

Meeting the Challenges of Modernity as Experienced by

Said Nursi, Muhammad Iqbal and Muhammad Abduh

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Meeting the Challenges of Modernity as Experienced by

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One of the core debates of the Muslim intellectuals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was on the question of whether Islam could or should embrace change. If so, then how would this change take place in meeting the current challenges, while also staying faithful to the primary teachings of Islam? Muslims, and non-Muslims alike were directly or indirectly influenced by the “modern” trends brought by the West. Did “modern” values always signify progress and value? To what extent would modern principles be adopted in the Islamic tradition? These were certainly a few of the many questions raised by pioneer figures of “modernity” like Said Nursi (d. 1960), Muhammad Iqbal (d.1938) and Muhammad Abduh (d.1905). As I have come to hypothesize prior to my research, their distinct educational background and context had great significant and lasting impacts in the unique approaches that they undertook in regards to bringing change. As I have concluded, the ways in which they have dealt with these “modern” challenges, as well as opportunities, were not only an inspiration for their own generations, but also relevant to many Muslims to this day. Still, many Muslims and non-Muslims are unaware of these intellectuals who have demonstrated an immense effort in resolving the issues of their day. This is important to note because there is the possibility

for these intellectuals to also shed light to the existing internal crisis of the Islamic world today, if meticulous attention is given to their teachings.

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INTRODUCTION

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Understanding and describing “modernity” has been an area of interest to many intellectuals of the contemporary world. Many scholars today break the “modern” time frame into three segments referring it to as “pre-modernity”, “modernity” and “post-modernity”. Although it is a challenge on its own to define what the significances of modernity really are, the term generally refers to the changes in industrialization, growth in economy, science, urbanization, mass communication, the secularization of religion, and the level of emphasis placed on individualism, among others. These have led to fundamental forms of changes in behaviors and beliefs of those experiencing it. Although the initial layout of change began in European societies, the trend would eventually spread to many parts of the world beginning with the eighteenth century onward.

Different reactions were raised in the region as the non-European societies came in to contact with modern trends. One particular concern came from the Muslim societies across the world. A central debate was on the relevance of Islam as these modes of changes were happening. Muslims were confronted with the emergence of new political states that promoted notions of nationalism and replaced sharia, the Islamic legal code with European legal laws, as the case of Turkey illustrates. There was also the issue of Muslim cultural and political power loss that left ambiguous reactions on the part of Muslims. It was traditionally believed by Muslims that God’s words would rule and succeed in the world, as had been the case in Islamic history. How was it possible that Muslims were experiencing power demise through European colonialism and imperialism? An examination was indeed needed in order to identity the roots of the

problem. This posed a critical challenge to the make-up of the traditional ways of sharia guiding every sphere of a Muslim's life. Internal criticisms within the tradition became prominent in meeting the challenges posed.

Indeed, there were many “modern” introductions in the Islamic world, which had a direct affect on Muslims. The concept of “faith” was to be regarded as a private matter, between God and the individual. This form of secularization of religion raised questions on the eternal nature of the sharia. Would Islam, like Christianity, need to reduce its principles to the private sphere? Would this pose any danger to the way Islam would be practiced? These were a few of the many questions that were raised by many intellectuals of the day and still continue to be an area of interest in internal debates.

It is, I think, important to highlight the fact that Islam's confrontation of modern values in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is not something new to the religion. The Islamic tradition from its early days has dealt with revisions and adjustments through an institutionalized juridical process. Even within the traditional framework of Islamic sharia, interpretation and modifications were permissible, on the condition of not questioning the ultimate nature and authority of the law. The discourse on sharia would be an interest to many Muslim modern thinkers.

Throughout the thesis, I will be using terms “modernist” intellectuals, or “traditional” ways of thinking. These are but general indicators and do not serve to express stringent or essentialized ideologies. The rigid framing of words can be useful in defining certain ways of understanding, but this does not signify a lack of fluctuation between constructed categories. For example, “modernism” does not always denote progress. Progress is in and of itself a socially constructed term. In the case of Islamic

“modernist” thinkers, one cannot argue that modernism is a total denial of the past. The way Islamic “modernists” are distinct is in the way they reflect the flexibility of Islam by allowing modern principles to fit Islamic ones. Likewise, it cannot be assumed that “traditionalists” totally reject modern values. This would be an oversimplification of the terminologies. That is to say, both categories in many ways interact with each other. Hence, as I come to use “modernist” expressions, in reality I mean those who embrace scientific, technological and other modern values, whereas by “tradition”, I refer to a continuing authorization of the past, that might be otherwise rejected in modernist world-views. Therefore one cannot make the argument that if “modernism” means rationality, progress, etc., that “traditionalism” means irrationality and backwardness.¹ These are not strictly opposing terms. Careful attention needs to be given in order not to make a simplistic picture.

One is also raised with the inquiry of the reasons for the emergence of “modernist” thinkers. The rise cannot solely be due to colonialism. Ali Merad, a scholar of Arabic literature and civilization notes that there were many contributing factors to the rise of Muslim modernist thinkers like the influence of Western culture, the liberal values adopted by the Ottoman regime, the pressures of pre-Modernist fundamentalism, etc.² Although Merad’s observation is typically within the lines of the Arab world, Muslim modernist reactions were in fact widespread in other parts of the Muslim world including South Asia and Anatolia.

¹ Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, 176-192

² Merad, “Reformism in Modern Islam,” *Cultures*, 4, 108-27

At the end of the day, the questions raised by modernists were similar. That is, to what extent is Islam a guide to social action and public legislation?³ Modernist positioners thus advocated for a “rethinking and reconstructing” of tradition in the modern world. In other words, what they requested was an adaptation of Islamic principles to the valuable principles of the West. This, in their understanding, did not pose any threat or danger to Islam, but would even bring about greater advantage to its revival and spirit in the contemporary world. It was a common trend of modernists to return to the “essentials” of Islam in bringing about those particular changes.

The interest in modernist Muslim discourses is perhaps growing in the present world, but many non-Muslims and Muslims are unaware of the efforts of those whom tackled the same questions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Often, it is assumed that Muslims have never before dealt with the challenges and opportunities of modernity. Today, many Muslim societies are experiencing similar problems as in the past, such as the role and ways of perceiving religious authority. As we will see in later chapters, some modernist thinkers like Muhammad Abduh advocated for religious authority to not only be given to the ulama, or learned scholars, but on a wider scale to those working for the “common good”, whether it be military commanders, rulers or governors.⁴ This sort of thinking also won favor from figures like Muhammad Iqbal from India, who was a proponent of establishing a legislative assembly composed of individuals from a variety of backgrounds—who would carry out independent reasoning in law in assistance of the ulama’. However, this open-ended flexibility of providing justification to the dispersed

³ Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, 198

⁴ Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age: Religious Authority and Internal Criticism*, 49

of authority, has today brought with it consequences of extremist ideologies. On a broader level, this certainly suggests that authority in Islam is, as Muhammad Qasim Zaman puts it, “not a stable endowment but one that is always exposed to implicit or explicit challenge and that it waxes and wanes in response to the pressures bearing upon it”.⁵

In addition, even though colonialism is not a contemporary issue in the Middle East and South Asia today, many living in these regions are shaken by their Islamic and ethnic identities. Colonialism may not be present, but what I think has replaced colonialism is the influence of mass media. Today, Muslims around the world are confronted with what would be considered in religiosity signs of moral deprivation. Western norms are injected and reinforced in the minds of individuals via technology. In the meantime, there are yet the anti-Muslim sentiments that are present in the West. To this day, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ignites earlier feelings of disempowerment felt by those experiencing territorial colonialism by outside forces. Likewise, many Muslim societies today struggle in making sense of and wondering if reform is a possibility in Islamic norms, institutions, and practices. If it were to be possible, then who would have the authority to carry out these reforms, and to what extent would it be legitimized? Questions similar to these were raised and tackled by many Muslim modernists.

I have conducted my thesis in a way to better understand the individual efforts of Said Nursi, Muhammad Iqbal and Muhammad Abduh who are perceived as having brought revival to Islamic identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I argue that Said Nursi, with his traditional role as a Muslim religious scholar of the twentieth

⁵ Ibid.33

century, will bring a more traditional approach to his modernist agenda. I further consider how Muhammad Iqbal's philosophical and poetic background provides a different tone to the way he presents his teachings. Finally, I hold that Muhammad Abduh, a distinct religious scholar of al-Azhar University, present a unique account with his traditional role as an ulama and an advocate of modernity.

My justification for choosing these three individuals lies in the possible shared themes that they hold in common as I place them under the "modernist" umbrella. I hypothesize that the time frame they lived in along with their different contexts of South Asia, Arab-Middle East and Turkey will serve to give their voices unique modernist expressions. I expect that their cultural backgrounds and the way they interact with internal and external factors to further lead to their differing constructed worldviews. By the same token, I assume that their diverse approaches to meeting the challenges and opportunities of modernity can raise important insights to today's generation of Muslims in tackling similar issues in the "post-modern" world.

SAID NURSI

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Life

Born in 1877 in eastern Anatolia to a Kurdish family, Said Nursi's early years are occupied with accounts that allude to his intelligence, bold character, and his ability to speak candidly and persuasively. Already, during his teens Nursi would be given the title- *Bediüzzaman* or 'Wonder of the Age' by the *ulama*, or scholars, of the day.¹ Receiving his early education from the *medreseler* (religious schools) in the Eastern provinces, (which were associated with the Naqshibandi, a Sufi order that was prominent in the region at the time), Nursi at a young age began to honor figures like Abdul-Qadir Geylani (d. 1166) and Ahmad Sirhindi (Imam Rabbani) (d.1624), referring to both as "the Highest Saints."² Nursi, however, for various reasons did not subscribe to any *tarikât* [Sufi order]. As he himself admits, "...preoccupation [with study of the religious science] prevented my becoming involved with the *tarikât*".³ Nevertheless, Nursi believed that Sufism (by itself) was not appropriate for the modern age.⁴

Nursi broke down his life into two segments, referred in Turkish as the "*Eski Said*" and the "*Yeni Said*", or "Old Said" and "New Said". During his Old Said period, one sees Nursi's active engagement in politics. It is during these years that Nursi noticed a growing range of Western influences in the new modernizing Anatolia. He hoped to use politics as means to "serve" his religion. His concerns revolved around the notion that

¹ Turner & Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 19

² Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, 167

³ Ibid.25

⁴ Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, 710

the Islamic world needed to cling to one another in dealing with modernity and science. He also began writing commentary on the Qur'an during his membership in the *Darul-Hikmeti'l-Islamiye* (The Academy of Higher Islamic Studies), one of the goals of which was to find solutions to the existing problems that Muslim countries in general were facing.⁵ Hence, it is safe to say that Nursi's early years encompass his active role in trying to influence government leaders like Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in not blindly adopting positivist teachings centered by the West.⁶

The "New Said" years begin shortly after World War I, with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. As he observed the newly forming secular regime with its conclusive adoption of Western values and materialist ideology and philosophy, Nursi felt a bitter disappointment and was also heavily affected by the abandonment of religious duties by government officials, which Nursi believed was one reason why there was doubt spreading in regards to faith and religion.⁷ It was in these years that he lost his nephew- a man whom Nursi referred to as "his student, his servant, his secretary, his adopted child"⁸, an incident by which he was very much shaken. All of these events were a spark to an inner crisis that eventually led to his transformation from Old Said to the New Said. Vahide provides a brief account on the transition:

We can say that Bediuzzaman's (Nursi) enlightenment occurred in three stages. Firstly, he realized the deficiency of the 'human philosophy' he had studied and how it had been an obstacle to his enlightenment and progress. And secondly, as Bediuzzaman himself confessed, through the 'bitter medicine' of Shaykh 'Abd-al Qadir Geylani's *Futuhu'l Gayb*. 'I understood my faults, perceived my wounds, and my pride was to a degree destroyed'. Then completed the process of his

⁵ Turner & Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 19

⁶ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, 167

⁷ Ibid.25

⁸ Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati*, 710

transformation in the new Said, he understood through the *Mektubat* of Imam-i Rabbani that he should take the Qur'an as his sole master. The instruction in Divine Unity he then received from the Qur'an through the phrase 'There is no god but God' was 'a most brilliant light' scattering the darkness in which he had been plunged and allowing him to breathe easily.⁹

In the "New Said" period, one witnesses Nursi walking away from and totally denouncing politics and dedicating himself to what he called in Ottoman Turkish "*hizmet-i imaniye ve Kur'aniye*" or "paying service to faith and Qur'an". In regards to politics, Nursi would later comment, "I seek refuge in God from Satan and politics".¹⁰

Not too long after his inner transformation, exiles and imprisonments dictated Nursi's life until his final days, for around 35 years. From his captivity by the Russians in 1925 at the age of 50, to the later accusations of him supporting a rebellion group in the eastern provinces-Nursi was sentenced to prison and exile for the rest of his life.

At the age of 83, Nursi died in Urfa on March 23, 1960, where he was initially buried. Two months after Nursi's burial, a military coup occurred and gendarme officials removed Nursi's body, an order given by the 'National Unity Committee', and buried Nursi in a covert location.¹¹

Context

Understanding the world into which Nursi was born is crucial, for it gives a general sense of how events proceeded in his life. Nursi was born after the "tanzimat".¹² The Tanzimat period (1839-76) refers to a series of reforms carried out by Ottoman sultans and leading ministers to reorder the government, administration, and many areas

⁹ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, 167

¹⁰ Nursi, *Şuâlar*, 616

¹¹ Turner & Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 41

¹² Markham, *An Introduction to Said Nursi: Life, Thought and Writings*, 4

of Ottoman life such that these would resemble those of the Western lifestyle. This was carried out in attempt to restore the power of the empire and form a closer bond with Europe. The effort of forming these reform policies were also a result of European pressure and advice. What the reforms were bringing about was a system that led to the separation of religion and state, which formerly functioned together under the sultan-caliph system.¹³ The nineteenth century marked the official decline and downfall of the Ottoman Empire. Steps towards modernization and reform policies were beginning to take shape. It was during this time that constitutional monarchy with a parliament system was also established to limit the rule of the sultan.

Thereafter, during Nursi's infancy years, a major war broke out between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, referred to as "The 93 War", which took place in 1877-78:

The Empire lost its provinces in Europe and part of the Balkans and was faced with a dramatic decline in economic activity. The migration and relocation of communities from lost provinces increased economic hardship and the empire struggled to maintain stability.¹⁴

Another major event that took shape in Nursi's life was his involvement in World War I. Nursi was one of those who gave his legal opinion or *fetva* calling out for Muslims to join and support the Caliph against the Allied powers.¹⁵ During 1914-1918, Enver Pasha, the Minister of War, requested Nursi to mobilize a militia composed of around four to five thousand men on the Caucasian front. It can be said that Nursi also was seen as a political leader at this point. Nursi placed his students in the center of the force, which he commandeered in 1916. However the Van province under his

¹³ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, 13

¹⁴ Markham, *An Introduction to Said Nursi: Life, Thought and Writings*, 6

¹⁵ Mermer, *Aspects of Religious Identity: The Nurcu Movement in Turkey Today*, 503

commandership fell to the Russians and Nursi was taken as war captive and spent two years in Siberia. It was during the war that Nursi began writing a Qur'anic commentary entitled *İşârât-ül İ'caz* (Signs of Miraculousness), despite adverse physical conditions at the front.¹⁶

Nursi lived during a major shift in the social and political structure of the Ottoman Empire that ruled for centuries. The empire was now at its breakdown point and outside forces were targeting their interest in the region. The century was going through a dramatic change. These external factors are important in analyzing the ways Nursi responded to them.

Works

The new age brought modernity, science, technology, along with positivism and materialism. Nursi did not believe modernity was a threat to Islam in terms of the benefits he saw in science and technology, however he did feel the need to defend religion against materialist philosophies that were suddenly spreading in to the heart of Anatolia. His written works are both a product and a demonstration of the abrupt and astute changes that were taking place in the newly forming secular nation.

Nursi's magnum opus, *Risale-i Nur*:

Was written over a period of six decades (from around 1909-1953) and exemplifies the scope of his intellectual and religious dynamism. This work also reflects Turkey's major institutional and ideological transition from a polyglot, multiethnic, and multi-religious empire to a secular republic.¹⁷

One also needs to keep in mind that most of these works were written during his exiles, imprisonments, and alienation years.

¹⁶ Turner & Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 17

¹⁷ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, xiv

Although Nursi was an active writer during his “Old Said” period, most of his major works were a product of the “New Said” years. The *Risale-i Nur* collection is composed of a total of fourteen volumes, which include, “The Letters” (*Mektubat*), “The Rays” (*Şuâlar*), “The Flashes” (*Lem’alar*), “The Words” (*Sözler*), *Mesnevi-i Nuriye*, *Sikke-i Tasdik-i Gaybi*, *Münazarat* and *Muhakemat*. “The Words” was the first of the treatises to be compiled. Written during his “New Said” years, it includes topics such as faith, the existence of God, the afterlife, etc. In illustrating his points, Nursi uses many short stories and analogies. The second main book of the *Risale* series, “The Letters” is a collection of questions and answers. Composed of questions raised to Nursi by his followers and students, Nursi’s answers pertain to a variety of topics regarding faith. Some reoccurring themes include the concept of *tevhid* or oneness of God, miracles of the prophets, reform in Islam, etc. The third main book is “The Flashes”, which as in the other books, consists of many different discussions like the concept of brotherhood/sisterhood in religion, important themes that are drawn from prophets’ lives, how to abstain from sins, and so on. The fourth main book is referred to as “The Rays”, which mainly discusses the existence through the lens of creation. *Mesnevi-i Nuriye*, *Münazarat* and *Muhakemat* are some of the works that date to Nursi’s early Said years. Referring to *Mesnevi-i Nuriye* as the seed of the *Risale-i Nur* ¹⁸, Nursi mentions in its introduction that because this particular *Risale* was written in short paragraphs, it was meant to resemble the couplet makeup of the *Mesnevi-i Şerif* of Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi, which in its content constitutes numerous words of wisdom that reached a broad range of audience. Finally, the *Münazarat* and *Muhakemat* is comprised of debates,

¹⁸ Nursi, *Mesnevi-i Nuriye: Habbe*

questions, answers, and discussions that deal with a wide range of topics like the involvement of non-Muslims as leaders and representatives in the parliament, Nursi's proposed thoughts on education policy and so on. Regardless of what the content may be, there happens to be a general trend of the titles reflecting the notion of "light":

With the individual treatise which comprise the work described variously as 'rays', 'gleams' and 'flashes', the *Risale* models itself as a sort of hermeneutical prism, catching what its author considers to be the effulgence of divine light from the Qur'an and refracting it as colors visible to, and understandable by, the eye of the human heart. Inspired by the sense of drama, which underpins the landscaping of his work, we suggest that we approach the *Risale* as one would a building. In fact, the *Risale* is not one building, but a whole complex of edifices, constructed at various points along the author's career.¹⁹

In terms of the language that Nursi used in his writings, his works are composed of separate treatises of mostly Ottoman Turkish, Arabic and some Persian.²⁰ During Nursi's last ten years, there was an attempt by him and his students to translate the works into multiple languages. Translating these works posed a significant task, for the intent was to reach out to as many people as possible both domestically and internationally. The message of the *Risale-i Nur* was to be spread to many countries like Germany, Pakistan, Syria and Korea- to only name a few.

Teachings

It is an arduous task to identify and discuss the overarching themes covered by Nursi in his magnum opus, *Risale-i Nur*. The collection lacks systematic organization and structure and many themes are scattered through different sections of the volumes. Thus, for the purposes of this thesis, it is necessary to limit our analysis to only some of the crucial aspects of Nursi's teachings.

¹⁹ Turner & Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 45

²⁰ Ibid. 2-3

Iman (Belief)

One of the chief ways of defining Nursi's works and teachings is to witness the amount of emphasis he places on matters of faith and belief. Nursi, who lived during an age when Western values were becoming the norm in Turkey's social and political transition, he believed that there were both highly valuable features that could be adopted from the West and threatening teachings to be cautious of. In one of his writings he states:

It should not be misunderstood; Europe is two. One is that which, benefiting from the religion of Jesus and Islamic civilization, serves human social life and justice through its scientific and technological inventions, the other is that which is based on naturalistic and materialistic philosophy and, supposing the evils of civilization to be virtues, has driven humankind to vice and misguidance...O young people, especially those in Muslim lands! Do not try to imitate Westerners blindly! After you have suffered misfortune at the hands of this second Europe, how can you still trust in and follow its debauched fallacies? Those who imitate them in their dissipation join their ranks unconsciously and condemn to death both themselves and their brothers and sisters.²¹

Nursi was very anxious and troubled with the positivist and materialist perceptions that were spreading in Turkey during the 20th century. What this meant was stagnation and even worse, retrogression in faith and belief. According to Hakan Yavuz, to get in the way of further spreading of secular positivism, Nursi believed that "active cultivation of *individual* Islamic spirituality and morality" would have to take place as the basis for a moral community.²² In a sense, he argued that Islamic consciousness should be raised primarily at an individual level, by strengthening ones' faith. With a strong faith one would be equipped with the tools needed to properly address and meet the challenges of modernity from an Islamic standpoint. In terms of Western influences in science,

²¹ Nursi, *The Gleams* 162, 167

²² Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 58

technology, education, and certain moral values and manners like work-ethic, Nursi considered these unopposed to the teachings of Islam. On the contrary, they are, he argued, characteristics that Islam applauds and encourages. Nursi comments:

One can be beloved not because of his essence but because of his attributes and profession. Therefore, it is not necessary that a Muslim's attributes be considered muslim too. And likewise, it is not necessary that a non-Muslim's attributes are non-Muslim. Thus it is possible that a non-Muslim individual could have a Muslim attribute and a Muslim profession. Why must this necessarily be impermissible? And why would the Muslim attributes of a non-Muslim not be a cause for praise and imitation? ²³

Here, Nursi uses *kalam* language (theology) in an attempt to distinguish Muslim and non-Muslim attributes.

Elsewhere, upon an inquiry raised at him regarding non-Muslims gaining success and victory in different occasions as battles or scientific and technological advancements, Nursi makes it clear that there is no such decree that it has to be otherwise. In *Lema'at*, he mentions that there are two standards to God's rules and regulations. Whereas one feature concerns religious regulations, in which one receives blessings or punishments mainly in the afterworld, the other aspect of His rules and regulations is principally concerned with this world and if one is able to comply with these rules, the benefit will be received in this world. In other words, according to Nursi, God set certain social and "natural" laws in motion. Abiding by these rules, analyzing and reading them carefully would help an individual prosper life standards. The universe- in a metaphorical sense is a book and it is up to human beings to read it and use it for their benefit. To simplify this, Nursi gives examples: "For instance, just as patience grants victory, the penalty for

²³ Nursi, *Mu'nazarat*, 70-71

laziness is misery and poverty. Likewise, working produces fortune”.²⁴ Here, Nursi draws a connection with how laziness had triggered poverty on Muslims in the world. During the 19th and 20th centuries, the intellectual aptitude and influence was in the hands of non-Muslims, mainly the European powers. Nursi believes that their accomplishment was due to their acquiring Muslim traits like diligence and trustworthiness. Non-Muslims were able to read and understand the specific laws that God has placed in the universe, from which they highly benefitted. Whoever “carries” these Muslim attributes of virtue will prevail over others in Nursi’s understanding.

Nursi did not claim that the West was to blame in totality for the spreading of materialist teachings or even for Muslim backwardness. He claimed that it is one thing to constantly blame “others”, and it is another to take a step back and reflect on one’s own state and try to amend one’s own faults. Nevertheless, Nursi believed that Muslims needed to “upgrade” their own *iman* or belief. He asserted at one point that belief is both a light (a light that brightens ones’ soul and acts as a guide), and is also strength (for the individual).²⁵ Elsewhere on the same subject, Nursi continues to highlight the importance of belief, “belief makes man into a real man, if not a king or sultan. This being the case, the actual duty of a man is belief and supplication. Unbelief makes him into an impotent beast”.²⁶

Nursi believed that a human being is made up of multiple components. One has one’s botanical, animalistic, humanitarian, and faith side, all of which should be disciplined by the guidelines of the teachings of Islam. The heart, the spirit, and the mind

²⁴ Nursi, *Lema’at*, 984

²⁵ Nursi, *Mesnevi-i Nuriye*, 329

²⁶ Nursi, *Sözler*, 514

that has been given to mankind by God, should be used in their own respective ways and reflect their ultimate purposes. Nursi asserts that belief is not a stable, or a fixed entity, but is flexible:

Since man himself and the world in which he lives are being continuously renewed, he needs constantly to renew his belief. For in reality each individual human being consists of many individuals. He may be considered as a different individual to the number of years of his life, or rather to the number of the days or even the hours of his life. For, since a single individual is subject to time, he is like a model and each passing day clothes him in the form of another individual.²⁷

To put it in another way, one cannot guarantee one's state of belief or disbelief throughout one's lifetime. An unbeliever should strive to reach the *kâmil* or highest point of *iman*, which Nursi refers to as the *ahsen-i takvîm* mentioned in the Qur'an: "We have certainly created man in the best of stature".²⁸ In Nursi's words, either a man can reach the highest of the high *âlâ-yı illiyyîn*, or with unbelief or heedlessness can end up in the lowest of the low or *esfel-i sâfilîn*.²⁹

Taking this *ayah* or verse from the Quran as a guide: "and I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me"³⁰, Nursi claims that human beings are entrusted with a duty and a task. In essence, mankind is a guest in the transient world and is presented with a crucial test. Either one will get to know God, be appreciative of Him and please Him through intention and action, or live a heedless life seeking pleasure and personal gain. Having awareness of the purpose of creation and submitting oneself to God through mind and heart raises the nature of human status and gives a purpose to one's life. By being aware of one's weak nature and witnessing the blessings of creation,

²⁷ Nursi, *The Letters*, 391

²⁸ Qur'an 95:4

²⁹ Nursi, *The Letters*, 669

³⁰ Qur'an 51:56

one eventually will turn to God in worship and mediation.³¹ On the other hand, an individual who chooses to only serve his/her carnal desires has a high chance of failing in the afterlife for living a reckless life.

Noticing one's impotent and needy nature helps one attain a stronger *iman* or faith in God, which results in a closer attachment to following His commandments. One realizes that the power one possesses is transient-that the source of the power is God Almighty. If one realizes one's limited nature, then one turns to God, and acknowledges His superiority and sustainer attribute. This in effect raises one's level of *iman* as the individual submits to Him in worship. If, on the one hand, one believes that human power is independent of its Creator, then the "power" at hand leads one to deny the need to worship or even believe in a Higher Being, as unnecessary. To put this in another way, an individual boasting about his/her power and abilities has a lesser chance of referencing a Higher being. Needless to say, the "ego" that brags and is full of pride, will act as a barrier to a stronger belief and submission to a Higher reality. Zeki Saritoprak adds:

He [Nursi] believes therefore that the only real source of evil is unbelief, which stems from a refusal to attribute everything to the Divine. He states that it is this willful disconnection of creation from its Divine source that causes pain and sadness, for without such a connection, the whole cosmos appears worthless and futile.³²

In the age of materialist progression, "belief through emulation" *taklidi iman* (take what people say for granted), according to Nursi is a dangerous and risky path to take because the chances of belief fading away are higher. In contrast, what Nursi advocates for is "belief through investigation" *tahkiki iman*.³³ He indeed hints that

³¹ Nursi, *Sözler*, 509

³² Saritoprak, "Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations", 25-37

³³ Nursi, "33rd Word"

matters of belief in Islam have a way of satisfying both the heart and the mind. It is only a matter of investigating Islamic teachings and not blindly taking matters for granted. The *taklidi* way of adhering to Islamic doctrines eventually can shake one's belief and agnostic or atheistic tendencies may occur.

In relation to the method that Sufi *tarikāt* and *tasavvuf ehli* (mystics) seek in search of the truths of *iman*, Nursi defines his approach and method in a rather different fashion. He is interested in directly engaging in theology, along with using *usul al-din* (principles of religion), *akaid* rulings (fundamental creed pillars in Islam with a reference to Qur'an and Prophet's way) to reach "the truths" of *iman*, which he believes is a quicker and stronger way of defeating the philosophical misguidance of his generation. He uses these approaches to simplify the terms to produce a clear understanding. In his own words, he identifies himself as being entrusted with a duty of giving legal opinions on faith matters.³⁴ However in the areas of hadith, commentary (*tefsir*), and Islamic jurisprudence (*fikih*), Nursi seems to only include summaries (*icmal*) and lays out the basis of the principles.

Nursi was a contemporary theology scholar. Unlike the traditional theology scholars, Nursi did not find it sufficient to produce scholarship that is confined to the books. After getting his religious scholarship from the books, he surpassed them by reaching out to apply these concepts to social action. He based his arguments on reference to the universe, the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad and based his actions on striving to reform people's belief. Nursi also believed in "comprehensive" knowledge. In other words, he did not think it was sufficient for an Islamic scholar, for instance, to

³⁴ Nursi, "29 Mektup, 6.Risale/Hucumat-i Sitte"

feel that it is enough to remain knowledgeable of religious texts. He believed that men of knowledge should work to grasp science of every sort, which leads to understanding of the universe. Hence, there needs to be a balance that secures both knowledge of the Qur'an and that of the sciences of the universe, created by God, a theme reflected in his writings:

While his *magnum opus*, the *Risale-i Nur* (The Treatise of Light), is for all intents and purposes a commentary on the Qur'an, it is not a work of exegesis in the technical sense of the word, though he was clearly an accomplished exegete. And while Nursi was well versed in the principles of *kalam* and the methods of the *mutakallimun*, and devotes the lion's share of the *Risale* to what he claims are rational proofs for the unity (*tawhid*) of God, it is not a work of traditional theology either. In fact, on one level, the *Risale* is as resistant to compartmentalization as the Qur'an itself, which it claims to mirror and to elucidate. And if, as Nursi often asserts, the aim of the Qur'an is to guide man to belief, then the teachings of the *Risale* should be seen as consonant with that aim.³⁵

In analyzing the relationship between *iman* (belief) and *islam* (submission), there is another crucial point that Nursi brings out in his writings. According to Nursi, an individual should strive for an investigated belief and submit whole-heartedly to the commandments of God, which are primarily apparent in the Qur'an. Nursi believed that there was an ideological assault on Islamic beliefs, which is one of the reasons why he elevated the value of shari'a. However, Nursi constantly writes that "believing" is a significant component of these external practices. While carrying out orthopraxy one should continually seek to raise one's level of belief to fill one's daily actions and worships with meaning and worth. Colin Turner affirms:

Implicit in the general Nursian discourse on Islamic orthopraxy is the notion that external submission to the will of God is predicable only on the possession of true, sustained and constantly reaffirmed belief, and that 'externalia' of Islam- the practice of prayer, fasting, and the like- are devoid of meaning without it. Belief

³⁵ Turner & Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 2-3

in turn must be based on investigation and introspection, on deliberation and contemplation: without knowledge, belief cannot obtain, and without belief, submission is of little value.³⁶

Elsewhere, Nursi defines his understanding of *iman* and *islam*:

Islam is a preference, while belief (*iman*) is a conviction. To put it another way, Islam is to take the part of the truth and is submission and obedience to it, and belief is acceptance of and assent to the truth. Long ago I saw certain irreligious people who fervently supported the injunctions of the Qur'an. That is to say, by taking the part of the truth, such people were in one respect Muslim and were called "irreligious Muslims." Then later I saw certain believers who did not evince support for the injunctions of the Qur'an nor take the part of them, and they reflected the epithet "non-Muslim believers."³⁷

Nursi clearly distinguishes between a person who believes but does not submit to the "truths" of the Qur'an and a non-Muslim who might be considered falling in the category of what is referred to as *muslim*. In terms of the former, Nursi defines these individuals as non-observant Muslims-the ones who accepts the fundamental teachings of belief, as in the Judgment day, or God's existence, prophethood, and so on, but who do not implement the truths of the Qur'an in their lives.³⁸ In terms of ones' salvation Nursi confirms that Islam and belief have to be both present. He states, "Neither can Islam without belief be a means of salvation, nor can belief without Islam be a means of salvation".³⁹

Spirituality and Sufism

The term spirituality has been contested among scholars of religion for many centuries and is still an area of debate in formulating its definition in Islamic terms. Not getting into the dilemma of what scholars of Islam have said on it, for the purposes of this

³⁶ Turner & Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 76

³⁷ Nursi, "9th Letter"

³⁸ Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyatı*, 360

³⁹ Nursi, "9th Letter"

paper, I will outline and give an overview of what spirituality signifies in Nursi's own definition and teachings.

In reference to Nursi's writings, Sukran Vahide points out that Nursi is very much concerned with the inner dimension of Islam that helps to strengthen belief in God. However, Vahide is also careful to point out that the term spirituality as used in *Risale-i Nur* is not the same as how the term is applied in Sufism.⁴⁰ Nursi, in the *Risale-i Nur* mentions *ruhani* or "spiritual" in reference to the Sufi tradition to make a clear distinction between it and the path that *Risale-i Nur* is concerned with taking. Instead of the term *ruhani*, Nursi uses *manevi*, which is usually an antonym of what is "material or physical" in essence. Interestingly, Nursi argues against the notion that Sufism is the inner dimension of Islam and Shari'a is the external practices. In defining the connection between the Sufi path and Shari'a:

The aim and goal of the Sufi path is – knowledge of God and the unfolding of the truths of faith – through a spiritual journeying with the feet of the heart [following his footsteps] under the shadow of the Ascension of Muhammad, to manifest the truths of faith and the Qur'an through tasting and certain enhanced states, and to an extent through direct vision; it is an elevated human mystery and perfection called the Sufi path or Sufism...Sainthood is a proof of divine messengership; the Sufi path is a proof of the Shari'a.⁴¹

Elsewhere he adds:

The ways of the Sufi orders (*tarikats*) 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'a, so then they become parts of the greater Shari'a...it is not right to think of the Shari'a as an outer shell, and reality as its inner part and result and aim, as some Sufis do.⁴²

⁴⁰ Vahide, *Spiritual Dimensions of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Risale-i Nur* 1-2

⁴¹ Nursi, "29th Letter 9th Section 1&3 Allusion "

⁴² Nursi, "20th Letter 9th Section 7th Allusion "

For Nursi, *tasavvuf* mysticism, and Sufi *tarikāt* are not paths that exist outside the boundaries of faith, worship, and Islamic way of life. The *tarikāt* way however can act as means to attain a deeper understanding and appreciation-hence a more profound way of carrying out the “truths of the *shari’a* in ones’ daily life. A person following the Sufi path clings to prophet Muhammad’s actions and sayings. According to Nursi, there are many ways to reach God, and two in particular that require attention. The Sufi way, which is lead by the *veliler* or the friends of God, mainly tries to encounter the “truth” and is concerned with disciplining one’s self through the heart and with working in ways to get rid of the evil-commanding soul in reaching closer to God. The latter path, which Nursi and the *Risale-i Nur* follows, is the way of the companions of prophet Muhammad. The paths of the companions, in Nursi’s perception, encompass the heart, mind, *nefis* (evil commanding soul). In other words, Nursi defines the way of the companions of the Prophet in two ways: a constant struggle with one’s *nefis*, though never denouncing the *nefis*; and a struggle to gain the knowledge and ways of spirituality (*ilim ve manevi rehberlik eşliğinde*) to be applied in the service of the religion, just as what the Prophet and his companions did. These individuals are in constant struggle with their evil-commanding soul. The followers of this path are actively concerned with spreading the knowledge of *tevhid* and are highly concerned with *al-amr bi ‘l-ma ‘ruf wa ‘n-nahy ‘ani ‘l-munkar* or promotion of virtue and prevention of vice mentioned in the Qur’an.⁴³

The Companions’ sainthood, known as the greater sainthood, is one that proceeds from the legacy of prophethood, and passing directly from the apparent to reality without travelling the intermediate path, looks to the unfolding of divine immediacy. Although this way of sainthood is very short, it is extremely elevated. Its wonders are few, but its virtues are many. Illuminations and wonder-workings are to be encountered on it only infrequently. Moreover, the wonder-working of

⁴³ Qur’an 3:110

the saints is mostly involuntary; wonders appear from them unexpectedly as a divine bestowal. And the majority of such illuminations and wonder-workings occur during their spiritual journeying, as they traverse the intermediate realm of the Sufi path; they manifest those extra-ordinary states because they have withdrawn to a degree from ordinary humanity. As for the Companions, due to the reflection, attraction, and elixir of the company of prophethood, they were not obliged to traverse the vast sphere of spiritual journeying of the Sufi way. They were able to pass from the apparent to reality in one step, through one conversation with the Prophet.⁴⁴

Nursi's understanding of *tasavvuf* and elevation of *shari'a* is in line with Ahmad Sirhindi's perception of *tasavvuf* and *shari'a*. Both place a high emphasis on the importance and need of *shari'a* in Muslim life. Sirhindi lived in India in 16th century, and was known as a Muslim reformer who opposed the widespread heterodoxies in the time of the Mughal Emperor Akbar. In reaction to his surrounding, Sirhindi developed an interest to re-purify Islam in India by putting an emphasis on the external practices of the religion. He saw Sufism subservient to *shari'a*, although not dismissing its role in helping raise awareness and sincerity in *shari'a* practices. Nursi borrows this understanding from Sirhindi by quoting him in his writings on Sufism. Perhaps this comparison of *shari'a* and Sufism in Sirhindi's work can be linked to the fact that Nursi also faced similar challenges in the century he lived in. He also felt like Islamic teachings were under threat due to their exposure with materialist teachings by the secular regime-a possible explanation to why he raised the position of *shari'a* practices and saw Sufism to be an inseparable journey from *shari'a*.

In recognition of the Sufi orders, Nursi adheres to the notion that a follower of a *tarikat* order should regard even the smallest way of the Prophet's *Sunnah* (actions and words), to be one's ultimate purpose and guide. However one should not be led astray by

⁴⁴ Nursi, "15th Letter 1st Question 1st Station"

making *tarikāt* one's soul purpose and abandon *sharī'a* practices (daily prayers, fasting, etc.):

The Sufi path and way of reality should not exceed its limits. If they are made the ultimate aim, the incontrovertible teachings and actions of the Shari'a and following the practices of the Prophet become merely a matter of form, while the heart looks beyond them. That is to say, such a person thinks of his circle[of worshippers] for the remembrance of God rather than the obligatory prayers; he is drawn more to his recitations and supplications than to his religious obligations; he is more concerned with avoiding offending against his order's rules of behavior than with avoiding grievous sins.⁴⁵

Colin Turner reminds that Nursi's own usage of "spirituality" would have to be in correlation to how spirituality is used in the Qur'an. For Nursi, it is crucial to stay faithful to the Qur'anic teachings and to have his writings reflect the image of the Qur'an:

If the word spiritual means 'connected to or concerning the spirit,' then the Islamic revelation makes it abundantly clear that the human spirit is an uncreated entity, breathed into man by God himself. Man's spirit is thus that uncreated 'breath of the Compassionate' (*nafas al-rahman*) within him that connects him to the divine, and that transforms an otherwise transient material being into the 'vicegerent' (*khalifa*) of God on earth, capable of rising above all other beings to take his rightful place in eternity, the highest of the high.⁴⁶

Hence, man's duty in this world in Nursi's understanding is to uncover the reflection of the divine within oneself.

Before getting into some of the specific teachings in the *Risale-i Nur* that touch on spirituality, it would help to understand how Nursi perceived Sufism as a social institution in the 20th century. As mentioned before, with the inner crisis that Nursi underwent with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and World War I, he tried to look for ways to alleviate the inner trauma that he was experiencing. He was looking for ways to find the essence of reality, as many *ehli tarikāt ve ehli tasavvuf* (followers of Sufi order

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Turner, *Spiritual Dimensions of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Risale-i Nur*, 25

and mysticism) did previously or during his period. However as a person who was engaged with the sciences and philosophies in his “Old Said” period, he was not fully persuaded that the Sufi *tarikāt* would be the adequate path for him, for his mind and heart were not in mutual harmony. As a result of reading the *Mektubat* of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi he was thoroughly convinced that his sole master was only the Qur’an and therefore he did not need to look for any other “masters”.⁴⁷

Although Nursi was very much appreciative of Sufi figures like Abdullah Qadir al-Jilani, Shah Naqshband, Mevlana Khalid, Ahmad Sirhindi, he asserted that the twentieth century was not the right time for Sufism in terms of following a *tarikāt* order. There are a couple of reasons he brings into account, one being that as Turner mentions, the socio-cultural context of the society Nursi was living in made it complicated for one to follow a Sufi way. The Sufi way was a gradual process in reaching for the truth.⁴⁸ What Nursi was more concerned with were the basic tenets of belief that were slowly disappearing in the society. Nursi was critical of those who overemphasized Sufism over paying service to the spreading of the truths of belief, as the Prophet directly did himself.⁴⁹

According to Nursi, in time of material expansion, the urgent task that a believer should be doing is securing his/her *iman* as much as possible, and share the truths of belief with others. Nursi asserts that if the great Sufi figures who lived, centuries ago lived during his lifetime, they would also take the same path as Nursi did:

Since the reality of the matter is thus, my conjecture is that if persons like Shaykh ‘Abd al Qadir Jilani (may god be please with him) and Shah Naqshband (may

⁴⁷ Nursi, *Şualar: İnci Şuâ*

⁴⁸ Turner & Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 86

⁴⁹ Nursi *The Letters*, 40

God be pleased with him) and Imam-i Rabbani (may God be pleased with him) were alive at the present time, they would expend all their efforts in strengthening the truths of belief and tenets of Islam. For they are the means to eternal happiness. If there is deficiency in them, it results in eternal misery. A person without belief may not enter Paradise, but very many have gone to Paradise without Sufism. Man cannot live without bread, but he can live without fruit. Sufism is the fruit; the truths of Islam, basic sustenance. In former times, through spiritual journeying from forty days to as much as forty years, a person might rise to some of the truths of belief. But now, if through Almighty God's mercy there is a way to rise to those truths in forty minutes, it surely is not sensible to remain indifferent to it.⁵⁰

Nursi affirmed that the spiritual purification that some individuals sought for in the classical Sufi path admittedly resulted fruitfully. However, the Sufi *tarikat* according to Nursi was not for the masses, and not everyone was capable of pursuing such process. As Oliver Leaman also adds in reference to Nursi, the individual in the Sufi path who ardently sought the truth might in fact be misled of their experiences for the "nature of reality".⁵¹ Hence, Nursi argued that in the present day there needed to be different techniques to "save" the beliefs of people, and *then* seek ways to increase their belief in the form of *tahkiki* or consciously verified belief. Thus, the aim of *Risale-i Nur* was to strengthen and save peoples' beliefs. In a sense that what the *Risale-i Nur* offered was a methodology that encompassed the use of both modern scientific language as well as a spiritual tone to both connect the mind and the heart:

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.⁵²

⁵⁰ Ibid. 41

⁵¹ Leaman, "Nursi's place in the Ihya' Tradition", 314–324

⁵² Vahide, *Spiritual Dimensions of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Risale-i Nur*, 4

It would serve justice to mention that although Nursi was critical of Sufism during his lifetime, he did not actively oppose it. In fact, at the time when the Sufi lodges closed down by the political authority, Nursi defended Sufism, for he believed that “sainthood is a proof of prophethood, and the Sufi way a proof of the *shari’a*, and that both are a means of happiness”.⁵³

The Human “I” or Ene

Throughout the *Risale-i Nur*, the theme of worship, supplication, and servitude encompass a significant portion of Nursi’s writings. Consequently, Nursi emphasized the importance of human nature in connection to its Creator. In the *Ene Bahsi* in *Otuzuncu Söz* (30th Word) he has devoted an entire section on understanding the concept of the human “I” and its relation to God. This, to Nursi is significant, because many questions as ‘Who am I?’ ‘Where did I come from?’ ‘Where am I headed?’ which rise from an inner perplexity of trying to find out the essence of one’s own nature, are answered. The mysteries of the world according to Nursi can be solved with a correct understanding of the human I, or the self.

Nursi claims that the self possesses imaginary or apparent power that is a mirror-like reflection of the true power and knowledge of God. In other words, the human ego or the self acts like a measurement scale thereby manifesting the attributes of God. Nursi further points out that there lies in every individual the potential to manifest the names of God (i.e. the Merciful, the Forgiver) that is made apparent in human nature. However, whereas some people choose to insist on being the source of these traits, others appreciate and know their limit and give total respect to their Creator. This is where the

⁵³ Turner & Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 90

surrendering of one's own attributes to one's real source is made a critical responsibility for mankind, rather than claiming ownership of all property and boasting in pride.

Referencing the Qur'an, Nursi contends that God has given the human individual an important trust and duty. "Indeed, we offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, and they declined to bear it and feared it; but man [undertook to] bear it. Indeed, he was unjust and ignorant [which Nursi will comment on]".⁵⁴ It is the concept of 'trust' that needs to be understood clearly in terms of Creator-creature relationship. According to Nursi, man is given the trust to act as divine vicegerent of God. The heavens and the earth refused to take this trust, but man agreed to act as representative of God in the world. Therefore, mankind has the responsibility to recognize God through his divine names and consciously manifest these attributes in the "self" as the "representative" of God. In other words, realizing the beauty, the mercy, the wisdom, and compassion in oneself, one directly assigns these characteristics to one's Creator, and realizes that the characteristics one possesses are only illusionary, temporary and sample of the "real" One. The mercy and compassion of a mother to her child, is only a tiny sample of the real and colossal mercy of God. Thus, the task entrusted on humans is to be conscious of God's attributes and names and use free will to bow down to Him by realizing one's weakness and impotent nature in comparison to God. If one chooses to see the attributes belonging to one's self, then one in a sense would associate partners with God by claiming ownership.

Furthermore, what is the function of the "I"? According to Nursi, the human "I" is not only a scale to understand the names of God, but it is also a "device" to unlock the

⁵⁴ Qur'an 33:72

“talisman” of creation. How does one define the universe and its purpose? Where did mankind come from? Where is he heading? These are all questions that have been raised by philosophers for centuries. What to make of one’s “self” and “existence” is a relevant area of inquiry. Turner adds:

When we understand the meaning of ‘I’, Nursi assures us, the locked doors of creation will open and the riddle of cosmic existence will be solved. The ability of the ‘I’-the self- to know God stems from its containing within itself what Nursi calls ‘indications and samples’ which reflect the attributes and functions of God. In this sense, the ‘I’ is like a unit of measurement, which exists solely for the sake of revealing the existence and measure of something else. Like any other unit of measurement, the ‘I’ does not have a concrete material existence.⁵⁵

Regarding the ‘unit of measurement’, Nursi states, “For example, an endless light without darkness may not be known or perceived. But if a line of real or imaginary darkness [metaphor given for the “I”] was drawn, it [i.e. the light] then becomes known.”⁵⁶ The human self would then realize that all the possessions, ownership, real beauty, etc. belongs to the true Owner. In other words, the individual says, “Just as I am the owner of this house, so too is the Creator the owner of this creation.”⁵⁷ Therefore, the human “I” without any reference to its Creator, does not really mean anything.

Nursi believes that the human self should surrender or submit to its Creator. The human power or ownership is illusionary and imaginary and only a gateway to reveal the attributes of the one who bears true ownership:

That is to say, the ‘I’ [...] realizes that it serves one other than itself. Its essence has only an indicative meaning. That is, it understands that it carries the meaning of another. Its existence is dependent; that is, it believes that its existence is due only to the existence of another, and that the continuance of its existence is due solely to the creativity of that other. Its ownership is illusionary; that is, it knows

⁵⁵ Turner & Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 62

⁵⁶ Nursi, “Man and the Universe”, 22

⁵⁷ Ibid. 23

that with the permission of its owner it has an apparent and temporary ownership.”⁵⁸

Nursi highlights that the more the individual sees God’s attributes in *ma’na-i ismī* or ‘self-referential’ form and claims ownership and shares them with other beings, the longer it will take the individual to submit to the will of God. It can therefore be said that out of the many duties of man, he has two specific fundamental responsibilities: getting to know God through the human ‘self’ by means of His divine names, revelation, the universe, etc; and a responsibility to share these known tenets with other people.

Nursi outlines his own understanding of the “Qur’anic spiritual psychology of man” mentioned in the verse: “Indeed, God has purchased from the believers their lives and their properties for that they will have paradise.”⁵⁹ Nursi argues that the one’s body is a trust given to mankind by God. That being the case, one should use the “trust” in the name of God, serve its purpose and pass the “worldly test” with success. A person who uses his/her possessions in God’s name will unlock the infinite treasures and wisdom behind the universe and creation.⁶⁰ A person who sees purpose and beauty in life, will worship the Creator alone and feel peace in one’s spirit by having to fulfill the commandment “And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me.”⁶¹

Thus “selfhood” for Nursi, acts like the key that reveals the hidden treasures, which are the Divine Names of God. According to Nursi, God gave the ego, or selfhood for mankind to recognize the truths about his Lordship’s attributes and Divinity’s characteristics. The individual selfhood therefore is bound to act as a “yardstick” to

⁵⁸ Ibid. 29

⁵⁹ Qur’an, 9:111

⁶⁰ Nursi, “30th Word”, 725

⁶¹ Qur’an 51:56

measure one's fictitious lordship, power, and knowledge granted by God and its transient state. By comparing one's self with that of God's power, the self eventually comes to notice and comprehend, hypothetically, the Divine attributes. According to Nursi, selfhood is one of the many essences of human nature that forms the identity of the individual. One side of it looks at "goodness" while the other looks at "evil". If selfhood comprehends its nature, and gives all true lordship to its Creator, it then achieves true worship and servanthood. However, if the self forgets the Divine purpose of creation, and abandons "the duty" and sees the self as self-existent and independent of the Creator, it "betrays" the trust. This is crucial because, according to Nursi, betraying the trust happens by associating partners (i.e. by considering the self to be the "real" source) with God. The self that forgets its nature and its connection with its Lord, will eventually put its *own* selfhood in the center of its being. This according to Nursi results in conceitedness. Nursi states that those who used the "self" in a wrong way were present in history and still exist today. In history, one notices the Pharaohs, Nimrods, etc. who served their self, and eventually corrupted their purpose of being. Today there exists materialists, polytheists, etc. who also betray the trust. Those who understood the Divine purpose in this world, "raise" righteous individuals like prophets, saints, etc. The reason is that they link their "self" with Divine values. If these individuals have power and ownership, they know that it is God that granted it, and therefore use the given power in works to spread goodness, and raise the level of justice. They see world's fundamental nature in relation to mutual assistance, instead of conflict.⁶²

⁶² Nursi, "30th Word"

Selfhood serves a purpose for Nursi, because he ultimately connects it to the Divine test entrusted on mankind in this world. If mankind forgets its purpose of being, this not only has devastating effects in this world, but it also destroys one's afterlife. By understanding the role of the self, one is able to answer questions that pertain to the purpose of "being", and to how to attain righteousness in using the "self" for the sake of God, which eventually opens the doors to the mysteries of the world, such as seeing specifics of creation through an "other-indicative" lens.

Education and Science

During the years when Nursi was interested in politics and met with regional governors and politicians, he expanded his knowledge in many areas of studies. At the age of 21, Nursi travelled to a newly appointed governor of Van and resided next to him for 9 years. During his stay in Van, he studied natural sciences in depth, including biology, chemistry, math, geology, and astrology.⁶³ During the late 19th century and early 20th century, Nursi was aware of the growing divisions between the educated classes. Either people strictly preferred to send their kids to religious schools where Islam was taught, or secular schools where religion was not part of the curriculum, but where modern sciences were the core focus. Ian Markham notes the frustration felt by Nursi towards many religious scholars, whose discussions did not and would not be able to provide solutions to contemporary problems like poverty.⁶⁴

Nursi believed that one of the areas of contemporary living that some ulama could not find solutions to was poverty. He believed that there were countless "ulama" who

⁶³ Markham, *An Introduction to Said Nursi: Life, Thought and Writings*, 9

⁶⁴ Ibid.

carried the name of a scholar but in fact were full of ignorance.⁶⁵ In other words, not paying heed to contemporary circumstances in any way, these scholars of religion had come to interpret religious texts at face value. For instance, Nursi believed the encouragement of striving for work in the Qur’anic verse “and that there is not for man except that [good] for which he strives”⁶⁶ had been altered in interpretation. Nursi realized that the age he lived in placed great importance in material gain and success, so he advocated for a material striving as well.

While Nursi considers poverty an illness of society, he does not necessarily believe that one should negatively view it as a bad thing. He mentions that the development of great world civilizations is partly due to individuals “trying” to get out of “needy” situations. He argues that out of desperation, curiosity for knowledge develops in human psychology, and thereby starts seeking opportunities to learn to improve living standards.⁶⁷ Nursi regards the needs of individuals as a motivating factor in finding solution to poverty. In his understanding, destitution should not leave individuals in a helpless state. Nursi states, “We love religion, and love the world for the sake of religion.”⁶⁸

Nursi believes that Islam encompasses every aspect of the society and is able to provide solutions with its comprehensive essence. Nursi received his encouragement of knowledge and science from the Qur’an. According to him, prophets are great leaders both spiritually and materially:

⁶⁵ Nursi, *Munazarat*, 94-95

⁶⁶ Qur’an 53:39

⁶⁷ Nursi, *Sunuhat*, 58

⁶⁸ Nursi, *Hutbe-i Samiye*, 97

As God Almighty sent the Prophets to human communities as leaders of spiritual and moral progress, He has also endowed them with certain wonders and miracles and made them masters and forerunners of humanity's material progress. He commands people to follow them absolutely.⁶⁹

According to Nursi, miracles mentioned in the Qur'an show the pinnacle point to that which mankind can reach in science. Nursi points out that in history significant skills and artwork were brought to the people by the hands of the prophets:

By relating the Prophets' spiritual and moral perfections, the Qur'an encourages people to benefit from them. By presenting their miracles, it urges people to achieve something similar through science. It may even be said that, like spiritual and moral attainments, material attainments and wonders were first given to humanity as gifts through Prophetic miracles. For example, Prophet Noah was the first to build ships, and Prophet Joseph was the first to build clocks. Thus the ship and clock were given first as Prophetic miracles. It is a meaningful indication of this reality that so many craft guilds take a Prophet as the "patron" or originator of their craft. For example, seamen take Noah, watchmakers take Joseph, and tailors take Enoch, upon them be peace... The verse "And to Solomon (We subjugated) the wind: its morning stride was a month's journey and the evening stride was a month's journey (Qur'an 34:12), expresses the wind's subjugation to Prophet Solomon, upon him be peace: Prophet Solomon covered the distance of two month's walk in two strides by flying through the air. This suggests that humanity can and should strive to travel through the air.⁷⁰

Hence according to Nursi, the Qur'an is a guide of both moral and material realms.⁷¹

Realizing the degree of polarization between *medaris*, Islamic schools and *mekatib*, secular schools, Nursi requested that in each, both religious and natural sciences and technology should be taught. After all, one could not dismiss modernity for its inspired logic and reason, which according to Nursi was totally compatible with a properly understood Islam. Nursi suspected that the traditional Islamic sciences in schools by themselves would not be sufficient to getting rid of the ambiguity on faith

⁶⁹ Nursi, "20th Word", 26

⁷⁰ Nursi, *The Words*, 267

⁷¹ Nursi, "Hutbe-i Samiye", 33-34

matters. At the same time, religious sciences would get in the way of a fanatic stance of materialism and positivism:

The religious sciences are the light of the conscience and the modern sciences (lit. “the sciences of civilization”) are the light of reason; the truth becomes manifest through the combining of the two. The students’ endeavor will take flight on these two wings. When they are separated it gives rise to bigotry in the one, and wiles and skepticism in the other.⁷²

Nursi, who was troubled by the rigidity of the disunion between a *medrese* and a *mekteb* system, outlined a proposal where he would present his joint educational reform plan in the sultan’s palace in Istanbul. Van’s governor Tahir Pasha would inform Sultan Abdulhamid of Nursi’s coming and his “high reputation among the eastern provinces [as a scholar of religion]”. Vahide writes:

The heart of Said Nursi’s proposals lay in reconciling ‘the three main branches of the educational system-the *medreses* or traditional religious schools, the *mektebs* or new secular schools, and the *tekkes* or Sufi establishments-and the disciplines they represented. The embodiment of this rapprochement was to be the *Medresetüz-Zehra*...Nursi attached the greatest importance to establishing this university where the religious sciences and modern sciences would be taught side-by-side ‘combined’.⁷³

Nursi aspired to establish a university in the eastern provinces, which he referred to as *Medresetüz-Zehra* to “to secure the future of Kurdistan and unity of the empire.”⁷⁴ Elsewhere, in terms of the university’s location, Vahide states that *Medresetüz-Zehra* was to connect the distant communities of the eastern provinces to the rest of the empire. Kurdish-related rebellious groups were growing in every region of the empire, and Nursi believed that enriched education would provide solutions for the existing problems.⁷⁵

⁷² Said Nursi, *Munazarat in Bediuzzaman Said Nursi’nin İlk Donem Eserleri*, 508.

⁷³ Vahide, “Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi”, 45

⁷⁴ Vahide, *Spiritual Dimensions of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi’s Risale-i Nur*, 45

⁷⁵ Ibid, 11

Nursi firmly believed that a modern approach should be taken to *medrese* education. In the proposed system for universities to be established in southeast Turkey, he encouraged a system where students would pursue interdisciplinary studies. Students would either major in science and minor in religion or major in religion and minor in science.⁷⁶ One of the ideas Nursi put forth was for the schools to adopt a trilingual system, with Arabic being *vacip* or “required”, Kurdish being *caiz* or “permissible”, and Turkish being *lazım* or “necessary”.⁷⁷ The Arabic language was the prominent language spoken in the Islamic World of the time and a gateway to Islamic culture. Just as how Greek was the language of the Roman Empire, Latin being eminent in the Middle Ages, and English being the prominent language spoken worldwide today. Likewise, Turkish also was significant in the Ottoman Empire, for it was the second most widely taught and used language of the rulers. Whoever requested a formal position in the empire, or desired an education, was expected to know Turkish. On the other hand, due to the abundance of the Kurdish population in the empire, it is not strange that Nursi would have requested Kurdish to be an elective course in schools, and not have lawful restrictions placed on it.

In *Münazarat*, Nursi argued for *Medresetüz-Zehra* to be divided in different departments that could specialize in the educations and practices offered by the *medrese*, *mektep* and *tekke* institutions. In other words Nursi argued that the university should have disciplines that touch on the modern sciences as in *mektep* along with departments where students can learn the Islamic sciences in the *medrese* and *tarikât* values of disciplining the individual soul that is practiced in *tekke* (Sufi lodges). In addition to the different departments dedicated to these studies, Nursi encouraged the notion of having a

⁷⁶ Markham, *An Introduction to Said Nursi: Life, Thought and Writings*, 11

⁷⁷ Nursi *Münazarat*, 71

“conference” room in the university where individuals would share their ideas and exchange knowledge and in a way complete one another.⁷⁸ The different disciplines as a result would not accuse one another by using expressions such as “You are led astray!” or “You are ignorant!” but look for ways of establishing peace with one another.⁷⁹

The introduction of modern education to the *medaris* was rejected by a number of *ulama* of the region. Such scholars of Islamic theology shared the same notion with the Europeans on the incompatibility of scientific and technological progress with the external teachings of Islam. The assessment of science being in conflict with Islam eventually led to suspicion and fears, thereby closing doors to modern enlightenment and progression. Nursi, however, asserted that these were false suppositions. According to Nursi, “Islam is the master and guide of the sciences, and the chief and father of all true knowledge”.⁸⁰ He aspired to see Islam functioning in society through mutual consultation “the three divisions of the army of Islamic education”—those of the *medreseler* (religious schools), the *mektepler* (secular schools), and the *tekkes* (Sufi lodges)—so that “each would complete the deficiencies of the other”. His aim was for the *Medresetüz-Zehra* to be an embodiment of this.⁸¹

Nursi’s Legacy

Said Nursi made it his ultimate goal to reintroduce the teachings of the Qur’an to the new generation through a unique methodology. He believed that there needed to be a distinct approach taken on behalf of the religious sciences so that it suited the modern language of the century, which was science. Nursi’s magnum opus *Risale-i Nur* had been

⁷⁸ Ibid. 127

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Nursi, *Muhakemat*, 71

⁸¹ Nursi, *Münazarat*, 76

a great influence in Turkey where his works are spreading gradually. According to M. Hakan Yavuz's evaluation, there are more than 6 million followers of Nursi around the world today.⁸²

The Nur community has been defined in various ways. According to Ian Markham, the Nur community is a text-based formation with a strong emphasis on community.⁸³ Colin Turner adds that it is a faith-based movement known as *Nurculuk*, which was a term used by the Turkish press to perhaps denote the movement as a Sufi order.⁸⁴ However Nursi stays away from any specific attachments to groups and only refers to those who read the *Risale* as *Risale-i Nur talebeleri* or 'those students of the Epistle of Light'. It would be misleading to place the Nur community under one category. There are many different communities and individuals who read the works of Nursi. The largest community known among the followers of Nursi's teachings is the *Hizmet Haraketi* or Service Movement in Turkey founded by Fethullah Gülen (b.1941). Although Gülen himself rejects being categorized as being a disciple of Nursi in any sectarian sense, he notes in an interview:

The word *Nurcu*, although it was used a little by Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, is basically used by his antagonists to belittle Nursi's movement and his followers and to be able to present it as a heterodox sect. In life, everyone benefits from and is influenced by many other people, writers, poets, and scholars. In my life I have read many historians and writers from the East and West, and I've benefitted from them. Bediüzzaman Said Nursi is only one of these. I never met him. On the other hand, I've never used suffixes like -ci, -cu [meaning – "ist"] that refer to a particular group. My only goal has been to live as a believer and to surrender my spirit to God as a believer.⁸⁵

⁸² Yavuz, *Islamic Political identity in Turkey*, 11

⁸³ Markham, *An Introduction to Said Nursi: Life, Thought and Writings*, 17

⁸⁴ Turner & Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 113-14

⁸⁵ Fethullah Gülen, cited in Lynne Emily Webb, *Fethullah Gülen: Is There More to Him than Meets the Eye?*, 96.

According to Thomas Michel, "...while admitting the influence of Nursi on his [Gülen's] own thinking, Gülen added his own emphases, interpretations, and directions to the original teaching of the *Risale-i Nur*".⁸⁶ In *Letters*, Nursi states about the characteristics of friends and conditions of their friendship:

They have to earnestly support our work and service connected with the Words and the lights of the Qur'an. They should not support injustice, innovations (*bid'alar*), or misguidance in heartfelt fashion. They should themselves try to profit from the Words... Together with truly and earnestly working to disseminate the Words, they should perform the five obligatory prayers and not commit the seven grievous sins... To feel as though the Words are their own property written by themselves, and to know their vital duty, their life's work, to be the service and dissemination of them. These three levels are connected with my three personalities. A friend is connected with my individual, essential personality. A brother is connected with the personality that springs from my worship and bondsmanship of Almighty God. And a student is connected with the personality that undertakes the duties of herald of the Wise Qur'an and teacher.⁸⁷

An evaluation done by Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs in 1996 demonstrates that there are various groups who are side branches of the Nur community, which include Yeni Asya Grubu, Nesil Grubu, Zehra Grubu, etc. Nursi's works are consistently read both in Turkey and around the world, wherever the followers of *Risale-i Nur* reside. Group discussions usually take place on a weekly basis mostly in homes or locations often referred to as *dershane* (study-homes). People from all socio-economic backgrounds, age groups, and professions come to discuss and reflect on the *Risale-i Nur*.⁸⁸ Said Nursi is becoming more of a known figure as his works are being translated in different languages and are being read around the world.

⁸⁶ Michel, "Fighting Poverty with Kimse Yok Mu", 2008

⁸⁷ Nursi, *The Letters*, 396

⁸⁸ Markham, *An Introduction to Said Nursi: Life, Thought and Writings*, 17

Nursi's influence in Turkey's Contemporary Politics

Said Nursi's ideas and vision on Islam, politics and modernity continue to resonate within contemporary Turkish society. According to Douglas H. Garrison, the social, political and religious ideas of Nursi--especially from his "New Said" period--have greatly influenced the increasing number of faith-based social movements and religiously affiliated political parties like the Justice and Developmental Part (AKP).⁸⁹ Yildiz Atasoy adds that the 'New Said' sought to construct an Islamic system of social and political ethics that would serve as a guide for the personal development of Muslims facing a disintegrating framework caused by the imitation of Western ways".⁹⁰ Nursi supported a pluralistic understanding of faith that also embraced modernism, which he believed was in absolute conformity with the Qur'an. Nursi's understanding of pluralism enabled his followers to construct "shared vernaculars of modernity through the traditional idiom of Islam. This shared Islamic social grammar provided Nursi's followers with the tools to create a social sphere separate from the state".⁹¹

During his "New Said" phase, Nursi developed three philosophical critiques of religion in relation to politics. He believed that politics and religion are not compatible with one another: "politics generally lead to corruption, conflict, and arrogance, which contradict [God's] moral teaching based on dignity, brotherhood, and humility".⁹² Nursi also asserted that it is likely that ordinary people miscomprehend socio-political intentions of Islamic scholars who aimed for political powers. On this he notes,

⁸⁹ Garrison, "Intellectual Roots of Islamic Politics in Contemporary Turkey: Religion and Politics in the Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi"

⁹⁰ Atasoy, *Islam's Marriage with Neoliberalism*, 125

⁹¹ Garrison, "Intellectual Roots of Islamic Politics in Contemporary Turkey: Religion and Politics in the Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi"

⁹² Ibid.

If the servants of the Qur'an take the 'light of the Qur'an with the club' of politics together, the bewildered people may not trust these servants. They may ask, does he want to attract [us] with the light and then to beat [us] with the club? and not follow the light.⁹³

The truthful servant of religion avoids being misrepresented and mistrusted as someone corrupt. Politics for Nursi, inverts reality presenting "an angel as Satan and Satan as an angel."⁹⁴ Last but not least, Nursi believed that religion should not be used as a specific tool and instrument to "advance particular interests" since it is a belief system for mankind in general. In other words it should not serve some and exclude others.

However this does not to say that Nursi was apolitical in a total sense. He believed that in order for there to be an increase in Muslim consciousness and Islamic identity, there should be religious freedom posed by the state:

The individual requires freedom to realize the power of God, and through this realization, the individual will in turn be freed from man-made oppression and persecution...[Nursi] invoked Islamic terminology to provide a vernacular for constitutionalism, liberty and elections. [He] argued that democracy and Islam are not contradictory concepts, and that democracy and freedom are necessary conditions for the existence of a just society.⁹⁵

The "New Said" did not encourage an 'Islamic state' nor an 'Islamic constitution'. What he was interested in was for Muslims to reconnect with God on an individual level, which would then prosper gradually at a societal level. For this to take place he held that freedom of expression, religious freedom and political liberalism were important rights that each and every individual should practice:

Realizing that even the most powerful individual resistance is subject to failure, and indeed fails, in the face of the attacks of the collective force of the people of misguidance and wrong, due to their solidarity, the people of truth should form a collective force through agreement in order to preserve right and justice against

⁹³ Kuru, *Apolitical Interpretation of Islam*, 103

⁹⁴ Saritoprak, "Islam and Politics", 119

⁹⁵ Yavuz, *Towards an Islamic Liberalism?*, 587

that dreadful collective force of misguidance.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Nursi, *The Gleams*, 212

MUHAMMAD IQBAL

-3-

Life

Muhammad Iqbal was born in Sialkot in North-Western Punjab, India on November 9, 1877. Iqbal's father was a pious spiritual man, leaving a profound impact on Iqbal. Throughout his life, Iqbal continued to build his interest in spirituality and Sufism. As a child, he received his education from a *maktab* (secular school) under the supervision of Mir Hasan (d.1929) ¹ who guided Iqbal with his passion of learning Arabic and Persian literary and religious works. Iqbal further studied Arabic and English literature and philosophy at the Government College in Lahore. There he met Thomas W. Arnold, a renowned scholar of Islamic studies, who taught Iqbal Western thought, theory and methods used in the academy. During these years, Iqbal already started to become well known for his Urdu poetry, which he would write from time to time.² Poetry played a crucial role in Iqbal's life. At one point he mentioned that poetry became a way of expressing his religious ideas and not for seeking appraisals from readers, as he had once anticipated.

In 1905, Iqbal decided to leave India for Europe where he studied law in London, and then obtained his doctorate degree in philosophy from Munich University in Germany.³ During the years he spent in Europe, Iqbal deepened his knowledge on western academic works of individuals like Nietzsche, Goethe and Hegel. Iqbal found these and others figures reflecting his own ideas on certain matters, and to an extent was

¹ Syed Mir Hassan was a scholar of the Qur'an, Hadith, Sufism and Arabic language. He taught Arabic at Scotch Mission College in Sialkot and was Iqbal's teacher.

² Schimmel, *Gabriel's Wing; a Study into the Religious Ideas of Sir Muhammad Iqbal*, 36

³ Ibid. 37

inspired by their works. One of the matters Iqbal reflected on during his stay in Europe was the need for Muslims to acquire knowledge and be cognizant of modern progress and western education.⁴

Iqbal held key positions in a variety of socio-political organizations and was concerned with India's "constitutional" future. In 1927, he was elected to the Punjab legislative council and was active in the All-India Muslim League and the Punjab Provincial Muslim League, organizations that strongly advocated the establishment of a Muslim-majority state, which would later be referred to as Pakistan. Iqbal addressed his vision of Muslim development in India while he was actively serving in these positions. This development would be both cultural and political. Aside from these organizations, Iqbal was also involved in religious and socio-political movements such as the "All-India Kashmir Committee".⁵ The organization specifically had strong concerns over the circumstances of Muslim oppression by Hindus in the Kashmir region. With the support of Iqbal, the organization led a propaganda campaign against the "Hindu Maharajas". Iqbal and other participants in the movement believed that Islam was in danger under the Hindus in the region. Iqbal returned to India in 1908 and engaged himself in law practices and teaching, in the city of Lahore, where he also produced most of his works. He died on April 21st 1938 in the same city he had lived most of his life.

⁴ Sevea, *The Political Philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal: Islam and Nationalism in Late Colonial India*. Cambridge, 18-65

⁵ Ibid. 14

Context

Iqbal was born in a time that India was colonized by Great Britain, hence there was a great deal of inflow of modern ideals and institutions as a result of colonialism. The East India Company, which was London's great trading industry in East India transformed over time from a commercial organization to a territorial power in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.⁶ Christian missionary groups were also at work within Indian borders, attempting to win over converts from the religiously diverse groups of India. Iqbal, over the course of his life condemned any justifications for the establishment of colonization and imperialism. In one of his speeches, he denounced the system for its tyrannical and unethical nature:

The tyranny of imperialism struts abroad, covering its face in the masks of democracy, nationalism, communism, fascism and heaven knows what else besides. Under these masks, in every corner of the earth, the spirit of freedom and the dignity of man are being trampled underfoot in a way of which not even the darkest period of human history presents a parallel. The so-called statesmen to whom government and leadership of men was entrusted have proved demons of bloodshed, tyranny and oppression...After subjugating and establishing their dominion over weaker peoples, they have robbed them of their possessions, of their religions, their morals, of their cultural traditions and their literatures.⁷

Works

Muhammad Iqbal is known globally for his poetic works in Persian and Urdu. Although his fame for his poems are undeniable, Iqbal did not necessarily define himself a poet, "I have no interest in the art of poetry, but I have some special intentions for the declaration of which I have chosen the way of poetry because of the state and traditions

⁶ Ibid. 3

⁷ Iqbal, ed. Abdur-Rahman Tariq *Speeches and Statements*, 201

of this country.”⁸ He envisioned his poems to be a form of reflection to raise Muslim awareness, and indulge in a crucial religious purpose:

All human art must be subordinated to this final purpose (i.e. life), and the value of everything must be determined in reference to its life-yielding capacity. The highest art is that which awakens our dormant will-force and nerves us to face the trials of life manfully. All that brings drowsiness and makes us shut our eyes to Reality around, on the mastery of which alone Life depends, is a message of decay and death. There should be no opium-eating in Art. The dogma of Art for the sake of Art is a clever invention of decadence to cheat us out of life and power.⁹

According to Schimmel, although Iqbal condemned the predominant type of poetry, which was adopted in Islamic countries and which represented a “funeral of love and intoxication”¹⁰, he maintained the classical styles of Urdu and Persian poetry that embraced traditional symbols.¹¹ He disapproved of the fact that prominent poetries were passive in their tones and the message they provided. Regarding classical poetry, he saw that it was convenient for memorization due to its “strongly determined meters” and its immense monorhyme.¹²

Throughout his life, Iqbal wrote and expressed a vast majority of his ideas through poetry. For the purposes of this thesis, few of his works will be mentioned. Iqbal’s first Persian work was *The Secrets of the Self*. Written in the style of Rumi’s *Masnavi*, “the self” is empowered by emphasizing the need to strengthen it through “personality, activity, and courage”.¹³ Two years after *The Secrets of the Self*, Iqbal wrote

⁸ Iqbal, *Bal-e-jibril*, 195 Also refer to Schimmel, *Gabriel's Wing; a Study into the Religious Ideas of Sir Muhammad Iqbal*, 70

⁹ Iqbal, Trans. Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, *Secrets of the Self*, 4 (in note 4)

¹⁰ Schimmel, *Gabriel's Wing; a Study into the Religious Ideas of Sir Muhammad Iqbal*, 65

¹¹ Ibid. 65.

¹² Ibid. 65

¹³ Schimmel, Annemarie. "Iqbal, Muhammad." *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

Mysteries of Selflessness. This particular *masnavi*-form poem notes a person's individual duties and roles in an ideal Muslim community that would be able to serve as a model of societal system for the rest of humanity.¹⁴ Another important Persian work of Iqbal is *Jāvid-nāma*, which he dedicated to his son, Javid, in 1931. As Schimmel notes, *Jāvid-nāma* includes Iqbal's thoughts and description of his relation with Mawlana Rumi, who, in the lines of the poetry introduces Iqbal to philosophy, poetry, politics, and finally to the "realm of Divine beauty".¹⁵ Iqbal was a great admirer of Mawlana Jalal- ad-Din Rumi, whom he considered his spiritual guide.¹⁶

In addition to his Persian works, Iqbal's famous Urdu writings include a collection of poems, *Gabriel's Wing*. Aside these poems, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* is a well renowned collection of lectures he delivered in universities in India, organized by the Muslim League. These lectures were not only an elaboration of his interpreting his own poetry, but it was during these gatherings that he addressed for the first time the notion of Muslims needing a separate nation of their own.¹⁷ He discussed the role of Islam as a religion as well as a "political and legal philosophy in the modern age." Iqbal was specifically concerned with the Muslim community in India. Muslims were a minority group in India and Iqbal feared that India's Hindu-majority population would culturally and politically influence the Muslim community, through its policies. He believed that the one affective way of keeping Islamic ideals "living" and prospering in India would be through reviving the spirits of Indian Muslims. He favored Muslim political rule autonomous of British control in the territory:

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

I would like to see the Punjab, North-West Frontier Province, Sind and Baluchistan amalgamated into a single state. Self-government within the British Empire, or without the British Empire, the formation of a consolidated Northwest Indian Muslim state appears to me to be the final destiny of the Muslims, at least of Northwest India.¹⁸

A separate and autonomous Muslim ruling would preserve Muslim identity and way of life:

The nature of the Prophet's religious experience, as disclosed in the Qur'an, is wholly different [from that of Hinduism]. It is individual experience creative of a social order. Its immediate outcome is the fundamentals of a polity with implicit legal concepts whose civic significance cannot be belittled merely because their origin is revelational. The religious ideal of Islam is organically related to the social order, which it has created. The rejection of the one will eventually involve the rejection of the other. Therefore the construction of a polity on [Indian] national lines, if it means a displacement of the Islamic principles of solidarity, is simply unthinkable to a Muslim.¹⁹

His desire for a separate nation ruled by Islamic principles will be discussed later in detail.

Iqbal's works became renowned primarily within the borders of Pakistan and India and later in Iran and Turkey. His themes touch on a broad range of interests and make him an appealing character. Furthermore, his works are introduced to a broad audience, from advocates of socialism to Marxism to Sufis, etc.

¹⁸ Iqbal Academy, "Allama Iqbal – Biography"

¹⁹ Iqbal, as quoted in "A Separate Muslim State in the Subcontinent," in *Islam in Transition*, 91-92

Iqbal's Philosophy

It should be noted once more that Muhammad Iqbal was not a religious scholar. Although he was a practicing Muslim and an intellectual of both Eastern and Western thought, he did not have rigorous training in Islamic theology. His three years of experience in Europe increased his attachment and bond to Islam, making him an observant Muslim.

Approach

Iqbal was not only cynical of the many religious scholars of his day, but was also finding fault with contemporary Sufis and Islamic modernists like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan²⁰, who, in Iqbal's view took Western norms for granted. Iqbal was also discontent with the *ulama* or religious scholars for not drawing inspiration from modern thought and experience, "a result of their ignorance of modern knowledge and intellectual developments in the West."²¹ Iqbal was disappointed that these individuals failed to pay attention to the worldly progress of Muslims. Furthermore, Iqbal believed that the Qur'an commentaries did not address issues of the modern day:

No wonder then that the younger generation...demand a fresh orientation of their faith. With the reawakening of Islam, therefore, it is necessary to examine, in an independent spirit, what Europe has taught and how far the conclusions reached by her can help us in the revision, and if necessary, reconstruction of theological thought in Islam.²²

²⁰ Sayyid Ahmad Khan was an educator, politician and Islamic reformer of the nineteenth century. Through his establishment of the Aligarh University, he spread his social and educational program. He recognized the futile efforts of denouncing British administration in India, hence his efforts were geared towards working within the British rule to bring about change to Indian discourse. The University modeled in a way that it resembled to those of British universities. Khan was known for his attempts at reconciling modern scientific thought with religion by rationalistic interpretations.

²¹ Sevea, *The Political Philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal: Islam and Nationalism in Late Colonial India*. Cambridge, 86

²² Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 8 Lahore: Javid Iqbal

The *ulama* stressed the importance of *taqlid* (imitation) over *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), which many modernists in general saw as problematic. *Ijtihad* is a significant term to understand, as the use of it in the modern context is inevitable by modernist thinkers like Iqbal. Wael Hallaq notes the development of *ijtihad* in Islamic jurisprudence:

As conceived by classical Muslim jurists, *ijtihad* is the exertion of mental energy in the search for a legal opinion to the extent that the faculties of the jurist become incapable of further effort. In other words, *ijtihad* is the maximum effort expended by the jurist to master and apply the principles and rules of usual *al-fiqh* (legal theory) for the purpose of discovering God's law. The activity of *ijtihad* is assumed by many a modern scholar to have ceased about the end of the ninth century, with the consent of the Muslim jurists themselves. This process [is known as] 'closing the gate of *ijtihad*' [no more engaging in independent reasoning].²³

Iqbal believed that the emphasis on *taqlid* led religious authorities to fail in providing guidance to Muslims of the day. In Islamic jurisprudence *taqlid* refers to:

This 'closing of the door of *ijtihad*', as it was called, amounted to the demand for *taqlid*, a term which had originally denoted the kind of reference to Companions of the Prophet[early Muslim community] that had been customary in the ancient schools of law, and which now came to mean the unquestioning acceptance of the doctrines of established schools and authorities.²⁴

Although Iqbal did not see the *ulama* taking roles in the future development of Islam and Muslims, he nevertheless recognized the role they would be able to play temporarily by revitalizing Muslims in India and actively guiding them through their publications and lectures.²⁵ In any case, Iqbal redefined *ijtihad* and *ijma*, or consensus (two of the four tools in Islamic law) in his own terms. He advised that the right to

²³ Hallaq, "Was the Gate of *Ijtihad* Closed?" in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 3

²⁴ Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law*, 69

²⁵ Sevea, *The Political Philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal: Islam and Nationalism in Late Colonial India*. Cambridge, 82-3.

interpret and apply Islam for the community should be taken from the hands of the ulama and given to a 'national assembly or legislature', consisting of learned individuals of both modern and religious sciences. This group would carry out *ijtihad* and eventually reach a legitimate consensus on behalf of the community. He believed that a "modern" legislative council, with greater knowledge, was a better fit to solving and relating to the problems of the day.²⁶

East vs. West

Iqbal had much to say about colonization and the West in general. He was troubled by how the East was portrayed as those who need to be "saved" and "taught". This was, in Iqbal's view very offensive and degrading. However he believed that his people were experiencing a "loss of vision, that is, blind imitation of the West and the uncritical adoption of facets of its civilization."²⁷ One of the things Iqbal was cynical of in the West, was its emphasis on "rationalization and reason" over passion and love. Although he did not deny the importance of reason, he believed that the highest form of knowledge is that which addresses and appeals to the heart.²⁸ Iqbal believed that reason alone would lead to: "dissatisfaction and hunger, apart from helping perpetuate colonial hegemony [in a way that one may see colonialism as a just cause through the arguments the colonizers pose]. It was love that provided fulfillment and the cure for the 'modern maladies'"²⁹ *Ishq* or love is a central theme in Iqbal's poetry and writings.

²⁶ Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 166

²⁷ Sevea, *The Political Philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal: Islam and Nationalism in Late Colonial India*. Cambridge, 83

²⁸ Iqbal, *Kulliyat-i Iqbal*, 'Intellect and the Heart', 41-44

²⁹ Iqbal, Trans. Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, *Secrets of the Self*, 14

Iqbal was unique in the way he defined Islam in the modern day, because according to Iqbal, Islam is more than a creed. It is a complete system and ideology. He attempts to empower Muslims and the colonized East (including Hindus) in general.³⁰ Therefore he was unlike modernists like Sayyid Ahmad Khan who interpreted Islam strictly in light of modern understandings of religion. Khan asserted that revelation should be interpreted in light of modern knowledge of the laws of nature and science, considering Islam a “natural religion”.³¹ Iqbal thought this was inappropriate, which portrayed religion as inferior to science leading to the conclusion that Islamic teachings should be interpreted in accordance with laws of science. It is also fair to note the irony that Iqbal himself was not well versed in Islam and that despite his criticisms, Iqbal was appreciative of Khan’s efforts to raise Indian Muslim consciousness on the need for a reconstruction of Islamic spirit in the modern age:

[Ahmad Khan was the] first Modern Muslim to catch a glimpse of the positive character of the age that was coming... But the real greatness of the man consists in the fact that he was the first Indian Muslim who felt the need for a fresh orientation of Islam and worked for it.³²

Iqbal did not belittle the role of science in the contemporary world. However he did see that science has its shortcomings unlike religion:

Now, since the transformation and guidance of man’s inner and outer life is the essential aim of religion, it is obvious that the general truths which it embodies must not remain unsettled. No one would hazard action on the basis of a doubtful principle of conduct. Indeed, in view of its function, religion stands in greater need of a rational foundation of its ultimate principles than even the dogmas of science. Science may ignore a rational metaphysics; indeed, it has ignored it so far. Religion can hardly afford to ignore the search for a reconciliation of the oppositions of experience and a justification of the environment in which humanity finds itself. But what is to be judged is of such a nature that it will not

³⁰ Iqbal, *Thoughts and Reflections*, edited by S.A. Vahid, 51

³¹ Allama Iqbal’s essay: *Bedil in the light of Bergson*, ed. Dr Tehsin Firaqi, 22-23

³² Iqbal, *Thoughts and Reflections of Iqbal*, 277

submit to the jurisdiction of philosophy except on its own terms.³³

Iqbal also states the need for science and religion to coexist, because both deal with matters of “reality”. While one specifically deals with the temporary world, the other turns its attention to the “eternal” side of “reality”:

But to rationalize faith is not to admit the superiority of philosophy over religion. Philosophy, no doubt, has jurisdiction to judge religion, but what is to be judged is of such a nature that it will not submit to the jurisdiction of philosophy except on its own terms. While sitting in judgment on religion, philosophy cannot give religion an inferior place among its data. Religion is not a departmental affair; it is neither mere thought, nor mere feeling, nor mere action; it is an expression of the whole man. Thus, in the evaluation of religion, philosophy must recognize the central position of religion and has no other alternative but to admit it as something focal in the process of reflective synthesis. Nor is there any reason to suppose that thought and intuition are essentially opposed to each other. They spring up from the same root and complement each other. The one grasps Reality piecemeal, the other grasps it in its wholeness. The one fixes its gaze on the eternal, the other on the temporal aspect of Reality. The one is the present enjoyment of the whole of Reality; the other aims at traversing the whole by slowly specifying and closing up the various regions of the whole for exclusive observation. Both are in need of each other for mutual rejuvenation. Both seek visions of the same Reality, which reveals itself to them in accordance with their function in life. In fact, intuition, as Bergson rightly says, is only a higher kind of intellect.³⁴

Iqbal was also opposed to the Enlightenment’s introduction of a private vs. public dichotomy; the notion that religion should be practiced in the private sphere and not get mixed up with the state’s norms. This philosophy was becoming popular in the West and in Iqbal’s view, since Islam is a complete system, it has its own rulings regarding politics and way of life. Religion cannot be separated from the state. After Iqbal returned from Europe, and especially after the 1930s, eight years before his death, Iqbal deliberately wrote and gave speeches on the necessity of Indian Muslims living by their own socio-religious political system. He envisioned that one day in the future there would be one

³³ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*

³⁴ Ibid. 2

uniting Islamic state under the leadership of someone who possessed power and was religious. Although Iqbal figured that he would not see the end result of this state like structure, he whole-heartedly accepted its future occurrence. However, it is crucial to note that Iqbal did not have this philosophy in mind throughout his life. After returning back from Europe to India in 1908, it occurred to Iqbal that there could not be fruitful Hindu-Muslim rule under one state. Muslims would need to rule on their own standards and Hindus with theirs. He developed a political program that would allow a Muslim nation to “speak” for itself. Iqbal, in other words, called for a formation of a single body with provincial and district bodies throughout India. This political paradigm would bring about a unity of the political aims and ambitions of the nation. The constitution (which is a modern Western concept) would be established in a way that would allow leading political thoughts to come to power and guide the community.³⁵ By establishing this political body, not only would the Muslim community mobilize its own law, education and culture, but also allow the individuals themselves to “live” the spirit of their original roots.³⁶ Ultimately, this shows the European influence of nineteenth century Utopianism on Iqbal. He believes in the ideal “Islamic state”, but the details were Western influenced notions.

³⁵ Iqbal, Ed. Abdur-Rahman Tariq *Speeches and Statements*, 57

³⁶ All India Muslim League Documents, 160.

Sufism

Iqbal was critical of contemporary Sufis. In fact, he felt that the Sufism practiced in India was one of the main reasons for the disempowerment of Muslims of India.³⁷ He distinguished between the Sufism that was practiced and lived in early Arabia, with contemporary Sufism, which he described as passive and quietist. Iqbal blamed Sufism to be one of the main causes that led Muslims to their contemporary state of passiveness and otherworldly attitude. The British were able to take advantage of this and impose their own value system in which the Eastern culture in general was near passive. This suggests that Iqbal's main priority was to uplift Eastern identity in general and Muslim identity in particular. Colonialism under any condition could not be justified in his understanding. "Eastern" cultures should know better than to just be submissive in Iqbal's understanding.

Broadly speaking, Iqbal appreciated Sufi teachings of love and efforts on gaining proximity to God. However he was critical of the Sufism practiced in his day holding that a great deal of "un-Islamic" practices had eventually emerged in contemporary Sufi tradition. Iqbal ties this speculation to the early years of Muslim conquest. According to Iqbal, as Islam spread to Persia and Central Asia, it adopted unfamiliar Islamic belief systems that had a profound impact on the Sufi tradition.³⁸ In his doctorate thesis *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, he came to the conclusion that Sufism in actuality is a mixture of both Semitic and Aryan thought.³⁹ The Semitic facet includes the notion that the formula of salvation is in the essence of man's will in consciously making an

³⁷ Iqbal, Ed. Sayyid Muẓaffar Ḥusain Barni. Na'ī Dihli, *Kulliyat Makatib-i Iqbal*, 542.

³⁸ Iqbal, "Islam and Mysticism," *The New Era*, 250-51

³⁹ Iqbal, *The Development of Metaphysics*, 83

effort to obey the commandments of God. As for the Aryan traditions (which he specifically refers to Buddhism), the essence of a man is his thought. Iqbal asserted that Sufis assimilated both these concepts in making sense of love and creation.⁴⁰ It is again clear from the language Iqbal uses that he was very influenced by European thought about Sufism and racial division understanding (Aryan vs. Semitic).

One of the areas Iqbal explores in *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*, is how “world” religions have affected Islam. In his analysis of Buddhism he argues that one central theme of Buddhism is that the universe and man is dominated by “forces of pain” and the only way to escape it is through freeing one’s individuality. In Christianity on the other hand, he looks into the doctrine of original sin, which signifies that one cannot be saved except through a Redeemer. Finally in Zoroastrianism, he notes that there is an ongoing struggle of good and evil in the universe and that man needs help in such a dilemma.⁴¹ Iqbal concludes, therefore, that what he sees in contemporary Sufism are the teachings of “renunciation, inaction, self-denial”, a constant struggle of an inner purification and the need for spiritual guidance. Ultimately, Iqbal is trying to make the point that contemporary Sufism has borrowed beliefs and practices from other religions and has strayed away from its “pure” Islamic nature.

It is important to note that Iqbal did not believe annihilation that signified fatalism and determinism to be an Islamic teaching as some Sufis would hold true. In Iqbal’s understanding, the human will cannot be ignored and is important in developing the ego to serve as a “ticket” for immortality.⁴² By his definition, the ego sustaining activity was

⁴⁰ Ibid. 83

⁴¹ Iqbal, "Islam as a Moral and Political Ideal", 101

⁴² Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 93-95

that of a struggle between man and his environment. Iqbal compared the world to a “field” of action, where the personality of a man would constantly go through a phase development. In his understanding, the internal struggle that Sufis expressed so often would need to shift to an outer form of struggle to attain fulfillment in one’s being. This is an obvious contrast to an “inner struggle” performed by many contemporary Sufis. According to Iqbal, there needs to be persistency in personal effort and striving. Otherwise, inaction would weaken one’s nature.⁴³ Additionally, this effort must be initiated by “love” to attain closeness to God. While analyzing Iqbal’s own descriptions and arguments, one should be reminded of the context in which he lived. Observing the Muslim population in India, Iqbal was concerned that the majority non-Muslim population threatened the Muslim identity. According to Iqbal, the majority Indian community would not be able to safeguard the protection and needs of the minorities. Either British imperialism would continue in the East, or India would have to be segmented on the basis of religion. This way, Muslims would represent and safeguard their people in their own ways.

What was however significantly as important for Muslims was active engagement in the world. Even though the end results were always to be for the sake of getting closer to God, in his day, this would be possible through gaining worldly success and nurturing the personality. Iqbal was disturbed after observing Sufism as “moving” towards Aryan understanding. On that note, Iqbal declared, “Do not Abandon Self! Persist therein!”⁴⁴ Elsewhere he adds:

A hundred nations thou hast raised from one,

⁴³ Iqbal, *The Secrets of the Self*, xxv-xxvii

⁴⁴ Iqbāl, *Žindah Rūd (Living Stream)*, 122

On thy own fort made treacherous assault.
 Be one; make visibly thy Unity;
 Let action turn the unseen into seen;
 Activity augments the joy of faith,
 But faith is dead that issues not in deeds.⁴⁵

Although Iqbal had criticisms of the Sufi practices of his day, this did not mean he opposed Sufism as whole. In fact he states that he has no enmity towards Sufis, and even considers himself the dust of their feet.⁴⁶ Additionally, it is also recorded that Iqbal would visit the shrines of saints like Shaykh al-Hujwiri, Ahmad Sirhindi and others, to obtain their blessings. This may even suggest that Iqbal himself was a Sufi. Since there is not, and cannot be one paradigm that constitutes who is a “proper” Sufi, one can be flexible in making assumptions. The very fact that he takes Rumi as his “spiritual guide”, (without getting into the dilemma of whether he faithfully represents him), says something about his values. In *The Secrets of the Self*, Iqbal outlines to the reader that the process of self-development of the ego is through the guidance of a self realized person, a Perfect Man “transmute thy handful of earth into gold, kiss the threshold of a perfect man.”⁴⁷ On that note, it is fair to claim that Iqbal was sympathetic of spiritual guides as teachers but not as “redeemers”, or someone acting as a savior.

Iqbal says of Rumi, “The Master of Rum transmuted my earth to gold, and set my ashes aflame.”⁴⁸ Iqbal found great comfort and guidance in Rumi’s poetry. However, he opposed Rumi’s perception of annihilation (becoming one with the beloved), which he considered as one of the many un-Islamic principles that have made its way to Sufi

⁴⁵ Iqbal, *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, 69-70

⁴⁶ Iqbāl, *Žindah Rūd*, 227

⁴⁷ Iqbal, *The Secrets of the Self*, 29

⁴⁸ Ibid.

teachings during Islam's expansion to other regions in the world.⁴⁹ Annihilation was problematic in Iqbal's view because it denied free will and led to fatalism and determinism. For Iqbal, this world is a world of action and external struggle. In opposition to the state of annihilation, Iqbal adopted a "self-hood" that would empower Muslims.

Iqbal also expressed the superiority of Islamic culture compared with other cultures in the world, because of the dynamism it had shown. This, he argued, was apparent in medieval Islamic history where Islam set the stones for the modern Western knowledge.⁵⁰ In demonstrating inherent superiority of Islam, Iqbal states:

The more you reflect on the history of the Muslim community, the more wonderful does it appear. From the day of its foundation up to the beginning of the sixteenth century- about a thousand years—this energetic race (I say race since Islam has functioned as a race-making force) was continually busy in the all-absorbing occupation of political expansion. Yet in this storm of continuous activity this wonderful people found sufficient time to unearth and preserve the treasures of ancient sciences, to make material additions to them, to build a literature of a unique character, and above all to develop a complete system of laws—the most valuable legacy that Muslim lawyers have left us.⁵¹

The "Self", Perfect Manhood and the Role of Community

Iqbal accused Eastern society of laziness and blind adoption of Western philosophy. He did not want his people to be degraded in the presence of foreigners. What Indians and specifically Muslims needed was empowerment of the "self". This idea is the core of Iqbal's philosophy and can be viewed in three of his significant works, *The Secrets of the Self* (1915), *The Mysteries of Selflessness* (1918), and *The Javid Nama*

⁴⁹ Ibid. 52

⁵⁰ Nix, *Muhammad Iqbal and the Perfect Man: The Restoration of Muslim Dignity through the Integration of Philosophy, Poetry, Politics and Conservative Islam*, 154

⁵¹ Iqbal, Ed. (Iqbal), *Stray Reflections*, 21

(1932). These poems discuss the meaning and role of *khudi*, which is the empowered ego that exists as a vice-regent of God in the Muslim community seeking to re-establish power, civilized success and religious consciousness. Although in Persian the word has a negative connotation of the “self”, Iqbal redefined it, giving *khudi* a sense of power and strength. His understanding of the self provided an outlook that emphasized the need for a development of the self so as to attain the empowered state of “Perfect Man”(a Sufi concept), which he believed everyone had the potential to do, but was too negligent to bring out on the surface. This Perfect Man, he believed, would enable Muslims of India to stand up to their imperial rulers.⁵² Iqbal describes the meaning of *khudi* according to his philosophy:

Ethically the word ‘khudi’ means (as used by me) self-reliance, self-respect, self-confidence, self-preservation, even self assertion when such a thing is necessary, in the interests of life and the power to stick to the cause of truth, justice, duty, etc. , even in the face of death. Such behavior is moral in my opinion because it helps in the integration of the forces of the Ego, thus hardening it, as against the forces of disintegration and dissolution (vide Reconstruction); practically the metaphysical Ego is the bearer of two main rights that is the right to life and freedom as determined by the Divine Law.⁵³

The ideal “Perfect Man” was also in need to restore the dignity of Indian Muslims by bringing back the lost peace and harmony absent in the world he lived in. He believed there needed to be Muslim leaders who would lead Islam to a new world order. At one point he declared, “Give up waiting for the Mahdi—the personification of power. Go and create him.”⁵⁴ In order for this to happen, he believed that Muslims would have to uplift their selfhood and regain their power. Nix mentions the positive traits Iqbal attributes to

⁵² Nix, *Muhammad Iqbal and the Perfect Man: The Restoration of Muslim Dignity through the Integration of Philosophy, Poetry, Politics and Conservative Islam*, 67

⁵³ Iqbal quoted in H. A. Shuja’, “Iqbal kay Nazriyah-i Khudi ka Sahih Mafhum,” 84

⁵⁴ Iqbal, Ed. (Iqbal), *Stray Reflections*, 94

the Perfect Man, which are those that enhance power (khudi, love, desire) while the traits Iqbal renounces are beggary, disunity, and passivity all of which diminish power.⁵⁵ He points out the necessity of power in the world he lived in:

Life has only one law.
Life is power made manifest.
And its mainspring is the desire for victory.⁵⁶

Iqbal lays out the stages to attain the Perfect Manhood and the path to the vice-regency of God. Using the teachings of Islam as a guide, he explains in *The Secrets of the Self*, the path to reaching the ideal man is through complete surrender to the law, self-control, and vice-regency of God. The first stage calls for an obedience to the Islamic law, which he viewed as an essential component of Muslim dignity:

Whoso would master the sun and stars,
Let him make himself a prisoner of the law!...
The start moves towards its goal
With head bowed in surrender to a law...
Since law makes everything strong within,
Why does thou neglect this source of strength?...
Do not complain of the hardness of the Law,
Do not transgress the statutes of Muhammad!⁵⁷

Elsewhere, Iqbal notes the importance of living under the Islamic law or sharia, which he sees as the basis of maintaining Muslim unity, “When a community forsakes its Law, its parts are severed, like scattered dust. The being of the Muslim rests alone on Law, which is in truth the inner core of the Apostle’s faith.”⁵⁸ However, obeying the law should not be through blind obedience, but through a continuous discovery of the self and God.

⁵⁵ Nix, *Muhammad Iqbal and the Perfect Man: The Restoration of Muslim Dignity through the Integration of Philosophy, Poetry, Politics and Conservative Islam*, 70

⁵⁶ Iqbal, *The Secrets of the Self*, 92

⁵⁷ Iqbal, *The Secrets of the Self*, 73-562. Iqbal, *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, 37

⁵⁸ Iqbal, *The Mysteries of Selflessness*, 37

The second stage of attaining Perfect Manhood is self-control. Self-control is needed to overcome the negative features of human emotions such as “fear, materialism, and vanity”. The way to attain self-control is through practicing Islam’s religious acts: prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, almsgiving and declaration of faith.⁵⁹ Not practicing these rulings results in “cultural and social judgment by God.”⁶⁰

The final stage of Iqbal’s perfect manhood is vice-regency, available to all Muslims who follow and practice what Iqbal and Islam teaches.⁶¹ Iqbal notes that “every man is potentially a microcosm, and that when he has become spiritually perfect, all the divine attributes are displayed by him... and he becomes the god-man, the representative and vice-regent of God on earth.”⁶² According to Iqbal, this perfect man is in a constant state of action and undertakes the same duty bestowed upon prophets. Iqbal uses Sufi terms such as the “perfect man” with his own distinct interpretation. This is mainly because he is concerned with the self-identity, which Rumi would call ‘nafs’ that needs to be annihilated.

In order for the self to completely develop itself, Iqbal believed that the socio-political environment one lives in matters significantly. The only way an individual becomes conscious of the ideals⁶³, is if one becomes a member of society that reflects one’s own religious values. Iqbal feared Muslims would lose consciousness of their origins. Schimmel describes Iqbal’s description of an ideal Muslim in his works where he defines him/her to be an individual of the community:

⁵⁹ Ibid. 76-8

⁶⁰ Ibid. 79

⁶¹ Nix, *Muhammad Iqbal and the Perfect Man: The Restoration of Muslim Dignity through the Integration of Philosophy, Poetry, Politics and Conservative Islam*, 76

⁶² Iqbal, *The Secrets of the Self*, 79

⁶³ Iqbal, *Mysteries of Selflessness*, 5-8

Truthful, fearless heir of the Prophet...the Muslim who should be able to rule himself by means of the Islamic law once given and yet eternally valid, to rule the world as vicegerent and coworker of God, to realize highest freedom in his state of being God's servant, and who should practice tolerance not out of weakness but because he is sure of himself.⁶⁴

The Islamic law is crucial because a believer would need to willfully submit to the laws set forth by God. One of the reasons why Iqbal becomes so critical of modern day Sufism is because many of its followers deny the Islamic law and adopt esoteric practices.⁶⁵ For him, the Islamic law is like the “cultural backbone” of the Muslim community, arguing that it provides both an “anchor of stability and a blueprint for adaptive change.”⁶⁶ In other words, for Iqbal it was the Islamic law that distinguished a Muslim identity from the lifestyle of the Hindus. The community working toward perfection, according to Iqbal should include the teaching of *tawhid* (or oneness of God). Iqbal states, “There is no God but God, this is the soul and body of our pure Community.”⁶⁷ Hence, “the unity is not based on nationalism but upon a common faith”, which would be a manifestation of the ‘oneness of God’.⁶⁸

Iqbal tied Muslim contemporary destitution with individuals losing power in the self, and forgetting their own roots. Iqbal's philosophy was therefore geared towards a re-empowering of the self in an ideal society and Muslim identity, which can be seen in his adoption of Sufi terms, although he critiques any universalist tendencies that downplay the significance of actual reforming identity and practice.

⁶⁴ Schimmel, *Gabriel's Wing; a Study into the Religious Ideas of Sir Muhammad Iqbal*, 85

⁶⁵ Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 419

⁶⁶ Abbott, *Islam and Pakistan*, 106-7

⁶⁷ Iqbal, *Mysteries of Selflessness*, 12

⁶⁸ Nix, *Muhammad Iqbal and the Perfect Man: The Restoration of Muslim Dignity through the Integration of Philosophy, Poetry, Politics and Conservative Islam*, 87

MUHAMMAD ABDUH

-4-

Life

Muhammad Abduh was born in 1849 near the Nile Delta in Egypt. As a child, Abduh studied at a mosque school in Tanta called al-Ahmadi, where he became unsatisfied with the teaching methods and became discouraged from attending school. After a year and half, Abduh ran away from Tanta, uninterested in fulfilling his studies, until he was on a personal level influenced by his uncle Sheikh Darwish who spiritually guided him and ignited in him an interest in learning. Abduh was only at the age of seventeen when he transferred his studies to al-Azhar University in Cairo, the traditional center of Islamic studies. After studying two years in the University, Abduh realized that, once again, he was not benefitting from his learning. During his al-Azhar years, Abduh underwent an inner crisis, which urged him to isolate himself and practice asceticism. During this time, he also met with Jamal al Din al Afghani, which marked a turning point in Abduh's life.

Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d.1897) was a revolutionary pan-Islamic preacher of Persian origin. Afghani sparked in Abduh an interest in theology, philosophy and politics. Abduh would attend Afghani's private lectures with a small group of people who were attracted by Afghani's charisma and teachings. In 1877, Abduh graduated from al-Azhar at the age of twenty-eight and then began teaching at the same university for about two years. Along with his position at al-Azhar, Abduh also taught at Dar al ulum and

Khedival School of Languages.¹ With his close connections to Afghani, Abduh's interests were now geared towards politics and away from mystical Islam.

In 1882, Afghani and Abduh were exiled from Egypt due to their connections with the Urabi Revolt. The Urabi Revolt (1879-1882) was a nationalist uprising in Egypt that aimed at deposing Khedive Tewfik Pasha² and ending the British and French influence over the country. As a result of the exile, Abduh traveled first to Damascus and then to Beirut, while Afghani moved to Paris. In 1884, Abduh joined Afghani in Paris where they formed a small community that would promote their political, social and religious agenda in their published newspaper called *al-Urwa al-wuthqa*. Though much effort was spent for the newspaper, it was short-lived. According to Sedgwick, there are several possible explanations. One reason might be that the British disapproved the newspaper to be imported to Egypt and India, and another, that it ran out of financial support.³ To raise money for the circulation of the newspaper, Abduh traveled to Tunis from Paris, but was unsuccessful in raising money. He notified Afghani, which was the last time they contacted one another. At this point, not only did Abduh split ways with Afghani but he also strayed away from political activities as well, rejecting Afghani's approach in reformism. Abduh suspected that a revival of society would not be possible through political activism because such efforts somehow often resulted in failure. Rather than having a top-down implementation of order, Abduh now gathered his energy and action towards a bottom-up approach to change. In other words, he began emphasizing

¹ Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh*, 15

² Khedive was a title given by the Ottoman sultan Abdulaziz to Ismail Pasha's (1867) successors Tawfiq and Abbas II in Egypt. Pasha is a person of high rank or office in Ottoman lands and North Africa.

³ Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh*. 57

education reform. When Abduh came back to Egypt in 1888, he began pursuing his legal career. In addition to being appointed as a judge and a lecturer at al-Azhar, he was appointed as the new Mufti of Egypt. He died on July 11, 1905 in Alexandria, Egypt.

Context

Abduh lived in the nineteenth century, when the Middle East was experiencing a demise of socio-political order and debates were becoming popular regarding the religious authority of the *ulama*.⁴ The more Europe's dominating influence in military, economic, scientific and political affairs over the Middle East increased, the more differing reactions and responses by Muslim rulers and intellectuals grew in the region. The triggers toward modernization grew in the region, initially with the *Tanzimat* reforms (1839-76) carried out by the Ottoman Empire (noted previously). These governmental and legal reforms began "modernizing" the Empire with the adoption of European ideas and values. The Ottoman government officials in the Empire carried out similar procedures based on European tenets that included notions of "popular sovereignty, constitutionalism and parliamentary democracy."⁵ Following the Ottoman model, Egypt sent its elite students to Europe for education. These students would return to their homelands with an outlook of modernizing the Middle East.

Exposed to the new modernization attempts of rulers and the new rising intellectual class, a fierce reaction came from many of the *ulama* in Egypt. They viewed attempts at modernization in education and law, as a sign of interfering in their domain, which would eventually threaten their authority. One of the traditional duties of the

⁴ Scharbrodt, *Islam and the Baha'i Faith: A Comparative Study of Muhammad 'Abduh and 'Abdul-Baha 'Abbas*, 2

⁵ Voll, *Islam, Continuity and Change in the Modern World*, 90-3

ulama included providing judges, scribes, and government officials.⁶ As a religiously conservative group, many of the *ulama* resisted any change in the *madrasas* or religious schools.

In the nineteenth century, there was also an increasing autocracy of Middle Eastern rulers and the growing trend of foreign influence and dependence. According to Scharbrodt, political liberalization was therefore seen as the means of gaining independence from both foreign influence and native autocratic rule.⁷ The new emerging intellectuals, including Abduh were dissatisfied with Egypt's socio-political and religious status. Many thought Middle Eastern regimes were blindly following European norms while underestimating Islam's position. Abduh was interested in consciously reconciling European ideas with Islamic tradition through tracing modern ideas back to Islam. He blamed the stagnation and demise of Islam in the modern world to the *ulama* and their strict adherence to outdated forms of scholarly tradition and methodology. According to Abduh, the *ulama* were incapable of addressing the challenges of modernity. Abduh was a close witness of the *ulama*'s condition, and became displeased with them during his student years in Tanta and Cairo. Abduh's aim therefore, was to create a "new kind of religious scholarship" whose religious and intellectual source would be based on traditional and modern knowledge.⁸

Abduh was aware of the existing internal and external threats to Islam and Muslim societies. Muslims had to deal with colonialism and outside influences that justified their existence in Muslim lands by claiming superiority over the indigenous

⁶ Scharbrodt, *Islam and the Baha'i Faith: A Comparative Study of Muhammad 'Abduh and 'Abdul-Baha 'Abbas*, 3

⁷ Ibid. 4

⁸ Haddad, *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, 49.

peoples. For people like Abduh, these were illegitimate reasons because Muslims from the time of the Prophet Muhammad had been the establishers of civilization. Muslims had played leading roles in history where they were an inspiration to the Westerners. The fact that Muslims were experiencing an inferior and unfortunate state in his day did not mean to Abduh that Muslims were incapable of establishing a rich history once again in the near future. Islam, according to Abduh, encouraged rationality and addressed the logic of human intellect. Because Muslims were experiencing an economic, political and social turmoil, what Abduh sought was an integration of sciences and modern values with Islamic norms.

The nineteenth century, one can recall, flourished in its scientific encounters. It was a period when knowledge and reason were equated with positive sciences, which had more prestige than any other forms of discipline. In a way, one can assume that one of Abduh's main missions was to refute the common notion that religion is incompatible with sciences. Abduh put great effort in demonstrating Islam's greatness and superiority by hinting that unlike any other religion that may be in contradiction with science, Islam is not and has never been discouraging of progress. For instance, Abduh references that the Reformation in Europe was only a partial success. The partial success was only on the side of science, because it led to a division between science and faith. Abduh was against such separation, because he believed that when religious sciences flourished, worldly sciences would also flourish due to their inseparable nature.⁹ Abduh also added that particularly after the French Revolution, the consequence of seeing science as a solution to the problem of social order produced a philosophy that "deliberately limited religious

⁹ Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950*, 170-171

thought.”¹⁰ Abduh would finalize his argument by asserting that Islam was and is the only religion that richly reconciles religious and worldly sciences.¹¹

Works

With the inspiration Abduh received from Afghani, he began sharing his political and religious agenda with the public by getting his writings published in the government’s official gazette. In his works, he addressed the need to develop social and religious reforms in the Islamic world. Abduh also helped Afghani in Paris to write and publish the revolutionary journal *al-Urwat al wuthqa*, “The Firmest Bond”. The newspaper had several aims. It declared its hatred of European imperialism in the Middle East and engaged in arguments revolving around the importance of Muslim solidarity and need for Muslims to adhere to “true” Islam, and to put an end to despotic government (with the exception of the Ottoman Sultan Abd-al-Hamid).¹²

One of Abduh’s most important works is *Risalat at-tawhid* or “The Theology of Unity”, which originally was a compilation of lectures he delivered at Madrasa al-Sultaniya¹³ and was later published as one collection. According to Mark Sedgwick’s analysis, the content of the book is not really about theology, despite its title. It has more to do with Muslims in the modern world and arguments on Islamic reformation. Therefore, by definition it is a religious work, but not a theological one.¹⁴ It is true that a lot of Abduh’s interest in this work revolves around themes of modernity and tradition

¹⁰ Abduh, *Al-Islam wa-al-Nasraniya*, 160-61 Also See Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic*

¹¹ Ibid. 170-71

¹² Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh*, 53

¹³ Madrasa al-Sultaniya (The Sultan’s School) was a liberal center for Muslims and non-Muslims to discuss Arab nationalism and other subjects like science.

¹⁴ Ibid. 62

and how to make sense of them. Abduh highlights for instance, the possibility of knowing God rationally and with reason through close examination of revelation and creation. It is apparent that Abduh places a great deal of emphasis on the “rational” side of the Qur’an:

We must however, believe that the Islamic religion is a religion of unity throughout. It is not a religion of conflicting principles but is built squarely on reason, while divine revelation is its surest pillar. Whatever is other than these must be understood as contentious and inspired by Satan or political passions. The Qur’an has cognizance of every man’s deed and judges the true and the false.¹⁵

Risalat at-tawhid further includes discussions of Muslim history and society along with arguments that deal with misconceptions of Islam.¹⁶

Abduh was interested in the new emerging genre called “new theology”, which Ottoman scholars in the day referred to as *yeni ilmi-i kalam*. Abduh believed that there needed to be a revitalizing of the *kalam* (scholastic theology), through the use of reasoning, dialectics, and logic, which were the greatest means to preserve faith in modern times.¹⁷ His views on the subject were apparent in *Risalat al-Tawhid*, where he stressed the need for rational theology to respond to changing proofs and evidences.

After being appointed as a Mufti, a particular newspaper referred to as *Al-Manar* was closely associated with Abduh due to the importance it had in spreading his message. Rashid Rida (d.1935), who later became Abduh’s close student, was the founder of the newspaper. Rida compiled Abduh’s lectures on Qur’an commentary and periodically published it in a section of the newspaper with the title, *Tafsir al-Manar*. Although Abduh commented up to chapter 4:126, this was a great contribution to his legacy, as it exemplified a rational interpretation of the Qur’an and spread his reformist agenda by

¹⁵ Abduh, *The Theology of Unity*, 49

¹⁶ Abduh, Kurzman ed. *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940: A Sourcebook*, 59

¹⁷ Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950*, 181

arguing against polygamy, for instance. Abduh would argue that in the early Islamic period, polygamy helped establish bonds of “social solidarity”, but is considered a social evil in the modern world.¹⁸

Abduh tried to establish the understanding that many other “modern” values are also compatible with the teachings of Islam. He developed scientific explanations for certain metaphysical concepts mentioned in the Qur’an in the light of scientific language. By doing this, Abduh’s intent was to make the Qur’an accessible for those who lacked the background in religious sciences and who at the same time related to the contemporary language of the modern age. For instance, his commentary on the Qur’an 105:1-5 is radically different from classical exegesis:

Have you not considered, [O Muhammad], how your Lord dealt with the companions of the elephant? Did He not make their plan into misguidance? And He sent against them birds in flocks. Striking them with stones of hard clay. And He made them like eaten straw.

Commenting on the defeat of Abraha’s army, Abduh states:

It is possible to conceive that this bird was a species of mosquito or fly which carries the germs of some diseases, and that these stones were of dried poisonous mud which the wind had blown and which had stuck to the legs of these insects. If these came into contact with a body they would enter its pores and cause sores that eventually lead to the decay and decomposition of that body. A multitude of these weak birds might be considered as the mightiest soldiers of God in His destroying whatever people He wills. And this small life form, nowadays called the microbe, is the same thing. The groups and communities of these [microbes] are do numerous that only their Creator can count them. But God’s ability to defeat tyrants does not depend on birds being on vast mountain tops, nor on their being a kind of griffin, nor to their being a unique species, nor to knowing the number of stones and why they have such an effect, for God has armies of everything.¹⁹

¹⁸ Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age: Religious Authority and Internal Criticism*, 196

¹⁹ Azmah, Aziz. *Islams and Modernities*.

Abduh's commentaries are very unlike the traditional commentaries that reflect on the miracles of nature. For centuries, Muslim commentators have regarded nature and Qur'anic references on the natural world as divine signs. It was traditionally believed that God had "two books", one being the natural world and the other being the Qur'an. This belief reinforced Islam's compatibility with science. While this would be as far as the commentators would go, Abduh did not confine himself with this much. He had a very unique twist to his exegesis in the way he directly applied rational and where applicable, scientific language.

I believe it is important to note that Abduh did not regard his commentary to be "the only" rightful interpretation. He seems to be suggesting an alternative understanding to the way difficult concepts can be explained and does not suggest that other explanations are incorrect. For instance, upon the discussion of the nature of *jinn* (spirits), Abduh suggests,

The *ulama* say that the jinn are living bodies that cannot be seen. *Al-Manar* has said more than once that it is *permissible* to say that those minute living bodies made known today through the microscope and called 'microbes' are *possibly* a species of jinn... We Muslims are fortunately under no necessity of disputing with science or the findings of medicine regarding the correction of a few traditional interpretations. For the Qur'an itself is too elevated in character to be in opposition to science.²⁰

This is unlike Abd al-Wahhab's outlook on exegesis for instance. Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792), founder of the Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia, affirmed that it was only his understanding of the scripture that was right, while that of others' he identified as heretical.²¹ This says much about Abduh and his pluralist character.

²⁰ Tafsir al-Qur'an, *Al-Manar* 9 (1906), 334-35. Also see Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 138

²¹ Abou El Fadl, *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, 53

In respect to the Qur'an, Abduh wanted Muslims to go directly to it for guidance, especially on concerns dealing with modern times: "There are two books: one created which is the universe, and one revealed which is the Qur'an and only through reason are we guided by this book to understand that one."²² He interpreted verses of the Qur'an with the lens of reasoning of a modern liberal bent. In other words, he applied "scientific exegesis" to the study of the Qur'an, interpreting many verses in light of new scientific, medicinal, and the modern liberal language of the day.

Abduh's Philosophy

Throughout his life, Abduh followed a "*salafi*" yet "modern" outlook in thought. *Salafis* adhere to the doctrines and practices of the *salaf*, the first generations of Muslims after the Prophet Muhammad, rather than later developing formulations of Islamic law produced by scholars. Although Muhammad Abduh, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Rashid Rida are known to be the founders of the Salafi movement in the nineteenth century, the salafi creed has undergone major transformations within less than a century.²³ One needs to therefore distinguish between Abduh's understanding and use of salafi ideas and the contemporary renowned Salafi movement. Both Abduh and contemporary Salafis reject *taqlid* (strict adherence to precedent) but for different reasons. Abduh was not in favor of the technicalities of Islamic formal law. He did not see any use for referencing medieval scholars on their complicated formulations of work, which Abduh viewed to be irrelevant in the modern world. The main reason he probably came to such a conclusion was because he wanted to simplify things for himself and his reform agenda.

²² Abduh, *Al Manar*, 292 Also check *Reading Darwin in Arabic*, 177

²³ Abou El Fadl, *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, 55

Contemporary Salafis are closely associated with the Wahhabis, partly because of the amount of support Rashid Rida gave to the movement in his later years.²⁴ Salafis today would reject *taqlid*, claiming that it gives too much agency to scholars who mislead and instill in people corrupted ideologies. Therefore, contemporary Salafis disregard the ulama, and take a literalist and puritanical approach to Islam and react in hostile ways to jurists outside of their framework.²⁵ Often times Abduh is mentioned as a Salafi but it is not surprising that contemporary Salafis would criticize him for using a great deal of agency in his attempt to reconcile modernity with tradition. Therefore, the contemporary approach of the Salafis is in line with the ideologies of Wahhabis, who are renowned for their hostile, uncompromising, literalist, and anti-rationalist approaches that do not reconcile with Abduh's liberal ideology.

As mentioned above, Muhammad Abduh claims the need to return to the primary sources of Islam and the early community of Muslims. His methodology involves the use of *ijtihad*. However, Abduh's understanding and use of *ijtihad* has its own distinctiveness. He identifies a *mujtahid*, or the one who engages in *ijtihad* as a person who "reinterprets the primary sources in the light of current problems and circumstances."²⁶ Abduh outlines the reasons for the Muslim community's stagnation. He opines that it is because of the breakdown of the Arabic language, the disruption of social order among the faithful, the perplexity of religious law (sharia), the corruption of the state and missionary schools throughout Arab East, and finally the stubbornness of the

²⁴ Ibid. 55

²⁵ Ibid. 56

²⁶ Skovgaard-Petersen, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State: Muftis and Fatwas of the Dār Al-Ifṭā*, 65-8

majority of the ulama to teach new subject in their schools.²⁷ Abduh references these as the “illnesses” that need to be cured. The cure he believes rests in the actual attempt at returning back to the foundations of the principles of the Qur’an and using *ijtihad* as a tool to integrate reason and faith. This, he believed, was crucial if Muslims wanted to live the golden age that they once lived in before with its highly alluring civilization.

Abduh sought to reform the authority of the ulama, while remaining within the framework of the Sunni establishment. When he became the Mufti of Egypt, he searched for alternative models of authority- those who would have both traditional and modern knowledge. This is apparent in the procedures he carried out as a Mufti, especially in regards to the legal opinions (fatwas) he gave. Conventionally, muftis were known to be experts in their field of religious law and were authorized to provide fatwas to individuals or judges. Muslims would request the Mufti to resolve newly arising legal disputes. The Mufti, with his extensive knowledge and training in the Qur’an, hadith and fixed precedents from the Islamic law, would then provide an answer. The fatwas would be a result of the use of reason, albeit based on scripture and on opinion of earlier schools, meeting the standards of *ijtihad*. In cases of declaring a fatwa, the issuer would look into other scholars’ similar sets of stances and supporting claims and distinguish the strength and weaknesses of the evidences presented by former scholars.

As will be seen, Abduh did not meet the general expectations of the fatwa guidelines. He was especially criticized for those that were referred to as “Transvaal

²⁷ Abduh, *Al-Islam wa-al-Nasraniya*, 112-45

Fatwas”.²⁸ These were written responses to the Muslim diaspora community in South Africa. The questions that were asked were:

“whether it was permissible for Muslims to wear European hats during their business transactions with non-Muslims, whether it is allowed to eat meat slaughtered by Christians, and whether followers of the Shafi’i rite can pray behind a Hanafi Imam.”²⁹

Abduh declared all to be permissible. He noted that one’s dress and religious affiliation is not relevant: As long as a person’s intentions were clear, there really could not be a problem in religious terms. As for the second question, Abduh referred to the verse from the Qur’an (5:5), which states that it is permissible to eat meat slaughtered by Jews and Christians as they are considered “People of the Book”. Instead of dealing with the different scholarly opinions on the issue, Abduh is content with giving out a straightforward answer. Lastly, he sees no boundaries between the four Sunni legal schools of thought.³⁰ In this case, he takes Maliki jurist Abu Bakr ibn ‘Arabi’s opinion on praying behind a Hanafi imam, indifferent to Hanafi scholarly claims.³¹ The Transvaal Fatwas posed a great controversy in the Muslim world, and especially for many of the al-Azhar ulama. Abduh not only ignored past religious scholarship, but he argued that there was nothing “wrong” with taking the side of a different legal school’s opinion when finalizing a decision. He was not interested in focusing on the legal distinctions, because for him this endangered Muslim unity by treating the four legal schools as strictly

²⁸ Abduh, *Al-Fatawa fi al-Tajdid wa-al Islah al Dini*, Tunis: Dar al Ms’arif, 20-1 as mentioned in *Islam and the Baha’i Faith: A comparative study of Muhammad ‘Abduh and ‘Abdul-Baha ‘Abbas* by Oliver Scharbrodt.

²⁹ Abduh, *Fatawa*, 20

³⁰ In Sunni Islamic law, there are four legal schools referred to as Hanafi, Shafi’ite, Malikite, and Hanbalite. In specific details concerning Islamic law, the traditions may reflect differing viewpoints on certain Islamic laws and obligations. The schools of law all have their own specific tradition in interpreting Islamic jurisprudence.

³¹ Rida, *Ta’rikh I*, 683-9

independent and exclusive. Abduh made it his objective to express the commonalities and disregarded traditional judgment on the impermissibility of *talfiq* or ‘piecing together’ a conclusion from more than one legal school thought, which is conventionally not advised.

Abduh surely stressed the importance of Muslim unity. The context in which he lived illustrated to Abduh that Muslims were internally and externally under trouble-externally by foreign influences and internally because of their own religious divisions and economic deficiencies. Abduh therefore used every opportunity at hand to avoid minor differences that would expand the existing conflicts and discord and rather tried to look into commonalities that united the community so that there would be a reestablishment of Muslim power.

Educational Reform

Although Abduh received his higher education in one of the Muslim world’s most prestigious Islamic schools, he was not fond of his al-Azhar experiences. Similar to his experiences in Tanta, he came to the conclusion that the teaching methodology of al-Azhar to be inefficient because students dealt with technical and grammatical terms but not be given the chance to ask questions about them. The only requirement for passing exams was to memorize countless and endless books, without internally absorbing the material:

I did not understand anything because of the deficient teaching methods. The teachers confronted us with grammatical and legal technical terms that we did not understand. They were not concerned with explaining their meanings to those who did not know them. Therefore, resignation reached me. I fled the lessons and disappeared for three months.³²

³² M.R.Rida, ‘Mulakhkas Sira al-Ustadh al-Imam’, *Al-Manar* 8, 381.

After separating his ways from Afghani, Abduh began to focus his interests on carrying out a reform in education. As a friend and student of Afghani, Abduh's initial modernizing agenda during his former years were liberal and political. While Afghani continued striving for political reform, Abduh decided to change his methodology. He noticed that the political reforms he and Afghani were trying were prevented by the British administration. Consequently, he decided that it would be more profitable to actually work with the British in a way that would allow him to transmit his ideologies. One of the reasons why he began working with the British was that he had a low opinion of the Egyptian ruling family and considered them as responsible for many of the country's social dilemmas.³³ Throughout his role as a Mufti, the British would also consult him on a variety of issues.³⁴ It is fair to state however, that Abduh always remained opposed to the British occupation because he was critical of British policies, as reflected in his legal rulings and published writings.³⁵ The ulama, Khedive and the Sultan remained suspicious of Abduh's alliances with the British nonetheless.

Abduh was interested in a bottom-up approach to reform, which would take time- but in the long run, would prove to be more effective. He still wanted to bring about change, but this change would be in lines with reinterpreting Islam. Indeed, this was a long-term project, but Abduh had faith that it would yield its fruits. In Rida's biography Abduh states:

‘I think’, he said to Afghani, ‘we should abandon politics and should go to a completely unknown place on the earth where we don't know anybody. We should then choose among the people of this place ten young men or more who are bright and in good condition. We should educate them in our way and draw

³³ Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic*, 207

³⁴ Blunt, *My Dairies*, 492

³⁵ Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition*, 144

their attention to our purpose. When for each one of them the further education of ten others is destined, it will only take some years and we have one hundred sons who are firm in the struggle (jihad) on the path of reform'... But Afghani replied: 'You are hesitant. We have been proceeding in this way and it is necessary to continue. As long as we preserve, we will see its effect'.³⁶

When Abduh returned to Egypt from Beirut, a lot was going on. Khedive Tawfik, who considered Abduh to be a rebel of the Urabi revolt, died in 1892. His son Abbas Hilmi succeeded his father at the age of eighteen.³⁷ Abduh tried to establish close ties with Abbas Hilmi. One of the things he immediately did was to present his educational reform plan, specifically the one on al-Azhar, which was positively received by the Khedive. When the Khedive formed a council to propose a new curriculum to al-Azhar, Muhammad Abduh became part of the board. Abduh placed great emphasis on al-Azhar because the university was Egypt's main and only higher university in the country. One way or another, every educated class had a connection with the institution. Despite the importance the university posed to Egypt's different intellectual classes, its physical condition was a total mess- not to mention the disorganized and narrow curriculum. Therefore, reform in al-Azhar's administration and curriculum was necessary for Egypt's development.

Under Abduh's leadership, al-Azhar's administrative council drafted a law on administration, which was declared in 1896. The council made available teaching positions at al-Azhar to graduates with a degree of *alimiyya* (total of 12 years study in the institution). As teachers, their salaries would also be doubled. The council also physically organized the institution in a way that resembled those of modern institutions. An official school year was introduced, regular set class times were inaugurated, student

³⁶ 36. Rida, *Ta'rikh* 1, 416

³⁷ Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh*. 74

attendance was taken, books were collected in a library with open access to all students, hygiene was improved by bringing running water, and doctors were provided to give students regular check-ups.³⁸ After becoming Egypt's Mufti, Abduh had also taken the time to give lectures at al-Azhar, so he used these lectures as an opportunity to promote his reform agenda, arguing against polygamy, defending Darwin on natural selection by giving it a "social" form of definition: "if God had not repelled some men by means of others, the earth would have been corrupted."³⁹ Here, Abduh is surely referencing Social Darwinism, which signifies that those "fit" as opposed to "unfit" will survive the changing sociological and political changes.

The council was able to reform the administration but an attempt at reforming the curriculum was unsuccessful. The majority of al-Azhar members were not in favor of a reform, seeing the reforms almost as a threat to the traditional religious material. Despite efforts in bringing social sciences and natural sciences to the picture, it was opposed instantly. Upon witnessing the resistance of the scholars to have an update of the curriculum, Abduh and his close friend Saad Zaghlul decided to build an entirely new institution where both modern and traditional education would be taught. Although his dream of opening a university was unsuccessful during his life, after his death when Zaghlul was appointed as minister of public instruction in 1906, the Egyptian University (later named Cairo University) was opened in 1908.⁴⁰

³⁸ Ibid. 76

³⁹ *Tafsir al-Quran al-hakim al-mushtahar bi-ism Tafsir al-Manar*

⁴⁰ Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh*, 115

Legacy

Abduh never wrote an autobiography. Rashid Rida wrote Abduh's first biography and completed Abduh's exegesis in *Al-Manar* until 1935. However, scholars of Abduh take caution in Rida's portrayal of Abduh. According to Sedgwick:

Without formal religious or scholarly credentials, and as something of an outsider in Egypt, Rida was in need of legitimization, and this was provided by his link with Muhammad Abduh, which he emphasized, presenting himself as Muhammad Abduh's closest disciple- despite the fact that he had known him only the last eight years of his life.⁴¹

In addition, Rida himself had some contradictory views with Abduh. For instance, he was not so much interested in European ideas as Abduh was. In his written biography on Abduh, Rida also eliminated sections of Abduh's life to avoid any controversies that would rise about him, like his membership in Freemasonry, his admiration of Guizot, and his relations with the British controller-general in Egypt, Lord Cromer.⁴² Although Rida's biography of Abduh is the most prominent, there are other biographies as well like that of Mustafa Abd-al Raziq (d. 1947), who was an Egyptian Islamic philosopher and the rector of al-Azhar in the early twentieth century. A follower of Abduh, he wanted "to prove the compatibility of traditional Islamic philosophy with the rationalism of modern thought."⁴³

The several variety of biographical accounts of Abduh demonstrates the amount of influence Abduh's thoughts has had on modern Islamic intellectual discourse. According to Sedgwick, Abduh became the "prototype of the twentieth-century activist

⁴¹ Ibid. 122

⁴² Ibid. 123

⁴³ Nasr & Leaman ed., *Routledge History of World Philosophies: History of Islamic philosophy. Vol. 1*, 1088–1092

alim whose religious authority does not solely rest on the depth of his scholarship but on a blend of traditional religious expertise and social and political activism.”⁴⁴

According to Albert Hourani, the tensions of different portrayals and understandings of Abduh’s thought were manifested among his disciples. One group stressed the Islamic elements of his teachings and Islam’s superiority, whereas others ignored the Islamic element, and strictly adopted his notions of progress, modernism, and freedom.⁴⁵ Abduh’s flexibility in extending Islamic norms to modern values was also an inspiration to the secularists of Egypt. The dynamic and independent reasoning applied to religion became an inspiration to a certain group of people including the likes of Ali Abdur-Raziq.⁴⁶ These individuals also took heart Abduh’s opposition to the ulama. On the other hand, the group that stressed Abduh’s Islamic side, which was led by Rashid Rida focused on his Sunni orthodox title.

An individual who was greatly inspired by the ideas of Afghani, Abduh and Rida was Hasan al-Banna (d. 1949), the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in the early twentieth century. Al-Banna considered these figures to be inspirations for building his philosophy and the activities of the Brotherhood. Al-Banna identified himself particularly with Afghani’s mission against British colonialism and influence in Egypt.⁴⁷ Despite the asserted inspiration al-Banna drew from these figures it is worth wondering how Abduh would have made sense of the Brotherhood’s use of his ideology.

⁴⁴ Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh*, 154

⁴⁵ Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939. Issued under the Auspices of the Royal Institute of International Affairs*, 161

⁴⁶ Scharbrodt, *Islam and the Baha'i Faith: A Comparative Study of Muhammad 'Abduh and 'Abdul-Baha 'Abbas*, 156

⁴⁷ Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, 104-5

When the Brotherhood was established in the 1920s, it was mainly an organization that placed its emphasis on education and provided religious and social services to the public. By making education its main concern⁴⁸ and providing an alternative to conservative religious education, it followed Abduh's educational endeavor. Hence, in its native years the Brotherhood did not have much to do with a political revolutionary agenda. Rather, the Brotherhood established a religious agenda working within the framework of a state politically controlled by secular British forces.⁴⁹ Despite Abduh's personal approval of such a stance, the Brotherhood became increasingly politicized in the 1930s and 1940s by outwardly denouncing the British presence in Egypt.⁵⁰ In 1948, a member of the Brotherhood assassinated the prime minister as vengeance for the failed acceptance to participate in the parliamentary elections.⁵¹ A later member of the Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb (1906-66) was an influential spokesperson also known for his radical assertions. Qutb rejected any form of man-made political and social order and struggled for the establishment of an Islamic state under sharia rule. He viewed that there was a need to overthrow existing regimes in Muslim lands through militant force.⁵²

Presumably, Abduh would not have envisioned his ideals about social and religious order being stretched to the extent that the Brotherhood has took it. Though in his years spent with Afghani, Abduh did engage in political activities to eradicate British

⁴⁸ Harris, *Nationalism and Revolution in Egypt; the Role of the Muslim Brotherhood*, 155-6

⁴⁹ Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, 232-59

⁵⁰ Ibid. 235-47

⁵¹ Ibid. 268-71

⁵² Mousasalli, *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Ideological and Political Discourse of Sayyid Qutb*, 147-237

influence over Egypt and worked for pan-Islamic ideals, he later altered his outlook and formed closer relations with the British authorities, hoping to spread his religious and social reforms through education. That is to say, he was at the very least “okay” with collaborating with the current British political authority. Likewise, Abduh would not have approved the use of political violence as a way to attain his ambitions.

CONCLUSION

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For the purposes of this thesis, I have analyzed the writings of three Muslim intellectuals, namely Said Nursi, Muhammad Iqbal and Muhammad Abduh, who are often grouped together under the “modernist” umbrella. Although all three ultimately have similar aims-as would any modernist, they nevertheless differ in many aspects, as I have hypothesized prior to my research. I will now review some overlapping themes of Nursi, Iqbal and Abduh’s thought, in the hopes of demonstrating that although these intellectuals lived in about the same time period and faced similar challenges of modernity, their outlook and ways of meeting them were distinct.

Nursi, Iqbal and Abduh stressed the need to follow *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and avoid *taqlid* (imitation of the past). However, their own perceptions of *ijtihad* and *taqlid* differed from one another. Iqbal favored *ijtihad* to take place through the new emerging intellectual class who had both knowledge of religious and natural sciences. In other words, people aware and familiar with both the modern sciences and religious scholarship with an emphasis on the primary sources like the Qur’an. Abduh on the other hand, asserted that a *mujtahid* (one engaging in *ijtihad*) should reinterpret the primary sources in light of current modern problems. Abduh himself moved away from traditional scholarship (he studied at al-Azhar), and only examined the Qur’an and Prophet’s Sunnah/Hadith, while ignoring later generations of scholarly work posed by different legal schools of thought. By not considering generationally produced scholarship, Abduh seemed to deny its relevance in the world he lived in or perhaps believed that it was too much of an obstacle for any rapid reforms. This might lead one to argue that he was not interested in the differences of opinions revolving around certain

matters, but rather favored clear-cut answers to existing problems. In contrast, Nursi placed restrictions to the use of *ijtihad*. According to Nursi, the gates to *ijtihad* are open, but there are six obstacles that “block the way to it”. In summary, Nursi warns that Muslims in modern times are exposed to un-Islamic and anti-Islamic customs from Europe, along with countless religious innovations and misguidance even from within the Islamic tradition. That being the case, carrying out *ijtihad* would create more dilemma and confusions than there already are.¹ Hence, he certifies the “openness” of the door of *ijtihad*, but also asserts that people in the modern period do not have the authority of entering it. Therefore it can be said that Nursi seems to take a more conventional view of *ijtihad* due to reasons of his traditional background and his interest in carrying out reform, particularly in faith. It is clearly the case that Nursi, Iqbal and Abduh all approached the issue of *ijtihad*, but in distinct ways.

One important discussion in modern Islamic thought includes the role of Sufism in modern times. Iqbal and Nursi had much to say about Sufism. Both claimed that the Sufism practiced in modern times was not necessary and helpful for Islam’s revival. Iqbal advocated for Sufism to be filtered from its “un-Islamic” elements. Not only did these “un-Islamic” elements hinder Islamic revival, but also dangerously affected the mindset of Muslims by disempowering their “selves”, because of its monistic tendencies. On the other hand, Nursi’s criticism of Sufism was in line with its teachings in the aspect of not appealing to the needs of the modern world. Nursi believed that although Sufism was appreciated for its services to faith in Islamic history, the contemporary world was mainly interested in “reason”. Hence, for him appealing both to the mind and the heart was

¹ Nursi, *The Words*, 502

crucial. Though both Iqbal and Nursi were very critical of Sufism's stance in the modern world, they both appreciated and respected the motives and efforts of the Sufi's mission to attain closeness to God. Muhammad Abduh, however, was critical of the contemporary popular Sufi beliefs and practices such as visiting saint shrines and praying for saints' intercession. In his eyes, Islam needed to rid itself from this heterodoxy.² For Abduh, these popular practices were forms of unacceptable innovation in the religion.

It is obvious that Nursi and Iqbal were both influenced by Sufism and even came from that background and it is clear from their works that instead of rejecting Sufism, they offered a new version of it, one that sought empowerment, engagement in the world, and a path open for all people instead of selected individuals. Iqbal, for instance, is known today for his love for Rumi and calls him his "spiritual master". Although this is the case, Iqbal brings his own interpretation of Rumi's teachings. For instance, Iqbal opposes notions of self-annihilation, in which Rumi was particularly interested. For Iqbal, the concept of annihilation in the "beloved" was a sign of impotency. Iqbal therefore uses the annihilation principle in the context of his Muslim nation-state ideal. Muslims, should "annihilate" themselves in the service of fellow Muslim brothers and sisters. In other words, he desires for Muslims to work externally for one another's benefit in this world. Although he uses Rumi's teachings in a certain way, he still places a great deal of value on the issue of "love" as Rumi did. He describes the "love" theme as an important one and as the essential moving force of existence.

Reforming the education system in schools was also a part of the reformist agenda. Both Nursi and Abduh attempted to take concrete steps in amending the

² Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic 1860-1950*, 167

curriculum of the madrasa schools. Abduh was specifically concerned with al-Azhar University and Nursi was interested in opening up a university in Eastern Anatolia, referring to it as *Mederesetuz-Zehra*. Both requested religious sciences to be taught alongside natural sciences. This was important for them because the students raised in these schools would also get a “modern” education. However, Egypt was not autonomous at first to make decisions for itself; British imperialists influenced every aspect of Egypt’s society. Turkey, on the other hand, had lost its caliphate to hard-core secularists. Abduh and Nursi believed the only possible way to deal with such circumstances were through a reformation that ought to take place through educating new generations in personal values and aspirations. Such projects would take years to bear fruits, but Abduh and Nursi had faith that it would eventually happen. A conscious generation would be raised.

In Nursi’s case, though the government claimed the opening of “Ataturk University” (1957) in Erzurum (Eastern Anatolian province) in Nursi’s name, it was not representative of Nursi’s own university model. He aspired a university that would allow students to specialize both in natural and religious sciences, while making Arabic the core teaching language. However Ataturk University did not meet these expectations. Nursi’s education model in general, to this day, is not properly implemented in any madrasa or university education. Abduh’s case was slightly different. Although the Egyptian University (later known as Cairo University) was established after his death, it was not a representative model of Abduh’s ideals. Abduh had not envisioned a European-style university, which would have a secular form of education that would leave religious sciences to the side. He didn’t want al-Azhar for example, to “graduate doctors, chemists,

engineers, physicists, and veterinaries”³, but for students to become familiar with modern subjects. The Egyptian University was later defined as a “university, which has no religion, only science [*ilm*].”⁴ As a side note, in the mid-twentieth century, al-Azhar *did* come to teach both modern sciences and traditional sciences, and the government would fund the institution.⁵

I have concluded that the differences in Nursi’s, Iqbal’s and Abduh’s interests and approaches were a result of their different educational backgrounds, their contexts and their idiosyncratic priorities. One observes that Muhammad Abduh and Said Nursi received formal education in religious sciences. Their rigorous background training in religion is reflected in their works and both wrote a commentary on the Qur’an (though Abduh’s was not completed). Nursi was a renowned religious scholar in Eastern Anatolia, and Abduh became a Mufti of Egypt, the chief judge of the Sharia court system. Iqbal however, was not a scholar of religion in a traditional sense. Iqbal received Western education in Europe like Abduh. Despite their varying educational backgrounds, they all felt licensed to speak on behalf of religion. This is an important point because until recently only authorized individuals—i.e., the ulama--could speak on behalf of religion. What Muslim intellectuals like Abduh and Nursi expected was that the ulama should somehow take modern trends into consideration, though not blindly. The *ulama* were the religious authority, and if they could not respond to modernity, this would further hinder Muslim societies away from progress and development. At the same time, one sees the

³ Nadim, *Al-ulama wa al-talim*, 608-9; Also see Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic* pg, 198-202

⁴ Reid, *Cairo University*, 31-32

⁵ Brunner, “Education, Politics and the Struggle for Intellectual Leadership: Al-Azhar between 1927 and 1945,” in *Guardians of Faith in Modern Times*, ed. Meir Hatim (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 109-40.)

shifting of this paradigm, as in the case of Iqbal. It is not only scholars who advise about religion, but also members of the intellectual elite who have no comprehensive religious training, yet still claim authority.

In recognizing their contexts, both Abduh and Iqbal were under the influences of British colonialism. Iqbal was raised exposed to the domination of foreign forces in his homeland. He believed that these forces were not only interested in economic and political control, but on a wider spectrum, were also successfully influencing the cultural and moral values of India. However, unlike Egypt, Muslims were the minority in India. Iqbal's foremost priority was to revive the Islamic identity in a majority Hindu nation. Muslims needed to empower their "selves" to bring about change and represent their identity in their own Islamic constitution. Not only would Muslims need to revive internally, but also the creation of a Muslim nation-state would be a great support of such revivification. Iqbal was nevertheless concerned for the "peoples of the East" in general. He detested colonialism, and believed that the "Easterners" had to speak up.

Nursi's case was unique among the three, in the sense that he not only experienced the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire, but unlike Abduh and Iqbal, he lived through the transition to the establishment of the "secular" Turkish state. Nursi's "threat" was not colonialism per se, but the positive materialist agenda of the state resulting from foreign and domestic pressures. Not only were the foundations of religion under threat by materialist ideologies, religion itself was blamed for the Ottoman Empire's final states of instability. On that note, Nursi dedicated most of his life to proving that the religious tenets should not be blamed, and to "saving" people's faith through *kalam* (theological) discussion. In addition, although Nursi was in support of a Pan-Islamic nation during his

“Old Said” years as was Abduh, in the new secular regime, Nursi came to the conclusion that as long as one was allowed to freely practice one’s religion, the type of politics held within the government was of secondary importance. Nursi was a figure who was exiled to different parts of Anatolia and was also imprisoned because of the impact he had on the public with his Islamic message which he made his first priority in life. This helps one appreciate his demand for freedom, at least to practice religion publicly, without having to face brutal force by the secular regime. Interestingly, Nursi did not see secular Turkey as being incompatible with an individual’s Islamic religiosity.

The context in which these three thinkers lived in also reflects their personal agendas. Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Iqbal were specifically interested in a revival of Muslim identity against foreign influences. Iqbal boldly demanded Muslims to engage more with modern philosophy. In Abduh’s case, Egypt was still under Ottoman rule, but British influences and enforcements were increasingly present in the region. After Abduh’s failing attempts with Afghani’s utopian pan-Islamist agenda, he tried to revive the role of Muslim solidarity within the positions he held in the government. He was interested, broadly speaking, in religious, societal and educational reform. Abduh desired to unite the Muslim community (by dismissing their differences) so that Muslims would come together and reestablish their cultural and political power. Nursi’s main priority, on the other hand, was the need to save Muslim “belief” itself in the modern age. In order for such reform to take place Nursi and Abduh both worked through a bottom-up strategy to bring about change.

Finally, on a broader level, Nursi, Iqbal and Abduh each represent icons in the modern Muslim world. Nursi, who has millions of followers in the twenty-first century,

represents a liberal version of Islam that is based on faith and submission to *sharia* such as placing great importance to daily prayers. It does not leave any room for extreme “religious-political” agendas, especially those that might threaten the faith of individuals. One notices that Nursi’s non-political emphasis in religion is reflected in the way Islam is practiced in Turkey today, where the Islamicly oriented party was democratically elected in 2002 and manages to still uphold the values of the Kemalist secular republic. Today, the state continues to issue publications of Nursi’s works under the Presidency of Religious Affairs. Nursi has also influenced many religious organizations and social movements present in Turkey today. For instance, as I previously touched upon, his particular ideas became systematized and institutionalized worldwide with the Hizmet (service) movement, otherwise known as the Gulen Movement (definitely the most prominent of Nursi’s inspired movements). The liberal, yet faith-oriented characteristic of the movement has been reflected in its ideas on religious pluralism, humanitarian aid projects, and mission of emphasizing religious and science education for boys and girls.

Many today assert Abduh to be the “founder” of the Salafiya movement. However, Abduh certainly was not a character who would be favored by contemporary Salafis. Salafism in the twentieth century became closely associated with the Wahhabi movement, which can explain why Salafism’s teachings are far from Abduh’s teachings. In Iqbal’s case, though he expressed the need for what I think was a vague and unspecific form of nation state in which “principles of tawhid” could be applied, the outcome of his wishes was distorted. Iqbal’s dream partially became true in that Pakistan was created in 1947. However, with the establishment of Pakistan, there were further divisions within the Muslim community, resulting in the state of Bangladesh. Furthermore, extremist

groups like the Taliban started emerging, which favored a strict, anti-intellectual interpretation of Islam. As a philosopher and poet, if Iqbal had witnessed the turnouts of his legacy, he would at the least have been appalled, but this is not by far a surprising outcome. Especially in the case of Abduh and Iqbal, it is unfortunate that their continual support for the liberal use of *ijtihad* became a tool for many personalities and agendas. This could not have been what Abduh and Iqbal envisioned, but it is inevitable that the doors to interpreting the law became a matter of individual expertise.

Despite the great efforts of Abduh, Iqbal, and Nursi in meeting the rising problems of modernity, I believe not enough attention is given to what they actually said and did in their own context. Living in different parts of the Muslim world, each tackled the challenges of modernity in unique ways. These were surely not radical figures. They came from modest backgrounds and had sincere intentions to change the current state of the Muslim *ummah*, or community. This change, they believed, would not only bring about security to Muslim religious identity, but also help provide a layout for future generations as well. Today, Islam is in the unfortunate situation of being labeled as radical, oppressive and violent. Although one can argue that such claims are a result of preconceived notions, biases, and ignorance on part of the individuals who brings them about, it also suits to “internally” question the ways to bring about solutions to the existing problems.

Iqbal, Abduh and Nursi in their own ways struggled with colonialism, materialism, and nationalism, etc., but they were successful in advocating alternative models that could work within the system, that is, peacefully, to attain healthier future ends. For instance, Abduh used the printing press as a means to spread his liberal and

rational agenda. Through his liberal and rational approach to the scriptures, he tried to demonstrate that a “scientific” reading of the Qur’an was possible. If the language of the day was science, then why would it be a threat to apply scientific language to make sense of complex concepts? This allowed for flexibility in interpreting the scripture, and in not limiting oneself to literalist interpretations, which many Muslim extremists do today.

Not enough attention is given to these figures for addressing problems of their days. Nursi, Iqbal and Abduh were in a sense the pioneers who each encountered different challenges of modernity specific to their own very different contexts. It only makes sense for today’s generation to receive inspiration from their efforts and works. They show without doubt that there is no inherent incompatibility between Islamic intellectual traditions and modernity. Muslims should use them as predecessor role models for present day in seeking different solutions relevant to a present day context.

GLOSSORY

akaid - fundamental creed pillars in Islam with a reference to Qur'an and Prophet's way
âlâ-yı illiyyîn - highest of the high
Bediüzzaman- Literally means 'Wonder of the Age'. A title given to Said Nursi by the religious scholars.
bid'a –innovation
caiz – permissible
dershane - study-homes
ene -the human "I"
esfel-i sâfilîn - lowest of the low
fatwa – legal opinion
kalam – scholastic theology
kâmil - highest point
khudi – the "Self"
Hadith – The words of the Prophet Muhammad
ijma – consensus in Islamic jurisprudence
ijtihad – the use of independent reasoning in Islamic jurisprudence
ilm – knowledge; science
iman – belief;faith
islam - submission
tekkes - Sufi lodges
lazım – necessary
madrasa/medrese – religious schools
maktab/mektep – secular schools
Mufti - experts in their field of religious law who resolved newly arising legal disputes.
mujtahid – the person engaging in independent reasoning
nefis -evil commanding soul
salaf - the first generations of Muslims after the Prophet Muhammad.
Sharia – Islamic law
Sunnah – The way of the Prophet Muhammad; his actions and words
tahkiki iman - consciously verified belief
taklidi iman - accepting what people say without requesting for proofs; belief through emulation
talfiq - 'piecing together' a conclusion from more than one legal school thought.
taqlid – imitation of the past
tarikât/tariqa - Sufi order
tasavvuf –Sufism
tawhid/tevhid – oneness of God
ulama – religious scholars
ummah – nation
usual al-fiqh - legal theory
vacip – required

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