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Spiritual Dimensions of  
Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's  
*Risale-i Nur*

Edited and with an Introduction by  
Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi'

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## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

### *History, Politics, and Charisma in Risale-i Nur*

Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi'

The objective of the chapters included herein is to present the reader with a picture of the spiritual dimensions of a major religious movement in the contemporary Muslim world by focusing on the spiritual ideas of its leader, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi. The Nur community is one of the most significant religious and social movements in contemporary Turkey, with millions of adherents and a strong institutional and educational system running across the country.

Modernity poses a curious set of problems to the modern and contemporary Muslim world. It is nearly impossible to summarize modernity in a few statements; however, it suffices to say that a great number of intellectual forces, institutions, and ideas have emerged within modernity since its historical beginnings in the fifteenth century. Throughout its long history in modern European societies and during European colonialism in various regions in the world, modernity has given birth to such modern phenomena as secularism, nationalism, capitalism, socialism, imperialism, colonization, and modern criticism.

There were several Ottoman responses to the nineteenth-century question of European modernity and the threat it posed to the integrity of the Ottoman state: first was the response of the modernizing elite in the Ottoman Empire, which opted to modernize the infrastructure of the Empire while preserving the status of Islam in that society. The second response was aimed at preserving the Ottoman Empire without giving any central role to Islam in either society or politics. The third response was nationalist in orientation and was mainly represented by Turkish nationalists who did not much care about empire or religion.

The fourth was more mass-oriented than the previous positions, and focused on religious community, text, and Shari'ah.

It is within these four major configurations that one must locate Ottoman debate about religion, civil society, constitution, modernization, and progress. Also, it is within this tumult that a critical appreciation of the Islamic tradition among a small but influential number of Ottoman Muslim intelligentsia emerged. This critical examination of tradition took place on at least on two fronts: (1) the Sufi front, especially the Naqshebandia tariqah and the efforts of Mawlana Khalid al-Naqshebandi to revive Sufism in the nineteenth-century Ottoman empire, and (2) on the front of dialectical theology, or *ilm kalam* or *yeni Osmanli kelam* pioneered by a number of Ottoman intellectuals in the nineteenth century.

This critical examination of Muslim tradition was necessary because the empire itself was going through some major changes, and the Muslim intelligentsia felt that it was their duty to revive the Muslim notion of *ummah* and connect it to nation and state. One may argue that *ummah*, nation, and state are the three terms that most aptly summarize Ottoman political philosophy in the nineteenth century. Nursi himself dealt with these three concepts in various ways throughout his religious and intellectual life. However, after the defeat of the Ottoman army in World War One, Nursi turned his attention to Islamic spirituality and the spiritual mission of Islamic communities in a new era marked by radical secularism and Westernization.

Nursi scholars are fond of dividing the philosopher's life into the "Old Said" and the "Young Said" periods. In his "old" phase, Nursi was totally immersed in traditional Islamic sciences and was actively pursuing a single mission: saving the Ottoman Empire from further decay and loss. In his "young" phase, Nursi focused less on saving the Empire and more on saving Islamic spirituality and ethics in a secular age. In his first phase, Nursi fought on many different fronts. He understood that there were deep gaps between 'center' and 'periphery' in the Ottoman Empire. As someone who belonged to the periphery, he sought to remedy the situation by advocating far-reaching educational, constitutional, and social reforms.

Nursi did all this with a view toward solidifying the bond between *ummah*, nation, and empire in the Ottoman state. That is, he did what he did in the name of Islamic solidarity. He tried to revive the Ibn Khaldunian notion of solidarity in a new age, and he did this on the basis of his understanding of Islamic identity. He thought that it was possible to accept the tremendous institutional and social changes that began within the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the nineteenth century while reviving the great bond between *ummah* and empire. Nursi argued that religion (i.e., Islam) must be organically linked to empire to

preserve its identity in the modern era. He basically did not see any contradiction between Islamic bondage and the major changes that had been taking place in the empire since the early days of Tanzimāt.

However, Nursi went through a radical transformation after World War One. Generally speaking, Nursi was disappointed with the failure of the empire to preserve Islam and began to look into new ways to promote Islam and its spirituality in a radically new phase of modern Turkey. Right after World War One, Nursi became well aware of the fact that it was a matter of time before the empire would be dismantled; that there were powerful forces, both internal and external, that were no longer interested in preserving the political integrity of the Ottoman Empire. He was aware of all of this because he was captured for two years during World War One while fighting for the Ottoman army.

While at some point Nursi was ready to let go of the empire, he was not ready to give up on Islam and the Muslim *ummah*. These two concepts began to acquire strong spiritual meaning for him. He still thought of the Muslim world in a universal sense and was anxious to preserve the great bond between the Turkish nation and Islam. He still thought of the Turkish nation not in nationalist terms, but in ummatic terms. And clearly, this went against the grain of the leading political authorities in the post-Ottoman phase of Turkey. The most dominant political current, epitomized by Kemal Atatürk and his comrades, defended the notion of severing ties between the Turkish nation and the Muslim world and attempted to relegate religion to a secondary status in the lives of the Turkish people.

Said Nursi and his comrades, on the other hand, were the only group to intellectually defend the traditional bond between the Turkish nation and the Muslim *ummah*. As we know, Nursi refused to subscribe to the European notion of nation when he denied assistance to the Shaykh Said rebellion, a Kurdish rebellion against the state in the mid-1920s.

As mentioned, empire, nation, and *ummah* played significant roles in Nursi's intellectual life, especially before World War One. With the progress of years, a new constellation of forces came to the fore in Nursi's life and that of his community in a secularized Turkey. This new constellation of forces can be called text-individual-community.

The text is, of course, Nursi's magnum opus, *Risale-i Nur*, which begins to take shape from the 1920s on. And the *Risale-i Nur* must be seen as Nursi's deep reflection on the Quran in light of the modern and rapidly changing conditions in Turkey. However, there is a central dimension of the text that many scholars have overlooked. The text was not a simple exegesis of the Quran; it was a product of Nursi's crisis, imprisonment, exile, and alienation. I believe his experiences give *Risale-i Nur* a unique edge. The text is similar in this sense to the

works of Antonio Gramsci in Italy and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Germany under Nazi authorities. It is a text forged from tremendous pain and suffering in the extreme. This is the main reason why the text is so charismatic.

Despite his spiritual, psychological, and emotional struggles, Nursi had an objective goal, which was to preserve the integrity of Islam in the high age of radical secularism. He immersed himself in the infinite treasures of the Islamic sacred to express his new position and achieve his goal. In so doing, he was also expressing the feelings of numerous people who were not affected by the new secular formula of nation, Turkification, and Westernization.

It is in this context that we must read the chapters in this book. The world is indeed fortunate that leading scholars of Nursi's work and spirituality shed light on a spiritual tradition in modern and contemporary Turkey that has steadfastly survived the secular project of Kemalism.

In conclusion, I sincerely thank Dr. Faris Kaya of the Istanbul Science and Culture Foundation for conceiving of the idea for this book and supporting its progress from the beginning.



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ONE

A SURVEY OF THE MAIN SPIRITUAL  
THEMES OF THE *RISALE-I NUR*

Şükran Vahide

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Written at a time that the drive for Westernization and secularization was gaining momentum in Turkey, the primary purpose of the *Risale-i Nur* is the revitalization of the faith of the ordinary believers, along with moral renewal. Employing a method derived largely from the Quran, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1877–1960) aimed to expound and prove the fundamental truths and tenets of the Islamic religion and instill a Quranic worldview based on the affirmation of divine unity (*tawhid*), at the same time disproving the basic assumptions of such materialist philosophies as positivism and naturalism, with which the government of the time intended to replace Islam. Supporting all his assertions with proofs and reasoned arguments, Nursi set out to demonstrate the logical coherence and validity of the Quranic view of existence and the falsity of the scientific view underlying Western modernity. The greater part of the *Risale-i Nur* deals with these questions, and is designed to offer a “direct” way, relevant to contemporary needs, of gaining conscious, affirmative belief in, and knowledge of, God by means of reflective thought on “the book of the universe” and the divine names manifested on its pages. From this it may be seen that for the most part the contents of the *Risale-i Nur* may be subsumed under the rubric of spirituality.

Thus, in this chapter, by spirituality is meant that dimension of Islam that encompasses the endeavor to gain and increase in faith in God, and in knowledge and awareness of Him, sometimes called its inner dimension, rather than its dimension related to legal matters, its scholarly disciplines, or the formal practices of the religion, which by the same token are said to be its outer dimensions.

Nursi, however, only uses the term “spiritual” (*rūhānī*) in this sense, in reference to Sufism and to the saints (*evliya*) and people of sainthood (*ehl-i velāyet*), by which he almost invariably means followers of the Sufi paths. For instance,

Underlying the terms Sufism, path, sainthood, and spiritual journeying is an agreeable, luminous, joyful, and spiritual sacred truth (. . . *rūhānī bir hakikat-i kudsiyye*).<sup>1</sup> The aim and goal of the Sufi path is—knowledge of God and the unfolding of the truths of belief—through a spiritual journeying (*bir seyr ü sülūk rūhānī*) with the feet of the heart. . . . and all the saints of his community make their spiritual journeyings under the shadow of the Ascension, with the spirit and heart (*rūhānī ve kalbī bir tarzda*).<sup>2</sup>

Nursi does not use the term spiritual in reference to the *Risale-i Nur* and its way, and is at pains to illustrate the differences between it and the Sufi way, as shall be shown. A term that may be considered an equivalent is “*mānevī*,” which he uses in its sense of pertaining to meaning, as opposed to material, physical, or related to form (*maddī*). The term, which is fundamental to Nursi’s general method or approach and is an important concept if not actually a theme, is mentioned in several contexts below.

Moreover, Nursi argues against the view that Sufism is the inner dimension of Islam, and the Shari’ah, as the body of formal injunctions and ordinances, its outward dimension:

The ways of the Sufi orders (*tarikāt*) and of reality (*hakikat*) are like means, servants, and steps for reaching the truths of the Shari’ah, till at the highest level they are transformed into the meaning of reality and essence of the Sufi way, which are at the heart of the Shari’ah. . . . it is not right to think of the Shari’ah as an outer shell, and reality as its inner part and result and aim, as some Sufis do.<sup>3</sup>

It may be added in connection with connotations of the word spiritual, which infer opposition or conflict between matter and spirit, that since Islam admits no dichotomy or opposition between corporeality and spirit, or between the visible, manifest world (*ālem-i şehadet*) and the nonmaterial worlds hidden from human perception (*avālim-i gayb*), all forming an indivisible whole and being various faces and gradations of the same reality, and making every aspect of “the world” and existence in a sense sacred, neither faith or belief (*imān*), nor knowledge of God, nor the purification of the self, can be disembodied or

isolated from the so-called outer dimensions of Islam, or indeed from the physical world. This, too, should be borne in mind when using the terms spirituality and spiritual. To reiterate, the terms are used in this chapter in a broad sense to refer to the endeavor to attain to and increase in faith in God, and in knowledge of Him and awareness of His presence.

With the *Risale-i Nur*, Said Nursi was attempting to construct a way of comprehending and practicing Islam at a time when, with the abolition of the Ottoman medrese system and the interdiction on the Sufi orders, an effective stop had been put to religious education, and, moreover, there were sustained assaults on religious belief and Islam on both the ideological and practical levels. He therefore made it first a general way that addresses all classes and types of people, and second, in his writings in order to achieve his main purpose of the revitalization of faith, he sought to bring together or, more accurately perhaps, perform the essential functions of various traditional religious sciences such as *kalām*, *'aqā'id*, *usūl-al dīn*, and *tafsīr*. He sought, too, to incorporate modern scientific knowledge, and with his overall method, which was derived from the Quran, satisfy inner spiritual needs. Thus, while constructing a system of thought that would answer the needs of the day, Nursi drew on existing institutions and traditions and in many cases took existing terms and concepts and adapted them to suit his way. Some of these will be mentioned in the course of this chapter. The introductory section of the survey will examine three basic themes of the *Risale-i Nur*: belief/faith; the way of the *Risale-i Nur* and reality; and the Quran. This will be followed by four main sections that, within the framework of the four fundamental principles of the *Risale-i Nur*'s "way," will attempt to investigate its main spiritual themes.

## BELIEF/FAITH

Belief or faith (*imān*) is the central theme of the *Risale-i Nur*, and the renewal and strengthening of belief its purpose and primary function. Nursi states this explicitly in many places in the work. For example: "The *Risale-i Nur*'s function is to strengthen and save belief. We are charged with serving [the cause of] belief."<sup>4</sup> And, "With the assaults of science and philosophy, and the contagion[s] of materialism and naturalism spreading through humanity, [its function] is first and foremost to save belief in such a way as to silence philosophy and materialistic ideas."<sup>5</sup> So, too, he attributes the present weak state of Islam first to the damage it has suffered over a thousand-year period from the infiltration of alien ideas, and second to the intellectual assaults of the present and to those furthering the ends of such currents. The purpose of the *Risale-i Nur* is to repair

that vast damage by "striving to cure with the medicines of the Quran and belief . . . the collective heart and generally-held ideas . . . and general conscience."<sup>6</sup> In other words, it is to revitalize the faith of the mass of believers by offering certain proofs of the fundamentals of belief by means of a method derived from the Quran, relevantly to the present situation, in a way that addresses both the intellect, the heart, and the conscience.

As a Quranic commentary the chief aim of which is the renewal of faith, the *Risale-i Nur* interprets and elucidates the Quran's call to men to believe in the world's Maker, its central message. Indeed, according to verse 51:56, "I created not jinn and mankind except that they might worship [Me]," faith is the central issue of creation. In expounding this verse, Nursi points out that to recognize, believe in, and worship the Creator of all things is "man's primordial duty" and is a requirement of his inborn nature.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, a theme running through Nursi's proofs of "the pillars of belief," around which most of the discussions in the *Risale-i Nur* revolve, is the necessity of faith; that is, he not only marshals all the elements of his method—logical proofs, reasoned arguments based on observation of the natural world, allegorical comparisons, and so on—to persuade his readers of the necessary truth of the Creator's existence and unity and other truths of belief; he also shows that the universe itself and its beings including man—and indeed the findings of science—necessitate them.<sup>8</sup> However, this necessity becomes clear only when beings are observed in the manner of the Quran. This crucial element of Nursi's method, called the "indicative viewpoint or meaning of things (*māna-yı harfî*)," is discussed in greater detail below. In addition, Nursi sets out to demonstrate the invalidity and impossibility of the ideas and concepts underlying unbelief.<sup>9</sup>

Another theme related to the pillars of belief is the interrelation and indivisibility of those pillars. For Nursi, "Belief is a single truth, which, composed of its six pillars, cannot be divided up. It is a universal that cannot be separated into parts. . . . In which case, an invalid idea that cannot shake all the pillars together with all their proofs, cannot in reality negate any one of the pillars, or even a single of their truths, and cannot deny them."<sup>10</sup> This interrelation is pointed out and demonstrated in most of the discussions of the *Risale-i Nur*.

A matter to which great importance is attached in the *Risale-i Nur* is that since the true nature of man and the cosmos is fully disclosed by the divine revelation of the Quran and is to be seen by the eye of belief, it is only in faith in this sense that human beings can find true happiness and fulfillment. In other words, if man himself and the world in which he finds himself are not "illuminated" by belief and the meaning and purpose it imparts to them, he

remains in the "darkness" of purposeless transience. The means Nursi most often employs to persuade his readers of this are comparisons between belief and unbelief or "philosophy,"<sup>11</sup> which analyze both states and illustrate their results from various angles.

The emphasis in the *Risale-i Nur* is on the strengthening and renewal of faith, and on inculcating Quranic morals and teaching the basics of "universal worship," yet it contains little discussion about "works (*amel*)" in the legal and formal sense. One can say that it deals with questions of faith to the exclusion of works. It allots minimal space to discussion of classic questions of debate such as the nature and relation of faith and works, though in reply to a question Nursi restates the orthodox position on the mutual relation of faith (*imān*) and Islam.<sup>12</sup> He does not enter into the debate on the possible increase and decrease of faith,<sup>13</sup> but he does offer illuminating discussion on "the degrees" of faith and certainty. It is probably fair to say that since Nursi was addressing all levels and classes of people at a time when the fundamentals of religion were under threat, he deemed it necessary to limit the discussions of the *Risale-i Nur* to questions directly related to its primary purpose.

For this same reason, since the *Risale-i Nur* is a popular, didactic work and was written at a time when people had no access to religious education, Nursi brought together and encapsulated the gist of various traditional religious sciences<sup>14</sup> so that it might perform their essential functions. His intention was to combine these with both modern scientific knowledge and the knowledge of the Quran, and to utilize all of them in proving his main theses.<sup>15</sup> However, because his propositions were mostly related to the truths of belief and were derived from the Quran, he termed the knowledge of the *Risale-i Nur* "the sciences of belief (*ulūm-u imāniye*)," which he informs us, is "the type of knowledge that the Quran teaches."<sup>16</sup> Besides its curative properties for spiritual wounds,<sup>17</sup> the particular characteristic of this knowledge is its being "the sustenance and light for numerous human inner faculties, in addition to the intellect."<sup>18</sup>

Nursi thus acknowledges the role of knowledge in belief and accords it an important place in his scheme. Indeed, as is well known, the cognitive elements of faith have always been emphasized in Islam.<sup>19</sup> Making one of his frequent comparisons, he emphasizes that faith is "knowledge, pertains to existence, and is an affirmation and a judgement,"<sup>20</sup> while for unbelief he uses such terms as "an evil, a destruction, and an absence of affirmation,"<sup>21</sup> and "denial, ignorance, and negation."<sup>22</sup>

The knowledge of the *Risale-i Nur* is the corollary of the powerful faith or belief that Nursi was aiming to gain for people, which he calls *imān-ı tahkikî*; that is, certain, affirmative belief or belief by investigation. As a conscious

assent and verification, it is the opposite of belief by imitation (*taklidi iman*), which Nursi felt could be easily negated by the skepticism of the scientific age. The strength of such belief lies in its suffusing man's heart, spirit, and other inner faculties as well as satisfying his intellect, which all then become immune to the whisperings of Satan.<sup>23</sup>

Aided by "the sciences of belief," certain, affirmative belief has innumerable degrees and levels; it may grow from being merely seed-like to resemble a mighty date-palm. It is related to thousands of the divine names and to the truths of the universe related to the pillars of faith. Ultimately it may unfold to a degree in which the whole universe will be read as though it were a Quran.<sup>24</sup> Further light will be thrown on this in the section on reflective thought.

### THE *RISALE-I NUR*'S WAY

Said Nursi characterizes the *Risale-i Nur* as being a "way" or "method," which, proceeding on the four principles of impotence, poverty, compassion, and reflection, is a direct way to reality (*hakikat*). According to Nursi, "all true paths are taken from the Quran, [but] some are shorter, safer, and more general than others."<sup>25</sup> He places this way within "the legacy of prophethood," rather than in the Sufi tradition, and frequently when explaining it compares and contrasts it with the latter. "It is reality (*hakikat*) rather than *tarik*at. It is Shari'ah." Thus, *hakikat* and various derivatives of the same root referring to aspects of the *Risale-i Nur*'s way form another major theme that should be examined here. The meaning he attaches to *hakikat* will I hope become clear in the course of this chapter. Nursi's use of this threefold categorization of Shari'ah, *Tarikat*, and *Hakikat*,<sup>26</sup> which is generally associated with Sufism, yet adapting it to fit his own system, suggests his intention to update and renew the existing traditions, rather than to innovate completely.

In the years following the demise of the Ottoman Empire, it was Nursi's immersion in certain works of Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi, Shaikh 'Abd al-Qadir Gilani, and presumably others, and his constant reading of the collection of prayers and litanies of leading Sufi figures, *Majmu'at al-Ahzāb*,<sup>27</sup> that led him to take the path of reality and resolved his spiritual crisis, allowing the New Said to emerge. The works he wrote thereafter expounded this way of gaining knowledge of God, which is derived from the pure *tawhid* of the Quran and its verses mentioning the divine names. He amplified and elaborated it when he started to write the *Risale-i Nur*, making it a general way based on reflective thought on the natural world that aimed to prove the fundamentals of belief.

According to Nursi, the way he propounds in the *Risale-i Nur* consists of “knowledge of [or the science of] reality (*ilm-i hakikat*),” and receives “the effulgence of the legacy of prophethood (*verāset-i nübüvvet*), [known as] the greater sainthood.”<sup>28</sup> Nursi quotes Sirhindi as specifying three grades of sainthood (*velāyet*): “The greater sainthood (*velāyet-i kübrā*) is to open up by way of the legacy of prophethood a direct way to reality without entering the intermediate realm of Sufism.”<sup>29</sup>

This very short though elevated path “looks to the unfolding of divine immediacy (*akrebiyet*).”<sup>30</sup> For there are two ways of passing from the apparent to reality: one is to traverse the degrees through spiritual journeying, as in Sufism. The second is to pass directly to reality without entering the intermediate realm of Sufism. According to Nursi, this way is particular to the Companions of the Prophet and those who succeeded them.<sup>31</sup> It was Nursi’s wish that the *Risale-i Nur* possessed the qualities necessary to effect this.<sup>32</sup>

In establishing his way of reality derived from “the highway of the Quran,” Nursi was, besides eloquently defending “the rights of beings” against materialist philosophy’s accusations of meaningless and purposelessness, pointing out some of the inconsistencies of Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas concerning the Unity of Existence, which, according to Nursi, “in order to truly affirm divine unity and fully enter God’s presence . . . relegates the universe to the level of imagination and casts it into non-existence.”<sup>33</sup>

Nursi argues that the realities (*hakikat*) of beings are rays of the divine name of Truth (*Hakk*) and the manifestation of His names and attributes. The reality of each and every thing, including man, is based on a name and relies on its reality. Things are not merely insignificant forms without reality.<sup>34</sup> The universal rule of this highway of the Companions and their successors is “the reality of things is constant (*thabita*).” Almighty God has a manifestation through all His names in actuality. Such names as Merciful and Provider are real and actual, and require actual mirrors—beings needy for sustenance and beneficence. Through His creativity, all things have accidental existence. Relatively to His necessary existence it is extremely weak and unstable, but it is not imagination.<sup>35</sup>

In addition, Nursi describes this way by contrasting it with the purely rational methods of the Islamic philosophers (*hükema*) and the ulama. These he likens to bringing water from the far reaches of the world by means of pipes and conduits, which may get broken or blocked. Through an instance of the miraculousness of the Quran’s meaning (*Kur’an’ın bir i’caz-ı mânevisiyle*), the way it teaches causes the water of life to flow forth wherever it strikes, like Moses’ staff; “it opens a window yielding knowledge of God in everything.”<sup>36</sup>

## THE QURAN

The third major theme of the *Risale-i Nur* to be examined in this introductory section is the Quran. Since his youth, it had been Nursi's goal in life to demonstrate to the world the Quran's miraculous nature and inimitability, and that it was the source of true knowledge and of the guiding principles for human life. His aim was to update Quranic exegesis and other Islamic sciences in order to explicate it in the light of contemporary advances in knowledge. *Isharat al-I'jaz*<sup>37</sup> (1913–1914) was one fruit of his endeavors. It was in the course of his transformation into the New Said that on the indication of Sirhindi he took "that most lofty guide and holy master" as his sole guide and dedicated himself to the study of it and to finding a way of expounding and proving its truths to the people of the present. He absorbed its meanings to such an extent that when writing the *Risale-i Nur* he claimed that it "had no source but the Quran";<sup>38</sup> that it had "issued from the Quran";<sup>39</sup> and that its verses had been his "absolute master directly."<sup>40</sup>

In response to queries about the *Risale-i Nur*, arising from its original form and styles, Nursi characterized it as being "a true and powerful commentary [on the Quran]";<sup>41</sup> a type of commentary that "expounds, proves, and elucidates with powerful arguments, the Quran's truths related to belief";<sup>42</sup> and "a commentary on the Quran's meanings (*mānevī tefsir*) that silences obstinate philosophers in unprecedented manner."<sup>43</sup>

As has been noted, Nursi made wide use of the term "*mānevī*" in a variety of contexts and with varying meanings such as nonmaterial or pertaining to meaning. It gives a clue as to what he was trying to achieve with the *Risale-i Nur*. He uses it also in connection with the *Risale* and the Quran's miraculousness, apparently ascribing the *Risale-i Nur*'s efficacy to the miraculousness of the Quran's meanings. For instance, he says: "As a miracle of the Qu'ran's meanings (*Kur'an'ın bir mānevī mucizesi olarak*), the *Risale-i Nur* saves the fundamentals of belief";<sup>44</sup> the *Risale-i Nur* is "one ray of the miraculousness of the Quran of Miraculous Exposition's meanings (*i'caz-ı manevisinin bir şuaı*)";<sup>45</sup> and the *Risale-i Nur*'s solving numerous riddles of creation and mysteries of religion was "directly the work of the miraculousness of the All-Wise Quran's meanings."<sup>46</sup>

The inimitability of the meanings the Quran expresses is only one aspect of its miraculousness. Nursi expounds numerous aspects of it. He claimed to have pointed out almost forty aspects in the first works of the New Said, written in Arabic and later put together in *al-Mathnawī al-'Arabī al-Nūrī*, and in *Ishārāt al-I'jāz*, which deals chiefly with literary aspects of the Quran's miraculousness;



its word-order, eloquence, and use of various literary devices. The Twenty-Fifth Word is the part of the *Risale-i Nur* that is proved and elaborated in greatest detail. Other aspects that he mentions are its youth and its addressing all classes and levels of men in every age;<sup>47</sup> its solving the riddles of the universe;<sup>48</sup> numerous aspects of its eloquence, and also its conciseness;<sup>49</sup> and its use of allegorical comparisons.<sup>50</sup>

The attribute of the Quran that is most emphasized in the *Risale-i Nur*, however, so that it has almost become identified with the *Risale*, is the Quran's being what Nursi calls "the pre-eternal translator of the book of the universe"; in other words, the Quran's interpreting and making meaningful the processes of the natural world with its verses describing the divine acts and the names from which they proceed. This question will be dealt with in greater detail in the section on reflective thought.

A further theme of the *Risale-i Nur* that may be subsumed under that of the Quran is its comparisons between the wisdom of the Quran and philosophy and science. These comparisons, which should be distinguished from the allegorical comparisons of a more abstract nature, are an effective device designed to illustrate the true wisdom of the Quran in several respects and the unwisdom of philosophy and the differences between them. Nursi makes wide use of them to illustrate the wisdom and purposes (*hikmet*) of things, which are a manifestation of the divine name of All-Wise, and a theme underlying many of his discussions. His emphasis on the purpose and use of teleological proofs was probably a response to the denial of ultimate causes by materialist thinkers like Büchner, who were influential in early twentieth-century Turkey, and their refutation of the order of the universe.<sup>51</sup> Seen through the filter of such thinkers' works, scientific discoveries had caused everything to be questioned.

## IMPOTENCE AND POVERTY

Impotence and poverty are two of the four main principles of the *Risale-i Nur*'s way. Signifying man's powerlessness and incapability before his Maker, and his want and neediness, they are two basic concepts in Nursi's system of thought. He describes impotence as being a path that, like ecstatic love, leads to winning God's love by way of worship, but is safer. Poverty leads to the divine name of All-Merciful.<sup>52</sup>

According to Nursi, infinite impotence, weakness, poverty, and need are intrinsic to human nature,<sup>53</sup> for "The essence of humanity has been kneaded" with them. One of man's innate duties is to recognize this and proclaim it before

the Most Merciful One by seeking his needs. To do so is, in Nursi's words, "to fly to the high station of worship of God and servitude to Him (*ubūdiyyet*) on the wings of impotence and poverty."<sup>54</sup>

This is the path of prophethood, inspired by divine revelation, which is the origin of sheer worship. It teaches "that the aim of humanity and duty of human beings is . . . knowing their impotence to seek refuge in divine power, by seeing their weakness to rely on divine strength, by realizing their poverty to trust in divine mercy."<sup>55</sup>

Just as the darkness of the night is a perfect mirror for displaying electric light, so man's vast impotence and poverty have the reverse function of allowing man to act as an extensive mirror to "the innumerable manifestations of the All-Powerful and Compassionate One Whose power is infinite, the All-Generous and Rich One whose wealth is boundless."<sup>56</sup>

References to man's mirror-like essence are found throughout the *Risale-i Nur*. For example, "Through its impotence, weakness, poverty, and need, my life acts as a mirror to the power, strength, wealth, and mercy of the Creator of life."<sup>57</sup> Not only human beings, all creatures act as mirrors to the Maker's power and riches through their impotence and poverty.<sup>58</sup>

Further, it is because of man's innate weakness and impotence that beings have been subjugated to him by divine mercy, not because of human power and dominance.<sup>59</sup> Thus, Nursi argues that human progress and civilization have been achieved not through man's conquering them or through combat but because he has been assisted by divine compassion and mercy due to his impotence; they have been given them due to his need.<sup>60</sup>

Another point Nursi frequently draws attention to is man's need to have recourse to the power and mercy of the All-Powerful and Compassionate One due to his innumerable enemies and needs on the one hand, and his impotence and poverty on the other.<sup>61</sup>

It is because of this that, after belief, man's primary innate duty is supplication. And supplication, Nursi informs us, "is the basis of worship of God and servitude to Him."<sup>62</sup> That is, the reason Almighty God made man infinitely weak and impotent was so that "he would perpetually seek refuge at the divine court and beseech and supplicate."<sup>63</sup>

## MAN AND HIS FACULTIES

Before examining the major themes of worship, servitude, and supplication, it will be useful to look at Nursi's treatment of man and his abilities and faculties.

With the *Risale-i Nur*'s way as one of universal worship (*ubūdiyet-i külliye*), Nursi assigns much space to analysis and descriptions of the human being, his comprehensive nature and many faculties, and his duties and functions. For, in Nursi's view, it is because of his duties and rank that man has importance. In respect of his face that looks to the ego and the life of this world, and to the soul (*nefs*) and physicality, he is insignificant.<sup>64</sup> If he is perfected through belief and Islam, and in regard to humanity and servitude to God, he may rise to universality within his particularity and to a position whereby he discerningly reads the book of the universe and oversees its creatures and benefits from them. In this way, according to Nursi, he rises to "the highest of the high and becomes the Most Excellent Pattern of the universe (*ahsen-i takvim*—Quran, 95:4)." Here, to illuminate this question, we will take a brief look at Nursi's interpretation of, first, the 'I' or ego; second, the evil-commanding soul (*nefs-i emmāre*); and third, man's comprehensive nature.

### *The 'I' (ene)*

According to Nursi, man's 'I' or ego is one component of the Trust mentioned in Quran 33:72, and is the key both to the divine names and what he calls "the locked talisman of creation." Thus, when the 'I' is understood correctly, so may the mysteries of the universe be solved, and the divine names be understood. Crucial to the understanding of this fundamental question is the concept of the indicative meaning of things (*māna-yı harfî*), and the nominal meaning, which is related to viewpoint and was Nursi's major finding during his intense inner search as the New Said was emerging following World War One. It is one of the pivotal concepts of the *Risale-i Nur* and is discussed further in the section on reflective thought. As far as the 'I' is concerned, what it means is that the 'I' should be seen as possessing only apparent or imaginary power and other attributes, and as being mirror-like, indicating the true power, knowledge, and ownership of its Maker. That is, the 'I' "is a sort of scale or measure that makes known the absolute, all-encompassing attributes of the Necessary Being." When perceived in this way, the 'I' abandons its imaginary ownership and, ascribing both itself and other beings to their True Owner, sees the universe as it is in reality and "the duties it is performing." It purifies the soul, carries out the Trust, and achieves true worship. If, however, it fails to do this, as it ascribes power and ownership to itself, so it does to causes in the outside world. Thus, it betrays the Trust and, not seeing the universe as it is in reality, attributes partners to God on a grand scale.<sup>65</sup>

### *The Evil-Commanding Soul*

Being the way of the Companions of the Prophet, the *Risale-i Nur*'s method is to purify and cleanse the evil-commanding soul, rather than to kill or annihilate it as with the Sufis and saints. For by virtue of the many faculties within the soul, the Companions performed a greater variety of worship, thanks, and praise, while the saints' worship acquires a simplicity and plainness.<sup>66</sup> According to Nursi, although the human soul is dense like earth, on condition it is purified, it may rise above all the other subtle faculties because of its comprehensiveness.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, Nursi's analyses and discussions of the sicknesses and tricks of the unregenerate soul and his suggestions for its cure and purification form another major theme of the *Risale-i Nur*. The Addendum describing the path of impotence, poverty, compassion, and reflection, which consists of four steps, is Nursi's most systematic exposition of his method of purifying the soul.<sup>68</sup> Other references and remedies are found scattered through the volumes of the *Risale-i Nur*. In the Addendum he gives brief explanations of the four steps, each of which is inspired by a verse from the Quran, and then explains how it is shorter, safer, and more universal than various Sufi paths, for by means of it a person may find a way leading to God in everything.

Nursi points out the positive functions of the soul, one of the most important of which is its being a means of perpetual striving and therefore of moral and spiritual progress,<sup>69</sup> and he suggests that a person should train his soul with compassion while seeing its shortcomings,<sup>70</sup> but he still does not fail to draw attention to its evils and pitfalls.

A final matter that may be cited as a related theme is Nursi's condemnation of "philosophy," and modern civilization, which springs from it, for their gratifying and inflating the appetitive soul.<sup>71</sup> He equates philosophy with the soul,<sup>72</sup> and the soul with nature, as put forward by the naturalists, in the world.<sup>73</sup>

### *Man's Comprehensive Nature*

Nursi dwells at length on the comprehensive abilities and faculties given to man, which make him the center and conscious fruit of the universe,<sup>74</sup> and "the chief pivot of the works of [divine] dominicality"<sup>75</sup>—that is, the center of the Sustainer's administration and regulation of all beings. "Most of the wisdom, aims, purposes, and benefits in the universe look to man." The reason for their focus on him in this way is his comprehensive nature, by virtue of which he can understand and experience all the divine names manifested in the universe.<sup>76</sup>

Reworking the theme of man's virtual worthlessness regarding his transitory physical being and his supreme importance in regard to the duties and rank he assumes through belief and Islam, Nursi in many places lists the rising levels of divine bounties and expanding spheres from corporeal life up through humanity, which extends as far as the mind can reach, then Islam and belief, which encompass the spheres of contingency and of the divine names and attributes, to knowledge and love of God. At each he describes the human senses and faculties with which man may weigh the divine gifts and understand the divine names manifested in it. In this way, he is raised up from petty particularity "to an exalted luminous universality."<sup>77</sup>

Since man possesses the faculties and abilities to receive all those bounties and to reflect the divine names manifested in the cosmos, he is like a point of focus displaying together all the names in the mirror of his essence, thus proclaiming God's oneness (*ehadiyet*).<sup>78</sup>

There are thus two main aims in the creation of man's senses and faculties: the first is thanks and worship, and the second is to make known to him the divine names so that he should believe in them.<sup>79</sup> He has many other duties and functions;<sup>80</sup> his heart, spirit, intellect, imagination, and other subtle faculties each has duties of worship peculiar to it.<sup>81</sup>

The perfect man is he who, driving all those subtle senses towards reality on the different ways of worship particular to them, marches heroically like the Companions in a broad arena and rich fashion towards the goal, with the heart as commander and the subtle faculties as soldiers.<sup>82</sup>

### WORSHIP, SERVITUDE, AND SUPPLICATION

We have seen how man is created with a comprehensive disposition, as a comprehensive mirror, thus being prepared for universal worship. That is, Nursi counts as worship (*ubūdiyyet*) all the acts a person performs with his limbs, members, senses, and faculties, physical, mental, and spiritual, when he perceives both the latter and the objects in the outside world as mirror-like creatures reflecting the divine names, and he performs his actions consciously offering thanks, praise, and worship. Now we will examine a number of other themes related to worship and supplication.

As has been mentioned, in expounding the Quran, Nursi points out that all the branches of knowledge and sciences, being based on the divine names, are in

essence truth and reality. Thus, part of man's universal worship is the practicing and advancing of knowledge and science.<sup>83</sup> For this reason, he describes as "valuable worship" the work of "craftsmen and artists and inspired inventors who purely for the benefit of God's servants, serve the general interest and public well-being and betterment of social life."<sup>84</sup>

Furthermore, in a short treatise on supplication, in which he explains its three main sorts, Nursi says: "The greater part of human progress and most discoveries are the result of a sort of supplication. . . . They were asked for with a sincere tongue of latent ability and so were given."<sup>85</sup>

A key theme running through Nursi's expositions of worship is the exalted worship of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who is shown to be the model in many matters. According to Nursi, the comprehensive worship performed by the Prophet was at the very highest degree and earned for him the title of God's Beloved.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, just as his messengership was the reason for the creation of this world, so his worship was the cause of the foundation of the next.<sup>87</sup> Nursi also frequently cites the Prophet's prayers and supplications, the essence and basis of worship, as being the reason for the creation of eternal felicity.<sup>88</sup> He even extends this prayer to include all beings, saying: "[The Prophet] is beseeching for a need so universal that . . . all beings join in his prayer . . . he supplicates with such want . . . that he leads the whole cosmos to join in his prayer."<sup>89</sup>

Nursi looked on the reading of the *Risale-i Nur* itself, and the practice of the reflective thought it teaches, as worship,<sup>90</sup> and this "sacred" aspect of the work is enhanced by the fact that each part of it is concluded by a verse, or verses, from the Quran and sometimes a short prayer. Parts of it are actually in the form of supplications or invocations, such as the Twenty-Ninth Flash, in Arabic, and the Third Ray, in Turkish. These latter are summarized versions of the reflective journeys through the cosmos described in various parts of the *Risale-i Nur*, and reiterate some of the arguments and ideas they put forward. Furthermore, Nursi considered the recitation of such supplications as *al-Jawshan al-Kabîr*,<sup>91</sup> and particularly the litanies (*tesbihat*) recited following the five daily prayers, to be an essential part of the *Risale-i Nur*'s "way."<sup>92</sup>

### *Cosmic Worship and Glorification of God*

The reading of the tongues of beings and the glorifications of God they utter through displaying manifestations of the divine names is the purpose of the reflective thought on the universe that is discussed below. Here is included a brief outline of what this worship of beings consists of.

First, according to Nursi, it was only through the light brought by Muhammad (PBUH) that the universe was raised to life and "transformed into a place where God's names are recited in joy and ecstasy." Previously to the sending of the Quran, it had been a dark place of mourning, filled with dumb, dead, insensate creatures.<sup>93</sup>

Second, from Nursi's descriptions it seems that the beings of the universe perform worship and glorifications in myriad ways. For instance, "the perfect worship and obedience of the angels and spirit beings" on the one hand, and the conformity and submissive obedience to the divine laws and general order of all beings animate and inanimate on the other, are forms of worship that indicate the existence of an object of worship.<sup>94</sup>

In expounding Quran 22:18, which "states explicitly that everything from . . . planets to particles prostrates, worship, praises, and glorifies God," Nursi divides beings into four categories and explains their duties of worship, which, he tells us, "vary according to their capacities and the divine names that they manifest." The four categories of beings employed in the palace of the universe are the angels, the animals, plants and inanimate creatures, and human beings.<sup>95</sup>

One of the most frequently mentioned of the angels' functions is their representing in the angelic tongue in the World of the Inner Dimensions of Things (*melekûkiyet*), and presenting to the divine court, the glorifications of the external beings of the universe. Another is their being bearers of the divine command. In interpreting certain allegorical hadiths, Nursi explains their duties of representation in terms of universals as well as particulars, thus showing that "although external beings are outwardly inanimate and unconscious, they all perform extremely vital, living, and conscious duties and glorification."<sup>96</sup>

Nursi explains causality in terms of supplication, with the refutation of nature and causality being one of the main purposes of the *Risale-i Nur*. He says that the gathering together of causes is a supplication for the creation of the effect. For a tree, for example, "which is a miracle of divine power," cannot be attributed to the lifeless substances surrounding it. This is a form of supplication through the tongue of latent ability. Supplication through the tongue of innate need, made by all living creatures, is another sort. In fact, Nursi says: "All that rises to the divine court is supplication. Those things that are causes seek the effects from God."<sup>97</sup>

## COMPASSION

Compassion (*şefkat*) is the third principle of the *Risale-i Nur*'s way. "Compassion is a path like ecstatic love is a path, but it is swifter and broader,