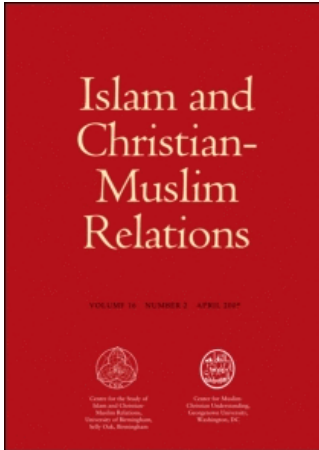


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Apolitical Interpretation of Islam: Said Nursi's Faith-Based Activism in Comparison with Political Islamism and Sufism

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ABSTRACT *In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, Islam has generally been represented in the media as a political ideology and some academics have over-emphasized this political image of Islam. These are not baseless speculations; there are several political Islamic groups worldwide. However, there are also many apolitical Islamic groups. This article analyzes one of the most influential apolitical Islamic movements in the world, the Nurcus, and its founder, Bediüzzaman Said Nursi. Nursi, the author of the Risale-i Nur collection, emphasized the ascetic aspect of Islam: 'Ninety-nine percent of Islam is about ethics, worship, the hereafter, and virtue. Only one percent is about politics; leave that to the rulers.' He also added, 'I seek refuge in God from Satan and [party] politics.' Through the analysis of Nursi's thought and activism, the article will try to answer the following questions: Was Nursi a Sufi? What are the theological and structural bases of Nursi's apolitical interpretation of Islam? What is the impact of the secular state in Turkey on the development of Nursi's apolitical outlook and activism? What does his apolitical understanding of Islam say to non-Turkish Muslims who do not live in a secular state?*

In the aftermath of the September 11, Islam has generally been presented in the international media as a political ideology. Even certain academics have over-emphasized this political image of Islam. According to Bernard Lewis, there is no separation of religion and the state in Islam. For him, it is Christianity that accepts such a separation on the basis of the biblical verse 'Render therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's, and unto God the things which be God's' (Luke 20:25).² Samuel Huntington expands Lewis's thesis to other religions and cultures: 'In Islam, God is Caesar; in China and Japan, Caesar is God; in Orthodoxy, God is Caesar's junior partner. The separation and recurring clashes between church and state that typify Western civilization have existed in no other civilization' (Huntington, 1996, p. 70). These are not baseless speculations; there are several

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self-defined Islamic states and political Islamist groups worldwide. However, these writers neglect the existence of many apolitical Islamic groups, such as the Sufi orders. We are aware of the fact that it is not possible to stay out of politics completely; by 'apolitical' groups here, we imply two things: (a) those who do not aim to found an 'Islamic state'; and (b) those who refrain from 'party politics'.

In this essay, we will analyze one of the most influential apolitical interpretations of Islam, that of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi. Nursi, the author of the *Risale-i Nur (Epistles of Light)* collection, emphasized the ascetic aspect of Islam. He challenged the classical view on the so-called unity of *dîn wa-dawla* (religion and state). For Nursi, Islam focuses on an individual's belief in and relations with God, rather than being concerned with state policies. In his words, 'Ninety-nine percent of Islam is about ethics, worship, the hereafter, and virtue. Only one percent is about politics; leave that to the rulers' (Nursi, 1996a, p. 1922). He held a very pejorative view of politics: 'I seek refuge in God from Satan and [party] politics' (Nursi, 1996f, p. 368). Through the analysis of Nursi's thought and activism, we will examine the theological and contextual bases of his apolitical interpretation of Islam by comparing his stand with political Islamism and Sufism.

In a nutshell, we argue that neither political Islamism nor Sufism truly reflects Nursi's teaching. The development of a new category, faith-based activism (*hizmet-i imaniye* or *iman hizmeti*, in Nursi's own words), is necessary to understand his thoughts and activism. Faith-based activism is different from political Islamism, since it focuses on the spread of Islamic faith among individuals, rather than pursuing the political goal of establishing an Islamic state. It also differs from Sufism, since it is more activist, more rational, and less mystical. Nevertheless, a comparison with political Islamism and Sufism will be helpful to understand what Nursi's faith-based activism is.

Nursi and Political Islamism

Political Islamism: An Overview

We use the term 'political Islamism' to describe an ideology that emerged in the twentieth century in reaction to colonialism and modernization. Political Islamism aims to create an 'Islamic state' ruled according to the Shari'a. Although political Islamist movements can be categorized as a part of the Islamic religious resurgence, these movements 'are primarily political' (Ahmad, 1991, p. 463). Political Islamists regard the foundation of an Islamic state as the sine qua non for the attainment of a complete Muslim life (Nasr, 1994, p. 106). Although they do not neglect personal spiritual needs (Ahmad, 2000a, p. 34), political Islamists focus on the struggle through political means. Their strategies and tactics are adaptable to changing political conditions. They generally participate in multi-party elections, whenever they are allowed to do so (Beinen & Stork, 1996, p. 4). If they are oppressed, they organize underground. The key ideological components of the political Islamists' program are: taking the Qur'an as the source of political, legal, and social systems; and claiming to return to the example of the Prophet Muhammad (Esposito, 1999, p. 48; Ahmad, 2000b, p. 4; Maududi, 2000, p. 271).

Political Islamists are in general agreement with modernists in the Muslim world in terms of the necessity to import Western science and technology. However, they disagree with modernists in that they criticize socio-political Westernization, since they believe in the total sufficiency of Islam as a socio-political blueprint (Esposito, 1984, pp. 135, 217).

Political Islamists, particularly those who embrace Salafism, are also critical of Sufis. For them, the Sufi orders have deviated from the pure origin of Islam by absorbing extra rituals and superstitious practices.

The Muslim Brotherhood and the Jamaat-i Islami are the best-known political Islamist movements (Roy, 1994). The Muslim Brotherhood was established in Egypt by Hasan al-Banna. Later, Sayyid Qutb consolidated the major ideological framework of the movement (Abu Rabi', 1996, p. 63). The Jamaat-i Islami was founded by Abu al-A'la Maududi in Pakistan. It has sought the Islamization of socio-economic and political systems, especially the state. Both movements have claimed that: the societies in their countries have deviated from Islam; Westernization is a problem, not a cure; and the only way of solving the socio-political crisis is to return to Islam (Esposito, 1984, p. 94). Recently, several sub-groups have emerged out of the Brotherhood and the Jamaat-i Islami. Some of these groups have embraced a democratic mentality and strategy, whereas others have become radicalized (El-Ghobashy, 2005), but political activism, which aims to Islamize the state, retains a central role for all political Islamist groups.

Politics in Nursi's Life

Said Nursi (1876–1960) was born at the end of the nineteenth century, about three decades before Banna (1906–1949), Qutb (1906–1966), and Maududi (1903–1979) (Davudoglu, 1999, p. 97; for Nursi's life, see Yavuz, 1999). Until the early 1920s, Nursi was also a political figure who made political speeches and wrote on politics. His writings in this period addressed the social and political problems of the late Ottoman Empire. *Divan-ı Harb-i Örfî* (The Military Court) included Nursi's defense in his trial in the course of the March 31 Incident of 1908. The military court tried him for Islamist reactionism and found him not guilty (Nursi, 1996a). Another work, *Münâzarat* (The Dialogues) comprised his conversations on socio-political issues with the Kurdish tribes of eastern Anatolia. In these dialogues, Nursi defends the liberalization of the Ottoman polity, including the political equality of Christians and Jews in the empire (Nursi, 1996 g).³ As elaborated in *Münâzarat*, in the aftermath of the Second Constitutional Revolution of 1908, Nursi supported the newly established rule of the Young Turks, including the Committee of Union and Progress (Mutlu, 1994, pp. 22–33). A major reason for his support was that the Young Turks were promising to promote political freedom. According to Ramazan al-Buti, another of Nursi's motives in supporting them was to give the Young Turks an Islamic color that they seemed to lack (al-Buti, 1995).

In this period, Nursi also became a member of the Ittihad-i Muhammadiyya, the committee that tried to unite Muslims under the Ottoman Caliph (Vahide, 2003, p. 2). Nursi viewed politics as a means to solve the problems that (Ottoman) Muslims experienced. At this point, his emphasis on the unity of the Muslim umma did not differ greatly from that of Jamaladdin Afghani (Nursi, 1996a, p. 1922). In addition to the political problems, Nursi was also aware of the challenge to the Islamic faith from Western positivism but, until the 1920s, he remained hopeful about the major role politics could play in solving the problems that challenged Muslims (Abu Rabi', 2003, p. 77).

In 1922, the transformation began from the 'old Said', who pursued a political way, to the 'new Said', who initiated a faith-based movement (Reed, 2003, p. 40). After the victory of Turkey over Greece, Nursi joined the first Grand National Assembly in Ankara to celebrate the Turkish victory. He noticed the spread of positivism among the

Turkish elite (Nursi, 1996i, pp. 2137–2139; Vahide, 1992, p. 178) and decided that this threat against the faith of the Turkish people was much more dangerous than the political threat from the West. It was relatively easy to detect and fight against a foreign threat, but now the threat against the faith was coming from within. The worm was in the body and it was hard to defeat it (Nursi, 1996i, p. 2205). Nursi understood that he needed to do something to save the faith of Muslims and decided to work only for the promotion of the Islamic creed. That was the birth of the ‘new Said’. The new Said completely abstained from politics. He regarded party politics as futile and even harmful to the service of Islam. His new motto became, ‘I seek refuge in God from Satan and [party] politics’ (Nursi, 1996f, p. 368).

The New Said and Faith-Based Activism

The new Said emphasized first personal spiritual growth, and then the spread of the Islamic faith as the most important duty of Muslims. He discouraged his followers from discussing politics. According to Nursi, the old and the new Sais were different, even regarding their everyday attitudes. The old Said used to read several newspapers a day while the new Said did not read a newspaper for years (ibid., p. 374). The new Said stressed that he did not even know the names of Turkish politicians (Nursi, 1996h, p. 1033). He wrote an essay specifically to explain why he did not listen to the radio for news about World War II. He argued that entering heaven and being saved from hell in the hereafter, through actualized faith and good deeds in this life, were much more important than World War II (ibid., pp. 952–953).

During the last four decades of his life, Nursi focused on writing and distributing the *Risale-i Nur*, which was mainly an exegesis of the Qur’an. Contrary to the classical exegeses, which explain all the verses with regard to their order in the Qur’an, *Risale-i Nur* explains some verses with regard to their relevance to current problems and questions, particularly those about the Islamic belief system. *Risale-i Nur* elaborates the six pillars of Islamic faith—belief in the oneness of God, the hereafter, the sacred books, prophets, angels, and destiny—in addition to the acts of worship, such as daily prayer and fasting. In doing so, it provides answers to questions such as: ‘What are the rational proofs of the existence of the hereafter and other pillars of the faith?’ ‘What are the psychological benefits of believing?’, and ‘Why did the Merciful God create Satan and why does he allow bad deeds?’

Nursi gives three main reasons for his avoidance of politics. The first is that the main problem facing twentieth-century Muslims is the weakening of individual faith: Muslims need to transform their *taklidi iman* (imitative faith) into a *tahkiki iman* (actualized faith). The political problems are symptoms, not the real disease. In modern times, Muslims are facing the danger of losing their eternal happiness because of the atheistic and positivistic trends that challenge the faith. The faith of each individual must be strengthened to withstand these challenges. It is trivial to deal with political problems, since Muslims need to develop an actualized faith that will lead them to happiness here and in the hereafter. As a result of this new emphasis on faith, Nursi stresses that one may live Islam as an individual even if the state does not implement the Islamic law. Therefore, for the new Said, unlike Abu Hamid al-Ghazali,⁴ religion and state are not ‘twin brothers’. In sum, the new Said focuses on the enlightenment of individuals through a bottom-up process, rather than a top-down political project (Nursi, 1996f, pp. 374–375).

Second, Nursi stresses that spiritual development and political activism can very rarely be compatible. Politics generally lead to corruption, conflict, and arrogance, which contradict his moral teaching based on dignity, brotherhood, and humility (ibid., pp. 367–368).

Finally, Nursi notes that if he were involved with politics, people would misunderstand his intentions. The overwhelming majority of Turkish society, Nursi argues, is bewildered and needs guidance to find the true path—which is Islam. 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 (Nursi, 1997, p. 69). Therefore, a true servant of the Qur'an should avoid politics in order to be trustworthy (ibid., pp. 66–67). On another occasion, again in *Mektubat* (Letters), Nursi stresses a similar point:

But if you ask why service to the Qur'an and belief prohibit me [from political life], I would say: Since the truths of belief and the Qur'an are each like diamonds, if I was polluted by politics, the ordinary people who are easily deceived, would wonder about those diamonds I was holding, 'Aren't they for political propaganda to attract more supporters?' They might regard the diamonds as bits of common glass. Then by being involved with politics, I would be wronging the diamonds and as though reducing their value. (Ibid., p. 85)

In addition to his ideational influence, Nursi also directly led a very influential faith-based movement in Turkey. The Nur movement was different from political Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Isa Abdulkadir makes a comparison between these two groups in a Baghdad-based newspaper, *Ed-Difa*, where he suggests four differences between them. First, the Nur movement focuses on the service of faith, whereas the Brotherhood pursues a political agenda. Second, the Nur movement is text based, so Nur students do not need to meet with their leader, while the Brotherhood has public centers and leaders and its members take orders or lessons from their leaders. Third, Nur students do not need permission from government, since they do not constitute a formal organization, while the members of the Brotherhood need governmental permission to open their community centers. Finally, the Nur movement attaches importance to the quality of the students rather than their numbers, while the Brotherhood seeks to increase the number of its followers in order to carry out its political agenda.⁵

Nursi and the Secular State

What is the impact of the foundation of the secular state in Turkey on Nursi's emphasis on a new apolitical interpretation of Islam? The relationship between structure and agency is one of the main ongoing debates among social scientists. Obviously, political conditions, especially the secular state, had an impact on the transformation of Nursi's ideas and way of activism, but it would be too simplistic to say that Nursi's faith-based activism was tactical, for three main reasons.

First, structure does not determine the actors' decisions about politics. Both Nursi and Khomeini (of pre-revolutionary Iran) experienced the oppression of secular state policies. However, one chose to pursue faith-based activism while the other rebelled against the regime to establish an Islamic state. They made opposite choices despite the similarity of the political structures. This indicates that secular state pressure does not necessarily

and automatically make Islamic leaders apolitical. Moreover, Nursi defended his apolitical stand with theological reasoning that went beyond structural conditions. He clearly and consistently opposed any use of violence. For him, violence could only be used against foreign invaders, because the use of violence always harms innocent individuals (Nursi, 1996c, p. 1912). To support this argument, in *Risale-i Nur*, Nursi frequently quotes a verse of the Qur'an: 'No bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another' (Q 17:15), which stresses that individuals cannot be held responsible for the misdeeds of their relatives, societies, and states (ibid., p. 1850). This is the exact point that terrorists have always disregarded.

Second, Nursi's avoidance of politics is not 'doubletalk': he used the same apolitical discourse in his speech and writing addressed to the general public as to his own followers. When one of his students showed an interest in knowledge about international politics, Nursi strongly rebuked him. In his letters to his followers, Nursi used this event as an example to remind all his disciples that they should not be interested in politics (Nursi, 1996b, p. 1693). Nursi stressed that he perceived the secular state as a state that tried to be neutral toward all religions. He did not try to replace it with an Islamic state. Instead, he wanted the Turkish rulers to implement a genuine neutrality by respecting the rights and freedoms of pious Muslims (Nursi, 1996f, p. 555; 1996h, p. 1030; 1996i, p. 2157). He never criticized the secular state itself. Some students visited him and criticized their teachers who did not talk about God in their classes. Instead of supporting the students' critique of secular schools, Nursi advised them to focus on the sciences that the teachers taught. He asked them to use their agency to understand the real essence of sciences, which would speak of God (Nursi, 1996h, pp. 954–955).

Third, if Nursi had pursued political power, he would have accepted the civil position offered to him in the early Republican period, but he chose to leave Ankara and went to Van to live an ascetic life away from politics (Nursi, 1996i, p. 2139). It was later that the secular state exiled him to Isparta, and then Barla.

Finally, even if certain political conditions did affect Nursi's ideational change, that would not undermine the importance of the *Risale-i Nur's* apolitical interpretation of Islam. All texts speak independently of their authors and the conditions under which they were written. *Risale-i Nur* provides a consistent Islamic perspective on the apolitical service of faith.

Nursi's stand against the idea of an Islamic state and party politics does not mean that he alienated himself from all socio-political issues. He was still interested in socio-political problems and took action when it was necessary. In the aftermath of World War II, Turkey embraced democracy. The Democratic Party (DP) won the national elections in 1950 and replaced the Republican People's Party (RPP), which had single-handedly ruled the country for about three decades. Nursi supported the DP, since it was much more sympathetic to religious freedoms than the RPP (Mürsel, 1995, p. 183). During the DP's rule, Nursi sent a letter to the Prime Minister, Adnan Menderes, to encourage him to expand religious freedom (Nursi, 1996c, pp. 1882–1883; cf. Vahide, 2003, p. 108). Nursi did not oppose some of his students' membership of the DP either. However, he made it clear that anyone who got involved in politics did so in his or her own name, not in the name of the Nur movement in particular, or Islam in general. According to Nursi, if anyone uses Islam in her/his political propaganda, there is a possibility of limiting Islam to his/her party and excluding other Muslims. Islam is not the property of any group and cannot be monopolized by any party (Mutlu, 1994, pp. 121–132). Nursi's very limited

engagement with some DP politicians does not mean that he had gone back to the old Said or that a third Said, a combination of the old and the new, had emerged. On the contrary, Nursi explained in his letters that he had become more, not less, ascetic in the 1950s, the last decade of his life (Nursi, 1996h, p. 1094).

Nursi's critique of political Islamism and his emphasis on individual spirituality have led certain academics to categorize him as a Sufi. It is true that, for the purposes of classification, Nursi can be seen as closer to Sufism than to political Islamism. However, to define him as a Sufi also carries serious limitations, as we shall explain in the following section.

Nursi and Sufism

Sufism: An Overview

Sufism, unlike political Islamism, is an old tradition in the Muslim world. It focuses mainly on individual spiritual progress and is based on the personal relationship between the shaykh (master) and the *murīd* (disciple). Sufism aims to enlighten people's hearts and develop their spiritual life, mainly through *dhikr* (remembrance of God). In the twentieth century, Sufism became a focus of criticism from several political Islamists, as well as modernists (Trimingham, 1971, p. 246). The main reasons for these criticisms were the Sufis' 'mystification of Islam' and the influence of the shaykhs upon the people.⁶ Despite these criticisms, certain Sufi orders have managed to survive and continue to be active in the twenty-first century. Sufism had an important impact on Nursi's ideas and spiritual experiences as explained below.

Sufism in Nursi's Life

Nursi was born and raised in eastern Anatolia, where Sufi orders had a significant influence. He benefited from Sufism and respected the historical Sufi masters. For these reasons, several scholars mistakenly define Nursi as a Naqshibandi (Trimingham, 1971, p. 254; Özdalga, 2000; Karpat, 2001, pp. 108, 113). These scholars generally refer to Şerif Mardin's ground-breaking book, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*. Despite its scholarly quality, Mardin's book misrepresents the Nur movement as an extension of the Naqshibandi tariqa (Mardin, 1989, pp. 58–60). Elsewhere, Mardin defines Nursi as a modern Naqshibandi figure and classifies him along with Mehmet Zahit Kotku, a traditional Naqshibandi shaykh (Mardin, 1991, p. 132). Two theoretical aspects of *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey* might have resulted in this inaccurate classification. First, the book tries to explain social phenomena through structural conditions. It therefore explains the emergence of the Nur movement through the social structure of Nursi's environment, which was overwhelmingly dominated by the Naqshibandi tariqas. Second, the book searches for historical continuities between the late Ottoman and early Republican eras. In this regard, it attempts to show a historical continuity between the Naqshibandi tariqa and the Nur movement.

However, Nursi never identified himself with the Naqshibandi, or any other tariqas. Although he was influenced by Sufism, he made it clear that his faith-based movement was something new and different from Sufism (Öservalı, 2003, p. 321). Moreover, the

intellectual impact of Sufism on Nursi's life and *Risale-i Nur* is not confined to influence from the Naqshibandi tariqa. Nursi was also influenced by the Qadiri and Mevlevi tariqas and considered such Sufi masters as Abdulqadir Jilani (d. 1166) and Mevlana Rumi (d. 1273) as his guides, in addition to Naqshibandi masters such as Baha' al-Din Naqshiband (d. 1390), Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624), and Khalid Baghdadi (d. 1827) (Nursi, 1996a, p. 1768). However, he did not mention any of them as the essential source of his inspiration (Vahide, 2003, p. 2). He elaborated on how his search for a master led him to accept the Qur'an as his main master, rather than any shaykhs:

However much I thought: 'Should I follow this one, or that one, or that other one?' I remained in a state of bewilderment. Each had different characteristics which drew me, one was not enough for me. While thus bewildered, it was imparted to my heart by God's mercy that 'the head of these various ways and the source of these streams and the sun of these planets is the All-Wise Qur'an; the true single *qibla* [direction] is to be found in it.' (Nursi, 1997, p. 419)

Moreover, Nursi did not allow his students to join any Sufi order either. Once, Nursi and his students were imprisoned with a Naqshibandi shaykh, Serafettin Zeinalabidin Dagistani, and Nursi appreciated that none of his students found the shaykh's Naqshibandi lessons superior to the *Risale-i Nur* (Nursi, 1996d, p. 1603). Additionally, Nursi did not hesitate to express his substantial reservations about Sufism, as elaborated below.

Nursi's Critique of Sufism

Nursi's major criticism of Sufism is based on his understanding of the modern age. He argues that, in the past, loss of belief arose from ignorance. In the modern era, however, the challenge to the faith arises from science and education. In *Risale-i Nur*, Nursi tries to present Islamic faith through rational and convincing arguments. Moreover, he stresses the compatibility of science and Islamic knowledge (Kuru, 2003). According to Nursi, Sufism is not sufficient to respond the challenge of positivism and materialism. Sufism requires total submission, which is extremely difficult for modern people. Today's Muslims, Nursi emphasizes, need rational proof to support their faith. According to Hamid Algar, *Risale-i Nur* is very important, since it helps contemporary Muslims to strengthen their faith by providing rational responses to the questions and doubts that the modern age puts to Islam (Algar, 2001, pp. 305–306). In sum, Nursi stresses that one may not enter paradise without belief, but may enter without Sufism: 'A man cannot live without bread, but he can live without fruit. Sufism is like fruit; the truths of the Qur'an are like bread' (Nursi, 1996f, p. 355).

Nursi also opposes the Sufi disdain for the world. When asked about the Naqshibandi method of discarding all worldly things, he rejected it. A questioner asked Nursi whether it was necessary to give up this world in order to reach to the knowledge of God and human perfection, as Sufi orders instructed. Nursi noted that if a human being consisted of only a heart, it would be necessary to renounce everything other than God, but human beings have many senses such as mind, ego, and soul. Perfection could be attained by purifying these senses and directing them to God, following the example of the Prophet. If the heart abandoned other senses, it would bring grief to the heart, not a situation to be proud of (Nursi, 1992, p. 511).

Another difference between Nursi's teaching and Sufism lies in their distinct understandings of authority. Nursi frequently emphasized that he was not a shaykh. He directed his followers to *Risale-i Nur* rather than to his own person. Nursi did not approve of or practice the classical Sufi connection (*rabūta*) between the shaykh and the follower. He strongly refused all appreciation directed toward himself and stressed the importance of reading *Risale-i Nur*. His aim was to create a text-based authority, rather than a shaykh-based authority.

Nursi is critical of certain Sufi conceptions. For example, he embraces neither *wahdat al-wujūd* (the unity of being) nor *wahdat al-shuhūd* (the unity of witnessing), which are important conceptions in Sufism. *Wahdat al-wujūd* is a Sufi ontology that claims the non-existence of beings other than God. Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) is known as an important defender and formulator of this school of thought (Schimmel, 1975, p. 267). The followers of *wahdat al-wujūd* deny the existence of everything but God. *Wahdat al-shuhūd*, which is especially promoted by Sahrirdi, has a more moderate point of view. It accepts that creatures do exist ontologically, but Sufis cannot witness them, since God covers up their vision (Leaman, 2003, p. 258).

For Nursi, *wahdat al-wujūd* has two main problems. First, it considers this world and creation as an illusion and may therefore end up denying of some of the *Asma-ul-Husna* (the Beautiful Names of God). The creation functions as a mirror that reflects these names. For that reason, it is almost impossible to witness several names of God if the creation does not exist. In the words of Nursi,

The sovereignty of Divinity necessitates in actuality numerous sacred Names like All-Merciful, Provider, Creator, Doer, Munificent, and Compassionate. And those true and actual Names require actual mirrors. Since the people of the Unity of Existence say: 'There is no existent but He,' they reduce the reality of beings to the level of imagination. Consequently, the manifestations of Names like Merciful, Provider, Compeller, and Creator would not be real, they would be hypothetical. (Nursi, 1997, p. 107)

Therefore, Nursi does not see *wahdat al-wujūd* as the highest point in spiritual progress, as many Sufis claim. He views *wahdat al-wujūd* as an incomplete stage in the spiritual journey, but considers that, since it is an emotionally delightful experience, many Sufis cannot avoid being stuck there. In sum, Nursi concludes, 'God's relation with beings is Creativity. Beings are not imaginings or fancies as those who follow the way of the Unity of Existence said. Visible things too are Almighty God's works. Everything is not "Him," everything is "from Him"' (Nursi, 1996f, p. 385).

Nursi's second criticism of *wahdat al-wujūd* is more related to modern conditions. He claims that in this age of materialism *wahdat al-wujūd* may unintentionally and paradoxically be confused with pantheism, which claims that the universe is God, and materialism, which denies the existence of the supernatural. *Wahdat al-wujūd* denies the duality of and separation between the Creator and the creation in order to glorify God at the expense of the material universe. That may be misunderstood and manipulated by the pantheists and materialists, who deny the duality of and separation between the Creator and the creation for the sake of the material universe and at the expense of God (Nursi, 1996e, p. 739). To these two groups, who see materiality as the source of everything, the unity of existence may mean the non-existence of God and the deity of the

material universe, though *wahdat al-wujūd* claims the complete opposite (Nursi, 1996f, pp. 564–565).

Despite these criticisms, Nursi's teaching also has many similarities with Sufism as summarized in the next section.

Nursi's Faith-Based Activism and Sufism: Different Means, Similar Ends

In contrast to Salafis and other critics of Sufism, Nursi is a friendly critic of the Sufi worldview. He notes that *Risale-i Nur*'s faith-based approach and Sufism have similar ends, but different means. For that reason, *Risale-i Nur*'s terminology is very compatible with that of Sufism (Aydin, 2003, p. 219). Nursi even refers to Sufi masters to justify his service of faith. He mentions that Sirhindi stresses the importance of the 'clarification of a single truth of belief' (Nursi, 1996f, p. 355). If Abdulqadir Jilani, Baha' al-Din Naqshiband, and Ahmad Sirhindi, three major Sufi masters, had been alive at the present time, Nursi claims, 'they would have focused on strengthening the truths of the faith' (ibid.; cf. Algar, 2002, p. 9). Nursi elaborates his ideas on Sufi concepts and methodology in his treatise 'Telvihât-ı Tis'a' in *Mektubat* (Letters). According to him, Sufism aims to help Muslims gain a sure belief, achieve spiritual development, have a brotherhood that may continue in the hereafter, be serious during worship, educate the inner self, gain pure intention, maintain salvation, and reach the knowledge and love of God (Nursi, 1997, p. 535).

Although Nursi appreciates Sufism's ideals, he describes the Sufi method as full of trade-offs and paradoxes. Nursi was not satisfied with any of the mystical methods of his predecessors. In this regard, Nursi found his teachings more effective than Sufism.⁷ He claims that *Risale-i Nur* accepts all of the benefits of Sufism without following a Sufi path. In the words of Algar, 'Whatever personal regard Bediüzzaman may have had for individual *shaykhs* and their followers, he was clearly convinced that the *Risale-i Nur* had abrogated the functions of the [tariqas]' (Algar, 2002, p. 15). In sum, Nursi tried to offer a way of reaching the goal of Sufism—spiritual progress—but with a more textual and rational method than that of Sufism (Nursi, 1997, pp. 523–533).

Conclusion

In this study, we have examined Said Nursi's apolitical understanding of Islam, which is different from both political Islamism and classical Sufism. Nursi advocates faith-based thinking and activism. He had a direct involvement in politics in his early life, but avoided politics following the transformation that he experienced through the foundation of the Turkish Republic. It is clear that Nursi draws a line between himself and political Islam. While political Islamists see an Islamic state as a must for the Islamic life, Nursi attaches importance to individuals consciously practicing Islam. For Nursi, only individuals who have *tahkiki iman* (actualized faith) can stand against the challenges of materialism and positivism. To respond to these challenges, he stresses, is much more important than seeking the establishment of a so-called Islamic state.

In general, Nursi seems closer to Sufism than to political Islamism, since he attaches importance to individual spiritual development rather than political activism, especially party politics and activism aimed at founding an Islamic state. However, the fact that Nursi was influenced by Sufi masters did not prevent him from developing a critical stance towards Sufism. For him, Sufism takes a basic level of faith for granted and

seeks to develop spirituality, while failing to see the substantial problems that Muslims experience in modern times. For instance, Sufism takes the presence of God as given, and tries to bring people closer to God. Nursi appreciates this endeavor, but also recognizes that the very foundation that Sufism takes for granted is shaking in the modern age, particularly due to the spread of positivism and materialism.

In short, Nursi regarded neither political Islamism nor Sufism as a remedy for the problems of Muslims in the modern age. Through his writings, Nursi tried to respond to the questions that the modern age addresses to faith. He considered the strengthening of the faith with convincing rational arguments as the primary need of contemporary Muslims in particular, and human beings in general.

Notes

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2. Quoted in Lewis, 1991, p. 15. See also Lewis, 1996, pp. 52–56; 2003.
3. See also Kuru, 2005, pp. 262–263; Saritoprak, 2000.
4. For Ghazali's view on state–religion relations as 'twins', see Rosenthal, 1958, p. 19.
5. For the full comparison see Nursi, 1996g, pp. 1880–1881.
6. In the words of Annemarie Schimmel, 'People gather around tariqas, awaiting help for all their needs, hoping that the *shaykh* would give them some amulets or teach them some useful prayer formulae' (Schimmel, 1975, p. 240).
7. For the distinction between Nursi's faith-based activism and Sufism, see Kuşpınar, 2003, p. 157; Kuşpınar, 1995.

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