

BEYOND THE 'MODERN':
SA'ĪD AL-NŪRSĪ'S VIEW OF SCIENCE

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The advancing tide of Western scientific thought, which began to spread in the Muslim world at the beginning of the nineteenth century, was one of the most pressing challenges faced by Muslim intellectuals of that time and it continues to have major implications for our own times. Many Muslim scholars of Ottoman Turkey, with its capital, Istanbul, lying halfway between Europe and the East, viewed this tide as a threat to the Islamic worldview and tried to form barriers to curtail this intellectual onslaught. However, by the time they realized its impact, the encroachment had already gone too far, leading to a confusion in knowledge which often weakened their responses and stances. This confusion was experienced first hand by Bedī'uzzamān Sa'īd al-Nūrī (1873-1960), one of the most important Turkish scholars of the period whose intellectual journey and torments were not unlike those experienced by a great many Sufis of previous centuries, al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) in particular. This article provides an overview of the historical and intellectual milieu in which al-Nūrī lived and experienced, worked and evolved. It explores some of his spiritual and intellectual struggles as well as ideas which bring into relief his general response to modern scientific thought.

Keywords: Qur'anic view of science; Sa'īd al-Nūrī's view of science; Islamic science; secularization; cosmos; *āyāt*; al-Ghazālī; logic; Prophethood; revelation; *ḥarfī* and *ismī* meanings; *shirk*; human philosophy of science; cosmic revelation; causation; universality.

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The Ottoman architects of the reforms, the *tanzīmāt* (1839-76), were greatly impressed by the success achieved by the nations of Western Europe, particularly by their military and economic strength and by their advances in science and technology. Convinced that the very survival of the Ottoman state could only be secured by following the pattern of countries like France or England, they launched an unprecedented program of modernization and secularization. By the 1840's, Turkey—or at least its capital Istanbul—was a bustling laboratory for an experiment in Westernization on a scale not witnessed anywhere outside Europe, perhaps excluding Russia. The modernization that the early reformists hoped to achieve depended heavily on the upward participation of the citizens. For that participation to be effective, it was imperative for the state to ameliorate the education of its citizens in order to recruit from their midst cadres to fill executive positions in the administration and in the corps of the army. To this end, new institutions of learning, a new concept of education, that of education 'as a means for progress', and a new concept of knowledge, that of *ma'arif* as opposed to the traditional concept of *'ilm*, began to emerge.

This bifurcation marked the beginning of a gradual secularization of education that continued unabated until well after the *tanzīmāt* period. Beginning from the early 1870's, an intensive publishing activity combined with a more accelerated translation movement contributed to an unprecedented popularization of modern science as well as modern Western philosophy. By the end of the 1890's, Turkish litterateurs and intelligentsia in the Ottoman capital were inclined to accept unquestioningly the premises of Western scientific thought *en masse*, leading to the emergence of a new class of intellectuals and new trends of thought that presented a serious challenge to Islamic culture and values.

As opponents to the 'Westernist' reforms of the *tanzīmāt* (New Regulations), both Young Ottomans and the regime of Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876–1909) were aware of the growing disdain for religion and made many attempts to counter the intellectual encroachments of the West. However, the secularization, particularly in the field of education, continued unabated during this period as neither saw any conflict between the principles of Islam and those of modern science. When Sa'īd al-Nūrsī (1873–1960) first lived in Istanbul from 1907 to 1909, and later during the Young Turk rule,

he was often in the midst of these apologetic debates. He named this early period of his life the 'Old Sa'id'.

After the fall of the caliphate, which was followed by the birth of the New Republic, the ongoing process of secularization that had commenced nearly a hundred years ago and which had transformed most aspects of religious life, was supported by a new zeal absent in the earlier period. The unprecedented fanaticism with which the Kemalist regime proceeded to implement its Western model of society had far-reaching consequences for education. The year 1924 saw the dissolution of the *medreses* and all other kinds of religious schools, as well as the proscription of the teaching of religion in all state schools. In 1925, laws were passed to officially close all Sufi orders; the scant religious education that remained at the higher level was effectively terminated with the closure of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Istanbul in 1933.¹

In 1928, a prominent thinker of the Kemalist period wrote:

The function of religion is not to provide men with knowledge but with the will and power to live... The more religion leaves explanation of the events of the universe and the search for the means of influencing them to science, the more it assumes this pragmatic and moral appearance.... Then, it is faith which manifests itself as an absolute subjugation to a moral ideal that can develop in harmony with the present-day conditions of civilization and science.²

While this trend of secularism looked somewhat askance at the Islamic intellectual tradition, a peculiar kind of atheistic rationalism underpinned by the claims of modern science was about to launch a more aggressive onslaught on religion and its scripture through other intellectual quarters. The very essentials and springs of

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1. M. Pacaci; Y. Aktay, "75 Years of Higher Religious Education in Modern Turkey" in *The Muslim World*, Vol. LCIX, No. 3-4 (Jul-Oct 1999), 389.
 2. Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (London: Hurst & Co, 1998), 497, quoting Mehmet Izzet, *Yeni İctimaiyat Dersleri* (2nd ed.; Istanbul, 1928), 278.

religion, such as belief in the existence of God, in His power to create, in prophecy, and in the Day of Judgment were painted as mere superstitions in many intellectual circles and schools. Saʿīd al-Nūrsī's resistance to the Western intellectual infringement presented by positivism, materialism, or atheistic rationalism took place against the background of these important transformations in a polarized intellectual atmosphere. In what follows, his arguments against the premises of modern scientific thought, which formed the basis of those philosophies, are emphasized.

Understanding the position of Saʿīd al-Nūrsī vis-à-vis modern science and philosophy is not a straightforward task and may elicit confusion. Confusion may arise from oversights related to al-Nūrsī's intellectual developments. Al-Nūrsī had divided his life into two distinct periods: the time of the 'Old Saʿīd', a person devoted to politics and speculative philosophy, and that of the 'New Saʿīd', who repudiated the 'Old Saʿīd', taking a new intellectual direction.³

3. About fifty years ago, Old Saʿīd, who had been steeped too deeply in intellectual and philosophical sciences, tried to find the ultimate truth following the teachings of the great Sufis as well as that of the investigators of ultimate reality from among the philosophers (*ahl al-ṭarīqah*, *ahl al-ḥaqīqah*). He could not be satisfied like most of the followers of *ṭarīqah* with an impetus coming from the heart because he was already under the spell of the 'intellect of philosophy'. He was confused as to which path to follow and had to be cured.... The Imām al-Rabbānī (Sirhindī) transmitted to him an encrypted message, urging him to 'unify his *qiblah*' and find a single master. The Old Saʿīd surmised, "the true master is the Qurʾān."...Soon, his soul (*al-naḥs al-ammarah*) with its knack for refractoriness forced him to a spiritual and intellectual showdown. He confronted it not with his eyes closed; rather, he journeyed through his ordeal with his eyes open just as al Ghazālī, Mawlana Jalāluddīn, and the Imām al-Rabbānī had journeyed with the eyes of their heart and intellect open in places where others had closed them. Praise be to God... he found an unfrequented path to truth through the guidance of the Qurʾān. B. S. Al-Nūrsī, *al-Mathnawī al-ʿArabī al-Nūwī* (Istanbul: Sözleryayinevi, 1999), 29; henceforth *Mathnawī*. All translations from the *Mathnawī* are by the authors; other translations from al-Nūrsī's works based on

Another source of confusion might be the *Risale-i Nūr*⁴ (*The Epistles of Light*), al-Nūrsī's major work. Although the text of the *Risale* is replete with the poetry and terminology of the Sufi narrative, it boasts of myriads of proofs, arguments, and demonstrations. Al-Nūrsī warns us against rushing to judge his demonstrative proofs (*al-burhān al-istidalālī*) as *nazar* (speculative thought). He says:

Know that the issues you come across upon studying my work, although they present themselves in the forms of demonstration and proofs, can hardly be called speculation or '*nazar*'. No! They are but intuitive insights which were recorded, bound and then retained by the lights of certitude that overflow from the Generous Qur^ʿān.

The 'rational mood' of the *Risale* could easily lead one to label its author with a rationalism or for that matter a 'modernism' that is far from being accurate.⁶ Indeed, this confusion may very well arise

existing translations but have been amended by the authors.

4. *Risale-i Nūr* is the title Sa'īd al-Nūrsī has given to his Qur^ʿānic commentary, *Risale-i Nūr Kulliyati* (Istanbul: Nesil Basım Yayın, 1996); henceforth, *Risale*.

5. *Mathnawī*, 318.

6. Professor Taha Abdel-Rahman argues that an erroneous differentiation is often made between *al-ḥadath al-ʿaqliyy* (rational intuition) and *al-ḥath al-mitafiziyy* (metaphysical intuition), in that the latter could also be of a 'rational' nature, relying on peculiar forms of demonstration which he calls *al-istidlāl al-matwiyy* (a pregnant demonstration), the latter being a form of demonstration that does not lay out all the premises that are concomitant to that intuition. Intuition, he maintains, depends on the condition and intellectual ability of the interlocutors. While some might understand them without the mediation of premises and demonstrations, others would be in need of them, until these turn, in their case, into intuitions. Thus, he says: if someone asked what was intuition, my answer to him would be: it is an *istidlāl matwiyy* (a pregnant demonstration), and if he then asked me: what is *dharwq* (fruitional taste), my answer would be *ʿaql matwiyy* (pregnant intellect), and if he went on asking 'what is *istidlāl* in this instance? I would say: *al-istidlāl ḥadth manshūr* (demonstrative

from the modern understanding of *‘aql* (intellect) that has become preponderant in Muslim scholarship, which is generally alien to al-Nūrsī’s particular type of intellection i.e. *al-‘aql al-īmānī*.

The *Risale* is an exegesis and elucidation of the message of the Qur’ān written for an age in which ‘disbelief and misguidance are advocated in the guise of science and knowledge’⁷. The discourses of al-Nūrsī present arguments with the aim of showing the absurdity and ‘illogicality’ of the modern paradigm and the truth and universality of the Qur’ānic worldview. From this point of view, al-Nūrsī is really addressing a crisis of meaning. Consequently, his critique of science could not confine itself to an ‘offense’ but had to serve as a means for ‘collective salvation’⁸. Hence, it had to go beyond ‘offence’ and attempt to ‘redeem’⁹ this modern scientific

proof is an unraveled or unpacked intuition), similarly, should he ask what is *‘aql*, I would retort: *al-‘aql dhawq manshūr* (the intellect is intuition in the mode of unraveling). On this point see, Taha Abdel-Rahman, *Hīwarāt min ajli l-Mustaqbal* (Casablanca: Matba‘at al-Najah Al-Jadida, 2000), 107-09.

7. Al-Nūrsī, *The Supreme Sign: The Observations of a Traveller Questioning the Universe Concerning his Maker*, trans. by H. Algar (Istanbul: Sözlere Nesriyat, 2002), 102-03; *Risale*, 711; 1683.

8. “As opposed to personal salvation only, it has become a question of collective salvation as misguidance is being spread in the name of science,” al-Nūrsī writes. The *Risale-i Nūr* is not only repairing some minor damage of some small house; it is repairing vast damage of the all-embracing citadel which contains Islam, the stones of which are the size of mountains. And it is not striving to reform only a private heart and an individual conscience; it is striving to cure with the medicines of the Qur’ān and belief in the Qur’ān’s miraculousness the collective heart and generally-held ideas, which have been breached in awesome fashion by the tools of corruption prepared and stored up over a thousand years, and the general conscience, which is facing corruption through the destruction of the foundations, currents, and marks (*shā‘ir*) of Islam which are the refuge of all and particularly of the common believers.” al-Nūrsī, *The Supreme Sign*, 96.

9. Here, ‘offense’ refers to that ‘offensive critique’ in which something like science is attacked and nullified, but without

mind. This semblance of ‘rational discourse’, al-Nūrsī argues, ought not be seen as ‘acquiescence’ to the demands of the modern mind, but rather as a ‘mercy’ and a ‘cure’ to the ills of the ‘modern mind’ caught in the webs of ‘human’ philosophy.¹⁰ al-Nūrsī says, “given that the issues [of the *Risale*], present themselves in the guise of demonstrative proofs, they could serve as ‘rescue ladders’, saving those who have erred in the path of thought and knowledge from slipping into the abyss of philosophy.”¹¹ Thus, when we read in the *Risale* statements like: “At the end of time, mankind will spill into *science and learning*. It will obtain all its strength from science (*‘ilm*).¹² Power and rule will pass to the hand of science (*‘ilm*),” we may be facing utterances that are more problematic than meet the eye. Likewise, frequently blurry difference between the ‘offensive’ and the ‘redemptive’ approaches of al-Nūrsī deserve more attention than we tend to give.

The Crucial Role of the Universe in the *Risale*

In one of his early works, *Muḥakamāt*, first published in 1911, al-

presenting the student of science, or the age of science for that matter, with remedies and ways of ‘picking up the pieces’, as it were, resulting from the critique. As for ‘redemptive’, it is used in the sense that although al-Nūrsī’s conception of science is completely different from that of modern science, he still uses an intellectual discourse, strives for ‘universality’, and displays a demonstrative ability that can help modern science change its course. Redemptive, thus, purports to the intellectual task of addressing the problems modern science has failed to resolve, but in a language it can understand and adopt.

10. The authors have borrowed the term “Human Philosophy” from Prof. T. Abdel Rahman, who uses it to refer to the knowledge acquired by human beings without revelation and thus it is in contrast to what he calls “Qur’ānic Philosophy”.

11. *Mathnawī*, 226.

12. *Risale*, 107. It is important to highlight here a confusion that might arise as a result of relying solely on translation when dealing with al-Nūrsī. His use of the word *‘ilm*, which is usually understood as knowledge, is often translated as science, whereas al-Nūrsī himself would use the word *fen* for modern science.

Nürsî lays down the methodological principles for understanding the Qurʾān. One important principle directly related to the issue of science¹³ is the role of the universe in confirming the veracity of revelation since imitation in matters of faith is regarded as unacceptable by many quarters in Islam. Al-Nürsî asserts that the Qurʾān and the cosmos cannot be understood separately; he describes the Qurʾān as “the eternal interpreter of the various tongues reciting the verses of creation” and as “The revealer of the treasures of the divine names hidden in the heavens and on the earth; the key to the truth concealed beneath the lines of events.”¹⁴ That is, the Qurʾān recites the cosmic signs (*āyāt*)¹⁵, which pervade the world, in such a way that it creates a meaningful activity out of the constant flux, change, and renewal of the cosmic processes. For al-Nürsî the cosmos is not just a metaphor for the Qurʾān: it *is* the Qurʾān in *viva vox*. The *Risale* spares no effort, through proofs and cogent arguments, to demonstrate that the meaningful activities in the cosmos are a kind of speech; each being an event, each change is like a word and their constant flux a never ending testimony to the glory of God.¹⁶

In short, just like the Qurʾān is God’s speech through word and discourse, the cosmos is His speech through deed and act.¹⁷ Al-Nürsî says that the Creator makes the cosmos speak through the Qurʾān, which is “the tongue of the unseen world in the manifest world.”

13. Not necessarily modern ern science for as we will see al-Nürsî has his own Qurʾānic understanding of science beyond the modern.

14. Al-Nürsî, *The Words*, trans. S. Vahide (Istanbul: Sözlür Nesriyat, 2002), 376-77, 728; al-Nürsî, *Isharat al-iʿcaz* (Istanbul: Sözlür Yayinevi, 1999), 22.

15. The Qurʾān refers to its verses as well as to beings and events with the same word, *āyah*, which means sign. The word *āyah* and its plural (*āyāt*) occur in the Qurʾān 380 times, mostly referring to the creation, beings and events in it.

16. Al-Nürsî, *The Letters*, trans. S. Vahide (Istanbul: Sözlür Nesriyat, 2001), 339-340. There is a verse in the Qurʾān that says, *They will reply: God, who gives speech to all things, has given speech to us (as well)*. *Fuṣṣilat*: 21.

17. Al-Nürsî, *The Rays*, trans. S. Vahide (Istanbul: Sözlür Nesriyat, 1998), 146-49.

Both have a common origin: the preserved tablet, which contains the heavenly Book, but whereas one proceeds from God's attribute of speech, the other proceeds from His attribute of 'will'. In other words, what He says is what He wills in *kun!* (Be), and what He wills is what He says in *Qul!* (Say).

Al-Nürsī explains that 'in order to describe His act to both eye and ear, the Maker describes His act while performing it: as a true artist, He unravels His art as He works it, and as a true Bestower of bounties He displays His boons in the very act of bestowing. As such, His very word constitutes His very act and vice versa. The Creator speaks as He creates; and thus He unites word and act through the 'audible' Qur'ān and the cosmic Qur'ān in one revelation. Following this vision, it can be said that on the one hand the Qur'ān interprets or rather translates the speech of the cosmos in its *āyāt al-takwīniyyah* (cosmic signs, verses), while on the other, the cosmos witnesses to the truth of the *āyāt al-tadwīniyyah* (Qur'ānic verses) and reveals their import. Given the importance of the cosmos for al-Nürsī, it is not difficult to understand that until the First World War, he was favourable to science through which he sought to *mediate* the revelation of the Qur'ān in the hope that it would eventually help uncover the signs of God in the world.¹⁸

The Old Sa'īd and the Islamic Tradition of Knowledge

The Qur'ān speaks extensively of the cosmos and invites its readers to seek God's signs 'in the horizons,' that is, in the outer world, 'and in themselves'.¹⁹ Annemarie Schimmel notes that this verse could legitimately be understood as encouraging Muslim scholars and scientists 'to look deeper and deeper into the marvel of nature, as well as the marvels which the human being contains in himself, and to invent ever new ways for a profounder understanding of the world.'²⁰ She also mentions al-Ghazālī (1058-1111), who wrote in his *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn* that the real *muwa'ḥḥid* (monotheist) is the one who looks at the

18. Al-Nürsī, *Ishārat al-i'jāz* in *Risale*, 1216.

19. *Fuṣṣilat*: 53.

20. Annemarie Schimmel, "Reason and Mystical Experience in Sufism" in *Intellectual Traditions in Islam*, ed. F. Daftary (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000), 143.

world because it is created by God, and because it gives him the possibility of seeing God in His signs and worshipping Him.²¹

Al-Ghazālī, a representative of the Ash‘arī school of *kalām*, is well known for his critique of Greek metaphysics because it was incompatible with fundamentals of the Islamic beliefs. Osman Bakar contends that al-Ghazālī disagreed with the Muslim philosophers on certain metaphysical issues: he argued against the use of the philosophical method of the *falāsifah*, which he found wanting particularly when it was brought to bear on issues of a metaphysical order. However, Bakar reminds us that al-Ghazālī warned Muslims not to oppose science just because it had been associated with the philosophers.²² Al-Ghazālī thought that the influence of the Muslim philosophers was due to their pragmatic success in natural sciences. In order to solve this problem, he excluded philosophy from his classification of the sciences.²³

His approach was to put forward the a priori and a posteriori character of science and establish the speculative character of philosophy. From this standpoint, al-Ghazālī maintained that the philosophers were right insofar as the mathematical and natural sciences were concerned but not in the field of speculative philosophy and metaphysics. In his *al-Munqidh min al-dalāl*, al-Ghazālī accepted science on the ground that it can be useful to mankind and referred to the services provided by medicine to underscore his point. Hence, in his classification, science fell under the category of *fard al-kifāyah*, that is, a knowledge that a section of the population was required to acquire. As opposed to philosophy, he viewed the pursuit of this knowledge as ‘harmless’, in that science was inherently relative (*i‘tibārī*) with no claim to ultimate knowledge of reality or *ḥaqīqah*. What is noteworthy, though, is that al-Ghazālī in spite of his criticism of the philosophers, accepted Aristotelian logic as universally valid and most of all neutral. This position casts a

21. Ibid.

22. Osman Bakar, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, ed. S.H. Nasr and O. Leaman (London: Routledge, 1996), Vol. II, 938-39.

23. Al-Ghazālī, *The Book of Knowledge of Iḥyā’ ‘Ulum al-Dīn*, trans. N.A. Faris (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1962), 36-37.

different light on al-Ghazālī's final stance on science particularly from the vantage point of the modern era. Al-Ghazālī's position on logic continued to have a significant influence over the intellectual developments in the Muslim world, despite the important critique of Ibn Taymiyyah. Indeed, its epistemological traces can be gleaned in al-Nūrī's early works.²⁴

The end of the First World War and that of the Ottoman Caliphate terminated the first part of al-Nūrī's life²⁵, the period of the "Old Sa'īd", as he himself later calls it. For many reasons that exceed the scope of this paper, al-Nūrī entered a completely new phase in his life; he was as he himself confessed, a 'New Sa'īd.' New Sa'īd admits that Old Sa'īd was not very aware of the philosophical underpinnings of modern science, and like al-Ghazālī, had taken its logic *prima facie*. Unwittingly, he came to view science as a 'candid student' of the universe and hence as potentially helpful in uncovering the cosmic signs and verifying the veracity of the cosmic reality of *tawhīd*. Like the Muslim philosophers, Old Sa'īd, too, took the principle of combining human philosophy with Qur'ānic wisdom for granted.²⁶

24. *Ta'liqāt*, an early work of al-Nūrī, is in fact a commentary on Aristotelian logic.

25. The years of destruction caused by the First World War, followed by the momentous demise of the Ottoman Caliphate pushed al-Nūrī into an acute spiritual crisis that prompted the overall transformation of his intellectual outlook. The parallels between al-Nūrī's intellectual journey and that of al-Ghazālī are beyond the scope of this paper, but is worth noting here that both had undergone a long spiritual crisis as a result of their accepting some of the precepts of philosophy. In both, one takes notice of that spiritual struggle, that 'dark night of the soul', which ends in their case with the victory of the 'heart' over the 'soul' (*nafs*), culminating in a birth of a 'new' intellect, as it were, and a new *Qur'ānic* Man.

26. In a treatise written sometime between 1928 and 1932, the New Sa'īd explains why his style differed from that of the Old Sa'īd as follows: "The Old Sa'īd and certain (Muslim) thinkers in part accepted the principles of man-made modern philosophy. For even when they argued against the proponents of this

Al-Nūrsī describes one of his spiritual awakenings right after the First World War. He searched the Islamic sciences and also philosophy and the sciences he had learned up to that time for consolation and hope. He describes the sciences and Western philosophy as “in part misguidance and in part trivia or superfluous.” He says:

Quite erroneously, I had imagined those philosophical sciences to be the source of progress and means of illumination. However, they had sullied my spirit and been an obstacle for my spiritual development. Suddenly, through God’s mercy and munificence, the sacred wisdom of the Qur’ān came to my assistance. As is explained in many parts of the *Risale-i Nūr*, it washed away and cleansed the dirt of those philosophical matters. The spiritual darkness arising from science had drowned my spirit in the universe. Whichever way I looked seeking a light, I could find not a gleam in those matters, I could not breathe. And so it continued until the instruction in divine unity (*tawḥīd*) given by the Qur’ānic phrase ‘*There is no deity but He*’ dispersed all those layers of darkness.²⁷

It is here that the New Sa’īd starts. Al-Nūrsī had by then “shed his old philosophical guise, and put on a new one, the robe of wisdom. Here we see the death of al-Nūrsī the philosopher and the birth of al-Nūrsī the sage”.²⁸

One of the radical changes New Sa’īd had undergone has a direct bearing on his views on modern science. He now felt the need to get deeper at the roots of the philosophy underpinning this

philosophy they used their weapons, thus accepting those principles to a degree. They submitted to some of their principles in the form of the physical sciences, believing them to be unshakable and therefore could not demonstrate the true worth of Islam. It was quite simply as though they were grafting Islam to philosophy, the roots of which they supposed to be very deep; as though strengthening it.” *Risale*, 560-61.

27. *Risale*, 711.

28. T. Abdel Rahman, “The Separation of Human Philosophy from the Wisdom of the Qur’ān” in Sa’īd al-Nūrsī’s *Islam at the Crossroads*, ed. I. M. Abu Rabi’ (Albany: SUNY, 2003), 202.

science. Al-Ghazālī's stance on science coupled with his convictions about Aristotelian logic might have constituted a somewhat 'acceptable' position in an intellectual climate in which medieval science was at least searching for an anchor in religion. Eight centuries later, however, in an age where secular modern science had become the dominant paradigm, science, as it developed in the West, was in the main identified with 'truth and objective reality' and religion with 'superstitions and subjective faith'. Al-Ghazālī's approach to logic and by extension to science needed, therefore, an overhaul. As for the approaches professed by such philosophers as al-Farābī, Ibn Sīnā, and Ibn Rushd, they needed to be 'repudiated'. Although abstract rational inquiry allowed for the combination of philosophy and wisdom at some point in history, the social and political upheaval that shook history and undermined society with a shocking effect on humanity refuted the possibility of such combination.

Al-Nūrsī was aware that this sociopolitical upheaval was but an effect of the impact on Western societies of the intellectual revolution carried out by modern philosophy against religion. Taha Abdel Rahman says that:

Such strange contradiction between reason's permission for the combining of philosophy and wisdom and the refutation of this possibility by the lived reality preoccupied al-Nūrsī's thought for a long time, prompting him to review his philosophical position and, consequently, to reconsider the established view among Islamic philosophers that philosophy and wisdom are connected interpenetratively like sisters or associatively like friends.²⁹

One of the major merits of New Sa'īd's new intellectual journey is his rigorous refutation of the very logic of modern science and the cognitive claims of its philosophy.³⁰ His critique of the theory of

29. *Ibid.*, 201-2.

30. One of the salient features of al-Nūrsī's critique of science is that it does not confine itself to the destruction (and deconstruction) of modern science. As mentioned earlier, al-Nūrsī's 'offense'

causation³¹, which formed the ontological foundation of modern science, may be considered as one of the most important achievements of modern *kalām*.³²

The Weight of Science in the Scales of New Sa‘īd

Historically, the *horizontal* dimension of life refers to the point in time when Man has forsaken his *vertical* dimension, heaven, to realize his ‘earthly’ utopia instead. The horizontal dimension, whose origin may be traced back to the renaissance, marks the time when human fulfillment was seen as no longer *above* the cosmos but ‘down here’ in time and space. The way nature has been studied and understood in the context of this ‘horizontal’ dimension typifies the modern mind whose main characteristics are “its going ahead in the world which is determined by time and space, causality and substance...indefinitely, without any termination”, and its endless

combines an attempt to ‘redeem’ science and cure what Paul Tillich called the ‘schizophrenic split in our consciousnesses’. It strives to show that sound reasoning and logic and a more critical understanding of the very processes of creation themselves point to the Divine and uphold the truth of revelation as the ultimate expounder on the secrets and finality of creation.

31. The Asha‘ri tradition of refuting causation has been maintained not only by the scholars of *kalām* but also by the great Sufis like Ibn ‘Arabi and Rūmi. The latter argued in his *Mathnawī* that the main mission of the prophets had always been their resistance against the worship of apparent causes, since this delusion opened the gates of polytheism and ungratefulness.
32. It should be made clear that a number of Muslim and non-Muslim scholars had been aware of the limits of the modern scientific mind and argued eloquently against a number of its claims. Aside from al-Nūrsī, we are not aware, however, that the ontology of the modern scientific mind has ever been debunked on the basis of its very premises and on its own turf as concisely and as cogently. See, for example, al-Nūrsī’s treatise on ‘Nature’ and also Y. B. Mermer, “Induction, Science and Causation: Some Critical Reflections” in *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 35 (Autumn 1996) no. 3. and Y. B. Mermer, *The Muslim World*, Vol. LCIX (Jul-Oct 1999) no. 3-4, 270-96.

attempt at “controlling nature...without ever asking about the purpose of this controlling.” Also, typical of this mind are its obsession with “making everything into calculable objects which can be described in terms of numbers, [so that] they can be managed, divided, and put together again...it is a calculating reason...a tool [in the hand] of the business man, the technician, or of scientific analysis.”³³ Hence, for the modern mind nature is not to be *contemplated*, but coerced. Things that lie in this ‘open Book of Nature’ are truncated and cut off from their vertical connection, causing them disfiguration and loss of their ‘symbolic’ meaning.

Al-Nūrsī argued that the modern scientific formulation and vision of reality is anchored in a faulty understanding which delivers a distorted meaning of being. As early as 1926 the New Sa‘īd took the hermeneutical dimension of science to task. Commenting on the verse, *And he who has been given wisdom has been given great good*,³⁴ he compared ‘sacred Qur’ānic wisdom’ with the philosophy of science at an ontological level and used a parable to illustrate the great difference between the knowledge imparted by ‘human’ philosophy and the one diffused by revelation. A king, he relates, one day showed a heavenly book embellished with art and jewels to a philosopher and a sage and asked them both to write a paper about its value and wisdom. As the philosopher in the parable had little knowledge of the language in which the book was written, he confined his deliberations to the shapes of the letters, their numbers, and their inter-relationships, to the chemical composition of the ink and paper and so on.³⁵

The point of al-Nūrsī’s parable is that, unlike the sage, the student of ‘human’ philosophy does not realize that words are symbols and views them as ‘words’ per se, or as essences pointing each to a unique self. In this way, it does not even dawn on him that he is before a Book whose words convey meanings beyond the shape, size and the form of their appearance. Having failed to be aware that

33. Paul Tillich, *The Irrelevance and Relevance of the Christian Message*, ed. Durwood Foster (Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1996), 24-25.

34. *al Baqarah*: 269

35. Al-Nūrsī, *The Words*, 143-45; *Mathnawī*, 456-57.

words are symbols, let alone grasp their meaning, whatever advances human philosophy makes, it cannot be said that it has knowledge of the 'Book of Nature'. Hence, for al-Nūrsī

Human philosophy, [be it natural philosophy, the philosophy of life, existentialism or modern science], looks at things from that aspect that pertains to their essences and their causes. It regards them as objects or concrete beings *bearing meaning in themselves* (*ma'nā ismī*). Wisdom [the knowledge revealed by God] on the other hand, perceives beings as bearing *the meaning of another* (*ma'nā ḥarfī*): they are collocations or 'letters' of a 'mighty Book'. Confined to its *ismī* method, modern science 'sunk' into the 'decorations': the external and *literal* meaning of the cosmic text. Eventually, it veered away from the path of the truth.³⁶

For al-Nūrsī, then, a philosophy that is not guided and 'reigned in' by Divine wisdom "is a sophistry divorced from reality and an insult to the Universe."³⁷

During that period which saw him fall into a deep existential and spiritual crisis, the Old Sa'īd had often revisited modern science and philosophy in search of a light or a cure. But, in the end he deplored what he perceived to be the utter poverty of these branches of learning, which hardly addressed the ultimate questions facing humanity. Whenever these branches of learning dealt with these questions, he found them wanting due to their tendency to fall into what he saw to be the "quagmire of doubt", making his struggles even more difficult.³⁸ Astronomy, he says, is busy with 'learning what the rings around Saturn are like', while statistics frets over 'how many chickens there are in America',³⁹ and other branches of knowledge according to al-Nūrsī are similarly engrossed in non-essential issues. However, to the primordial questions which arise from our existential predicament: 'What is the meaning of my being

36. Al-Nūrsī, *The Words*, 145, emphasis added.

37. *Ibid.*

38. For a detailed autobiographical account of these intellectual crises and spiritual struggles of Sa'īd al-Nūrsī, see his *Mathnawī*.

39. *Risale*, 111.

and of all beings which I am surrounded by? Where do I come from and where am I ultimately going? How can I save myself and break free from the mechanical chain of causes and their determinacy? For such questions, modern science and the philosophies that embrace it are utterly bankrupt, offering neither solace nor a path toward human perfection.⁴⁰

Al-Nūrsī says that in times past, misguidance had come from ignorance and hence it was easy to eliminate. In modern times, misguidance is not easily eradicated because it arises from science and learning, and so he felt the need to expound the truths of belief with many comparisons “proceeding from the effulgence of the Qur’ān”. The Qur’ān urges the intellect to investigate the signs in the universe and calls on the heart to testify to the divine messages they bear.⁴¹

The darkness and ‘nihility’ of ‘human’ philosophy is for al-Nūrsī often the most effective backdrop to bring into relief the light of the wisdom of revelation, therefore it is no surprise to find in the *Risale* numerous comparisons between those two avenues of knowledge. How each views and understands existence is often the main theme of this type of exposition. For example, the Qur’ān, he says, speaks of the sun as a revolving lamp; it does not speak of the sun for itself, but as the center of a system, that mirrors the Maker’s attributes of perfection. By declaring, *And (We) set the sun as a lantern,*⁴² the Qur’ān depicts the world as a home prepared for humanity and other living beings. It infers that the sun is a subjugated servant, and thus reveals the mercy and bestowal of the Creator. As for the “foolish and prattling philosophy” and science, it speaks of the sun as “a vast burning liquid mass that storms through the universe, causing the planets which have been flung off from it to revolve around it. Its mass is such-and-such. It is this, it is that.”⁴³ Apart from terrible dread and bewilderment, al-Nūrsī wonders whether the human spirit can derive anything else from such ‘delirious’

40. *Risale*, 96, 711.

41. Al-Nūrsī, *The Supreme Sign*, 102-03 and *Risale*, 1683.

42. *Nūḥ*:16

43. *Risale*, 96, and *The Words*, 252.

expositions.

As we will see, al-Nūrīsī does not so much object to the subject of science as he does to the way it deals with its subject. Modern science just misses the meaning of the world and that is why, despite all 'its pretentious claims, its inside is hollow'.⁴⁴ For al-Nūrīsī only revelation can impart knowledge of the reality of the world to man. Human reason is not a source of knowledge but only a tool. On the other hand, sound intellect, 'the intellect of faith', commands that revelation be followed because all that revelation says is 'reasonable', as all that revelation witnesses can be observed in the universe, and attested by the heart.⁴⁵

The Way of Prophethood Versus the Way of Human Philosophy

For al-Nūrīsī there have always been two main paths to knowledge, two main currents in the world, from the time of Adam up to the present. One path he calls the way of Prophethood and religion, the other the way of human philosophy in its various forms: Whenever those two ways have been united in agreement, that is to say, whenever philosophy sought refuge in religion and obeyed it, humanity has experienced happiness and a blissful social life. Whenever the gap between the two paths widened, and they reached a bifurcation, light and goodness rallied around the way of Prophethood, religion and wisdom on the right side, while evil and misconceptions rallied behind the way of 'human' philosophy on the left.⁴⁶

In al-Nūrīsī's works, philosophy or science become wisdom when they serve the worldview of Prophethood, that is when they study the universe in accordance with the revealed purpose of creation. Al-Nūrīsī contends that given the limitations of human reason, there is no other way to reach reality. The Prophetic teachings tell us that human ownership of life is only apparent and temporary. The continuance of existence depends on another Being beyond the human realm. When one accepts that the essence of one's existence

44. Ibid.

45. *Risale*, 171, 1963.

46. *Risale*, 242.

has a *ḥarfī* (symbolic)⁴⁷ meaning, one understands that one's being does not pertain to one's self, but carries the meaning of another. Consequently, he realizes that all things have a *ḥarfī* meaning; they are like mirrors to the attributes of the 'wholly-other'. As darkness is the mirror to light, likewise, created beings act in many respects as mirrors to the attributes of the Maker. Due to the contrast of opposites, all things reflect His power through their intrinsic powerlessness, and His perfection through their deficiency.⁴⁸

When Man listens to the 'cosmic prayers of inherent powerlessness', he witnesses how these prayers are instantly and constantly answered with 'cosmic sustenance and mercy'. He himself

47. To the extent that words serve to convey a meaning they are symbols like characters in musical notation. Thus, what is meant by 'symbolic' in this paper does not relate to what is conveyed by 'token' nor is it in any way related to symbolic logic or symbolism. Al-Nūrsī borrowed the term '*ma'nā ḥarfī*' from the glossary of Arabic grammar. There, a preposition such as a *ḥarf al-jarr*, or an isolated letter, has no meaning in itself, but serves to point to a meaning beyond itself (*Al-ḥarf ma dalla 'alā ma'nā fī ḡhayrihī*) *Mathnawī*, 270. Al-Nūrsī uses *ḥarfī* to allude to both aspects of things, which looks to their Maker, as well as to the intellect, which as a result of its being cleansed of its *ismī* vision is made to witness their 'symbolic' activity. By contrast, '*ma'nā ismī*', pertaining to '*ism*' (noun), bears a meaning in itself and points to itself (*ma dalla 'ala ma'nā fī nafsihī*). *Mathnawī*, 270. As in the English language the nominative 'I', for instance, is a pronoun denoting a case expressing the 'subject' of the verb, one may, in the figurative sense at least, propose 'nominative mood' as an English equivalent to *ma'nā ismī*. Al-Nūrsī uses *ma'nā ismī* or 'nominative mood' to allude to the view that holds that Man *actually* does exert power over things and produces effects, a view which, according to al-Nūrsī, leads Man to either ascribe some 'divinity' to himself or to the things in his horizon. *Mathnawī*, 221. Thus in al-Nūrsī's usage *ma'nā ismī* is often used to convey 'ego-philosophy', speculative thought (*nazar*), Greek philosophy and the like, all of which cause Man to view beings as independent agents or 'essences' contained within concrete objects.

48. Al-Nūrsī, *The Letters*, 286-87.

is then beckoned to open up to ‘the grace of the Divine Names’, and begins to prepare himself to hand over all things to their real owner and attain true affirmation of *tawhīd*.⁴⁹ Whoever is blessed with this ‘living faith’ understands the reality of divine unity in the cosmos and in the Qur’ān because one then lives in constant witness to it.

To be sure, the *ḥarfī* meaning is no mere cogitation, nor is it a product of speculative thought, although the *Risale* often assumes the garb of demonstrative arguments and proofs. *Ḥarfī* meaning is an outcome of ‘fruitful tastes’ (*fuyūdāt Qur’āniyyah*) unbosomed from the Qur’ān. Indeed, these ‘tastes’ and lights, as al-Nūrsī explains in many parts of his *Mathnawī*, shine only upon an impotent intellect of the one who accepts his or her intrinsic weakness (*‘ajz wa faqr*). It is an outcome of divine ‘grace’, rather than of ‘genius’, for the intellect that is witness to the truths of the *ḥarfī* meaning is not the intellect that knows ‘by and of itself’, but the one that ‘knows by and from God’. Not only is this intellect guided by revelation; it constantly experiences and witnesses its lights.

The way of philosophy, which has not yielded to the way of Prophethood, represents the one who walks the path of heedlessness and forgets the wisdom behind his creation, and assumes his existence purports strictly to an *ismā* (nominative) meaning. Such a person claims that he owns his existence and his life and imagines himself to be the real master in his dubious sphere of volition. This second attitude echoes Heidegger’s *Dasein* who is unable to stand the thought that he is not his ‘own’ creation. Richard Rorty explains that when Heidegger says that *Dasein* is guilty, he has in mind the fact that he speaks somebody else’s language rather than his own, and lives in a world he never made, a world, which, for this reason, is not his home. *Dasein* knows he is only contingently there, ‘thrown’ in the universe as it were, where he does not mean what he says.⁵⁰

Al-Nūrsī explains that when one does not surrender to the ultimate Reality and pretends that one’s existence is independent of one’s Sustainer, one is bound to compare everything to oneself,

49. Al-Nūrsī, *The Words*, 557-59.

50. R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 108-11.

claiming that everything owns itself. Such a person assumes that beings have an *ismī* (nominative) function only; they carry no meaning other than themselves. *Dasein*'s estrangement in the world stems from this self-understanding and essentialism. He fails to see their divine origin and vertical connection, he cannot but see them as objects 'thrown' in the world, left to their own devices, like orphans having to fight for their own survival. This, for al-Nūrī, is the typical predicament of the Man of *shirk* (i.e. the one who ascribes partners to God and divides His Sovereignty among created things), leading Man to fall into darkness, committing not only "a great transgression"⁵¹ against himself but against the whole of creation by relegating everything to a state of meaninglessness. Under the sway of his delusion, such a man is in absolute ignorance even if one knows 'thousands of branches of sciences.' For, whatever lights one's senses and thoughts may gain from the cosmos while in this state, "those lights are soon extinguished because one does not find anything within oneself by which to confirm, illuminate and perpetuate them."⁵² Even if one encounters pure wisdom as claimed, that 'wisdom' takes the form of futility, due to its ascribing partners to God or denying Him".⁵³

Al-Nūrī asserts that the 'great genius' of modern science and the guidance of revelation cannot be reconciled. They each arose from fundamentally different origins:

51. *al-Shams*:10

52. While things in the book of nature and the horizons are open, they are locked if the receptacle, the 'I' in Man, remains hostage to 'essentialism'. Al-Nūrī, *The Words*, 557-69. The secret for al-Nūrī lies in unlocking this talisman through worship and prayers. He says: "Know that knowledge received from the horizon of the 'outer world' is not free from doubts and delusions. Only when it is remitted to the scanning filters of the heart and the *fundus anima (wijdān)* is it purified from the disturbing scruples and ascertained. Therefore, as you contemplate this world, perceive it *from* the centre *to* the circumference and then the outskirts, and be aware of the reverse, lest you retrogress." *Mathnawī*, 226.

53. Al-Nūrī, *The Words*, 550.

Guidance descended from the heavens, genius emerged from the earth. Guidance enlightens the heart, which then stimulates the intellect to work. Genius works in the mind and confuses the heart. Guidance illumines the spirit, making its seeds sprout and flourish; dark nature is illumined by it. Its potentiality for perfection suddenly advances; it makes the carnal soul a docile servant; it gives aspiring man an angelic countenance. As for genius, it looks primarily to the soul (*nafs*) and material being, it plunges into nature, making the soul an arable field. Under its sway, the animal potentialities develop and flourish; it subjugates the spirit, desiccating its seed; and brings out the evil in mankind. As to guidance, it gives happiness to life, it spreads light in this life and the next; it exalts mankind.⁵⁴

If Old Saʿīd had sought to establish a connection between human philosophy and divine wisdom, the Qurʾānic inspiration of the New Saʿīd brought him to see their ‘disjunction or subordinating separation’, as Taha Abdel Rahman puts it. The New Saʿīd makes philosophy subservient to wisdom in cases where they agree and wisdom the substitute for philosophy when they contradict each other.⁵⁵ Al-Nūrī’s critique of ‘human’ philosophy has three dimensions: logical, moral, and figural for the reason that the sage is not content with logical criticism alone.⁵⁶ The focus of the remainder of this paper will be on the logical aspect of al-Nūrī’s arguments since we have already briefly mentioned other dimensions.

Al-Nūrī and the Classical and Contemporary Muslim Philosophical Debates

Know O Dear friend! There is an important difference between the path I have followed in the epistle entitled “droplet”, a boon unbosomed from the Qurʾān, and the path of those professing ‘thought’ and ‘human’ philosophy. In my path, that most precious *water of life* will

54. Ibid., 747.

55. Abdel Rahman, “The Separation of Human Philosophy from the Wisdom of the Qurʾān”, in *Islam at the Crossroads, op. cit.*, 206-09.

56. Ibid., 202.

gush forth whenever and wherever I choose to dig and beat my staff, while those who are besotted by the glitter of philosophy cling to the idea of putting up pipes and aqueducts to channel water within the confines of the universe. To this end, they are forever tying up chains and setting up ladders and more, for having succumbed to the principle of causation, they are compelled to erect and post millions of waterproofs to protect their exiguous proofs against the destructive attacks of doubts and misgivings. Praise be to God, *the Qurʾān has given to us the equivalent to the “staff of Moses”, and taught us how to use it that we may extract that water of life from anywhere, even from underneath a rock. Hence, the proof of the Qurʾān has saved me from undertaking that futile journey beyond the world and into outer space. It has exempted me from the futile and officious chore of ensuring the up-keep of those long pipes and has removed from my heart the fear of falling from breaking ladders or jaggig pipes in that long and winding road.*⁵⁷

Nearly a thousand years ago, the Muslim world was confronted with philosophical and scientific views that seemed to reduce the role of God to a prime mover—a view not compatible with the Qurʾānic notion of God. At that time, many Muslim philosophers were dedicated to Greek philosophy, which depicted the world as a system operating on natural principles.⁵⁸ The God described by al-Farābī and Ibn Sīnā is very unlike the God of Islam. The God of the Muslim philosophers is “not capable of listening to his creatures or even knowing what they do, he does not resurrect the dead.”⁵⁹

Leaman compares the role of this God to that of a monarch in a constitutional monarchy who has no significant power to influence events. “No law in Britain is a law unless the Queen signs the necessary documents, but the Queen always signs whatever has been approved by the parliament.”⁶⁰ The philosophers believed in a

57. *Mathnawī*, 170, emphasis added.

58. O. Leaman, *Averroes and His Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 1-42.

59. O. Leaman, “Al-Nūrī’s Place in the Iḥyā’ Tradition” in *The Muslim World*, Vol. LCIX (Jul-Oct 1999) No. 3-4, 315.

60. *Ibid.*

deterministic view of the world, which left little for God to do. Majid Fakhry notes that the determinism of Ibn Rushd “can hardly leave any scope for the belief in an effective providence of God. Averroes, it is true, concedes that God plays the role of Author and Preserver of the universe; but it is difficult to see how this role can be interpreted in any but deistic terms.”⁶¹

The Ash‘arī theologians including al-Ghazālī reacted strongly to the philosophers’ understanding of the world and therefore of God. They refuted horizontal causation because it is incompatible with the omnipotence of God as stated in the verse: *God has power over all things*,⁶² a phrase that appears in the Qur’ān many times. They rejected that causes had an efficient role in creation but they did not deny causality and order in the world.⁶³ They endorsed a kind of vertical causation, according to which, every thing is directly related to an effective agent who creates both the cause and the effect in an orderly way.⁶⁴

Ash‘arī position “not only survived all criticism leveled at it, but succeeded in attaining a key position in Sunni Islam”.⁶⁵ Admittedly, it based its doctrines primarily on Qur’ānic precepts. All that Ash‘arī discourse did was merely to project the Qur’ānic conclusions onto the world without justifying them. They did not engage in a parallel reading of the cosmic signs even though the Qur’ān constantly refers the interlocutor to the world and teaches how it should be looked at in order to gain knowledge of the cosmos, oneself and God. Unwittingly, in their drive to assert God’s sole agency, the

61. Majid Fakhry, *Islamic Occasionalism and its Critique by Averroes and Aquinas* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1958), 121.

62. There are other verses that attribute the creation to God: *Say: God is the creator of all things (al-Ra‘d: 16) and Surely His is the creation and the command (al-A‘rāf: 54)*.

63. R. M. Frank, “The Structure of Created Causality According to al-Ash‘ari: An Analysis of the *Kitāb al-Lum‘a*”, 82-164 in *Studia Islamica* XXV (1969), 14.

64. M. Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1970), 234.

65. H. Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, trans. L. Sherrad (London: Islamic Publications Ltd., 1993), 120.

occasionalism that Ash‘arī discourse erected as a counter to causation served to undermine knowledge of God that can be gained through knowledge of ‘causal relations’.

Al-Nūrsī, following the Ash‘arite tradition, states that to attribute the effects⁶⁶ to causes (i.e. created things) is to ascribe to them the power to create and thus to associate partners with God. However, al-Nūrsī does not refute causation and determinism merely on the ground that they are incompatible with divine unity and omnipotence. Rather, he moves to show that the very horizontal logic of causation is unsubstantiated. In fact, al-Nūrsī explains that it is a corollary dogma of the *ismī* approach, which ventures to act as a *pressio veri* to the ‘speech of the universe’. In doing so, he does not feel the need to abandon knowledge (*ma‘rifah*) that can be gained through the eliciting of causal relations, nor does he feel the need to bestow ‘agential power’ to causes. His approach is not about imposing a logic on the cosmos, but ‘listening’ to its logic: the *ḥarfī* logic. Although the *ismī* attitude ventures to act as a blind to the *ḥarfī* logic, this in the end ransacks it and illumines its dark chains with the bursting light of the vertical ‘lightenings’ of the meta-cosmic text. Al-Nūrsī’s *ḥarfī* approach is based on a parallel reading of the world under the light of revelation, which is the light that supplies the intellect with intuitions, which in the case of al-Nūrsī are unraveled proofs. The conclusions of the Qur’ān are not taken for granted but verified through observation of the world.⁶⁷

Al-Nūrsī establishes that the uniformity of causal sequences is evidence for the significant, symbolic quiddity of things; it does not justify belief in a horizontal causal nexus. The proponents of the *ismī* approach among contemporary Muslims thinkers react vehemently

66. Note that each effect is also a cause and vice versa.

67. Al-Nūrsī describes the proofs he expounds in his *Risale* to be at the degree of knowledge of certainty (*fī martabati ‘ilm al-yaqīn*) at the level of witnessing (*shuhūd*) and certainty. The resulting confirmation (*taṣdīq*) of the truths of belief is the outgrowth of both the mind and the emotions of the heart which in this scheme unite and become one, i.e. the Qur’ānic intellect. Al-Nūrsī, *al-Malāḥiq fī Fiqh Da‘wa al-Nūr*, trans. I. Q. al-Salihi (Istanbul: Sözleryayinevi, 1995), 112.

to the refutation of causation. Their reason is exactly the same as that of Ibn Rushd's who objected to al-Ghazālī some eight centuries earlier under the alleged reason that knowledge was the necessary concomitant of causation. A contemporary Muslim scholar, Mehdi Golshani contends that the negation of causation, which he identifies as the corollary of determinism, implies that "nothing would be the requisite of another, and anything could be derived from anything, so there would be no room for science."⁶⁸

Golshani's view is that God creates through intermediary causes. But if the world operates on natural principles, and if causes are necessarily connected to the effects, where does God fit in except as prime mover or first cause? If causes produce the effects naturally, necessarily, and immutably, how then are things in the world to lead us to witness to the reality and 'Life' of their Creator? In other words, if things do not function as signs and symbols to the constant renewal of the divine reality, as in this *ismī* model of the world, how can we then turn and say that 'everything' is a sign of God as held by Golshani? If we simply reply: 'because the Qur'ān says so', there is then some difficult reconciling to do. The *ḥarfī* meaning of things is not an inherent feature of the *ismī* model, unless it is introduced *ad hoc* with no precise role to fulfill.⁶⁹

Muslim proponents of the *ismī* approach recognize the

68. M. Golshani, "Philosophy of Science from the Qur'ānic Perspective" in *Toward Islamization of Disciplines* (Herndon: International Islamic Publishing House, 1995), 88.

69. In relation to this point al-Nūrsī writes: "Know dear friend of mine! Sadly, the majority of mankind, it appears, has failed to give this great 'visible book', the cosmos, and this highly venerable 'audible book', the Qur'ān, their due esteem, largely, as a result of ill-conceived thoughts diffused by some of the philosophers and literati in our midst. Infatuated and absorbed by their 'I am ness', as is often the case, philosophers tend to accord '*the Necessary Being*' only the thin husk of His entire creation. Then, following this 'wishful thinking' and absurd 'tokenism' they overreach themselves daring to stretch their hands to divide the remains of His Kingdom among imaginary, if not impossible causes, and contrived names and shares that refer back to no *real nominee*". *Mathnawī*, 307.

significance of causality in connection with knowledge, but they, too, like the *falāsifah* start, according to al-Nūrsī, with their preconceived notion of causation and interpret experience and the world accordingly. But al-Nūrsī believes that such interpretation is akin to putting the cart before the horse, since we cannot say anything about the status of causation before we observe the world. Observation however, does not appear to suggest that causation is true. That is why attempts to reconcile causation with the Qurʾānic concept of divine unity and omnipotence involve great difficulties and remain conjectural and paradoxical.

‘Allamah Sayyid Ṭabaṭabāʾī writes that “whatever is caused by natural causes is really caused by Allah...The causes do have causality (which he defines as natural causation) because Allah has given it to them...Every cause has been given the power to create the relevant effect; but the real authority is yet in the hands of Allah.”⁷⁰ From al-Nūrsī’s *ḥarfī* perspective this last statement is paradoxical: if a cause has the power to create an effect, it has necessary properties with which it produces the effect. But if something is necessary, it exists of itself and from itself; it has not been given existence at any point in time. This means it is not contingent. However, all observed causes are contingent.⁷¹

The *ḥarfī* approach does not deny causality and the order in the world, which is one of the major *designata* of unity, but it refutes the fact that a cause could create anything as groundless. It does not dismiss causes but employs them as signs in attaining knowledge, in the way revelation teaches. It is concerned with showing how every cause and effect and particularly their relationships are signs

70. M. H. Ṭabaṭabāʾī, *Al-Mizan: An Exegesis of the Qurʾān*, Vol. I, trans. S. S. Akhtar Rizvi (Tehran: WOFIS, 1973), 112-13.

71. “Know O friend still under the spell of causes! The creation of a cause with its precise determinations as well as its constant supply with the necessary requisites that makes it fit to bring into being the effect, is not at all easier and worthier, nor is it more perfect and loftier than the creation of the effect *within* the cause in an instant by the order ‘Be’, from He who, before Whom stands as equal the atoms, as well as, the solar system.” *Mathnawī*, 212.

pointing to the knowledge of the divine attributes and to the laws of the manifestation of those divine names in this world. In other words it is by showing that causation is untrue because it is unfounded that al-Nürsî's approach reveals the *ḥarfî* nature of things and hence the truth of the teachings of the Qur'ân. For al-Nürsî, things are not signs (*âyât*) just because the Qur'ân states so, rather the Qur'ân says so because things actually function as signs as it can be verified through observation.

Al-Nürsî's Analysis of *Ismî* Science

Know that most of Man's 'earthly'⁷² cogitations, his incontrovertible and even self-evident truths are built on 'customariness' (*ulfah*), the source of *compounded* ignorance. A corruption of serious consequences therefore resides in the very foundations of his knowledge. It is owing to this almost perpetual state of affairs, that the Qur'ân constantly directs the gaze of mankind towards the recurrent vicissitudes (*adiyât*), beckoning them fervently to look closer at the veils of the 'ordinary'. For the recurrent, the ordinary, and the mundane conceal beneath that 'extra-ordinary' activity transiting the very vicissitudes (*adiyât*) of life and the world. Indeed, it is through these that the lights of the Qur'anic stars pierce the dark vaults and tenebrous shrouds of the mind succumbed to 'customariness' (*ulfah*).⁷³

Know that due to 'customariness', many have ceased to mull over the recurrent vicissitudes (*adiyât*)⁷⁴ of the

72. Al-Nürsî usually uses the term 'earthly' to refer to 'human' philosophy, which resists the 'heavenly knowledge' or revelation.

73. *Mathnawî*, 324.

74. This interesting passage reveals that the author was keen to take the challenge of the materialist philosophers of his time into their own grounds, explaining that the Qur'anic appraisals of matter were more conclusive and 'positive' than those of the positivists. Comparing the cognitive value of the wisdom of the Qur'ân with that of the philosophy of science, al-Nürsî holds that the Qur'ân shatters the veil of customariness instigated by the *ismi* vision of modern science and makes us wonder at the

world, although, these are but inroads of the miracles of Divine power. Having instead confined their gazes to the surface of these perpetually flowing manifestations, they have taken an attitude similar to those who upon perusing the surface of the ocean have failed to bring themselves to see in the ocean anything beyond the mere undulations brought about by the caressing of the air and the twinkling of the sunshine. How can they who rely only on these superficial observations reach to the conclusions about the depth of the ocean, the might of its Owner and Creator whose *tremendum*⁷⁵ reigns the heavens and the earth and all that lies between?

Understanding and interpretation of the world is for al-Nūrsī a mode of being. *Ismī* science, that is the science that proceeds from the intellect of philosophy, is based on a flawed understanding of being, dictated by the whims of the soul and cannot lead to reality. Its so-called scientific knowledge is ignorance masquerading as knowledge.⁷⁶ Scientific knowledge is based on causation, which is a corollary dogma of *ismī* (the nominative) meaning. Causation is neither elicited by experience, nor logically justifiable. While dealing primarily with the 'ills' of his own soul, al-Nūrsī argues extensively against its intellectual claims, demonstrating in various contexts and from many perspectives that there are challenging difficulties in accepting both its claims to 'divinity' and its consequent teaching, namely, causation: knowledge presupposes universality, but there can be no universality if the horizontal line of causation is assumed.

Causation is taken to mean that the existence of an effect is necessitated by its causes; it is more than just causality. The *ismī* meaning takes it for granted that causes are efficient, that is, they produce the effect and sustain its existence. However, al-Nūrsī argues that the occurrence of one effect calls for the existence of the whole cosmos and not only its apparent causes, because things are inseparable and inter-related in the cosmos.

divine names manifested in things and events. Al-Nūrsī, *The Words*, 150-54.

75. *Mathnawī*, 323.

76. Al-Nūrsī, *The Words*, 576.

Know that an atom may bear the sun and run with it while it could not, in essence, accommodate another atom as attested by evidence. Being similar to the rain drizzles blazing in the sun, atoms of these living beings and their compounds are fit to become vessels for the flashes of the manifestations of the luminous, pre-eternal, absolute, and encompassing power of His pre-eternal infinite knowledge and absolute will. Or else, how could an atom of one of the cells in your eye be the source and origin of the potency, the sensibility, and the volition enabling it to carry out its ever-increasing duties in the complex arenas of its operations? Particularly, as we bear in mind that atoms carry out numerous functions and duties. Indeed! Doesn't it travel in the sensing nerves of the eye, in the veins, and the arteries, and is involved in the operations of visualizing, and intercepting visuals, and many more bewildering activities like these? Seeing this wonderful and precise work, this orderly and adorned sculpting, this profound and far-reaching wisdom, one is left with the following question. Either every atom and every compound in creation are the origin and the source for these comprehensive and perfectly consummate attributes, or else they are the locus and mirrors to the rays of the manifestations of the 'Pre-eternal Sun' to whom appertain these Attributes. The first consideration entails difficulties by the number of atoms and their compounds in the world.⁷⁷

In other words, the production of the tiniest effect requires a knowledge, power, will, and so on that encompass the whole world, not only in space but also in time. "The One Who created the mosquito created both the sun and the Milky Way; and the One Who ordered the flea's internal organs clearly set in order the solar system."⁷⁸ If it is not accepted that causes and effects are being made and cannot produce anything,⁷⁹ then it has to be accepted that

77. *Mathnawī*, 226.

78. Al-Nūrsī, *The Words*, 732.

79. The Qur^{ān} states this very clearly: *Those they invoke beside God cannot create anything, since they themselves are but being created. (al-Naḥl: 20-21); Will they, then, ascribe divinity, side by side with Him,*

within each contingent cause there resides infinite creative power, knowledge, and will; this is nonsensical and contradictory because each cause being also an effect would have to be both dominant under the domination of all other beings.⁸⁰

From another point of view, al-Nūrsī refers to the countless events (creative acts) occurring in countless places all at the same time and without intermediaries, such as the advent of spring, hatching of the eggs, and so on. These events, these creative acts proceed from a law of creativity that encompasses all those events. That is, the one who gives life to an insect must be the one who creates and gives life to all insects and animals, and whoever spins particles must be the one who sets the celestial bodies in motion, for the law of creativity is a chain and creative acts are tied to it. Al-Nūrsī concludes that each thing ascribes every other thing to its own Maker, and each creative act attributes all acts to its author.⁸¹

In respect to the *ismī* meaning, beings in themselves are transitory and accidental. They do not possess in themselves anything that can perpetuate and sustain their existence. But in respect to the *ḥarfī* meaning, the existence of every thing is directly connected to its Maker and through that connection it is related to all other things in space and in time. The particular gains universality through this vertical connection. Al-Nūrsī affirms that it is through its connection to the Creator that ‘a fly did away with Nimrūd, an ant destroyed Pharaoh’s palace, and a fig seed bears the

unto that which does not create anything since they themselves are created?(al-A‘rāf: 191); And yet, some choose to worship instead of Him, (imaginary) deities that cannot create anything but are themselves being created, and have it not within themselves to avert harm from, or bring benefit to, themselves, and have no power over death, nor over life, nor over resurrection! (al-Furqān: 3).

80. Al-Nūrsī, *The Words*, 303. Al-Nūrsī presents this line of argument as a development of the logic of the Qur’ānic verse, Which is more reasonable: belief in the existence of numerous divine lords, each of them different from the other, or (in) the One who holds absolute sway over all that exists? (*Yūsuf*: 39).

81. Al-Nūrsī, *The Letters*, 392-93; *Mathnawī*, 240.

load of a fig tree'.⁸² Within the context of the *ḥarfī* approach, we may say that universality exists only in relation to the Creator. Were it not for that connection, things would all be like orphans, alien to all the rest of beings and they all would become 'estranged particulars' and 'logically nothings'.⁸³ The so-called causes and effects would have been horizontally related to each other if they had been necessarily related i.e. if it had been possible to deduce the effect from its cause(s) through a purely rational process, without referring to past observation, which is obviously not possible.

In science, universal statements are inferred from particular ones inductively, while from a logical point of view, universal statements cannot be inferred from particulars, no matter how numerous and ubiquitous. Inductive inferences could have been justified if an empirical relation between a cause and effect, i.e. a purely logical truth were necessary. Inductive logic conjectures that induction is valid, and then concludes that horizontal causation is true; whereas, induction can only be justified if causation i.e. a one to one relation between cause and effect is true. According to Karl Popper, the difficulties of inductive logic are insurmountable. To justify induction, inductive inferences should be employed, and then these will have to be justified by invoking a new principle of induction, and so on *ad infinitum*. The attempt to base the principle breaks down since it leads to infinite regress.⁸⁴ This means that science has no valid method to move from the particular to the universal. A scientific law is the recurrence of particular events, but there is no reason why a collection of contingent particulars should result in a universal law. One of the most important results of the problem of induction is that the cognitive claims of inductive logic, in other words the scientific method, are unjustifiable.

The point al-Nūrsī makes is simply that scientific laws are unjustifiable, but more broadly, that every single statement of the form 'A causes B' is also unjustifiable. This, nevertheless, neither

82. Al-Nūrsī, *The Flashes* (Istanbul: Sözlür Nesriyat, 1995), 241.

83. *Mathnawī*, 107, 271.

84. K. R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1959), 37.

leads him to deny 'causes' and 'effects', nor their relations. His concern and arguments are directed against the nature and interpretation of such relations: the uniformity and order in the universe is wrongly attributed to causation. What is observed is causality, the principle that nothing happened without being caused, and not causation i.e. cause produces an effect.

For al-Nūrsī it is not evident at all how one can maintain that unconscious, conflicting, deaf and blind causes can be the agents of effects full of meaningful art and adornment, while maintaining *le hazard* and a theory of chaos at the same time. The wise benefits from effects dismiss causes from ability to create, and instead reveals them as the aqueducts⁸⁵ of His mercy and will, handing them over to a Wise Maker Who wants to make Himself known and loved through His 'cosmic personal and intentional mercy'.⁸⁶ Although causes seem adjacent to effects, they are far from reaching one another although they reach out to each other through His mediation. Effects have been tied to causes so that great numbers of Divine Names may be manifested along the distance that separates them, when it is 'realized' that causation is an illusion of the *ismī* vision. Then, it becomes clear that infinite essential power, knowledge, will, compassion, and many other Divine Names are manifestly involved in those relations.⁸⁷

Al-Nūrsī repeatedly states that causes and things are not efficient, and that to maintain the contrary amounts to attributing a kind of divinity to them.⁸⁸ Moreover, horizontal causation is an impediment to the *true* knowledge, which is the knowledge of God and not the detailed knowledge of the things themselves. But as mentioned earlier, al-Nūrsī's *ḥarfī* approach is not in favor of abandoning the search for causes. On the contrary, it is in uncovering the relations between causes and effects that one may be a witness to the Divine Names and obtain knowledge of God, which

85. When causation is removed whilst causal relations are maintained, what remains are *aqueducts* of mercy and will.

86. Al-Nūrsī, *The Words*, 172, 687, 712-13.

87. *Risale*, 312-13, 191-92.

88. *Risale*, 121, 122, 320, 501, 570, 813; *The Letters*, 542.

is, according to the Qurʾān, the aim in the creation of humanity. Al-Nūrsī often quotes *Read and ponder carefully the lines of this creation; For they are sent to you as missives from the supreme heavenly realm.*⁸⁹

The *ismī* meaning looks to things in their horizontal relations and thus ignores the many other levels of existence. The *ḥarfī* meaning looks at the ‘effects’ of beings as windows to infinity, to the Divine Names and Attributes of their Maker.⁹⁰

The Qurʾān does not bring out the conditions of the things in existence insofar as they point to their ‘selves’, but insofar as they point to the One who endows them with existence: what is essential in its eyes are those conditions in which they are looking up to their *endower*. Human philosophy and modern science, on the other hand, exploit them for their own dead end, and masquerade them as ‘reals’, objects and *nomen agentis*, so much, that what gains utmost importance in the eyes of the devotees ought to be devoted to the conditions in which they are pointing to their own essences. Thus, al-Nūrsī highlights that the two approaches are world apart.⁹¹

Qurʾānic wisdom teaches that an atom or a bee or a flower are signs bearing the meaning of another and therefore they should be looked at on account of that ‘wholly-other’ according to the meaning of the Qurʾānic verse: *There is nothing but extols His limitless glory and praise.*⁹²

The Qurʾān Reveals the Meanings of the Cosmic Recitation

Know that among the signs of His absolute universal divinity and mercy towards humanity are the inscriptions of a word, a locution, or even a whole book in the upper or lower case letters of this cosmos in order that they become a ‘manifest’ sign for the thoroughness and comprehensiveness of His *knowledge and caring*. Take for instance, His *creating* the fish in the large inscription of the ocean, and His creating the small ant in the lines of the trees, or His *creating* animals in this minute particle

89. *Risale*, 482. *Mathnawī*, 227.

90. *Risale*, 244; *The Words*, 565.

91. *Mathnawī*, 74.

92. *al-Isrāʾ*: 44.

that we call earth. See now without heedlessness all those insects you find in those seemingly lifeless, unattended, and totally abandoned places. Really, some of the Maker's creatures bring to mind the calligraphy of the letters 'Yā' and 'Sīn' within which is inscribed in miniature the whole of the verse *Yāsīn*.⁹³

According to al-Nūrsī, the Qur'ān interprets the cosmic speech in a way that is congenial to its interlocutors. The Qur'ānic verses not only refer to the meanings of the signs in the universe but they also teach how to uncover those meanings. For al-Nūrsī, the true meaning of the universe can only be understood through a universal view revealed by the Qur'ānic verses. Reflection (*tafakkur*) for al-Nūrsī is not so much *on* the verses, but essentially *by means of* the verses (*tafakkur bi'l-āyāt*).⁹⁴ In his view the interpretation of the cosmic signs should proceed under the guidance of the very logic of Qur'ānic verses, and is effected by the operations and effulgence of its cosmic signs. Man reaches self-understanding and that of the beings around him when his intellect is in the 'mode of listening' to the Qur'ān's cosmic revelations.

The *Risale* does not claim that God is the creator of beings because the Qur'ān says that *He is the Creator of everything*.⁹⁵ To use the conclusions of the Qur'ān to support one's views, which may or not be compatible with the messages of the Qur'ān, is different from confirming the truth of the Qur'ān. Although such claim refers to

93. *Mathnawī*, 323. It has been reported in many prophetic traditions that surah *Yāsīn* is the heart of the Qur'ān. Many calligraphers have put themselves to the task of writing the full content of this verse in miniature inside Arabic letters 'Yā' and 'Sīn'. Through this imagery, the author expresses the fact that as a small surah of the Qur'ān may comprehend the whole content of the Book; also a small particular creature from the cosmic Qur'ān may contain the whole truth of the universe and be an *āyah* or a major sign of God. This is following the logic that the particulars are in al-Nūrsī's *tawhīdī* system 'particular universals' enjoying a value akin, and identical, to that of the universal.

94. *Mathnawī*, 257.

95. As found in *al-An'ām*: 102; *al-Ra'd*: 16; *al-Zumar*: 62; *al-Ghāfir*: 62.

the Qurʾān, it does not follow a Qurʾānic approach but Aristotelian logic.⁹⁶ Similarly, to say that God creates ‘all’, without witnessing how ‘every single’ being is proclaiming to that reality, is no safeguard against the heedlessness (*ghaflah*) and the nonchalance of the soul. Man’s primordial duty consists of “experiencing the meaning of the words concerning the Creator’s Unity and Maker’s Lordship *uttered by each of the beings in the world in its particular tongue.*”⁹⁷

Al-Nūrsī insists that true affirmation of divine unity requires that one sees the seal of divine power and Lordship (*rubūbiyyah*) on every single thing, and opens up from every thing a window directly onto the light of the divine attributes of perfection or the divine names and thus attain to perpetual awareness of the divine presence.⁹⁸ Some of the salient arguments of this affirmation of *tawhīd* as already mentioned are: “*Nothing can exist without everything else*”;⁹⁹ and “*Without holding the universe in one’s hand, one cannot create a single particle.*”¹⁰⁰ Moreover, al-Nūrsī appeals that his teachings on the nature of *tawhīd* are consistent not only with the spirit of the Qurʾān, but with the path of *walāyah* inaugurated by the Prophet. Commenting on the *miʿrāj*, he says:

There is within this particular journey a general one and

96. Al-Nūrsī believes that Greek philosophy springs from a mythological and speculative worldview, and for this reason it is essentially alien to the Qurʾānic spirit of inquiry and the nature of *tawhīd* (Divine Unity) that nurtures and enlightens that spirit. For al-Nūrsī, Greek thought has been an impediment to Islamic thought and “has opened a way from *tahqīq* (realisation) to *taqlīd* (imitation)”. He says that, “They (some Muslim thinkers) conjured up a resemblance and compatibility between the true logic of the Qurʾān and the Ḥadīth, and this fictitious and false (Greek) philosophy and interpreted the Qurʾān accordingly. However, the meaning of the Book of Miraculous Exposition is within it. So seek the meanings of the Qurʾān in its luminous words, rather than those gimmicks and artifices you sneak in the back-pocket of your mind.” *Risale*, 1989.

97. Al-Nūrsī, *The Words*, 140-41

98. Al-Nūrsī, *The Words*, 731.

99. Al-Nūrsī, *The Words*, 733.

100. Al-Nūrsī, *The Words*, 584, emphasis added.

universal ascent during which the prophet *heard* and *saw* the Dominical Signs and wonders of Divine Art that encountered his eyes and ears within the universal degrees of the *Divine Names*...¹⁰¹

He adds further that this was an invitation by way of which God “made [the prophet’s] journey through both *the external face* of the world of existence and *the face that looks to its Creator*.”¹⁰²

The world occupies a vital place in al-Nūrsī’s hermeneutical approach to the Qur’ān: the world is referred to, in the manner the Qur’ān itself instructs and not according to one’s own preconceptions, in order to understand the Qur’ān and confirm its truth. There are signs in every single thing, in every event in the universe; each thing glorifies God by reciting *Say, he is God, the One, the Besought*.¹⁰³ The whole world recites the Qur’ānic verses and express *there is no deity but He*.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, to be a witness to the truth of *tawḥīd* is to be witnessing the reality of that truth in the cosmos.

Let us reiterate, nonetheless, that al-Nūrsī urges his readers not to interpret this cosmic text as mere ‘thinkers’ but as ‘witnesses’ (*shuhadāʾ*). He urges them to open with the ‘keys’ of faculties placed in their primordial nature the secrets of the Divine names, of consciously witnessing the *tasbiḥāt* and the *takbirāt* of the living beings to their Creator, as they transit in and out of existence respectively, and of observing their worship of the Bestower of life and *joining them*. Surely this joining is not without worship and humility of heart and intellect, nor is the reading of this cosmic Qur’ān possible and accessible without the effulgence of the ‘*ideal reader*’: the excellent Man of *mīʿrāj*, to whom *all beings send their*

101. Ibid.

102. Al-Nūrsī, *The Words*, 304.

103. For more on this, see *Risale*, 121.

104. *al-Tawbah*: 31. Also see *al-Baqarah*: 163, 255; *Āl-Imrān*: 2, 6, 18; *al-Nisāʾ*: 87; *Al-Anʿām*: 102, 106; *al-Tawbah*: 129; *Hūd*: 14; *al-Raʿd*: 30; *Ṭā Hā*: 8, 98; *al-Muʾminūn*: 116; *al-Naml*: 26; *al-Qaṣaṣ*: 70, 88; *al-Fāṭir*: 3; *al-Zumar*: 6; *al-Ghāfir*: 3, 62; *al-Dukhān*: 8; *al-Ḥashr*: 22; *al-Taghābun*: 13; *al-Muzzammil*: 9, as elaborated in al-Nūrsī, *The Words*, 728.

blessings and greetings of peace. Ultimately, the *tawhīdi* journey that al-Nūrsī wants to evince reaches its peak through this *tazkiyah* (purification) and awareness of the Prophet's cosmic reality. Only then the objects of observation are no longer the outward *ismī* things, but the soul of the experimenter itself. Al-Nūrsī explains that through the insight of belief and one's union with all beings through the connection to the Eternal One, one experiences a boundless existence apart from one's personal existence.¹⁰⁵

***Ḥarfī* Science: Towards a Science of the Future**

It is often argued that science explains how things occur in terms of causation but it cannot explain why they exist the way they do. Everything depends for its ultimate explanation on something outside the universe and that is God. Thus, the story goes that things are the way they are because God has so willed. To answer 'how' is the domain of science and 'why' is that of religion. Within the *ḥarfī* attitude, we are part of the cosmos and hence we can learn only by asking 'how' questions. In order to answer a 'why' question that cannot be reduced to a 'how', we either have to go outside the universe to investigate it, which is impossible, or we have to accept that God has so willed, given that we know Him.

Since the *ḥarfī* approach seeks knowledge of God by means of His signs in the world, it is concerned with answering 'how' questions. It proceeds in agreement with the Qur'ānic verses, which repeatedly bid the reader to consider how things are created. *Do they never gaze at the clouds pregnant with water, (and observe) how they are created? And at the sky, how it is raised aloft? And the mountains, how firmly they are reared? And the earth, how it is spread out?*¹⁰⁶ *Do they not look at the sky above them, how We have built it and made it beautiful and free of faults?*¹⁰⁷

The *ḥarfī* approach is concerned with how things are being made, for, as pointed out earlier, it is by establishing the relations between causes and effects that the Divine Names can be witnessed

105. Al-Nūrsī, *The Rays*, 72.

106. *al-Ghāshiyah*: 17-20.

107. *Qāf*: 6

and knowledge of God can be reached. Belief in God, as taught by the Qurʾān, is a confirmation of His attributes of perfection in every observed cause–effect relationship. The Qurʾān does not restrict the realm of religion to the ‘unseen’ or ‘hidden’ so that belief in *ghayb* entails belief in the ‘unknowable’. *Ghayb* does pertain in many ways to that which transcends human perception and the categories of speculative thought, but the Qurʾān is not for blind faith, as other aspects of *ghayb* look to our condition, and there is a way ‘from God to humans’ (whether through the Qurʾān, the cosmos or the prophets) called *wajh Alāah*. In this sense, there is no bar between this world and ‘the transcendental world’.

The Qurʾānic speech is described by al-Nūrsī as *lisān al-ghayb fī ʿālam al-shahādah* i.e. ‘the tongue of the world of the unseen in the manifest world’. It clearly shows that there are cosmic evidences for the ‘matters of faith’ such as belief in resurrection. For instance, the Qurʾān says:

Behold, then, the signs of God’s grace, how He gives life to the earth after it had void of life! Verily, this Selfsame (God) is indeed the One that can bring the dead to life: for He has power to will anything!¹⁰⁸

And He it is Who sends forth the winds as a glad tiding of His coming grace, so that, when they have brought heavy clouds, We may drive them towards dead land and cause thereby water to descend; and by such means do We cause all manner of fruit to come forth. Even thus shall We cause the dead to come forth: (and this) you ought to bear in mind.¹⁰⁹

In the context of the *ḥarfī* approach there is no distinction between physics and metaphysics as it is the case with the *ismī* attitude. All attainments, all learning, all progress, and all sciences have for al-Nūrsī an eminent reality, which is based on at least one of the Divine Names, which are the ‘weft and warp’ of the tapestry of the cosmic text. Science finds its perfection and becomes reality when it serves the sacred aims of revelation and makes known the

108. *al-Rūm*: 50

109. *al-Aʿrāf*: 57

Divine Names that should constitute its roots matrix.

For instance, medicine fulfils its reality and embodies wisdom when it is based on the name Healer, and Man becomes a student of this science when he is seeking the grace and the healing of that lofty Name. Al-Nūrsī says that “through observing that name’s compassionate manifestations in the vast pharmacy of the earth, medicine finds its perfection and becomes reality.”¹¹⁰ Al-Nūrsī emphasizes that ‘without these perfections, science is transformed into superstition and trivia, or else it gives rise to misguidance like the one spread by naturalist philosophy.’¹¹¹ *Ḥarfī* science—whether it is physics, anthropology or religion—instigates wisdom and perfection; *ismī* science in contrast, yields superstition and misconception.

At this point, we can safely conclude that science is not a neutral phenomenon for New Sa‘īd, nor is the cosmos. So what did al-Nūrsī mean with his response to high school students who complained to him that their teachers did not mention God, “The sciences you study speak of God and make Him known, each with its own particular tongue. Do not listen to your teachers; listen to them.”¹¹² As is clear from all that he said, al-Nūrsī was actually inviting the students to forgo the *ismī* interpretation of the cosmic signs which were often force-fed to them by the academy. Indeed, he went on to explain to them how to ‘listen to science’, he was initiating them to the *ḥarfī* science; he wanted to show them how to look critically with the *ḥarfī* logic at the so-called natural phenomena and see that they are signs pointing to their Maker and glorifying Him. Given his critique of the very foundations of modern science, al-Nūrsī cannot have thought that *ismī* positive science speaks of God. He himself says, “Through the lights of belief, I have razed the sturdy bastions they call positive sciences and Nature.”¹¹³

Ḥarfī science, as al-Nūrsī understands it, is an activity within the

110. Al-Nūrsī, *The Words*, 270-71.

111. Al-Nūrsī, *The Words*, 271.

112. *Risale*, 954.

113. *Ibid.*, 379.

universal scope of religion.¹¹⁴ It is not an alternative to religion but an integral part of it. Al-Nūrsī suggests that the Qurʾānic verse, *And He taught Adam the names, all of them*¹¹⁵ indicates that the greatest miracle upon which the supreme vicegerency of mankind revolves is the gift of true knowledge that can be gained by means of the grace of the Names. Hence, humanity’s most pressing duty is to rise to the heights of divine wisdom by means of spiritual *progress* and the *ḥarfī* sciences. In his commentary, al-Nūrsī argues the above Qurʾānic verse addresses our age in the most particular terms; it is as if it were urging us to renounce our ways of understanding knowledge and beckoning us to other worthier directions:

Come on, step forward, adhere to all My Names and rise [it says]! Your forefather (i.e. Adam) was once deceived by Satan, and temporarily fell to the earth from a state akin to Paradise. Beware! In your *progress*, do not follow Satan and from the heaven of divine wisdom thus fall into the misguidance of ‘Nature.’ Continuously raising your head and studying carefully My beautiful names, *make your sciences and your progress steps by which to ascend to those heavens*. Then you may rise to My divine names, which are the realities and sources of your sciences and attainments, and you may look to your Sustainer *with your hearts* through the *telescope* of the Names.¹¹⁶

Al-Nūrsī, it may be added, is inviting us to contemplate anew to reach a new understanding of ‘being’. The progress, to which he now calls us, is none other than ‘spiritual progress’ that leads Man towards fulfilling his perfections and *raison d’être*. The science which he finally proposes for us is that science which yields *yaqīn*

114. The word for ‘religion’ in Arabic is ‘*dīn*’; it means primarily “obedience, in particular, obedience to a law or to what is conceived as a system of established usages, i.e. something endowed with moral authority.” In this sense everyone has a ‘*dīn*’ of moral law as the Qurʾān states when it says, *Unto you, your dīn and unto me my dīn!* (*al-Kāfirūn*: 6). Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qurʾān* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus Ltd, 1980), 981.

115. *al-Baqarah*: 31

116. Al-Nūrsī, *The Words*, 270.

(tranquility of the heart from certitude) and dispels doubt, leading Man to the presence of the Divine and His *maʿrifah*. The merit of Saʿīd al-Nūrsī in this task is his use of an intellectual discourse that is commensurate to our present predicament and cultural condition. This should not lead us in the end to see him as one who was mesmerized by the ‘modern Mind’, but as an intriguing ‘modern’ enigma, fittingly known by the sobriquet of Bedīʿuzzamān, “the *non-pareil* of his time”.