

GOD'S USE OF PROPHETHOOD FOR CREATING THE UNIVERSE: A CHRISTIAN EXPLORATION OF SAID NURSI'S INSIGHTS

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Abstract: Said Nursi makes the exalted claim that prophethood, especially that of Prophet Muḥammad, has a crucial, even central, role in God's activity of creating. The Christian New Testament and Nicene Creed make similar exalted claims about Christ's role in God's creating of the universe. These statements can occasion shock, offense and misunderstanding among people outside these respective religious traditions. Both statements underscore that God's activity of creating is purposeful, with that purpose being definitively expressed in these respective prophets and/or their messages. Apart from considerations of purpose, there is no creating. In that sense, prophethood and God's activity of creating are intimately connected. Nursi's approach can help Muslims and Christians understand their own, and one another's, respective theological languages about the relationship between prophethood and God's creating activity.

Keywords: *Nursi, prophethood, prophet, creation, purpose, Muḥammad, Christ, Qur'ān*

At numerous places in his extensive writings, Bediüzzaman Said Nursi claims Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) played a key role in God's creating the universe, e.g.

Muhammad (Peace and blessings be upon him) ... is as necessary for the universe as is the sun. For he is the supreme master of mankind and its greatest prophet, the Glory of the World, and the one addressed by [the *ḥadīth qudsi*, which says,] 'if not for you, if not for you, I [God] would not have created the spheres.' The Muhammadan Reality was the reason for the world's creation, and is its result and most perfect fruit.¹

... the messengerhood of the Prophet was the reason for the foundation of this realm of trial – the saying 'were it not for thee, were it not for thee, I would not have created the spheres' being an indication of this ...²

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¹ Said Nursi, *The Rays Collection* (Istanbul: Sözlür Publications, 2002), 1st Station, Part 3, 1st Indication, 591-592.

² Said Nursi, *The Words: On the Nature and Purposes of Man, Life and All Things* (Istanbul: Sözlür Publications, 2008), 10th Word, 5th Truth, 83.

... the Muhammadan (pbuh) reality ... is the original seed of the universe, a reason for its creation, and its most perfect fruit.³

This article explores and interacts with Said Nursi's exalted claim that Prophethood, especially that of Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh), has a crucial, even central, role in God's activity of creating. It maintains this claim is essential to Nursi's understanding of prophethood, not an optional component of it, and his major arguments in support of this claim are convincing. This study has been prompted by a keen awareness of the presence of similar exalted statements in the Christian New Testament and the Nicene Creed, which claim a connection between Christ and God's creating of the universe. It likewise has been conducted with the recognition that many Christians may be shocked and offended by Nursi's exalted language about Muḥammad's role in God's activity of creating, as well as that many Muslims may be likewise shocked and offended by the exalted language about Christ's similar role within the New Testament and Creed. Both groups can legitimately ask: How can any human Prophet possibly be viewed as having a role in God's creating the universe? What do such statements even mean? This article maintains Nursi's approach can help Muslims and Christians understand their own respective theological languages about the relationship between prophethood and God's creating activity, and can increase their understanding and appreciation of one another's language and perspective on this important issue.

NURSI'S LINKAGE OF PROPHETHOOD WITH GOD'S CREATING

Nursi's claim that Muḥammad is in some way "the reason for the world's creation" is certainly not unusual nor an innovation within the context of Islamic tradition. This is demonstrated by the fact he quotes a specific *ḥadīth qudsi*⁴ to support his claim: "... if not for you, if not for you, I [God] would not have created the spheres."⁵ Although debates exist within Islam regarding the authenticity of this particular *ḥadīth qudsi* and similar ones, even many who have questioned its authenticity, such as Imam al-Ghazali, scholars nonetheless maintain that what it declares is correct. To my knowledge, Nursi never addresses the issue of this *ḥadīth qudsi*'s authenticity, but he certainly agrees with the correctness of its content, and thereby aligns himself with a Muslim interpretive tradition that long preceded him.⁶

How should Nursi's exalted statements about Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) in relation to God's creating be understood? What is the rationale for those statements?

³ Nursi, *Rays*, The Shining Proof, 1st Station, Part 3, 2nd Indication, 603.

⁴ A *ḥādīth Qudsi* is a saying attributed to God in the sayings of Muḥammad, which is not found in the Qur'ān.

⁵ Nursi, *The Rays*, The Shining Proof, 1st Station, Part 3, 1st Indication, 591-592. The "spheres" mentioned here are the spheres of the universe, as envisioned in the Ptolemaic model of the cosmos.

⁶ That tradition includes the works of Naqshabandi Sufi Shaikh Ahmad al-Sirhindi (1564–1624), known also as Imam Rabbani, who used the expressions "Light of Muhammad" and "the Muhammadan Reality" in relation to God's creating of the universe, and whose *Maktūbāt* (Letters) had a profound impact on the formation of the New Said (Şükran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005), 165-166.

God's Oneness/Uniqueness requires Prophethood

Somewhat ironically, the process of understanding Nursi's exalted statements about Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) must begin with the affirmation at the very heart of the Prophet's message, which stands as the primary basis in Islam for criticising undue exaltation of any human: the Oneness of God, in terms of quantity (i.e. there is numerically only One God) and of quality (i.e. God is unique, in a category of one; nothing, no one, is like Him), with the latter being especially relevant. This emphasis on the uniqueness and incomparability of God necessitates that nothing be 'associated' or share credit with God for anything: God alone is sufficient; God alone is necessary. Accordingly, *Surat al-Ikhlās* declares, "In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy. Say, 'He is God the One, God the eternal [or 'the self-sufficient']. He fathered no one nor was He fathered. No one is comparable to Him.'"⁷ Any exaltation of a human (or anything else) to such an extent that it encroaches upon or violates the Divine uniqueness constitutes *shirk*, idolatry.

However, philosophers have long recognised, if God were completely incomparable and unique, it would be impossible to speak about God at all, for human language would have no tools for doing so. So-called 'revealed religions,' including Islam, partially get around this problem by maintaining that God has graciously revealed Godself in ways that accommodate human limitations by a 'divine condescension.'⁸ Thus, the very affirmation of the uniqueness of God must be accompanied by the recognition that the Inexpressible One nonetheless expresses Himself most authoritatively through prophets/messengers; these two cannot be separated, although the initiation of communication always remains with God. Nursi recognises that Islam's double *Shahadah* – "There is no god but God, and Muḥammad is the Messenger of God" – puts the affirmation of God's oneness and uniqueness side by side with the affirmation that this One God communicates Godself *definitively* through a very specific human prophet/messenger, Muḥammad (pbuh). The two affirmations mutually depend on one another: "The confession of faith [*Shahadah*] contains two phrases, each of which testifies to the other and is its proof and evidence."⁹ God cannot be talked about authoritatively except as a result of Divine Revelation, and that necessitates a prophet/messenger to convey that revelation. As Nursi succinctly puts it, "... Divinity necessarily implies messengership."¹⁰ Thus, God's oneness/uniqueness inevitably entails speaking of a particular prophet in a

⁷ Qur'ān 112.

⁸ "In order to establish this truth in our minds, the Qur'an speaks at the level of the general public and presents to their view a sovereign's rule of His country from His throne. This style of the Qur'an is described as 'God's lowering His speech to the level of human understanding'" (Said Nursi, *The Reasonings: A Key to Understanding the Qur'an's Eloquence* (Somerset, NJ: Tughra Books. 2008), accessed http://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/sgia/imeis/thereasoningsmuhakemat_ing_ic.pdf, 3rd Part, 2nd Purpose, 4th Way, 142). Similarly, "To speak in accordance with men's intellects and understandings, known as 'Divine condescension to the minds of men,' is a form of Divine descent. It is a requirement of God's dominicality that He endows all of his conscious creatures with speech, understands their speech, and then participates in it with His own speech" (Nursi, *The Rays*, 7th Ray, 1st Chapter, 147).

⁹ Nursi, *The Words*, Gleams, 735.

¹⁰ Nursi, *The Words*, 10th Word, Introduction, 2nd Indication, 73.

preferential, honorific way, because God cannot be understood appropriately apart from that prophet.

This logical necessity, however, does not accurately express the epistemological process entailed. Talk about the One God or prophethood never begins as an abstract, theoretical issue for Nursi; it begins with an experience of value, meaning and purpose in life, rather than with a blank slate. Nursi talks about prophethood and the One God in order to speak about something he, as a Muslim, had *already* experienced – namely, that he knew himself to be addressed by God, valued by God, guided by God and accountable to God. He knew, because he was a part of a Muslim community that has been shaped by the recitation and reading of the Qur’ān, by reflecting and meditating upon the Qur’ān, and by recognising the Qur’ān as *definitive* for talking about the experience of value, meaning and purpose in life. That experience precedes and unites both the “Old Said” and the “New Said.”¹¹

This is part of what Ian Markham describes as “grounded spirituality” – a spirituality that results from the experience and recognition of *already* being ‘grasped’ by God and in relationship to God because of a very particular mode of encounter¹² – in this case, by and through the Qur’ān, received through a particular prophet, Muḥammad (pbuh). As a result, the importance of prophethood is not a ‘conclusion’ that was drawn only at the end of a logical syllogism by Nursi as a neutral, uninvolved observer; rather, it is a way of talking about what he *already* presupposed because he had already *definitively* experienced it – this claim *already* entailed personal involvement and commitment. This is not a defect in Nursi’s argument, but the way in which all ‘grounded spirituality’ *must* function; its discussion of the Ultimate, of God, of What Matters Most, flows from a very particular encounter, which the Abrahamic religions describe as prophethood. Prophethood is thus not so much either a description or explanation of revelation, as it is an acknowledgement that revelation’s benefits of value, meaning and purpose have *already* been experienced in a *particular, definitive* way, which provides the vantage point from which all else is seen and expressed. A community claims prophethood only for that which *already* has impacted and shaped it; prophethood establishes the community.

If the One God cannot be talked about except in relation to a particular prophet, the use of exalted language for talking about that prophet is inevitable. God and the prophet are not the same thing, yet they also cannot be separated from one another. Language of devotion, love, submission and commitment are appropriately directed to the One God alone, but that language necessarily ‘rubs off’ on the prophet through whom the One God has been made known, so a

¹¹ These two expressions were used by Said Nursi to self-describe two major periods within his own life. Vahide points out the early government ‘reforms’ during the Tanzimat, which sought to disestablish Islam in Turkey, “had little effect on the mass of people and their way of life, which was inextricably bound up with Islam. They still identified with Islam” (Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 190). The populist response to the Old Said and New Said was based on this Islamic, Qur’ānic foundation, made possible through Muhammad’s prophethood. Nursi’s approach provided people a way to re-appreciate the intellectual and spiritual respectability of those roots, and engage the modern world without fear.

¹² Ian S. Markham, *Engaging with Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: A Model of Interfaith Dialogue* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 90-94.

prophet can no longer be treated as ‘just another person’; prophets are automatically viewed as ‘special’ by virtue of their prophetic role. Islam’s recognition of the authority of the *Sunna* of the Prophet, alongside that of the Qur’ān, is one result of this inseparable connection.¹³

God’s Purposes are the Link Between God’s Creating and Prophethood

The Qur’ān insists God did not create the universe “for sport.”¹⁴ Rather, God’s creating is purposeful, by which God intends to accomplish something. In fact, it would be legitimate to maintain that purposefulness is what constitutes God’s creating; creating is the actualisation of God’s purposes. At numerous points, Nursi appeals to various teleological arguments regarding the universe, insisting the animate and inanimate world exists the way it does because God intends it to be that way; God has ‘designed’ it that way, and such indications of ‘design’ and utility indicate God’s purposeful activity.¹⁵ However, Nursi does not stop there;¹⁶ for him, recognition of purpose in the origin and present existence of life is valuable and helpful, but not sufficient. Rather, Nursi views God’s meta-purposes for humanity and the created world as much more important, i.e. what God intends to accomplish through humanity and the created universe. These meta-purposes can only be recognised and attained through prophethood.¹⁷

Crucial to Nursi’s dealing with the relationship of prophethood to God’s creating is his frequent reference to God’s ‘two Books’.¹⁸ First, there is God’s Book of the Cosmos, which contains numerous ‘signs’ (*ayat*) that point to God, as well as various forms of ‘inspiration’ that constitute the ‘bottom-up’ witnesses to God’s activity that occurs in and through the activities of all God’s creatures. The testimony of the Book of the Cosmos is valuable, but by

¹³ The reference here to the authority of the *sunna* (normative example) of the Prophet should not be understood as a blanket endorsement of every tradition that purports to provide a saying or describe an action of the Prophet (pbuh). Nursi devotes considerable attention to the problem of inauthentic *hādīth* and appropriate interpretation of *hādīth* (e.g. Nursi, *The Words*, 24th Word, 3rd Branch, 350-361).

¹⁴ For example, “We were [i.e. God was] not playing a pointless game when We created the heavens and earth and everything between; We created them for a true purpose, but most people do not comprehend” (Qur’ān 44:38-39). Likewise, “We did not create the heavens and the earth and everything between them for play. If We had wished for a pastime, We had it in Us – if We had wished for such a thing” (Qur’ān 21:16-17).

¹⁵ For example, Nursi, *The Words*, 33rd Word, 683-723; Nursi, *The Rays*, 7th Ray, 1st Chapter, 163-169; Said Nursi, *The Flashes Collection* (Istanbul: Sözlür Publications, 2000), 23rd Flash, 232-254.

¹⁶ Nursi’s approach stands in contrast to many advocates of ‘intelligent design’ (who often focus on complexity and interconnectedness in certain biochemical systems in living organisms, to argue these could not have arisen a piece at a time, by chance) and of the so-called ‘Anthropic Principle’ (who point out the ‘happy coincidence’ of the delicate balance of so many physical properties in the universe that make the conditions for sentient life ‘just right,’ concluding the universe seems ‘programmed’ or ‘rigged’ to produce such life-forms). These others seem content merely to point out ‘purpose’ solely in terms of the past emergence of life, or of sentient life, whereas Nursi also deals with God’s purposes in the present and future.

¹⁷ “The Maker does nothing without a purpose; there are many instances of wisdom in His every act. There is an order in everything in the universe, down to the things that are seemingly most insignificant. Nothing is neglected in creation, and humanity needs a guide on its way to eternity. All these realities demonstrate the necessity of the institution of Prophethood” (Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 3rd Part, 2nd Purpose, 121-122). Likewise, Nursi says with respect to Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh), “...as though the universe was created for him, all its purposes become apparent through him and his religion and the Qur’ān” (Nursi, *The Rays*, 9th Ray, 2nd Point, 210).

¹⁸ Nursi, *The Words*, 13th Word, 2nd Station, 6th Topic, 171.

itself is ambiguous for identifying God's purposes. The second is God's Book of Scripture, especially the Qur'ān, which comes down to messengers, and which other prophets more fragmentarily proclaimed. This 'top-down' communication provides the interpretive key to the Book of the Cosmos. Prophets receive indications of God's meta-purposes, which go far beyond the mere production of the material universe and even beyond the creation of humanity, to include what God intends to bring about within and by means of the created world, including justice, morality, compassion, generosity and a host of other values endorsed and enjoined by Scripture.

Nursi maintains, without prophets, the Divine purposes for humanity and the universe would not be made known, and thus would not be able to be fulfilled, which would reduce those purposes to nothing – a logical impossibility, in Nursi's view:

... through the sending of man and particularly of Muhammad [the universe's] value and duties were established, and its beauties and perfections became clear, and the wisdom in its truths were realized. For his messengership revealed them and was the means of their realization. If it had not been for his messengership, this perfect universe, this eternal and meaningful mighty book [of the universe], would have gone for nothing, its meanings would have vanished and its perfections declined utterly, which is impossible in numerous respects.¹⁹

Nursi declares here that a key part of God's purposes in creating is to make those purposes known, and the revelation of God's purposes, in turn, "was the means of their realization." In other words, prophethood has a critical role in the attaining of God's purposes for the created universe. Prophethood is thus a necessary aspect of God's creating and cannot be properly understood apart from its own role in God's creating. The recognition of this intimate connection between God's creating and prophethood, in which the latter is actually part of the former, helps immensely in understanding Nursi's claim that Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) is the "reason for the world's creation." Without prophethood, the Book of the Cosmos would fail to become what God intends it to become, and the process of God's creating would be aborted, with the universe reduced to meaninglessness, i.e. it would not be 'Creation.' This inability to draw a clear, consistent line of separation between God's creating and prophethood is also another consequence of the claim made in the section above, that God's oneness/uniqueness requires prophethood. God's oneness entails an inherent oneness of all God's activities, e.g. between creating and revealing, so any distinctions drawn between them in human theological discussion is always somewhat arbitrary and misleading.

This issue of the purposefulness of the universe, which constitutes its createdness, and the fact it is not self-sufficient, is at the heart of Nursi's critique of materialism/naturalism/secularism, a critique that shaped so much of his life and career.²⁰ In Nursi's view, the key problem of these ideologies is that they only allow the universe and its constituents to be self-referential; they cannot point beyond themselves, and therefore are incapable of expressing any

¹⁹ Nursi, *The Rays*, 15th Ray, 1st Station, 14th Testimony, 600-601. This quotation was written earlier by Nursi in Arabic, on which he then comments.

²⁰ For example, Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 189-194.

sense of value, meaning and purpose.²¹ According to these ideological stances, everything is reduced to its lowest common denominator and the most basic particles. From that viewpoint, value, meaning and purpose are irrelevant, for such things always entail a wider set of relationships, especially with God. Within the framework of materialism/naturalism/secularism, all that exists is mere multiplicity; nothing can (nor should) be viewed as more than what it presently is, in and of itself. From that perspective, all acts – whether murder, rape, generosity or compassion – are purely arbitrary, and none of them can be seen as either better or worse than any other, for nothing other than the ‘individual’ can be appealed to as a standard. Nursi clearly recognises and opposes the dehumanising and destructive tendencies of such an approach. He sees them as leading only to meaninglessness and chaos, and he considers prophethood to provide their proper antithesis and antidote.

Prophethood is the Form that God’s Creating takes when Addressing Human Agency

God’s creating takes the form of prophethood because, with the rise of human beings, the ability of creatures to respond (or not to respond) to their Creator becomes an especially significant factor in bringing about the fulfilment of God’s purposes. Prophethood does not replace God’s other creating and sustaining activities, but becomes another form of them, appropriate to the increased agency, self-initiative and self-awareness of human creatures.²² Humans are capable of making decisions, and they do make them – sometimes well, sometimes poorly. The human *fitra*, which provides the basic orientation and yearning of the human self toward the Creator, is easily overwhelmed by the multiplicity of choices with which it is confronted, by the ambiguity of the created world, and by the vicissitudes it faces as part of creaturely existence. Humans require guidance, because they do not naturally see reality clearly, or make the most appropriate decisions. The opening *surah* of the Qur’ān, *al-Fatihah*, can be understood as God giving voice to the plea of the human *fitra* for guidance, to which the remainder of the Qur’ān stands as the Divine response, received by Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) on behalf of the rest of humanity and for its benefit. Revelation as guidance is thus not a form of pre-loaded software in humans, present from the beginning, but is a supplement and reminder, which is received through interaction with what prophets convey. The very necessity of interacting with prophets is part of God’s educating humanity by means of prophethood, necessitating individuals to look for guidance beyond themselves, thus interrupting the human project of self-sufficiency, and requiring the formation of relationships and drawing them toward community.

²¹ Nursi, *The Words*, 13th Word, 1st Aim, 561-567.

²² Although I refer specifically to humans here, it is unwise to draw too sharp a dichotomy between human and non-human creatures with respect to these abilities. The Qur’ānic worldview includes the *jinn* as creatures with these characteristics, which provides a caution against human arrogance in claiming them only for themselves. So-called ‘process philosophy and theology,’ which draw on the philosophical categories proposed by Alfred North Whitehead, speak of an experiential, subjective aspect of all entities. Nursi’s notion of the ‘prayers’ of non-human creatures (including those usually categorised as ‘inanimate’) being joined with the prayers of Muḥammad (pbuh) provides an opening to a less rigid categorisation than is often used in this regard (e.g. Nursi, *The Words*, 19th Word, 12th Droplet, 248).

God compassionately communicates His will and guidance to humanity. Whatever is known about God is because the One God graciously conveys that to people, beginning with Adam, the first prophet. Thus, prophethood is as old as humanity – an Islamic claim that is unique among the Abrahamic traditions, and which has immense implications for considerations of the relationship between prophethood and God’s creating. Nursi, as with the rest of Islam, maintains that every nation and culture has always had access to prophets. Prophethood is an expression of God’s compassion, responding to human need and guiding humanity toward behaviours that are in accordance with God’s purposes for the created world and that will fulfil those purposes.²³

Prophethood conveys a call and reminder to humans of God’s purposes, a promise of what is made possible by them, and a warning regarding the negative consequences that come from ignoring them. It thereby provides the means by which a greater proportion of humanity can potentially share in what God intends for the created world. Prophethood is the means by which God’s purposes for the created world become realised, and thus is intimately involved as part of the process of creating – a process that is ongoing in the present.²⁴

Human acceptance of this guidance is non-compulsory; humans are not automatons. However, God’s provision of guidance, delivered through prophethood, introduces the elements of morality, justice and accountability into the created world within the framework of identifying God’s purposes for the created universe, and particularly for humanity. Beings that are ‘respond-able’ to God are thereby also held ‘responsible’ for their decisions, thoughts and actions in individual and social life.

Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) is the Intersection of God’s Purposes and Appropriate, Exemplary Human Responsiveness to Them

Nursi and Muslims collectively encounter prophethood supremely in relation to Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh), and thereby recognise him to be the one in whom God’s purposes for the created universe become most profoundly and most fully expressed, both in the Divine message he received and proclaimed, and in his own person, as a human who embodied, lived and expressed that Divine message.²⁵ Both these dimensions – as Messenger of God (his prophethood) and as expression and exemplar of what humanity has been called to become (his sainthood) – are crucially important, and the two are connected.²⁶ Nursi writes,

²³ Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 3rd Part, 2nd Purpose, 122.

²⁴ Colin Turner (*The Qur’an Revealed: A Critical Analysis of Said Nursi’s Epistles of Light* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2013)) points out that Nursi emphasises God’s “ceaseless creativity” and “continuous creation, re-creation and maintenance of all beings during their sojourn in the phenomenal world (82). “... God’s creativity – be it with regard to the cosmos as a whole or each individual entity as microcosm – is operative constantly...” (84).

²⁵ “... just as the Creator is known in a general fashion through His creation, He is known specifically and most perfectly through the most perfect of His creatures. For Nursi, as for other Muslim believers, Muhammad was, is and always will be the most perfect of human beings...” (Turner, *The Qur’an Revealed*, 236).

²⁶ Although sainthood and prophethood are not the same, they are related. Their relationship, though, does not appear to be simply sequential in Nursi’s view; one does not follow upon nor result from the other –

If you regard [Muhammad] in regard to his being a worshipful servant of God, you will see him to be the model of love, the exemplar of mercy, the glory of mankind and the most luminous fruit of the tree of creation. While if you look ... in regard to his Messengership, you see him to be the proof of God, the lamp of truth, the sun of guidance, and the means to happiness.²⁷

Nursi understands prophethood in general to entail the prophets' embodying the message they proclaim, but views Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) as the supreme example of that:

All the Prophets, upon them be peace, adopted and strictly observed [the lights of Divine favor and munificence] as the basic principles in their actions. In addition, their treatment of their people, their people's view of them, their perfect altruism and selflessness, and many other factors all proved that they were Prophets. The attributes essential to Prophethood (truthfulness, intellect, trustworthiness, communication of the Divine Message, sinlessness, and freedom from physical and mental defects) were found in the most perfect form in Prophet Muhammad, upon him be peace and blessings ...²⁸

Aisha, wife of the Prophet, reportedly said of him, "His personality is the Qur'ān," which Nursi explains as meaning, he "is the exemplar of the fine moral qualities described in the Qur'ān. He conforms to them more than anyone, and his nature was created in accordance with them."²⁹ Message and messenger become inextricably bound to one another in the person of the Prophet (pbuh), and cannot be talked about apart from one another – hence the double *Shahadah*: "There is no god but God, and Muḥammad is the Messenger of God." The Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) is what the created universe is intended to be and what humanity is intended to be: aligned with God's purposes, transparent to them, and fully responsive to the Creator in words and in actions. Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) became what had been envisioned and purposed in God's statement, "I created *jinn* and mankind only to worship me,"³⁰ in which "worship" entails all forms of service to the One God. As a consequence, Nursi describes Muḥammad (pbuh) with a long list of superlatives:

although he occasionally uses language that can be understood in that way, e.g. in referring to the Ascension of Muhammad, Nursi writes, "He went through his sainthood, returned through his messengership, and left the door open" (Nursi, *The Words*, 31st Word, 3rd Principle, 606). Instead, they are interactive with one another, and meet each other. Nursi underscores the distinction of the two by dealing with two different, exalted forms of consequences from each. This article deals with one of those, i.e. with Muḥammad's (pbuh) prophethood being the "reason for the world's creation." However, Nursi additionally says Muḥammad's (pbuh) prayer/worship/sainthood produces a second consequence: Paradise/Afterlife: "Yes, just as his Messengership was the reason for the opening of this place of examination and trial [i.e., this world], so too his worship and servitude to God were the reason for the opening of the next world" (Nursi, *The Words*, 19th Word, 13th Droplet, 248). See also Nursi, *The Words*, 81, 84, 247; Said Nursi, *Al-Mathnawi al-Nuri: Seedbed of the Light* (Somerset, NJ: The Light, 2007), accessed https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/sgia/imeis/masnavinuriye_ingilizce_23_02_07.pdf, 28. However, consideration of this additional exalted claim goes beyond the scope of this article.

²⁷ Nursi, *The Words*, 19th Word, 6th Droplet, 245.

²⁸ Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 3rd Part, 2nd Purpose, 128.

²⁹ Said Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness: The Inimitability of the Qur'an's Conciseness* (Istanbul: Sözler Publications, 2004), 21.

³⁰ Qur'ān 51:56.

He is the master of all messengers, the foremost of all prophets, the leader of all pure ones, the closest to God of all those who have drawn nigh unto Him, the most perfect of all creatures, the monarch of all guides to righteousness.³¹

The logic of Nursi's claim that Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) is "the reason for the world's creation" starts to become clear once one recognises that prophethood has a necessary creative function for bringing into actuality God's purposes for humanity and the rest of the universe, and that Nursi understands Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) to be the preeminent proclaimer of those purposes and the one who represents their highest actualisation.

[H]e is both the envoy of the realm of multiplicity to the Divine Court, by virtue of his universal worship, and also the messenger of the Divine Court to the realm of multiplicity, by virtue of his closeness to God and being entrusted with His message.³²

For Nursi, to look at Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) is to see God's purposes for humanity and the rest of creation. To say that Muḥammad (pbuh) is "the reason for the world's creation" is to say that God's purposes for the created universe are seen most clearly in him.

Exalted, Symbolic Language for Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) Functions as an Indicator of his 'Definitiveness' in Relation to God

When anything or anyone is viewed as being or providing what is *definitive* for understanding God and what humans 'should' be, language for talking about that being/entity automatically shifts from any sort of empirical or literal statements into exalted, symbolic language that points beyond itself to God, to what is Ultimate, to What Matters Most. The language springs from and is grounded in the speaker's experience of value, meaning and purpose in relation to that particular thing/person, and is intended to communicate the ultimacy and *definitiveness* of that for how the speaker lives life; it additionally and necessarily functions as an appeal to the audience to 'try' that way of living. The language is inescapably analogical, metaphorical and symbolical – and thus capable of being understood in multiple ways.

Two dominant sets of metaphors occur in Nursi's language about Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) in relationship to God's activity of creating. The first is that of seedbed—seed—tree—fruit. At various points, the created universe – and humanity – and prophethood – are all described as a tree, developing through time, with Muḥammad (pbuh) described as its finest fruit: the best expression of all creatures, the best expression of humanity, the best expression of all prophets. This organic metaphor underscores Muḥammad's connection with and dependence upon the remainder of the universe/humanity/prophets that preceded him. Yet, there is also a difference; he is described not just as a particular branch or twig of the tree, but is called its fruit, its product – and thus the purpose/reason for the tree's existence. Yet, approached from another direction, the fruit is understood as providing a new set of potentialities, leading to newer, further developments.

³¹ Nursi, *The Words*, 10th Word, Introduction, 2nd Indication, 73.

³² Ibid, 72.

Nursi also presents a pictorial inversion of the image of tree, referring to the ‘Tuba-tree,’ which has its roots ‘above,’ in the ‘upper world,’ with its branches extended down into the ‘lower world.’ In this variation, humanity, the prophets and pre-eminently Muḥammad (pbuh) have their roots in the ‘upper world,’ being nourished from it, and ‘bearing fruit’ in this world.³³

At the other end of this complex of botanical metaphors, the tree and fruit result from a seed, which contains the genetic, programmatic instructions for producing all that follows. Thus, whatever develops from the seed had already been present in some sense within the seed from the beginning, and destined to come from it – which Nursi claims God, in His foreknowledge, already knew, intended and had established. The argument from analogy in this metaphorical complex works from fruit to seed, and then back again in the opposite direction. Thus,

O listener! Do not consider it improbable that this strange and mighty universe is created from the particular essence of a human being! Why should the All-Powerful One of Glory, Who creates a huge pine-tree – a sort of world – from a seed the size of a grain of wheat, not create the universe from ‘the Light of Muhammad’ (Peace and blessings be upon him)? Why should he not be able to do so?

... Since Muhammad (pbuh) was the means of all those aims being realized, he must have been regarded with favour by the universe’s Maker before the universe was created, he must have been the first recipient of His manifestation. For the result and fruit of a thing is considered first. That is to say, material existence comes last and meaning comes first. However, since Muhammad (pbuh) was both the most perfect fruit, and the means of all other fruits acquiring value, and the means of all the aims becoming manifest, his Light must have received the first manifestation of creativity.³⁴

The above quotation also includes the second metaphor used by Nursi – the dominant metaphor in all his works: light (*nur*), which elsewhere connects with the related metaphors of ‘sun’ and ‘mirror’. The resulting mixed metaphor here considers light as God’s “aims,” “meaning” and “value” that were realised and attained by means of Muḥammad – and thus as “fruit” – yet Muḥammad is also “the most perfect fruit” and can, by the polyvalency and play of the metaphors, also be seen as the light. At the same time, “the Light of Muḥammad” – which can be variously understood metaphorically as “the Light that consists of Muḥammad,” “the Light (understanding/meaning/value) that results from Muḥammad,” “the Light carried or brought by Muḥammad,” or the “essence of Muḥammad” – is also treated as the “seed” of the universe, a “meaning” that preceded Muḥammad’s “material existence.” This shifting, mixed metaphor is valuable precisely because of its polyvalency. It cannot be ‘nailed down’ with precision; it entails considerable slippage and variation in meaning. It lends itself to being combined with forms of argument that would be weak if used with propositional statements, but which function effectively by means of suggestion, innuendo and implication within an argument from analogy, e.g. “Why should the All-Powerful One of Glory ... not ...? Why should he not be able to do so? ...he must have been ... he must have been ... his Light must have ...” The very fact that “light” is used prominently in the Qur’ān and within Islam to refer

³³ Ibid, 31st Word, 3rd Principle, 606.

³⁴ Ibid, 606-607.

to God (e.g. Qur'ān 24:35-38) means the use of this metaphor in connection with Muḥammad has brought God and Muḥammad into the closest possible relationship for the audience.³⁵ As mentioned above, this also occurs within the *Shahadah*, and in the joint authority of the Qur'ān and *sunna* (normative example) of the Prophet (pbuh) within Islam. This 'closest possible relationship' *can* be tremendously problematic, subject to immense misunderstanding and mischief – and yet it is also inevitable, since God/value, meaning, purpose/What Matters Most has *already been definitively experienced* in connection with Muḥammad (pbuh) in his role of prophet – the recipient and chief interpreter of the Qur'ān, the Word of God whereby God's Purposes for the created universe and humanity have been revealed.

The argument provided by Nursi does not provide any new information about the history of the universe, or Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh). Rather, his argument emphasises the depth and significance of what is *already* experienced and known, i.e. its *definitiveness*. In the middle of his use of exalted language for describing Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh), Nursi nonetheless recognises the potential risks involved of over-emphasising this individual human, and therefore argues by means of analogy and metaphor, especially mixed metaphors, to prevent individual terms from being viewed too concretely, literally or univocally. Most especially, Nursi signals the symbolic depth of his imagery by frequently using even more ambiguous, imprecise, 'fuzzy' terms, such as the "Muḥammadan Reality/Truth," the "Muḥammadan Being," and the "collective personality" of Muḥammad, to describe the "seed" of the universe or the "reason for the world's creation" or the universe's "finest fruit," in addition to the specific name "Muḥammad." By using these varied terms, Nursi widens the referent of fruit/seed at critical points in his argument to include the whole line of prophets/ messengers who preceded Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh), as well as *all* of what has been brought about through him, including Islam and all those who have come to recognise God's purposes for humanity and the universe – purposes that are expressed in the Qur'ān and in Prophet Muḥammad's life. Thus, Nursi often refers to these two wider groups as Muḥammad's "wings": the preceding prophets/messengers, and those who follow him in recognising and living the Truth he brought.³⁶ They are all part of the "collective personality" of the "Muḥammadan Being." Nursi's term "collective personality" has special relevance for understanding what he is doing, and is perhaps his most distinctive contribution to the stream

³⁵ According to a broad stream of interpretation within Islam, the Qur'ān uses "light" to refer to Muḥammad: "People of the Book, Our Messenger has come to make clear to you much of what you have kept hidden of the Scripture and to overlook much [you have done]. *A light has now come to you from God*, and a Scripture making things clear, with which God guides those who follow what pleases Him to the ways of peace, bringing them from darkness out into light, by His will, and guiding them to a straight path" (5:15-16, emphasis added).

³⁶ "... our master Muhammad the Trustworthy (Peace and blessings be upon him) is the supreme sign of the mighty Book of the Universe and the Greatest Name of that mighty Qur'an, the seed of the tree of the universe and its most luminous fruit, the sun of the palace of the world and the radiant moon of the world of Islam, the herald of the sovereignty of Divine dominicality, and the wise discloser of the talisman of the universe, who flies in the levels of reality with the wings of Messengership, which take under their shade all the prophets, and the wings of Islam, which take under their protection all the world of Islam; who too behind him all the prophets and messengers, all the saints and veracious ones, all the purified and the scholars, and demonstrated Divine unity with all his strength and opened up the way to Divine oneness" (Nursi, *The Words*, 22nd Word, 2nd Station, 11th Flash, 314).

of tradition that speaks of Muḥammad (pbuh) as somehow being the “reason for the world’s creation.” He understood the present period of history to be the time of the “community,” not of egotism or the individual. The “collective personality” of the *Risale-i Nur* community exemplifies for him the “Muḥammadan Being” that is intimately connected with Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh), but always so much larger than the individual person Muḥammad.³⁷

Though much of Nursi’s language often appears to focus solely on Muḥammad (pbuh), it is actually dealing with God’s purposes for the benefit of humanity and the created world as a whole, made known through his prophethood:

Yes, through the light of the Muhammadan Being the form of the world has changed. The true essence of men and all beings in the cosmos became apparent through that light; it became clear that they are each missives of the Eternally Besought One proclaiming the Divine Names, precious and profound beings with God-given functions and destined to manifest eternity. Were it not for that light, beings would be condemned to utter annihilation, they would be valueless, meaningless, useless, confused, the result of blind chance, sunk in the darkness of illusion. It is for this reason that just as men say “amen” to the prayer of the Prophet, so too all other beings, from the face of the earth up to God’s throne, from the soil to the stars, all take pride in his light, and proclaim their connection with him. The very spirit of the worship of the Prophet is indeed none other than this prayer.³⁸

The purpose of this language is not to magnify Muḥammad, but to celebrate what he has brought, namely, the awareness that indeed “... all beings have their faces turned to the world of meaning,” rather than the sense of meaninglessness and futility Nursi sought to counter through his life’s work.³⁹ Any attempt to focus solely on magnifying Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) ends up misunderstanding both him and Nursi’s language about him. The abundance of Nursi’s laudatory language about Muḥammad (pbuh) can perhaps best be understood within the context of his life struggle against those who dismissed God, dismissed religion, dismissed Islam and dismissed Muḥammad; he counters those combined dismissals by unapologetically and effusively speaking of the Prophet. Offering benedictions for the Prophet (pbuh) is not praise and exaltation of Muḥammad as an individual human, but rather an acknowledgment that “everything is connected with the Muḥammadan Light” and is seen appropriately because of that light.⁴⁰ Thus, Nursi speaks of the importance of God’s

act of dominicality of making Muhammad’s messengership a spiritual sun in the universe, and making his religion the index of the perfections of His servants; and making his reality a comprehensive mirror to the manifestations of His Godhead; and His entrusting him with duties necessary for the existence of creatures in the universe such as mercy, wisdom, and justice, as necessary as food and water, and air and light.⁴¹

³⁷ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 170, 231, 240, 244, 276, 335.

³⁸ Nursi, *The Words*, 10th Word, 5th Truth, 82 n.15. See also Nursi, *The Words*, 31st Word, 4th Principle, 1st Fruit, 608, in which Nursi gives an interpretation of Muḥammad’s miraculous Ascension into the heavens, which is the context of the Muhammadan Reality as the fruit/seed of the universe in the extensive passage quoted earlier.

³⁹ Nursi, *The Words*, 10th Word, 10th Truth, 98.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 24th Word, 4th Branch, 371.

⁴¹ Nursi, *The Rays*, 15th Testimony, 601. This quotation was originally written by Nursi in Arabic.

The exalted, honorific language applied to Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) results from these practical, necessary, life-giving realities, which God provides through the Prophet.⁴²

Nursi views the Muḥammadan Reality as absolutely transformative, providing a different view of reality and a necessary remedy for the ills he witnessed in his own society. Viewpoint is crucial:

Without his presence, the universe and everything in it (including humanity) would have been rendered worthless and meaningless. Had it not been for that wonderful, superior person who makes known the universe and its Creator, this beautiful universe would not have existed, for we could not have understood its meaning. How truthful is He Whose words are true, and for Whom is the sovereignty of creation, in His declaration: *But for you, I would not have created the worlds.*⁴³

CHRISTIANITY'S LINKAGE OF PROPHET JESUS/CHRIST (PBUH) WITH GOD'S CREATING

Said Nursi's exalted language, which connects Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) with God's creating of the universe, sounds strikingly similar to the exalted language in portions of the Christian New Testament and certain Christian creedal statements that connect Prophet Jesus (pbuh) to God's creating the universe. Witness, for example, the following:

... for us there is one God, the Father, from (*ex*) whom are all things and for (*eis*) whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through (*dia*) whom are all things and through (*dia*) whom we exist.⁴⁴

He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in (or "by means of," *en*) him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through (*dia*) him and for (*eis*) him. He himself is before (*pro*) all things, and in (or "by means of," *en*) him all things hold together.⁴⁵

In the beginning was the Word (*logos*), and the Word (*logos*) was with God, and the Word (*logos*) was God. It was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through (*dia*) it, and without it not one thing came into being. What has come into being in (or "by means of," *en*) it was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome [or 'understand'] it. ... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. It was in the world, and the world came into being through (*dia*) it; yet the world did not know it. ... The Word (*logos*) became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen its [or "his"] glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.⁴⁶

⁴² Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 126-127.

⁴³ Nursi, *Al-Mathnawi i-Nuri*, Fifth Droplet, 21-22.

⁴⁴ 1 Corinthians 8:6. All Bible quotations in this article, unless otherwise indicated, are from the New Revised Standard Version.

⁴⁵ Colossians 1:15-17.

⁴⁶ John 1:1-5, 9-10, 14. Most Christian translations of this passage, under the influence of verse 14, use personal pronouns (he, him, his) throughout, whereas I have modified the NRSV to translate them as

... The words of the Amen [i.e., “The words of Christ”], the faithful and true witness, the origin [or “beginning,” *archē*] of God's creation.⁴⁷

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through (*dia*) whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word...⁴⁸

Through (*dia*) him [Christ] all things were made.⁴⁹

Historically speaking, of course, this exalted language that connects Jesus (pbuh) in some way to God's creating the universe appeared earlier than the similar, exalted language about Muḥammad (pbuh). However, nothing about the latter seems to be a direct imitation of the former. Instead, the earlier portions of this article have maintained the linkage of Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) to God's creating the universe, claimed by Said Nursi and prior Muslim tradition, is a consequence of the logic of prophethood. Nursi recognises that God's creating is primarily a matter of enacting God's purposes, which Muslims understand to have been *definitively* disclosed and recognised in the message Prophet Muḥammad received, proclaimed and embodied. Nursi emphasises, by means of implicit extrapolation from the present experience of value, meaning and purpose through Muḥammad's prophethood, back to the beginning of God's creating, that what Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) brought is not something new, additional, arbitrary, accidental or illusory. Rather, it reflects the fundamental Truth about reality that has always been there, ‘from the beginning,’ the Truth that prophets have always proclaimed. God's creating has always entailed these particular purposes, and Muḥammad's prophethood invites people to align themselves with them. That is what it means to say that Muḥammad is the “reason for the world's creation” or Muḥammad is the “seed” of the universe.

The same epistemological dynamics that led to Nursi's exalted language likewise produced the New Testament and creedal language that speaks about God's creating the universe ‘through’ Jesus/Christ (pbuh), who is the “beginning,” the “firstborn” of God's creation; the same logic of prophethood is expressed. The Christian authors did not begin with this exalted language as a ‘given’; the ‘historical Jesus’ did not proclaim this about himself. Rather, Christian authors *formulated* this language in order to claim that God's purposes in creating are *definitively* disclosed in the figure of Jesus, something they *already* had experienced, which had ‘grasped’ them.⁵⁰ By linking what had been revealed through the words and actions of

impersonal (it, its) prior to v. 14, since the explicit antecedent of these pronouns is *logos* (‘Word,’ ‘Reason,’ ‘Message’).

⁴⁷ Revelation 3:14b.

⁴⁸ Hebrews 1:1-3a.

⁴⁹ This final quotation is from the Nicene (or Nicene-Constantinopolitan) Creed, adopted 381 CE, using the translation by the English Language Liturgical Consultation, *Praying Together* (www.englishtexts.org), 17.

⁵⁰ The argument here presupposes a widely-accepted Christian scholarly view that New Testament writings were humanly authored, very unlike the Islamic claim of divine ‘authorship’ for the Qur’ān. No criticism of Islamic views about the “coming down” of the Qur’ān is implied or intended. Christian language about Christ's role in God's creating the universe was *not* derived from other exalted titles for Jesus, such as “son of God,” or from Trinitarian presuppositions, although it was almost certainly

Prophet Jesus (pbuh) to God's creating, they insisted this is what God had *always* been doing, just as Nursi and the Muslim interpretive tradition on which he draws had done with respect to Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh). The dynamics are identical, and all five major points made previously in this article with respect to Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) apply equally well when applied to Prophet Jesus (pbuh).

The New Testament and subsequent Christian tradition use 'prophet' as just one of numerous terms for referring to Jesus (pbuh), and within the history of Christianity this term became overshadowed by other titles for him, especially 'Christ'/'Messiah,' 'Son of God,' and 'Lord.' As a result, Christianity has tended to view 'prophet' as one of the 'lesser' ways of referring to him, and has seen these other titles as adding something 'more' and 'higher,' which 'prophet' does not adequately express.⁵¹

However, in the context of Muslim/Christian comparative theological conversations, it is essential to recognise that the Muslim use of 'prophet' contains no hint of any 'lesser' role. Rather, within Islam 'prophet'/'messenger,' as one who conveys and embodies God's Word to humanity, is *the* highest role a human can possibly have. Prophethood is a far higher, more comprehensive category in Islam than it has traditionally been treated within Christianity.⁵² The fact Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) can be intimately linked to God's creating of the universe demonstrates that nothing more can, nor need, be added to the role of 'prophet' in Islam's understanding. Christianity's use of additional titles to talk about Jesus' link to God's creating of the universe demonstrates the *functional* equivalence between 'prophet' in Islam and the *multiple* exalted titles for Jesus in Christianity, i.e. both traditions are specifying what they recognise and experience as *definitive* for understanding God, humanity and the created world. Islam needs just one term for doing that, whereas Christianity requires several. Nothing other than Godself can be higher than what is *definitive*, for whatever is *definitive* identifies the pinnacle of what can be humanly encountered of God. Therefore, this article, which specifically engages Nursi's exalted understanding of prophethood, unapologetically borrows Islam's more

aided by language produced by Jewish Wisdom speculation, which spoke of the "Wisdom of God" as an agent in God's creating the universe, e.g. in Proverbs 8:22-36 and in Wisdom of Solomon 7:21-8:1; 9:1. Trinitarian claims were a further, later step, built upon the language of Christ's role in God's creating the universe; issues regarding the legitimacy, or illegitimacy, of that additional step are not addressed in this article.

⁵¹ Numerous factors contributed to this 'lesser' status of 'prophet' and the shift of focus to other titles within Christianity, e.g. an emphasis on former prophets as those who particularly looked forward to and 'predicted' Jesus and who, by that function, were viewed in a 'lesser' category than of Jesus (e.g. Acts 3:18; Romans 1:2; Hebrews 1:1-2); the ongoing activity of contemporary 'prophets' in early Christian communities and the desire to express the superiority of Jesus over them (1 Corinthians 12:28-29; 14:29-32; Acts 11:27; 13:1); the acknowledgement that 'false prophets' exist (Luke 6:26; 1 John 4:1), making prophethood a more ambiguous category; the association of Jesus' death specifically to the fate of the prophets (Luke 13:33-34; 1 Thessalonians 2:15), whereas the other titles became particularly associated with Jesus' resurrection as his vindication by God (Philippians 2:9-11; Romans 1:4; Acts 2:36); and the use of these other titles in Christian polemic against Imperial Rome (Luke 2:1-2,11).

⁵² For example, a common motif in Christian theology is to speak about Jesus (pbuh) as "prophet, priest and king," in which priest and king are viewed as providing additional characteristics to the role of prophet. Islam, however, would never use those additional terms for speaking of Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh), because his role as prophet/messenger *already* includes his functioning as a ruler, judge and channel of God's grace, mercy and compassion. For Islam, "prophet" says it all, making any additional title unnecessary.

comprehensive use of “prophet” to refer to ‘*Prophet Jesus*’ (pbuh), whom Christians view as *definitive*, even though Christians would usually use additional terms to express that. The net result of those additional Christian terms produces the comparable functional perspective in Christian theology as Islam’s own language of prophethood applied to Muḥammad (pbuh), i.e. for Christians, God’s purposes entailed in creating the universe are *definitively* expressed by what Jesus (pbuh) taught and lived.

New Testament and creedal statements claim that God’s creating the universe occurred ‘through’ (*dia*) Christ, but they do not specify what that means. Those statements did not become further narrativised into new ‘creation stories’ that speak explicitly about Christ ‘alongside’ God, doing something different from God, or contributing something that God did not. They did not, because they cannot; that is not the function of these metaphorical, symbolic statements. Christ makes *no* contribution to the creating of the universe that is ‘additional,’ ‘different’ or ‘distinguishable’ from God’s activity. Rather, this exalted language indicates that God’s purposes in creating are those which are *definitively* revealed in the message spoken and lived by Prophet Jesus (pbuh) – just as Nursi’s similar, exalted language indicates God’s purposes in creating are those that are *definitively* revealed in the message spoken and lived by Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh). For each of these traditions, if one wants to know what God’s creating is all about, its own central prophet provides the best clue.

Recent Christian theologians have rarely put language about Christ’s role at the centre of their discussions of God’s creating, or explored its meaning or significance. The general silence regarding these biblical and creedal statements in current Christian theological discussions about God’s creating is actually quite deafening.⁵³ Instead, Genesis 1-2 dominate most

⁵³ Daniel Migliore’s widely used textbook (*Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014)) is better than most in this regard, but exemplifies the problem. As the last of five ‘themes’ he presents about God’s creating, he briefly describes it as “purposive,” and helpfully identifies Jesus as the key “clue” and “confirmation” of God’s creative purposes (105-106). However, although he refers to some of the New Testament passages cited above, he does not explore further what those passages mean in speaking of Christ as one “through whom” God’s Creating occurs.

An earlier generation of Christian theologians did a more adequate job in this regard. Gustav Aulén (1879-1977) begins his discussion of God’s creating in his theology textbook (*The Faith of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960)), with a reference to these biblical passages, emphasising God’s creative purposes are expressed in Christ, and using “love” as the key interpretive key (156-158).

In *Maker of Heaven and Earth: The Christian Doctrine of Creation in the Light of Modern Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1965), Langdon Gilkey (1919-2004) provides one of the most sustained discussions of value, meaning and purpose in relation to God’s creating, explicitly tying that to Jesus; these concerns run throughout this entire book. The following illustrates his perspective: “... the knowledge of the goodness of God’s will, on which is based the Christian belief in the meaning of creation, comes from the revelation of God’s will in the prophets and in Jesus Christ. ... [T]he doctrine of creation takes its peculiar stamp from the character of Jesus Christ. It is a ‘Christological’ doctrine through and through, and must always be understood in the closest relation to what we know of God in Christ” (272, 273).

In his massive *Church Dogmatics*, particularly vol. III, Part 2, “The Doctrine of Creation” (1948/1960), Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) highlights Christ’s role as integral to God’s creating, but the denseness of his writing has limited familiarity with it largely to scholarly specialists on Barth.

Another category of Christian theologians who has stressed a role for Christ in relation to God’s creating activity are those such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Wolfhart Pannenberg, who have emphasised the ‘future’ as having some sort of ontological priority and causal efficacy, although they do this in very different ways from one another.

Christian theological discussions about God's creating, most frequently with scientific cosmologies setting the framework for the discussion, with virtually nothing said about what it might mean to claim the universe was created "through Christ." This apparently occurs because "through Christ" has no counterpart within the context of scientific cosmologies, whose methods must systematically exclude issues of "purpose." However, this is a major loss for Christian theology, because it treats God's creating as something that apparently has little to do with Jesus/Christ, and views the universe as merely a 'neutral stage,' thus sidelining issues of value/meaning/purpose, and thereby negating precisely the things that religion/theology is most capable of addressing. Nursi's forceful highlighting the importance of God's purposes for an adequate understanding of God's creating should stimulate Christian theology to take more seriously the similar emphasis already present within its own tradition.

The language of Nursi and the New Testament and creedal authors, which ties its own *definitive* figure with God's creating, keeps God's purposes at the centre. For all of them, the universe, because it has been (and is being) created, is purposeful and purpose-full (i.e. full of purpose). The starting point for each is with that which 'grounds' its own spirituality, i.e. with what is experienced as *definitive*, and *then* each talks about God's creating activity and the universe in those specific terms. Their emphasis is on the significance of God's purposes for how life should be viewed and lived in the present, rather than merely talking about God's creating as an event limited to the past, 'in the beginning.' God's creating continues in the present, and includes prophethood as one of its forms, where individuals, societies, humanity and the universe are transformed in accordance with God's purposes, which are expressed, revealed and embodied in Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) and Prophet Jesus (pbuh), as recognised by their respective faith communities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INTER-RELIGIOUS CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS

The function of exalted language about prophethood's role in God's creating the universe is not primarily to provide information about a primeval event that anachronistically involved the key recipients and bearers of Revelation in these two religious traditions. Rather, the exalted language is used metaphorically and symbolically to underscore the *definitiveness* of what each of these faith communities experience regarding God's purposes, which provide a sense of ongoing value/meaning/purpose in their lives. This *definitiveness* of what each tradition has experienced is a presupposition of that particular tradition – a central, non-negotiable, integral element of its own spiritual identity and spirituality.

The Muslim claim that God's creating the universe occurs through Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh), and the Christian claim that God's creating the universe occurs through Prophet Jesus (pbuh), are not competing statements. To affirm one does not require attacking the other; the truth of one does not necessitate claiming the falsity of the other. Rather, each claim simply identifies the specific prophetic lens through which a faith community *already* experiences, understands and lives What Matters Most, i.e. God's purposes. Muslims and Christians cannot

beneficially debate which prophet is ‘more truly’ definitive of God’s purposes in creating the universe, because they both *already* experience and live their very different answers to that question in relation to their own respective prophets.

Although they cannot fairly debate which lens is better, they can converse about what Reality is like, which they all encounter and experience through their particular lens. Muslims and Christians can share what they identify about God’s purposes through their own respective lenses, for they are then talking about the One God’s activity of creating. Both sets of language about prophethood contribute to that conversation, with each tradition speaking from its own non-negotiable, *definitive* starting point. Despite their different starting points, these traditions nonetheless yield considerable overlaps in how they experience the universe as ‘holding together’ and what constitutes value/meaning/purpose for how people should live, e.g. the significance of community and individuality, justice, knowledge and education, family, caring for the physical environment, accountability for one’s actions, communication, freedom to worship as they choose without compulsion, forgiveness, generosity, hospitality, compassion/mercy/love, health, safety, integrity of speech, beauty, etc. Strikingly, exploring God’s purposes in creating the universe through the lens of one’s own prophet and sharing those insights with others is not something that needs to be done, or can be done, only by religious ‘specialists.’ Instead, these issues include the most ordinary, pervasive elements of life, and can be productively shared by ordinary people of faith, thereby opening increased grassroots opportunities for inter-religious understanding and respect. Value differences encountered in conversations provide opportunities for discovering whether those might be compatible with one’s own tradition, even though not highlighted within it. Overlaps and differences should be explored, celebrated and built upon by Muslims and Christians, in serving the One God.

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