁵³ All other elements which do not comply with this aspect were destined to be discarded ad infinitum without having the chance of being reincorporated into the scientific perspective.

Instead of addressing the issue philosophically, Nursi preferred the approach of the “accumulation of knowledge” (*telahuk-u efkar*),⁵⁴ and he integrated it into his intellectual perspective as such.⁵⁵ Therefore, he did not see any problem in declaring the traditional schools as obsolete. A philosophical approach would have shown that the type of accumulation modern science appreciated was that of particular “facts” for, in its perspective, unquantifiable entities cannot be considered in this category.⁵⁶ For modern science, only ideas and theories which buttress its legitimacy and functionality could be considered as pertinent and become incorporated into it, not the accumulated wisdom of humanity or traditional intellectual disciplines that came to existence in light of the teachings of revealed truths. Quite the opposite, for modern science there is a deep dichotomy between the two, and they cannot be reconciled by any means.⁵⁷

Yet, from Nursi’s perspective things looked different. At the time, he considered the quantification of science as an important step towards the

52. See Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 163; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Richmond: Routledge, 1993), 16.

53. See Kalin, “Three Views of Sciences in the Islamic World,” 51.

54. Compare with René Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity & the Signs of the Times*, tr. Lord Northbourne (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2000), 120-1.

55. See Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 14-16. A careful reading of the rest of the discussion shows the existence of a bifurcation in Nursi’s categorization of the quantifiable and non-quantifiable. More precisely, towards the end of the “Second Premise” in *Muhakemat*, Nursi emphasized that the type of accumulation he talked about cannot be extended to the spiritual sciences. Although this explanation seems to indicate that he realized the real nature of the linear, progressive conception of science he adopted, his attitude towards traditional disciplines, especially Sufism, indicates that he did not. Nursi’s approach shows that he embraced the compartmentalization of sciences and created a completely separate category for natural sciences apart from spiritual sciences.

56. See Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Paganism* (London: Norton & Co., 1995), 310-11.

57. See Titus Burckhardt, *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science & Sacred Art*, ed. & tr. William Stoddart (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 14.

attainment of knowledge of the Truth, the truths of Islam. He viewed the type of knowledge presented by modern science as a “source of spiritual progress” (*maden-i tekemmül*) and a “means of spiritual enlightenment” (*medar-ı tenevvür*) for himself,⁵⁸ and liberation from the hegemony (*riyaset*) of the clergy for the Christian West.⁵⁹ In his eyes, such liberation could but lead the West to embrace Islamic truths. Therefore, it was of crucial importance for the Islamic world to support the cultivation of modern science. The realization of this project would be the main duty of the Muslim intelligentsia of his time, and there could be no other work which could match the importance of this project in kind.⁶⁰ Thus, modern science meant to Nursi the driving force for the emergence of a new humanity in the West as well as the seed of a new Islamic civilization in the Muslim World.⁶¹

Adoption of the Mechanistic View of the Universe

In addition to the belief that modern science is “universally valid and objective,” another factor which convinced Nursi that an up-to-date exegesis had to be written in light of its findings was his modified version of the theory of correspondence between the Qur’ān and the book of the universe.⁶² With the emergence of modern science, he posited, what bestowed order upon the book of the universe also provided an intelligible and precise way of reading it. The ontological relation between the two was a perfect occasion for the emergence of a new exegesis and this relation had to be used without hesitation.⁶³ This could bring a more intelligible and precise exegesis of the Qur’ān into light,

58. Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyatı I*, 711. (Our Translation)

59. See Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 4.

60. Nursi, *Ibid.*, 4.

61. *Ibid.*, 4, 34-35.

62. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (Chicago: ABC International Group, 2000), 42.

63. Ibrahim Kalin writes: “If the mechanistic view of the universe presents a world-picture in which nothing can remain scientifically unaccounted for, then this proves not the fortuitous generation of the cosmos but its creation by an intelligent agent, which is nothing other than the Divine artisan.” Kalin, “Three Views of Sciences in the Islamic World,” 52-53. Kalin’s approach provides a good departure point to understand the shift from the old Said to new Said, but it does not delineate the whole picture. His statement presents a picture of Nursi’s views reflecting new Said’s tendency to prove the existence of God, but with the old Said’s approach. At the same time, it does not relate the adoption of the mechanistic view of the universe to the exegesis project in a comprehensive manner according to which Nursi first and foremost sought to create an atmosphere to accelerate the formation of a collective will towards progress.

and help the Muslim world progress.

As some have pointed out, this chain of reasoning was a result of the adoption of the mechanistic view of the universe, another aspect of Nursi's intellectual legacy. In reference to this chain of reasoning as reflected in his works and "the machine examples" used by him "to depict the universe,"⁶⁴ some scholars claimed that Nursi adopted the mechanistic view of the universe into his intellectual discourse.⁶⁵ They asserted that his purpose from this adoption was to refute the theory of the "fortuitous generation of the universe,"⁶⁶ and he used the "design (*nizam*) arguments from *kalām*"⁶⁷ as the Islamic basis of this adoption.

In response, a contending position argues that this is a misrepresentation of Nursi's views which stems from a selective reading of his works,⁶⁸ and that he used these examples as a means of simplifying the discussion, while spending a significant part of his intellectual effort on the refutation of material causality. Since the theory of material causality constitutes the basis of the mechanistic outlook, goes the argument, how could he have "incorporated the mechanistic view of the universe within the theistic perspective," while at the same time challenging its theoretical basis?⁶⁹

Regardless of how consistent this defense seems to such contenders, from the perspective of those who claimed that Nursi adopted the mechanistic view of the universe, his refutation attempts do not necessarily lead to the refutation of the mechanistic view of the universe. Rather, it indicates a fragmentary understanding of modern science and the "incorporation of the mechanistic view of the universe within the theistic perspective" by trying to separate it from its philosophical foundation. In this sense, although it seems paradoxical, it becomes natural to see both the presence of the depiction of the universe as a machine and the denial of material causality within the same picture in the *Risale-i Nur*.⁷⁰

For examples of the "portrayal of existing things as machines" in Nursi's

64. *Ibid.*, 53.

65. *Ibid.*, 52-53; Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 203-216.

66. *Ibid.*, 52. For the evolution of the mechanistic view of the universe from being considered as the proof of God to a departure point for His negation in modern western thought see Herbert Butterfield, *The Origins of Modern Science*, Revised ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 128-133.

67. Kalin, "Three Views of Sciences in the Islamic World," 52.

68. See M. Sait Özervâlî, "Said Nursi's Project of Revitalizing Contemporary Islamic Thought," in *Islam at the Crossroads*, 325.

69. *Ibid.*, 326. See also Mermer, "Beyond the 'Modern,'" 131-32.

70. See Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 216.

works, one can start with his comparison of man to “a factory which produces many thanks”:

God Almighty, in order to display His infinite power and unlimited mercy, has made inherent in man an infinite impotence and unlimited want. Further, in order to display the endless embroideries of His Names, He has created man like a machine capable of receiving unlimited varieties of pain, as well as infinite varieties of pleasure. Within that human machine are hundreds of instruments, each of which has different pains and pleasures, different duties and rewards... Beneficial matters like good health, well-being, and pleasures cause man to offer thanks and prompt the human machine to perform its functions in many respects, and thus man becomes like a factory producing thanks...⁷¹

Another example is the miracle of the ‘nocturnal journey’ (*mi‘rāj*). Nursi presented his explanation in the form of a parable in which a magnificent sultan shows the beauty of his palace to one of his dearest subjects so that his other subjects could come to know about his splendor and magnificence. In his explanation, Nursi included the archetypes and depicted them in the form of machines which brought the entire universe into existence. He stated:

As a consequence of this wisdom, he began to build a huge and splendid palace. It was magnificently divided into apartments and mansions. He adorned it with every sort of bejewelled treasure from his coffers, and decorated it with the finest and most gorgeous arts of his own handiwork. He ordered it with the greatest refinements of his knowledge and science, and decked it out and completed it with the miraculous works of his learning....

....Then he appointed one of them as the highest ranking general, invited him up from the lower levels and mansions to tour sphere after sphere in the levels rising one after the other. Showing him the successive machinery and workshops of his wonderful art and the storehouses for the produce coming from below, he brought him to his own particular sphere and private apartment.⁷²

After providing this explanation and in order to remove possible confusions, Nursi went on to answer several questions, some of which were likely self-devised, and in one of them he emphasized machines and workshops as representing the archetypes:

... In your explanations above you say that he made his Ascension in order to rise to the celestial realm and to see the

71. Nursi, *The Flashes*, 28.

72. Nursi, *The Words*, 598-602.

machinery and workshops of the works of art found in the realm of the earth, and the treasuries of their results. What does this mean?”...

As a response:

... This is so extensive that those like us with straitened minds cannot contain and comprehend it. However, we can look at it from afar. Yes, the immaterial workshops and universal laws of the lower world are in the higher worlds. And the fruits of the actions of jinn and men and the results of the actions of all the innumerable creatures on the earth, which is an exhibition of works of art, are also represented in the higher worlds...⁷³

In another interesting example in which Nursi discusses Sufism, he likens man to a “majestic machine” in whose center resides the heart, just as a machine is composed of different parts and the cogwheels that make it work. After providing a brief definition of Sufism, he writes:

Yes, since man is a comprehensive index of the universe, his heart resembles a map of thousands of worlds. For just as innumerable human sciences and fields of knowledge show that man’s brain in his head is a sort of centre of the universe, like a telephone and telegraph exchange for innumerable lines, so too the millions of luminous books written by incalculable saints show that man’s heart in his essential being is the place of manifestation of innumerable truths of the universe, and is their means, and seed.

Thus, since the human heart and brain are at this centre, and comprise the members of a mighty tree in the form of a seed in which have been capsulated the parts and components of an eternal, majestic pertaining to the hereafter, certainly the heart’s Creator willed that the heart should be worked and brought out from the potential to the actual, and developed, and put into action, for that is what He did. Since He willed it, the heart will certainly work like the mind. And the most effective means of working the heart is to be turned towards the truths of belief on the Sufi path through the remembrance of God...⁷⁴

Despite its contention, the indiscriminate use of machine examples as illustrated above shows that Nursi adopted the mechanistic view of the universe, and placed it in the center of his intellectual perspective. One can delineate this perspective as a tendency to conceive being as “becoming,” as an

73. *Ibid.*, 602. Compare with W. Chittick, *Ibn ‘Arabi: Heir to the Prophets* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005), 40-42.

74. Nursi, *Letters*, 518-9. For other examples see Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyatı 1*, 450 and Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyatı 2*, 1216.

entity in process,⁷⁵ and the use of machine examples explains why Nursi was uncritical in their utilization. Yamina Mermer's statements in her co-authored article "Beyond the 'Modern': Sa'id al-Nursi's View of Science" illustrates a good example for the explanation of this conception of being:

One of the salient features of al-Nursi's critique of science is that it does not confine itself to the destruction (and deconstruction) of modern science. As mentioned earlier, al-Nursi's 'offense' combines an attempt to 'redeem' science and cure what Paul Tillich called the 'schizophrenic split in our consciousnesses'. It strives to show that sound reasoning and logic and a more critical understanding of the very *process*⁷⁶ of creation themselves point to the Divine and uphold the truth of revelation as the ultimate expounder on the secrets and finality of creation.⁷⁷

In his book *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, Şerif Mardin pointed to this detail and depicted it as "turning the Sufi point of view on its head."⁷⁸ In Mardin's view, with his new conception of being, Nursi delineated the material reality as more real than it actually is, and in order to link this "reality" in constant process to God, rather than resorting to symbolism⁷⁹ as understood by Mermer, he resorted to the direct interventions of the Creator.⁸⁰ The parallelism Nursi created between the archetypes and the world in process in terms of their "resemblance" to the operation of machines is the most direct indicator of this point, and it shows the extent of the influence the view of the universe Nursi adopted on his conception of being.

This was clearly the systematization of Ash'arite occasionalism⁸¹ put

75. Thomas L. Hankins, *Science and the Enlightenment*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 13; Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 210

76. Emphasis added.

77. Mermer, "Beyond the 'Modern,'" 131-32. See also Yamina B. Mermer, "The Hermeneutical Dimension of Science: A Critical Analysis Based on Said Nursi's Risale-i Nur," *The Muslim World* 89, no. 3/4 (1999), 272.

78. Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 210.

79. Symbolism refers to the metaphysical truth that every level of reality reflects a higher one. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 15.

80. Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 207-216. Principally and in a broader sense this understanding of the relationship between manifestation and God can be related to Nursi's attempt to link the phenomenal world to the Divine attributes in a direct way, without resorting to the intermediary realms.

81. See *ibid.*, 210; Kalin, "Three Views of Science in the Islamic World," 71-72.

forward for the explication of the relationship between the universe and God; and by associating this with the mechanistic view of the universe Nursi gave a different color to it. Nursi's own statements conform to these explanations and show that he turned the Sufi point of view on its head. In *Mektubat* ("The Letters") he stated:

For, in order to attain to a constant awareness of God's presence, a person is not compelled to imagine the universe to be condemned to non-existence and to declare: "There is no existent but He," like those who believe in 'the Unity of Existence,' nor to suppose the universe to be condemned to imprisonment in absolute oblivion and to say, "There is nothing witnessed but He," like those who believe in 'the Unity of Witnessing.' Rather, since the Qur'ān has most explicitly pardoned the universe and released it from execution and imprisonment, one on this path disregards the above, and dismissing beings from working on their own account and employing them on account of the All-Glorious Creator, and in the duty of manifesting the Most Beautiful Names and being mirrors to them, he considers them from the point of view of signifying something other than themselves; and being saved from absolute heedlessness, he enters the Divine presence permanently; he finds a way leading to the Almighty God in everything.⁸²

In another paragraph Nursi depicted his approach as a shortcut to the Truth and likened it to the staff of Moses,⁸³ implying that his path was protected against the errors of the traditional schools. This became an important factor which led him to associate his path with the "legacy of prophethood."⁸⁴ He wrote:

The difference between my path in the distilling of benefit from the Qur'ān and the method of thinkers and philosophers is that I dig wherever I am and the water comes out. They, on the other hand, insist on laying pipes and ducts to bring the water from afar. They build long chains and ladders to above the Throne to bring in the water of life. As they rely on these causes, they have to place millions of proof-keepers all along those long roads to preserve them from the destructiveness of the devils of illusions.⁸⁵

Regardless of whether this was the case or not, in light of the views discussed above, it would not be wrong to claim that Nursi's attempt to write a new exegesis and later establish a new school was closely related to the

82. Nursi, *The Words*, 494.

83. Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* 1, 202.

84. *Ibid.*, 734.

85. As quoted in *Islam at the Crossroads*, 211.

scientific perspective he adopted. This choice affected the future development of his intellectual career, and led him to establish his own school of thought and spirituality.

The Influence of the Contemporary Political Situation and the Popularization of the Qur'ānic Knowledge

In view of the picture depicted above, it might appear that the idea of writing a new exegesis emerged as a result of Nursi's intellectual concerns. However, a closer examination reveals that this idea was an extension of his main political motivations. While this conclusion can be reached by an analysis of Nursi's statements on the relationship between the idea of progress and the necessity of a new exegesis as formulated during the old Said period, it also follows from the views of several scholars. Esat Arslan's argument on the legacy of the old Said period is in line with this important detail, and it helps explain why the question of politics took precedence over his intellectual concerns.

In "Social and Ethical Thought of Bediüzzaman Said-i Kürdi," Arslan argues that during the old Said period Nursi's "cause was not to save the Ottoman Empire;" it was rather to lay "the intellectual and ethical foundations of a new Islamic civilization."⁸⁶ For him, this endeavor reflected a good summary of the legacy of the old Said period, and it provided useful hints on the relationship between Nursi's social theory and Enlightenment thought.⁸⁷ Despite his silence on the exegesis project, as being an old Said project, we can relate it to the same endeavor, and argue that the exegesis project too reflected the political motivations Nursi had in mind while laying out the theoretical basis of his civilization project.

Needless to say, Nursi's civilization project was a reaction to the rise of the modern West, and it sought to facilitate the process of "progress" in the Muslim world. This conviction found its meaning in the idea that "the West progressed and the Muslim world fell behind,"⁸⁸ and as one of the ardent defenders of this idea, he was determined to do something for the reversal of this situation. In *Muhakemat* Nursi related this "decline" to the Muslim community's weakening of the bonds with the Qur'ān,⁸⁹ and he believed that the solution lies in the restoration of their original strength, after which the Muslim world could progress and reach the ideal level of civilization it has deserved since its inception.

Since Nursi held the traditional schools partly responsible for the

86. Arslan, "Social and Ethical Thought of Bediüzzaman Said-i Kürdi," 3, 45.

87. *Ibid.*, 37.

88. See Graham E. Fuller, *The Future of Political Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 4-5.

89. See Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 1-5.

weakening of the ideal relationship between the Qurʾān and the Muslim community, the restoration of this relationship entailed a new, more intelligible exegesis.⁹⁰ He chose the findings of modern science as its basis and defended it with a great vigor, without realizing that this choice gave his exegesis project a marked political element.⁹¹ Moreover, this was a popularization attempt of the Qurʾānic knowledge through a process of rationalization,⁹² and by resorting to the findings of modern science Nursi had chosen the most “suitable” instrument for this project.⁹³ Through these findings, he could make use of the “objective-natured”, “factual” knowledge modern science presented, and provide a solid exegesis to the Muslim community. Thus, they could strengthen their bonds with the Qurʾān and take the necessary steps towards progress.⁹⁴

Nevertheless, Nursi interpreted the picture differently, and propounded the exegesis project as an endeavor reflecting the divine purpose behind the revelation of the Qurʾān.⁹⁵

God’s primary purpose for sending His wise Book is the guidance of people.⁹⁶ All human beings are not on the same level of understanding, nor are they specialists in every branch of science. Therefore, God speaks in His scriptures in a way understandable to everyone. Those of a higher level of understanding and having expert knowledge can benefit from anything that is addressed to all people. But when a work addresses only scholars, things may become difficult for common people. Furthermore, people cannot easily abandon their habits or be freed from the things they have been familiar with for a long time. People often find it hard to deal with abstractions, but find it easier to understand things expressed with metaphors and similes, as these are closer to everyday life.

90. *Ibid.*, 41.

91. This important detail explains well why the subject of catching up with the West and the project of a new exegesis were dealt with in the same book, *Muhakemat*, as well as why Nursi made a very sharp turn from the old Said to the new Said as far as his political views were concerned.

92. See Vahide, “Toward an Intellectual Biography of Said Nursi,” 2; Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 32-35.

93. See Guénou, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, 89-95.

94. It is important to note that in the *Risale-i Nur* collection, Nursi attributed this authority to his inspirations and therefore to the work itself. See Yavuz, “Nur Study Circles (Dershanes) and the Formation of New Religious Consciousness in Turkey,” 297.

95. See Arslan, “Social and Ethical Thought of Bediüzzaman Said-i Kürdî,” 26.

96. A more exact translation of this sentence is “The divine purpose from the Revelation of the wise book is the guidance of majority.”

For this reason, truths are usually presented in familiar terms or forms and thereby effectively presented for guidance.⁹⁷

Although in the succeeding statements he did not ignore the esoteric meanings hidden in the Qur'ānic verses, in the chapter he kept his focus on the popularization of the Qur'ānic knowledge, and concluded his argument in the following way:⁹⁸

The Qur'ān of Miraculous exposition has considered how people can easily understand it and has used styles that are suitable to be presented in this way. The Qur'ān is God's address to human beings in a form that they can understand. The following expressions are examples of this: *He has established Himself on the Supreme Throne* (7:54); *God's Hand is over their hands* (48:10); *Your Lord comes* (89:22); *He saw it (the sun) setting in a spring of hot and black, muddy water* (18:86); *The sun runs the course appointed for it* (36:38). That is how the Qur'ān is, and there can be no doubt that it is God's Word.⁹⁹

What led Nursi to develop a politically motivated intellectual discourse to the extent of including the composition of a new exegesis was his unquestioned adoption of the idea of progress. His unreserved sympathy towards the cultivation of modern science was mainly related to this adoption.¹⁰⁰ Since some other well-known figures of the nineteenth century Muslim world, such as Jamal al-Din Afghani and Muhammad Abduh,¹⁰¹ positioned themselves

97. Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 41.

98. It is important to emphasize that Nursi's explanations are in the form of reminders and they do not complement his work synthetically. This is a general characteristic of the explanations given in *Muhakemat*, and a sign that Nursi was baffled with the process of Islamization of modern science on a theoretical level.

99. Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 41. On the levels of meanings hidden in the Qur'ānic Verses see Kristin Zahra Sands, *Sufi Commentaries on the Quran in Classical Islam*, (New York: Routledge), 8-13.

100. Kalin, "Three Views of Sciences in the Islamic World," 43.

101. In *Divan-ı Harbi* Örfi Nursi cites these names and states that he adhered to their views in the issue of Pan-Islamism. Nevertheless, the way he formulated his intellectual perspective during the old Said period shows that this adherence did not remain limited to the idea of Pan-Islamism. Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı 2*, 1922. See also Arslan, "Social and Ethical Thought of Bediüzzaman Said-i Kürdi," 22-26. Since Abduh sought to revive Islamic rationalism in the twentieth century, he can be considered as a source of inspiration for Nursi's exegesis project. See Richard C. Martin, Mark R. Woodward, and Dwi S. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism and Rational Theology from Medieval School to Modern Symbol*, (Oxford: Oneword), 128-9. On whether or not Nursi was familiar with Abduh's exegesis see Nursi,

in the same way, their intellectual perspective can be said to have exerted a significant influence on Nursi.

Aside from the nuances in their mutual discourses, the common source of inspiration for these figures was their conception of the West, which was primarily based on the idea of a “contest of civilizations.” This perspective created a paralyzing effect on their thinking and led them to develop their notion of the cultivation of modern science accordingly, for the attainment of power the West had reached.¹⁰² Since this conception marked relegation in the meaning of the pursuit of knowledge, it created a negative impact on the totality of the activities related to the domain of thought and spirituality.¹⁰³ Expectedly, it had the same effect in the Islamic world,¹⁰⁴ granting modern science a level of authority beyond its epistemological and methodological limitations.

The most prevalent outcome of this negative impact was the legitimization of modern science as a value-free science for the Muslim mind. By this legitimization, any possible contradiction that the study of modern science could cause between the Islamic and the modern scientific conception of being was relegated to an insignificant level and eliminated from the intellectual discourse without even being opened to discussion. Therefore, the totality of the repercussions the study of modern science could bring about was limited to the domain of morality. “Any kind of problem attached to it, such as the environmental crisis, positivism, materialism etc.,” was to be “solved by adding an ethical dimension to the practice and teaching of it.”¹⁰⁵ Once formulated in this way, the process of “Islamization” of modern science became reduced to a very simple project according to which the “immoral social” elements that the originator of modern science possessed are identified and rejected whereas the intellectual and philosophical elements that make modern science what it is, are accepted and adopted. This formulation found support among the populace as well, and it became the dominant strand of thought in the issue of the cultivation of modern science to this day.

An example of this view can be found among the poems of Mehmet Akif Ersoy:

Take the science of the West and its art,
And dedicate yourself to them fully,

Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı 2, 1244-5.

102. See Kalin, “Three Views of Sciences in the Islamic World,” 43.

103. S. H. Nasr, *Islam and Modern Science*, <http://msa.mit.edu/archives/narspeech1.html>.

104. *Ibid.*

105. Kalin, “Three Views of Sciences in the Islamic World,” 47.

For no longer can anyone live without them,
Since only art and science are value-free,¹⁰⁶

Nursi thought along similar lines when he wrote:

We will prevent the sins and the decadence of [modern] civilization from transgressing the boundaries of our conception of freedom and from entering our civilization through the sword of *Sharia*; the youth of our civilization and its years of youth, its elixir [will] be protected through *Sharia*. In the acquisition of the tenets of [modern] civilization, we can follow the example of Japan because of the fact that they preserved their values, which is essential to ensure the continuity of every nation, in the process of attaining the positive aspects of [modern] civilization from Europe. Since our values blossomed within the universe of Islam, we are obligated to cling to them in two respects [...].¹⁰⁷

The example of Japan's modernization was popular at the time when Nursi made these statements, and it was still popular in the mid-1990s Turkey. Yet, it is problematic to claim that Japan still does, or that it ever did constitute the best model for a comprehensive understanding of the modernization process. The type of resemblance Nursi tried to set up between Japan and the Ottoman Empire with respect to their attempts to modernize, without making any reference to their cultural and religious differences, does not indicate a profound understanding of the modern paradigm shift involved.¹⁰⁸ Rather, it points to a concern with practical considerations by searching for them, oddly enough, in a very distant geography. It clearly excludes the originator of the paradigm shift from the analogy, and tries to create an understanding of it without resorting to its influences on its originator.¹⁰⁹

Later in his life, Nursi accepted the inaccuracy of this approach and reformulated his views accordingly, but without being able to fully address modern man's use of knowledge for the creation of a technology which poses a threat to the very continuity of life on earth.¹¹⁰ Therefore, the question of

106. A. Osman Dönmez, Mehmet Akif ve Modern İlim, <http://www.sizinti.com.tr/konular/ayrinti/mehmet-akif-ve-modern-ilim.html> (accessed March 1, 2011). Our translation.

107. Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* 2, 1933. Our translation.

108. See Nasr, *Islam, Science, Muslims, and Technology*, 187.

109. In this respect, it would not be wrong to say that Nursi's analysis of the modern paradigm shift lacks a philosophical dimension, as this excerpt indicates. Its emphasis on Shari'ah in neutralizing the negative influences of the modernization project shows that Nursi conceives of it as a legal and moral question rather than a question which has a philosophical dimension.

110. This statement symbolizes the relationship between the emergence of the

what kind of conception of being modern science is founded on and the type of technology this conception of being led to remained unanswered.

In his response to questions such as, “Why do you speak of contemporary ‘civilization’ as a civilization that has nothing civil in it? Had you not attempted to convince the Nomads of the advantages of civilization and progress?” Nursi stated:

Because Western civilization as it stands today has contravened the divine fundamental laws, its evils have proved greater than its benefits. The real goals of civilization which are general-well being and happiness in this world have been subverted. Instead of economy and abstemiousness (*kanaat*) we have waste and debauchery, instead of work and service we have laziness and sloth. Thus humanity has simultaneously become very poor and very lazy. The fundamental law of the Qur’ān, which originated in the firmament (*semavi*), is that happiness in life of humanity is in economy and in concentration on work and it is around this principle that the masses and the elite can come together

First: In the state of nomadism people only needed three or four things. And those who could not obtain these three or four products were two out of ten. The present oppressive Western civilization in consequence of its consumption and waste and the stimulation of its appetites has turned nonessentials to essentials and because of mores and habituation this so called civilized man instead of four has twenty needs. And yet he can only obtain two of these twenty. Therefore, contemporary civilization impoverishes man very much...

Second: As the Risale-i Nur points out, while the radio is a great boon (*nimet*), which has partly been used for social purposes (and, therefore, should elicit our gratefulness) on the other hand, four fifths of it is being devoted to fancy, to superficial matters...¹¹¹

The Emergence of Nursi’s School of Thought and Spirituality

The Exegesis Project

Although Nursi’s other books contain complementary information concerning

scientific revolution and the tendency to read the book of the universe independent from revelation. Thus, it also pertains to the fruits of this reading which correspond to modern technology in its negative impacts on the order and harmony of the nature. See Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, 163-190.

111. As quoted in Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 99-100. His initial view on this issue is summarized in his words, “Thank God the radio is a complete *hafidh* with a million tongues which is meant to make all of humanity listen to the Qur’ān.” Ibid., 38.

the nature of the *Risale-i Nur* school, the history of its emergence can be traced primarily through three of his books: *Miınazarat*, *Muhakemat*, and *Mesnevi-i Nuriye*. A close look at *Miınazarat* reveals that Nursi's focus in this work was rather on the establishment of new schools which would teach modern and Islamic sciences together. Nevertheless, in *Muhakemat* this interest shifts to the discussion of the current situation of the traditional schools and the necessity of a new exegesis in light of the findings of modern sciences. Nursi first suggests that this exegesis should be written by a council of scientists. Yet, in the very first pages of the third chapter, he gives the impression that he intended to compose this exegesis, or a sample thereof consisting of three books,¹¹² all by himself. He started writing an exegesis during WWI, and completed a small portion of it, called *İşaratü'l İ'caz*. Yet, the rest of the exegesis never came out. Since *İşaratü'l İ'caz* does not reflect the characteristics of the exegesis project he propounded in *Muhakemat*, the question of whether this was the first book of the exegesis he intended to write remains unanswered.

Let us start with the passage in which he defended the necessity of a new exegesis to be written by a council of scientists who are well versed in modern and religious sciences:

What I would wish to conclude from this premise is the following: [Public] opinion demands a new interpretation of the Qur'an. Each age has characteristics peculiar to itself and therefore has its own needs and demands. Time adds its own interpretation, and new events and developments cause many new meanings to be discovered. What now prevails is scientific public opinion. So, I declare that there should be convened a "parliament of scientists" that would consist of specialists in natural and religious sciences. This parliament should bring into being a new interpretation of the Qur'an, without neglecting reference to the classical interpretations. They should work on the acceptable elements in these, deepening and developing them. We are living under a constitutional regime, so we should follow the principle of consultation in every matter. Public opinion is an observer. The consensus of scholars on a matter is a source of legislation in Islam. Thus, this principle confirms my thesis.¹¹³

In a subsequent chapter he included the current situation of the traditional schools in his explanation as he perceived it, and he related the exegesis project to this evaluation. By discussing the two issues together, he meant that there is a correlation between his exegesis project and the lack of efficacy of the traditional schools in modern times. He stated that:

There are four ladders or ways to reach knowledge of the

112. Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* 2, 1277. See also page 29.

113. Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 20-21.

Creator, which is the highest point beings can reach:

The first is the way of scholarly Sufis (*Ahl al-tahqiq*), which is based on purification of the soul, refinement of the heart, and intuition or inner observation.

The second is the way of the theologians (*mutakallimun*). It is based on two arguments. The first is that the existence of the universe is possible, but not necessary. This is because it is contained in time and space, or is accidental or contingent. So there must be One Who willed its existence and brought it into existence. The second argument is that the universe is not timeless or without beginning; it has a beginning, and this requires the existence of a timeless One Who brought it into existence.

Both of these ways are derived from the Qur'an, but [the abundance of scholarly interpretation created a vicious circle of intellectualization that obscured the original meaning.] The third way belongs to the people of Wisdom or the believing philosophers (*hukama*). [All of these are] open to controversy and the attack of whims or suspicion.¹¹⁴

Afterwards, he cited a fourth way, which he called *Miraj-ı Qur'āni*, claiming that it “is the most direct and the clearest of ways, one which shows the peerless eloquence of the Qur'an, and possible for everyone to follow.”¹¹⁵ In the following sentences he divided the method of *Miraj-ı Qur'āni* into: *Delil-i İnyet* (the argument of providence) and *Delil-i İhtira* (the argument of origination). He defined *Delil-i İnyet* as below:

The first is the argument of assistance, beneficence, and purposefulness. All the Qur'ānic verses that mention the benefits of things and the purposes they serve indicate or are comprised of this argument. This argument is based on the fact that the perfect universal order takes into account beneficence and purposefulness. Whatever exists serves many benefits and purposes and has many instances of wisdom. This categorically rejects and negates the assertions of chance or coincidence.¹¹⁶

He then went on to explain how different “branches of sciences,” modern science in particular, can be employed in reading the existing order in the universe in order to find a way to God through *Delil-i İnyet*. He stated:

Everyone may not be able to reach the Creator through the way of the order of the universe or the purposes of its existence; it is also possible that they may not be able to perceive this order of these purposes. But it is a fact that human thought and the

114. Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 107. Translation slightly modified.

115. *Ibid.*, 107.

116. *Ibid.*, 107.

investigations that support one another over the course of history have led to the foundation of sciences, each of which examines one part of the Book of Universe or a species of existence, and comprises the general rules and principles concerning that species. Where there is no order, it is impossible to deduce or discover general rules and principles. So, since there are such rules and principles that are in effect in the existence and lives of every species, this clearly shows that there is a specific order in every corner of the universe. The sciences based on general rules and principles are proof for the perfect order of universe.

By showing the benefits and purposes attached to the chain of things and beings and the instances of wisdom in the series of changes and revolutions (*inkilab*) that occur over the course of the days, months, seasons, years, centuries, and ages, the sciences indicate and testify to the universal purpose and wisdom of the Maker, functioning as meteors that destroy the devils of doubts and whims.¹¹⁷

As for *Delil-i İhtira*, Nursi defined it in the following manner:

The second basic Qur'ānic argument for God Almighty's existence and Oneness is that of creation or origination. Its summary is as follows: Every species and all members of every species have been given an existence according to the function or purpose assigned to each other and the capacity accorded to each. In addition, no species is a link in a chain that stretches back to eternity of the past, for their existence is contingent or accidental, not absolute. There is a Will that makes a choice between their existence and nonexistence, and a Power that gives them existence. Existence is clearly not timeless but it is contained in time and space, and therefore it has a beginning.¹¹⁸

Although the two approaches merge in their position on the theory of coincidental origination of existence, the explanations in the paragraphs seem to indicate that Nursi sought to utilize *Delil-i İhtira* specifically for the purpose of refuting the theory of evolution.

Before continuing with the explanation of *Delil-i İhtira* he provided a reminder on how the verses of the Qur'an reflect *Delil-i İna'yet*, and concluded that this would be apparent in the three books of Qur'ānic commentary he was going to write from the perspective of social and natural sciences.¹¹⁹ In this picture, in which the three schools of Islamic thought and spirituality were rendered inefficacious and modern science was made the primary standard

117. *Ibid.*, 108.

118. *Ibid.*, 109.

119. This part does not exist in the English translation. Compare to Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyatı* 2, 1277.

for evaluating the truth, reason inevitably emerged as the main instrument of knowledge, and even gained an autonomous legitimacy in approaching the Qur'anic truths, both in their apprehension and interpretation.¹²⁰ Moreover, the conception of time acquired a new meaning, becoming an essential point of reference in understanding the truths of the revelation,¹²¹ yet an insufficient one. Therefore, Nursi turned to a different frame of reference during the new Said period for the source of certitude, namely his inspirations, and he composed the *Risale-i Nur* collection as the fruit of these inspirations.

The Risale-i Nur Project

When it comes to the details of this transformation, namely the emergence of the *Risale-i Nur* School, they are also found in the introduction of *Mesnevi-i Nuriye*.¹²² In the section, Nursi discusses the issue in a fairly detailed way, and provides all of the hints which led him to establish the *Risale-i Nur* school.

Thus, far from being an accident the establishment of this school was a conscious choice after a long search for a new path to the Truth. Nursi specifically states that his pursuits, intellectual and spiritual, prepared the ground for the emergence of the *Risale-i Nur* collection.¹²³ He also emphasizes that the impetus which turned his attention from the exegesis project to the establishment of a new path was his spiritual crisis. Apparently, his overemphasis on reason in approaching the Qur'an had influenced his spiritual life negatively, driving him into a different direction.¹²⁴ Therefore,

120. See Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 11.

121. See Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* 2, 1944. See also footnote 121.

122. *Ibid.*, 1277-8.

123. This can be inferred from his approach towards the traditional schools and the emphasis he placed on the importance of the emergence of a new exegesis, but it is still crucial to hear this confession from Nursi himself.

124. See Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* 2, 1277-8. Nursi explained the emergence of the *Risale-i Nur* path in a more comprehensive paragraph where he stated, "Sixty years ago, I was searching for a way to reach reality that was appropriate for the present age; I was searching for a shortcut to obtain firm faith and complete understanding of Islam that would not be shaken by the attacks of numerous harmful currents. First I had recourse to the way of the philosophers; I wanted to reach the truth with just reason. But I reached it only twice with extreme difficulty. Then I looked and saw that even the greatest geniuses of mankind had gone only half the way, and that only one or two had been able to reach the truth by means of reason alone. So I told myself that a way which even then I had been unable to take could not be made general, and I gave it up... Then I had recourse to the way of Sufism and studied it. I saw that it was truly luminous and effulgent, but that

with not so many choices at hand, he was compelled to work on a different option, a new path, which would quench his thirst for the Truth beyond the limitations of his rational quests. This inclination became his departure point for the emergence of the *Risale-i Nur*. As his writings grew, they crystallized into the *Risale-i Nur* school and constituted Nursi's new school of thought and spirituality. Nursi summarized this experience as below:

[Forty-fifty years ago,] since the Old Said proceeded more in the rational and philosophical sciences, he started to look for a way to the essence of reality like that of the Sufis (*ehl-i tarikat*) and the mystics (*ehl-i hakikat*). But he was not content to proceed with the heart only like the Sufis, for his intellect and thought were to a degree wounded by philosophy; a cure was needed. Then, he wanted to follow some of the great mystics who approached reality with both the heart and the mind, and each of whom had different points of attraction. He was bewildered as to which of them to follow." None of the great figures, such as Imam Ghazzālī, Mevlana Jalal al-Din Rumi, or Imam-i Rabbani, answered all of his needs.¹²⁵

While in this state, "it was imparted to the Old Said's much wounded heart" that the one true master was the Holy Qur'ān. It occurred to him "through Divine Mercy" that "the head of these various ways and the source of these streams and the sun of these planets is the All-Wise Qur'an; the true single *kible* is to be found in it. In which case, it is also the most elevated guide and most holy master. So I clasped it with both hands and clung on to it."¹²⁶

Thus, having realized that he needed a spiritual guide, Nursi considered different alternatives, but interestingly not a living master in the traditional sense of the term. Yet, he was not satisfied with any of them. Thereupon, he sought out the help of the well-known figure of Islamic spirituality, Ahmad Faruq Sirhindi (d. 1624), by relying on his works for guidance. During these readings he came across two letters addressing a person whose name happened

it needed the greatest caution. Only the highest of the elite could take that way. So, saying that this cannot be the way for everyone at this time, either, I sought help from the Qur'an and praise be to God, the *Risale-i Nur* was bestowed upon me, which is a safe, short way inspired by the Qur'an for the believers of the present time." Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 167.

125. Vahide, *The Author of the Risale-i Nur*, 166. Although the paragraph is not very explicit, it seems that Nursi felt obliged to decide between practicing Sufism along with the intellectual studies he had been involved in his early years of life and finding an alternative method of spirituality which excludes the practice of Sufism.

126. Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 166.

to be Bediüzzaman. Due to some other coincidental similarities between the person addressed and Nursi, he read the letters as if the master was addressing him.¹²⁷ Since in the letters Sirhindi was advising his interlocutor to “unite his *qiblah*”, that is, to give allegiance only to one master Nursi decided to do the same. After spending some time pondering on this advice in bewilderment, he decided to unite his *qiblah* in the Qur’ān, that is, instead of giving allegiance to a human master, he chose the Qur’ān as his spiritual guide.¹²⁸

Even though this experience constituted a crucial turning point in Nursi’s spiritual life, it was not the only incident which prepared the ground for the emergence of the *Risale-i Nur* path. Probably, it was a second experience with another book written by the great Sufi saint ‘Abd al-Qadir Jilani (d. 1166), *Futūḥ al-ghayb*, which inspired Nursi that a work can represent an “alliance of reason and the heart.” It led him to believe that, in addition to containing intellectual knowledge, a book can replace a human being as a spiritual guide.

To elaborate on the experience, during his spiritual crisis Nursi discovered *Futūḥ al-ghayb*, and while going through its text he saw a statement which he deemed as pertinent to his own situation.¹²⁹ He interpreted the statement as follows:

Oh, you unfortunate! As a member of the *Daru’l-Hikmeti’l-Islamiye* you are like a doctor curing the spiritual sicknesses of the people of Islam, whereas it is you who is sicker than anyone. First find a doctor for yourself then try to cure others.¹³⁰

Upon this statement, Nursi paid more attention to *Futūḥ al-ghayb* and he considered it to be his doctor, his guide, and read the book “as if the master is addressing him.” Yet, since the master was chastising one of his disciples very sternly, Nursi found the book harsh and took a one-week break. After the break, he started reading it again and this time he finished the book, and since it ‘attacked [his] ego,’ he considered it to have been a medicine for his soul. He writes that he was spiritually transformed.¹³¹ Consequently, in addition to the first experience he had with the two letters written by Sirhindi, this second experience became another cornerstone in his efforts toward the attainment of spiritual perfection and, it is likely that their combination prepared the

127. Vahide *The Author of the Risale-i Nur*, 166.

128. This decision came as a result of the conviction that was in line with Nursi’s belief that the “Qur’ān is the real master [the fountainhead of the whole of Islamic thought and spirituality]; therefore it is the best guide in which one can “unite his *qiblah*.” *Ibid.*, 167; Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyatı* 2, 1277-8, 1297.

129. See Vahide, *The Author of the Risale-i Nur*, 5.

130. *Ibid.*, 166.

131. *Ibid.*, 166.

ground for the establishment of the *Risale-i Nur* school.

With these last steps, in addition to disassociating himself from *kalām* and *hikmah* Nursi also distanced himself from Sufism. Thus, the *Risale-i Nur* school has emerged as *the* source to resort to and *the* guide for his followers, both in intellectual and spiritual matters.

Characteristics of the Risale-i Nur Path

In the beginning of this paper we stated that in Nursi's eyes the *Risale-i Nur* collection represents an "alliance of reason and the heart." Therefore, any solid attempt to define the nature of the *Risale-i Nur* school should first clarify the nature of this alliance. This alliance can be seen as the fruit of a pursuit which is neither rationalistic, as in the old Said period, nor esoteric; but something between the two. In other terms, it can be described as an active and passive reading of the Qur'ān in the mirror of the book of the universe without following a systematic intellectual and spiritual discipline, whether traditional or modern, in its own methodological approach, but relying on inspiration instead.¹³² Parallel to this use of reason in approaching the Qur'ān, the use of the heart can be defined as a passive annihilation of oneself before the Qur'ān. Thus the Divine Book can read itself to the seeker beyond the limitations of the perspective he developed.¹³³ Since Nursi negated a part of the intellectual legacy of the old Said period and tried to minimize the role of reason in approaching the Qur'ān, he presented the fruit of this reading as an alliance of reason and the heart.¹³⁴ More specifically, he defined this alliance as standing on four spiritual and intellectual elements, *ajz* (spiritual weakness), *faqr* (spiritual poverty), *şefkat* (compassion) and *tafakkur* (contemplation) and gave a more definite color to the content of the collection.

In the manner these elements are used in the *Risale-i Nur*; it would not be wrong to say that they manifest themselves in the form of a constant attempt of refuting "horizontal causality"¹³⁵ accompanied by Nursi's struggle with his

132. See Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* 2, 1307.

133. *Ibid.*, 1297.

134. *Ibid.*, 1297, 1307.

135. The opening chapter of *Mesnevi-i Nuriye*, book I of the *Risale-i Nur* collection, constitutes a good example in terms of the centrality of the refutation of material causality in new Said's discourse. See Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* 2, 1278; and *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* 1, 191-192, 711. See also Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 216; Şükran Vahide "The Importance of the Risale-i Nur for the West," in *The Ideas of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi in the Thirtieth Year since His Death and Their Place in Islamic Thought*, 170.

carnal soul,¹³⁶ supported by frequent use of logical inferences,¹³⁷ and presented in a quasi-poetic language.¹³⁸ This combination constitutes the general characteristic of the *Risale-i Nur* collection and bestows it its efficacy. In Nursi's view this combination provides the seeker with a clear understanding of God, and more importantly, without compelling him to take a long intellectual and spiritual journey as required by the traditional schools.¹³⁹

Let us start with his refutation of horizontal causality. As we alluded earlier, the most salient feature of the new Said period was the systematization of "Ash'arite occasionalism." In religious terminology this approach can be summarized by the formula *La musabbibah illa Hu*, no cause but God, due to the very strong emphasis in the *Risale-i Nur* on the refutation of the material causality.¹⁴⁰ With this emphasis, Nursi intended to show that the "regularities of nature" i.e. the laws in nature are a scientific construction. The link between cause and effect is illusory, for there is no cause other than God Himself. The more one sees this "illusion", the better one comes to realize the existence of an Ultimate Power working behind the perfectly "operating" order.¹⁴¹

According to this formulation, the idea of order that Nursi emphasized so much in the old Said period is still present in his new discourse, but in a different way. For the new Said, this idea is still an indicator of the existence of God, but not as it would be with the help of a systematic branch of science whose very existence is also provided by this order. It should, rather, do so with the dissolution of all causal relationships which make the orderly universe possible, but which also "veil" the Real Cause in the mind of the seeker.¹⁴²

Thus, it can be said that with this emphasis Nursi took the opposite position of the one he defended at the time of old Said, and what he once considered to be the object of study of science – the regularities of nature – lost its basis in reality.¹⁴³ In the language of the new Said, every single act turned to a miracle and this miraculous picture presented a continuous order within a

136. Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* 2, 1297, 1307.

137. Vahide, "A Survey of the Main Spiritual Themes of the *Risale-i Nur*," 4. See also Mermer, "Beyond the 'Modern,'" 123.

138. See Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 176-177.

139. See Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* 2, 1277-1278, 1304; Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* 1, 734.

140. His "denial of authorship to his work" can be considered as an extension of this perspective. See Yavuz "Nur Study Circles (*Derşhanes*) and the Formation of New Religious Consciousness in Turkey," 299.

141. See Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* 1, 191-2.

142. See *ibid.*, 191, 711. Compare Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 196-197.

143. See Mermer, "The hermeneutical dimension of science," 276.

“discontinuous chaos”¹⁴⁴ or within the fragmented parts of reality.

As far as the spiritual aspect of the work is concerned, unlike his exegesis project, Nursi sought to incorporate within his *Risale-i Nur* collection a dimension of spirituality and his struggle with his carnal soul came to fill this gap.¹⁴⁵ While *Mesnevi-i Nuriye* represents the summary of this struggle as the first book of the collection, one can see traces of the elaboration of this struggle within the entire collection.¹⁴⁶

With this integration Nursi sought to convince his readers that they were under the sway of their carnal souls and would remain so unless they came to realize and overcome this imprisonment. This struggle’s link with the general characteristic of the *Risale-i Nur* lies in his effort to draw the reader’s attention to his inherent human weaknesses which made him vulnerable to the negative influences of his carnal soul.¹⁴⁷ Just as he emphasized the inability of an agent in the chain of being in bringing about the expected result into existence, Nursi tried to turn the attention of his disciples to their innate weakness, and claimed that it is primarily through the awareness of this weakness that one can attain a clear sense of God.

This line of reasoning comes out clearly in a passage from the *Risale-i Nur* collection in which Nursi compares the characteristics of various paths leading to the Truth by way of an allegory. In the analogy he depicts the one which works through dissolution of the feeling of potency within the seeker as the most effective method. He writes:

...And so, my friend, whoever has not forgotten the world is preoccupied with materiality, and whose soul is dense! You be ‘Flower’. ‘Flower’ takes on a color dissolved from the Sun’s light, and it mixes the Sun’s image in with that color and clothes itself in an adorned form. For your capacity resembles it as well. Then let this philosopher who has studied secular science and is plunged in causes like the Old Said be ‘Droplet’, which is enamored of the Moon. For the Moon affords him the shadow of light it has received from the Sun, and it gives a light to the pupil of his eye. ‘Droplet’ too shines with the light, but he can only see the Moon with it, he cannot see the Sun. Rather, he can only see it through his belief. Then, let this poor man be ‘Atom’, who knows everything to be directly from Almighty God and considers causes to be a veil. He is such an ‘Atom’ that knows himself to be poor in his own self. He has nothing on which

144. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Philosophy from its Origin to the Present* (Albany: SUNY, 2006), 130. For a different perspective see Mermer, “The hermeneutical dimension of science,” 276.

145. Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati 2*, 1297 and Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati 2*, 1307.

146. *Ibid.*, 1297.

147. The first parables of the *Words* can be read as an example.

to depend so as to rely on himself like 'Flower'. He possesses no color that he should appear through it. And he does not recognize other things that he should turn towards them. He has a sheer purity by which he holds the Sun's image directly in the pupil of his eye.

...And now our atom-like third friend, who is both poor and colorless. He swiftly evaporates in the Sun's heat, abandons his egotism, mounts the stream, and rises into the air. The dense matter within him takes fire with the flame of love and is transformed into light and radiance. He adheres to a ray proceeding from the manifestations of that light, and draws close to it. O you who resembles 'Atom'! Since you act as a direct mirror to the Sun, at whatever degree you are, you will find an opening, a window, looking purely at the Sun itself in a fashion that affords absolute certainty. And you will experience no difficulty in attributing to the Sun its wondrous works...¹⁴⁸

According to his formulation, once one detaches oneself from the illusory nature of causal relations to the extent of seeing his own innate weakness in order to bring about an expected effect, one directly finds oneself attached to the Truth, to God. From the viewpoint of Nursi, this approach creates a shorter way to God and it is more influential in addressing the majority of believers. It is for this reason that he considered the path he discovered to be a short path from the negation of the potency of the soul (*nafs*) to God, whereas he considered Sufism to be a longer path with two stages: from illusory love to the love of God. He stated:

When impotence removes the hand from the soul, it gives it directly to the All-Powerful One of Glory. Whereas, when the way of ecstatic love, the swiftest way, takes the hand away from the soul, it attaches it to the metaphorical beloved. Only after the beloved is found to be impermanent does it go to the True Beloved.¹⁴⁹

In fact, the "illusory" nature of the relationship between cause and effect is not a new subject in the history of Islamic thought, and it was interpreted in a similar manner by Ghazzālī, but not at the expense of a supra-sensible experience of the Truth, as was done by Nursi. While there is a strong emphasis in Ghazzālī's discourse on the "illusory" nature of the relationship between cause and effect,¹⁵⁰ this realization is not meant to provide knowledge of God

148. Nursi, *The Words*, 348-50.

149. *Ibid.*, 493-4.

150. See Massimo Campanini, "Al-Ghazzālī," in *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 1996), 262-3.

similar or superior to the experiential knowledge of Him.¹⁵¹ On the contrary, in Nursi's discourse, though it is somewhat ambiguous, there is an emphasis that such a realization can replace the supra-sensible experience of God.¹⁵² In his explanations, Nursi seems more in favor of a mental apprehension of God rather than a supra-sensible vision of Him, and he presents the *Risale-i Nur* path as an alternative to the latter. Namely, Nursi presents the *Risale-i Nur* school not only as an alternative to the traditional schools of Islamic thought but also as an alternative to the main strand of Islamic spirituality, Sufism.¹⁵³

As for the language of the *Risale-i Nur*, it can be said that this is one of the most important characteristics of the work enabling Nursi to convey his message to the reader in an influential way. Şerif Mardin describes this language as "incantatory" and claims that, in the formation of the *Risale-i Nur* group, this style is more important than the content of the work itself. This is due to the fact that, according to Mardin, this style gives the work a mystical quality, and establishes its relationship with the reader through this quality. While reading, one feels that one is in a mystical quest and regardless of how much one reads, one will not be able to exhaust the content. Naturally, this aspect gives the work a remarkably high level of authority, and contributes significantly to the expansion of the *Risale-i Nur* circles.¹⁵⁴

Mardin relates the *sui generis* style of the work mainly to three factors: Nursi's native language, which is Kurdish, his experience of Arabic, and the tendency to imitate the style of the Qur'ān, recognizing them as the main reasons in the creation of this "quasi-magical" influence. As opposed to how Mardin sees it, Nursi relates the efficacy of this style to its being also an inspiration from God, just like the content itself. He therefore states that he did not make any correction to the general structure of the work. By this Nursi also meant that the content of the work and its style are like body and soul to each other, and they cannot be separated. For the preservation of its quality as a path, the work should be kept as it is, and it must not be simplified or altered, be it linguistically or contextually.¹⁵⁵

What should perhaps be added to these interpretations is the influence of the *Futuh al-ghayb* on Nursi. Given that he designed the *Risale-i Nur* as a path which would provide guidance to the reader, he had to choose a language conducive to this choice. Therefore, whether or not it was the fruit of an inspiration, he composed it in a way which would give the reader a sense

151. *Ibid.*, 266-8.

152. See the introduction of the *Mesnevi-i Nuriye*. Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyati* 2, 1277.

153. See Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyati* 1, 734.

154. *Ibid.*, 177.

155. See Yavuz, "Nur Study Circles...", 299.

of being addressed by a master, that is, in an incantatory style. Nevertheless, unlike the style of *Futuh al-ghayb*, which is stern, he used a paternal language. This was in line with his belief that “the civilized [person] is conquered by persuasion, not by force,” and it is likely that it also reflected the element of compassion (*şefkat*) in the work’s linguistic style.

In other terms, by choice of its author, the *Risale-i Nur* collection was designed as a path, and thus it had to have a proper style to this choice. Therefore, it was written in a quasi-poetic style so that the reader could accompany Nursi in his spiritual and intellectual journey. This companionship is to a great extent provided by the language of the work, through which one journeys by internalizing Nursi’s perspective not just as an ordinary reader, but by becoming a follower. The only difference between Nursi and the disciple is that while Nursi submitted himself to the Qur’ān, the disciple is expected to submit himself to the work.

This means that, if one takes Nursi’s reading of the Qur’ān and the book of the universe in a passive mode as the norm, as the first two premises of the *Risale-i Nur* path, *ajz* and *faqr* demand, the language of the work is expected to transmit the same level of passivity to the reader towards the work. It seeks to provide the knowledge of the Truth to the disciple accordingly. Nursi’s statements regarding the nature of the *Risale-i Nur* are in conformity with this formulation, and for this realization he advises the reader to read the text repeatedly.¹⁵⁶ He argues that through these readings what is known by him would come to be known by the disciple, and this knowledge would contribute to his spiritual transformation.¹⁵⁷

As for the use of logical inferences, they represent a central intellectual aspect of the work and, much like Nursi’s poetic style, their use increases the work’s level of efficacy in conveying Nursi’s message to the disciple. This is an aspect Mardin neglects to address in his explanation which depicted the *Risale-i Nur* collection as “mytho-poetic integration.”¹⁵⁸ However, as opposed to what he defended in the explanation, which is dominance of “a metaphorical and allusive style,” Nursi’s resorting to logical inferences is as dominant as the utilization of a “metaphorical and allusive style.” There is no doubt it is this style of the work which brings the reader’s mood to a receptive level, but it is mostly through the frequent use of the logical inferences that Nursi seeks to substantiate his claims.¹⁵⁹

However, while on the one hand these inferences contribute to the efficacy of the work, on the other hand they give the *Risale-i Nur* collection,

156. Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati* 2, 1307.

157. *Ibid.*, 1307.

158. See Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 176.

159. Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati* 2, 2225.

as some have pointed out, a rationalistic outlook.¹⁶⁰ Aside from the fact that these repetitions are the source of the rational outlook in the *Risale-i Nur*, this outlook is likely related to Nursi's past intellectual project towards the rationalization of Islamic thought.¹⁶¹ During the new Said period, Nursi claimed that he had already overcome this dilemma. Nevertheless, the mode in which he developed his discourse and the lack of emphasis on the antidote to rationalism - mysticism in general and Sufism in particular - point to the fact that this may not be the case.¹⁶² In his rebuttal of material causality and the claims of anti-religious currents of thought, Nursi generally relied on reason rather than a broader framework which takes the inner dimension of Islam into account, as well as the philosophical underpinnings of those currents of thought. As a result, this stance gave his discourse a rationalistic outlook. Thus, even at the time of new Said, Nursi was inclined to rationalism and his mind was still operating within the limits drawn by the old Said period with the influence of Enlightenment thought.

This tendency can also be seen in Nursi's approach to the question of esoterism as a source of knowledge. In continuation of the old Said period perspective, Nursi approached the question of esoterism very "cautiously",¹⁶³ and removed the spiritual unveiling (*kashf*) and *dhawk-i ruhani* from the epistemological map he devised.¹⁶⁴ In an even more unusual move, he placed them in the category of worldly bounties and insisted that they should not be exchanged with their paradisiacal equivalents through attainment in this world. As a result they were relegated to a lesser position. By doing so, he also limited the level of knowing to the mental faculty¹⁶⁵ and, in a sense, completed

160. Mermer, "Beyond the 'Modern,'" 123-24; Turner, *Said Nursi*, 2-3.

161. For a specific example compare the "Eighth Principle" of *Muhakemat* with Kant's article "What is Enlightenment." Even if they are not identical, the similarity between the two is very clear. See Marvin Perry, Joseph R. Peden, and Theodore H. Von Laue, *From the Renaissance to the Present: Sources of the Western Tradition*, 5th ed. Vol. II. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 54-55.

162. For a comparison between false mysticism and rationalism in terms of their impacts on religious understanding see Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as a Way*, tr. William Stoddart (Pates Manor: Perennial Books, 1981), 39. On the relationship between rationalism and materialism, see Sir Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 34.

163. See Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, 176.

164. Compare with Reza Shah-Kazemi who considers *dhawk-i ruhani* as a natural outcome, as a *sine qua non* of the encounter with the Truth. See his *Justice and Remembrance* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 45-46.

165. A problematic point is not Nursi's emphasis of the mental activity in the

what he defended during the time of old Said, referred to above as – the rationalization of Islamic thought – at the time of new Said.¹⁶⁶

As an example we can cite the story of two people of a high spiritual state, through which Nursi explains the exchange of worldly bounties with their paradisiacal equivalents. According to the story, the couple is on the verge of starvation and this situation makes the wife very anxious. She starts complaining about their extreme poverty. As soon as she finishes speaking, a golden brick appears by her side. Bewildered by this incident, she asks her husband what it is. The husband says that it is a brick from the palace that would be built for them in the hereafter; it was sent to this world as a remedy for their poverty. Had they used it here, they would have squandered a paradisiacal bounty in this world. Upon this explanation, the wife decides that she does not want to use the golden brick in this world. Thereupon, the brick disappears and goes back to where it belongs.¹⁶⁷

Through this analogy Nursi draws a resemblance between the worldly bounties and the supra-sensible experiences of the Sufi path and he places *kashf* and *dhawq-i ruhani* in the category of worldly bounties. Much like the use of the golden brick, he concludes, the attainment of these experiences might cause deprivation in the hereafter. Therefore it is better to stay away from these spiritual and intellectual gifts in order to avoid wasting their paradisiacal equivalents in this world. Nursi reportedly based this claim on the interpretation of the Qurʾānic verse, *And on the day when those who disbelieve are exposed to the Fire (it will be said): Ye squandered your good things in the life of the world and sought comfort therein. Now this day ye are rewarded with the doom of ignominy because ye are disdainful in the land without a right, and because ye used to transgress* (46:20). It appears that Nursi believed that this verse also applies to Muslims. Therefore, he came to the conclusion that Muslims too should be careful in how they benefit from worldly bounties, regardless of whether they fall into the category of the permitted or the forbidden, so as not to be deprived of their heavenly correspondents. He extended the scope of the meaning of the verse to *kashf* and *dhawq-i ruhani*, an acknowledged means of attaining knowledge and its supra-sensible fruit in the intellectual and spiritual tradition of Islam, thereby possibly creating a new dilemma concerning the future of this tradition.¹⁶⁸

attainment of knowledge of the Truth, but his exclusion of presential knowledge of the Truth, which makes his approach rationalistic and relates it to the Enlightenment mentality. See Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 42. See also Mahdī Ḥāʾirī Yazdī, *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence* (Albany: SUNY, 1992).

166. See Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* 2, 734, 1674, 1714.

167. See Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı* 2, 1714.

168. See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Science: An Illustrated Study* (Westerham:

Conclusion

According to the picture depicted in this study, Nursi composed the *Risale-i Nur* collection as a new school and primarily as an alternative to the traditional Islamic schools of thought and spirituality. His encounter with Enlightenment views and the modern scientific outlook became influential in this undertaking and to a great extent provided Nursi with a departure point. Although he had rejected this heritage prior to composing his grand work, his rejection remained by and large within the parameters of the intellectual outlook he adopted during the old Said period. Therefore, even in his second position he responded not to Enlightenment views or the premises of modern science, but rather, to the views of the old Said as he understood them. In consequence, it can be claimed that Nursi's second position marked the emergence of a guide for individuals whereby one may protect himself against the attacks of the atheistic and positivistic currents on an individual level, not a systematic work dealing with the views and the premises alluded above. However, since this positioning had its complications on a theoretical level outside Nursi's perception of them, some questions concerning the continuity of the Islamic intellectual and spiritual tradition, such as how to study modern science from the perspective of this tradition and whether one can still speak about an Islamic intellectual and spiritual tradition within the parameters set by the *Risale-i Nur* itself, have remained unanswered.