

SAID NURSI AND PROPHETHOOD

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

David R. Law^{*}

Islam, or more accurately Islamism, is often in the news. Militant Islamist groups such as Boko Haram and the so-called Islamic State are constantly in the headlines. There is a great danger such groups and the atrocities they commit will determine our conception of Islam as a whole. There are two ways to address this problem. One approach is to show how unIslamic these groups are by exposing the gulf that exists between their ideology and the teaching of the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth* or traditions of Muḥammad. This is above all a task for the Muslim community. The second approach is to engage with Muslim thinkers and movements who advocate interreligious dialogue, cooperation between the world's faiths, and collaboration between East and West. Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1877-1960) is one such thinker.

Although Nursi does not employ the term dialogue, which is a relatively new Western coinage for interreligious engagement, the notion of dialogue is strongly implied in his emphasis on the need for "Muslims being *united*, or coming into *unity*, with true Christians."¹ This engagement with Christians manifested itself in concrete actions on Nursi's part. In 1915, he formed a volunteer militia to fight the Russians who were invading Anatolia. He is reported as having saved several thousand Armenians by having his troops escort them to safe areas away from the fighting. After the war he advocated participation of Christians and Jews in the leadership of the new Turkish Republic. In 1950-51, he was in contact with Pius XII and arranged for some of his writings to be sent to the Pope. In 1953, Nursi met with the Greek Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras in Istanbul to discuss closer cooperation between Christians and Muslims.²

Nursi also rejected the use of violence to further religious goals. Nursi held that 'jihad of the sword' was obsolete and had to be replaced by *jihad-i-manevi* 'jihad of the word' or 'jihad of the pen', i.e. personal witness, persuasion, and rational argument. Above all, Nursi affirmed the primacy of love. In his *Damascus Sermon* he told his audience:

What I am certain of from my experience of social life and have learnt from my life-time of study is the following: the thing most worthy of love is love, and that most deserving of enmity is enmity. That is, love and loving, which renders man's social life secure and lead

^{*} David R. Law is Professor of Christian Thought and Philosophical Theology at the University of Manchester. He has published extensively on modern Christian thought and has an interest in Christian-Muslim dialogue, particularly with reference to Said Nursi. His most recent books are *The Historical-Critical Method* (2012) and *Kierkegaard's Kenotic Christology* (2013).

¹ Quoted in Thomas Michel, *Insights from the Risale-i Nur: Nursi's Advice for Modern Believers* (New Jersey: Tughra, 2013), 8.

² See Şükran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2005).

to happiness are most worthy of love and being loved. Enmity and hostility are ugly and damaging, have overturned man's social life, and more than anything deserve loathing and enmity and to be shunned.³

For Nursi, the enemies of Muslims are not other religions, political factions, scientific advances, etc., but ignorance, poverty and disunity. Against these enemies, the Muslim should wage jihad with the weapons of knowledge, science and hard work. Although he died in 1960, Nursi's teachings are just as relevant today as they were during his lifetime.

Of particular interest is Nursi's conception of prophethood. This notion is of course central to Islam, which recognises Muḥammad as the Seal of the Prophets, but also acknowledges that other prophets, including those of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, played an important role in disseminating God's purpose to humankind. The notion of prophethood is therefore worthy of study, first, because it gives us an insight into the divine will and, second, because it provides the basis for engaging in dialogue between traditions that recognise the centrality of prophethood and in some cases venerate the same prophets. It is these concerns that have motivated the two principles according to which this special edition is organised: prophethood and religious diversity.

Religious diversity is evident in the variety of interreligious issues addressed and diversity of the scholars who have contributed to this special edition: scholars from the USA, Europe, Australia and Turkey, both Muslims and Christians, but united in a common appreciation of Nursi's thought and a recognition of its importance in the dialogue between Muslim and Western thought, Christianity and Islam, East and West. Although he spent much of his life under house arrest, Nursi's thought transcends boundaries. In an age of polarities, he points to fruitful, mutually respectful dialogue. In examining Nursi's conception of prophethood in the context of religious diversity, the contributors draw on one of Nursi's major insights: the openness of Islam to dialogue with other faiths, particularly Christianity, and the need for cooperation in opposing the forces of irreligion that threaten to bring about the spiritual impoverishment of humankind.

The first two contributions provide in-depth studies of Nursi's notion of prophethood. In "Universal Aspects of the Qur'ān's Inimitability and Proofs of Prophethood: Said Nursi's Interpretation," Şükran Vahide explores Nursi's interpretation of the Qur'ān's inimitability and how the miraculous nature of this inimitability constitutes proof of the genuineness of Muḥammad's prophethood. Nursi's demonstration of the inimitability of the Qur'ān was driven by an apologetic aim: the need to demonstrate the continued significance of the Qur'ān to an increasingly materialistic age. Vahide highlights the originality of Nursi's notion of the mutual relationship of the 'two books' – the Book of the Universe and the Qur'ān. Nursi breaks down the dichotomy of science versus religion by articulating how the meaning of the Book of the Universe can be unlocked only by means of the hermeneutical key provided by the Qur'ān.

³ Said Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon* (Istanbul: Sözlük Publications, 1996), 49.

As a result of the influence of nineteenth and twentieth century rationalism on Muslim thought, the doctrine of Muḥammad's ascension (*mi'rāj*) had come under considerable pressure. In "Nursi and Iqbal on Mi'rāj: The Metaphysical Dimension of the Prophet's Ascension," Mahsheed Ansari demonstrates how two major Muslim thinkers, Said Nursi and Muhammad Iqbal, responded to this challenge by employing the weapon of the rationalists, namely, reason, to map out a place for *mi'rāj* and to articulate the metaphysical principles that underlie this disputed doctrine. Ansari demonstrates how these two thinkers combine respect for the role of reason in religious thinking with attention to the role of the heart in Muslim spirituality. Far from being a redundant, outmoded notion, *mi'rāj* is an essential doctrine for grasping the richness of the notion of prophethood and the uniqueness of Muḥammad's prophetic role.

In "Wisdom, Prophecy, and the Guidance of Humanity: Pope John XXIII and Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," Leo D. Lefebure argues it is vital that Christians and Muslims recover the wisdom of the prophetic tradition of both traditions in order to address the pressing problems of the modern world. In the twentieth century, there were two outstanding religious figures who took up this challenge on behalf of their traditions: Pope John XXIII and Bediuzzaman Said Nursi. After providing brief biographies of these two religious leaders, Lefebure sketches the impact on Roman Catholicism of the biblical heritage of prophecy and wisdom, before comparing biblical teaching with that of the Qur'ān and the *Risale-i Nur*. Noting that Christianity and Islam share a wisdom tradition that God can be known through creation and a prophetic tradition that critiques social injustice, Lefebure demonstrates this common tradition offers a foundation for religious dialogue and challenges Muslims and Christians to work together for the just society willed by God.

Denny Clark, Wilhelmus Valkenberg and David R. Law explore how overlapping theological concerns in Christianity and Islam can provide the basis for interreligious dialogue. In "God's Use of Prophethood for Creating the Universe: A Christian Exploration of Said Nursi's Insights," Clark considers the connection Nursi posits between prophethood, especially that of Muḥammad, and God's creative activity. By placing Nursi's thinking in dialogue with the Christian notion of Christ's agency in the creation of the universe, as stated in the New Testament and the Nicene Creed, Clark is able to sketch the implications of the doctrine of creation for inter-religious conversations between Muslims and Christians. By focusing on the role of prophethood in God's creative purposes, Clark demonstrates how Christianity and Islam, despite their different starting points, share a common experience of the universe being created and sustained by God's prophetic Word.

After outlining the different functions Jesus and Muḥammad play in Christianity and Islam respectively and the difficulties of comparison these different functions create, Wilhelmus Valkenberg analyses in his essay "Prophets Muhammad and Jesus: Models and Interpreters of Scripture – A Comparative Study" Nursi's conception of Muḥammad as a recipient of divine revelation and the most reliable interpreter of that revelation. This sets the scene for Valkenberg to draw out the parallels between Muḥammad's relation to the interpretation of the Qur'ān and Jesus' interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures. While noting that Christians see Jesus as more

than solely a prophet, Valkenberg demonstrates that a parallel exists between Jesus' interpretation of Scripture and the way the Sunnah of the Prophet Muḥammad functioned as a model for the first Muslims. As recipients or mediators of explicit revelation who themselves embody this revelation implicitly in their own lives, Jesus and Muḥammad provide models of the interpretation of their respective Scriptures. Highlighting the parallel ways Jesus and Muḥammad handle Scripture and the way they submit to the revelation they mediate to their followers opens up opportunities for the mutual appreciation of each other's faith by Christian and Muslim believers alike.

In "The Prophethood of Jesus and Religious Inclusivism in Nursi's *Risale-i Nur*," David R. Law focuses on what he loosely calls Nursi's 'Christology' and its significance for Christian-Muslim dialogue. Law sketches the distinctive features of Nursi's conception of Jesus: the incompleteness of Jesus' Sharia, Jesus' role as the forerunner of Muḥammad, and Jesus as the representative of the collective personality of Christianity. Law then places Nursi's critical but appreciative view of Jesus in the context of the theology of religions and demonstrates that Nursi's view of Christ can be read as an Islamic example of *religious inclusivism*, i.e. the appreciation of other faiths, while remaining true to one's own. Although Nursi was a committed Muslim and convinced that Islam was the highest religion, he nevertheless recognised the presence of truth, goodness and holiness in Christianity and pleaded for cooperation between the two faiths in the struggle against materialism, atheism and irreligion.

It is striking that Clark and Law make use of similar metaphors connected with light to express how Christianity and Islam can interact in a mutually beneficial way. For Clark, Christians and Muslims view reality through different lenses, but despite this difference, both sets of believers can share their experiences of encountering God's creative and prophetic purpose in reality through their particular lens. Law, on the other hand, employs the metaphor of the mirror to articulate the relationship between Christianity and Islam. By seeing how one tradition is 'reflected' in the mirror of the other, both faiths can be mutually enriched.

Taken together, these six articles demonstrate the distinctiveness of Nursi's conception of prophethood and illustrate how the centrality of this notion in Christianity and Islam provides a fruitful foundation for interreligious dialogue and the mutual appreciation of the spiritual treasures of both faith traditions. This special edition also showcases the deepening quality and vibrancy of Nursi Studies and that the academic study of Nursi is beginning to establish itself as a significant discipline in *Islamwissenschaft*. It is hoped this special edition will make a further contribution to growth of our understanding of this important Muslim thinker.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Michel, Thomas. *Insights from the Risale-i Nur: Nursi's Advice for Modern Believers*. New Jersey: Tughra, 2013.

Nursi, Said. *The Damascus Sermon*. Istanbul: Sözler Publications, 1996.

Vahide, Şükran. *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*. Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2005.