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## Toward an Intellectual Biography of Said Nursi

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Said Nursi, in many ways a distinctive figure, was an original thinker and scholar whose important contributions to contemporary Islamic thought are now being recognized in the Islamic world, but are still relatively unknown in the West. These were primarily in the field of Qur'anic interpretation and contained in the body of work known as the *Risale-i Nur* [henceforth referred to as the *Risale*] which represents his mature thought. His greatest achievement was to develop a way of expounding the teachings of the Qur'an on "the truths of belief" that incorporates the traditional Islamic sciences and modern scientific knowledge, and that while instilling those truths, effectively refutes the bases of materialist philosophy. Moreover, with these writings he founded a movement for the renewal of belief that is probably unique in the Islamic world.

Nursi divided his long life into two main periods, those of the Old Said and the New Said, which roughly coincided with the main periods of recent Turkish history: the final decades of the Ottoman Empire, then the first twenty-seven years of the Turkish Republic (proclaimed in 1923). A third period, that of the Third Said, which in essence was a continuation of the New Said but combined with it some characteristics of the Old Said, coincided with the Democrat Party era (1950–1960), and with the last ten years of his life.

From his youth, Nursi's overriding aim in life was to vindicate the Qur'an as a source of true knowledge and progress, and he prepared himself accordingly by acquiring wide learning in numerous branches of knowledge. However, in his early life he pursued other urgent goals aimed at the revitalization of the Empire and Islamic world; it was only on his transformation into the New Said that he devoted himself exclusively to expounding the Qur'an. All of this lent a diversity to his thought. Given the breadth of the subject, therefore, this chapter will mention only some of the factors influencing Nursi's thought, and will outline its main features in each period as reflected in his works. The development in his ideas that marked his transition from the Old to the New Said will be charted in greater detail. Then the thought of the

New Said will be discussed chiefly in respect to the method of Qur'anic interpretation that was the culmination of his thought and is contained in the *Risale*. Following this is a brief look at the growth of the *Risale-i Nur* movement [henceforth referred to as the *Nur* movement] and its function as it reflects Nursi's ideas, and then its expansion in the period of the Third Said and his restatement of some of the ideas of the Old Said.

One of the factors influencing his thought was the state of the *medreses* of his native eastern Anatolia. Their cumbersome curricula, largely irrelevant to the needs of the late nineteenth century, and the resultant failure to fulfill their functions, drove him to formulate projects for their radical reform, and more importantly to work toward the reformulation and renewal of the sciences they taught.

Among the broad currents of Islamic thought, namely, the scholarly tradition, philosophy, and Sufism, Nursi thus belonged to the former. As is shown in the next section, he had a firm grounding in classical Islamic scholarship despite his unconventional education, even surpassing his peers. The greater part of his early life he spent studying and teaching its disciplines, and in both periods was preoccupied particularly with the updating of the sciences of Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*) and scholastic theology (*kalām*). As for philosophy, in the early period, his seeking ways of renewal also led him to involvement with philosophical thought of both Islamic and Western origin. The influence of the latter is discussed as follows. The question of Sufism and its influence on his thought is a complex one. The following brief points may assist in putting it in perspective.

Although Nursi grew up in an environment that was steeped in Sufism, there is no evidence of its influence in the works of the first period of his life. The work of the New Said, however, is more problematic as it may contain such influences.<sup>1</sup> Such elements, which perhaps should not be exaggerated, may be linked to his time of crisis between the two periods, when he immersed himself in the works of spiritual masters, and tended toward intuitive knowledge and away from his former emphasis on rationalism. One of those masters, Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī (1563–1624), was instrumental in his eventually finding guidance. However, all of this led him not to Sufism and its personalism, but to the Qur'an and ultimately to the general way for the renewal of belief that is described in this chapter. Reference is made in the course of the discussion to Nursi's own comparisons of the *Risale's* way and Sufism. Nevertheless, the *Risale* is a voluminous work covering numerous subjects and certainly contains ideas and influences from a variety of sources including Sufism. But to unravel these and to specify the sources requires detailed study and is outside the scope of this chapter.

Brief mention should also be made here of external factors influencing his ideas, namely, the currents of Western thought that came to play an increasingly important part in Ottoman life in the nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries. As far as Nursi was concerned, these were twofold: one was the liberal thought<sup>2</sup> that was adopted by the majority of Ottoman intellectuals, and many Islamists, of the period, and then applied in the Second Constitutional period (1908–1918). It is shown that Nursi also adopted, and adapted, some of these ideas. Second was the infiltration of the Positivist ideas of Comte and Materialism of Büchner and others, initially by way of the new secular schools.<sup>3</sup> These became very popular among the Westernized elite, and were finally taken by the founders of the Republic as the ideological basis of the state in place of Islam. The various forms of Materialism, which exalted science over every other value and used it to attack Islam, had a profound effect on the shaping of Nursi's discourse.

Firstly, it was his encounter in the 1890s with officials whose thinking had been influenced by those currents that prompted him to take the unusual step of learning the modern sciences. Only in this way could the Islamic sciences be updated and attacks on Islam satisfactorily answered. Nursi came to accord great importance to science, not least because together with technology it was also the basis of material progress. But later he became disillusioned with it as a means of ascertaining truth, and as is shown in this chapter; in following his discovery of 'the Qur'anic viewpoint' during his transition into the New Said he developed a method of expounding the Qur'an that brought together scientific facts and the truths of religion. This allowed him to include in his works indirect refutations of the arguments and criticisms of the Materialists such as the conflict between religion and science, the creative power of nature, and the pre-eternity of matter, while positively proving "the truths of belief." Comparisons between the Qur'an and 'philosophy,' by which is often meant natural philosophy or a materialist interpretation of science, are another component of his method. Thus, although in one sense Nursi rejected science, it is still an important element of his thought, the more so since it is undoubtedly a major factor in the continuing relevance of his works. This subject too deserves more attention than can be given it in the present study.

## Childhood and Youth

Nursi was born in 1877, in a mountain village in the province of Bitlis in eastern Anatolia.<sup>4</sup> His family, though known for their piety, are not recorded as being a learned one. As a child and youth, Said, however, was distinguished by both his exceptional intelligence and ability to absorb knowledge, and by his instinctive dissatisfaction with the existing educational system and wish to reform it. His minimal attendance of *medreses* in the vicinity of Nurs, his village, then in Dogubayezit, was sufficient for him to reach the required standard and be awarded his diploma (*icazet*) (1892), confirming that he had completed the main course of study current in eastern Anatolia at that time.

According to an early biography,<sup>5</sup> Nursi attended a *medreses* directed by both *ulama* and Sufi *shaykhs*. Three of the former are given, but the majority were members of the Naqshbandi (Khalidi) order.<sup>6</sup> However, it is clear from the available sources that the latter taught the ‘medrese,’ that is, Islamic, sciences, rather than (or perhaps in addition to) instruction in the mystical path. Nursi never joined any of the orders, and later explained this saying that pre-occupation with his studies prevented it.<sup>7</sup> In his first three years of study, he mastered the works on Arabic grammar normally taught in eastern Anatolia, from *Amthila* as far as *Ḥall al-Muʾaqqad*, which was of an “intermediate level” and the equivalent of *Izhar* taught in the Istanbul curriculum.<sup>8</sup> During his three months in Dogubayezid, by studying only selected passages from each work, he completed the syllabus from *Molla Jami* (a commentary by ‘Abd al-Ḥakīm on a work on Arabic syntax). His intention was to show the need for *medrese* reform. The syllabus included such tomes as *Jamr al-Jawāmi* by Ibn Subki on the principles of *fiqh*, *Tbn Ḥajar*’ on the same, and *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif* by Jurjāni on *‘ilm al-kalām*.<sup>9</sup> When it was proposed to him on graduating that he wear the gown and turban that in the east were the right only of the *mudarris*, he refused on grounds of his immaturity.<sup>10</sup> His subsequent unbeaten record in defeating in debate all the scholars *ulama* of the area, and in answering all the questions set for him by the *shaykhs* of the *medreses*, were proof of his achievement. It was in recognition of this that he was given the name of Bediuzzaman, “the wonder of the age.”

The young Nursi continued his education independently, first by memorizing all of the standard works on the main Islamic sciences. In the two years he stayed in the governor’s residence in Bitlis (1893–1895?) he is reputed to have memorized forty such works.<sup>11</sup> Then, while in Van (1895?–1907) as his general knowledge increased of the problems besetting the Ottoman Empire and Muslim world, he took the step unprecedented among the *ulama* of the region at that time of learning the modern sciences. It states in his biography that he was awakened to this need by “mixing with the Governor and officials.”<sup>12</sup> That is, he became aware of the influx of Positivist and Materialist ideas, the doubts these had raised about Islam, and the the inability of the traditional form of *‘ilm al-kalām* to answer them. Tahir Pasha, the governor, was an enlightened official who followed intellectual developments and had an up-to-date library, and his residence was a center of lively discussion. He perceived Nursi’s unusual talents and did much to encourage and assist him. The other officials were the products of the secularizing Tanzimat reforms, the effects of which were doubtless evident in their ideas. Availing himself of Pasha’s facilities, Nursi taught himself all of the modern sciences, “history, geography, mathematics (at which he excelled), geology, physics, chemistry, astronomy, and ‘philosophy’ (probably natural science), and so on.” His swift progress was further expedited by his practice of engaging in contests of knowledge with high school teachers, which indicates the level he reached.<sup>13</sup>

From then on basic to his projects for educational reform and for the renewal of the *medreses* was the combined teaching of the Islamic and modern sciences. He also applied this new method in his own *medrese* in Van.

A crucial event during the period as far as Nursi's future was concerned was his realization of the severity of the threats to the Qur'an. In later years he described his shock at learning from a newspaper that the British in the person of Gladstone had declared open war on the Qur'an as the chief obstacle to their imperialist ambitions. This occurred in 1900 and caused "a revolution in his ideas." He vowed to make all the knowledge he had acquired "steps to understanding the Qur'an and proving its truths," to take its miraculousness as his guide and teacher, and to dedicate his life to its service. However, he goes on to say that due to the "deceptive" events in that time of his youth, he only took up the duty on the eruption of the First World War.<sup>14</sup> We learn from other pieces that it was actually in 1329R/1913 that he began work on his Qur'anic commentary *Ishārāt al-İjāz*, "the first stage of the *Risale*."<sup>15</sup> Here are indications both to the way that would be taken by the New Said, and that he viewed his activities in the years up to the First World War as something of a deviation from what he perceived to be his main aim in life.

## Constitutional Period

When Nursi came to Istanbul toward the end of 1907, it was with the intention of raising support for his educational projects in the eastern provinces of the Empire and particularly for the Medresetü'z-Zehrâ, the Islamic university that was to be the embodiment of his ideas on educational reform. He became a well-known figure through his efforts to publicize the problems of the east, in a short time establishing his reputation as a scholar among the Istanbul *ulama* and intellectuals. Within a few months he presented a petition to Sultan Abdülhamid, setting out his ideas on education and seeking government backing.<sup>16</sup> He did not meet with a favorable response; indeed, he was arrested, and after a brief incarceration, regained his freedom. This was shortly before the Constitutional Revolution of July 1908. Following it, he became an active supporter of constitutionalism. For along with other Islamist thinkers, he believed that the Ottoman Empire could be saved, its progress achieved and Islamic civilization be established, only through freedom and constitutional government.<sup>17</sup> It was this 'political' approach that Nursi was later most critical of. Nevertheless, his subsequent self-criticisms should not obscure the fact that all his varied activities of the period whether directed at the revival of the *medreses* of the Eastern provinces of the Empire and revitalization of the region as a whole, or his support of the constitutional movement, or of Islamic Unity and the *İttihad-ı Muhammedî Cemiyeti* (Muhammadan union) were all aimed at strengthening the unity of the Empire and Muslim world, and at urging its development and progress.<sup>18</sup>

Nursi's support for constitutionalism was not limited to the theoretical; in the early days of the 'revolution' he worked together with the *İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti* (Committee for union and progress-[CUP]), giving speeches in Istanbul and Salonica explaining these concepts, which were alien to most of the people, and persuading them of their manifold benefits. Together with this, Nursi's main concern—and because the majority of the CUP later deviated from this aim he became a strenuous opponent of them—was to emphasize the conformity of constitutionalism with the *Sharī'ah* and to insist that the *Sharī'ah* be made the basis of it.<sup>19</sup>

In virtually all of the speeches, newspaper articles, and other writings that have been preserved, Nursi uses the ideas and terminology of the liberal thought made familiar to the Ottoman intellectuals in the nineteenth century by Namık Kemal and the Young Ottomans, and their successors.<sup>20</sup> That is to say, with his speeches and articles he was attempting to familiarize the people with such concepts as constitutionalism, consultation, freedom, despotism, progress, civilization,<sup>21</sup> fatherland, and nation (*millet*). However, he always in some way links these concepts with Islam. For instance, he speaks of the sovereignty of the nation, but immediately qualifies it by saying: "our nation is only Islam."<sup>22</sup> An idea he also frequently stresses is Islamic nationhood (*İslamiyet milliyeti*), but this is to emphasize the fraternal bonds among Muslims, rather than a political entity.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, he even applied such concepts as consultation and constitutionalism to his ideas for *medrese* reform.<sup>24</sup> Another concept he adopted that was new for the Ottomans was that of 'society'<sup>25</sup> thus in his writings are found references to society (*hey'et-i iḫtimaiye*)<sup>26</sup> human society (*iḫtimaiyat-i insaniye*),<sup>27</sup> and Islamic society (*hey'et-i iḫtimaiye-i İslamiye*).<sup>28</sup>

Nursi's efforts to persuade the people of the necessity of accepting the constitutional government did not lead to any direct involvement in politics as such. In fact, in the disturbed and anarchic conditions that developed within months of the Proclamation of the Constitution, he used his influence to prevent further division and strife. This did not prevent his arrest following the revolt, blamed probably unjustly on the *İttihad-ı Muhammedî* and known as the Thirty-First of March Incident. According to the bold defense he delivered before the Court Martial, which won him his acquittal, he had joined the *İttihad-ı Muhammedî* to prevent the exploitation of "that blessed name," and in his regular contributions to the *Volkan* newspaper, the society's press organ, had emphasized its aims of reviving the Prophet's *Sunna* and initiating a widespread movement for moral renewal, "the opposite of politics."<sup>29</sup> The society hoped to arouse the consciences of Muslims to the potentials of unity and brotherhood, and to urge them down the way of progress.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, his relations with the Kurdish porters were essentially educative and aimed at enlightening them as to the meaning of constitutionalism and how they should benefit from it. He impressed on them that their threefold

enemies of “ignorance, poverty, and internal conflict” should be combated (*jihād*) with “education, industry, and unity.” He called on them to furnish, through obedience to the government, a good example to the other “elements” making up the Empire. They should not meddle in affairs of government and politics, for they did not know the rationale of government.<sup>31</sup>

Nursi felt a concern too about the politicization of the army and warned against individual soldiers joining political societies.<sup>32</sup> His addresses to the mutinying soldiers during the Thirty-First of March Incident, and newspaper articles, were instrumental in no less than eight battalions returning to barracks and obeying their officers, and thus assisted in the quelling of the revolt. The following year, 1910, Nursi published a selection of his speeches and writings under the title of ‘Nutuk.’ It was his first published work.<sup>33</sup> His defense in the Court Martial was published in 1911, with a second printing the following year.

Probably early in 1910, he returned to the east. Despite the fact that the constitutional government in Istanbul had not produced the promised fruits of ‘freedom,’ but inflicted a regime no less repressive and restrictive than the absolutism of Sultan ‘Abdülhamid, Nursi was not disillusioned with the ideas it had initially claimed to represent. In the summer of 1910, starting from Van, he toured a wide area of the wild, mountainous country informing the tribes about constitutionalism and freedom and the new government, and persuading them to accept them. He then traveled on to Damascus, where the following spring he gave his famous sermon in the Umayyad Mosque. The sermon propounds six cures from “the pharmacy of the Qur’ān” for “the sicknesses” afflicting the Muslim world, and emphasizes moral renewal. Diagnosing despair as the most serious of these sicknesses, it prescribes hope and describes how Islam is compatible with progress. On his tour, in order to encourage what Nursi called “the people’s natural proclivity for constitutionalism,” manifested in their use of debate in their *medrese* studies, he proposed that they ask questions, which he answered. Some one hundred and fifty of these he subsequently compiled into a work the Turkish version of which he published in 1913 under the title of *Münāzarat* (*Debates*). The second fruit of these journeys shows Nursi’s continuing preoccupation with the revitalization and renewal of the *medreses*, which tends to be eclipsed by his other activities. This work addressed the *ulama*. Also originally in Arabic, its Turkish version was published in 1911 as *Muhākemat* (*Reasonings*). Relevantly, Nursi later described the final part of *Münāzarat*, which sets out “some of the conditions, revenues, and fruits” of the Medresetü’z-Zehrā, his projected eastern university, as “the spirit and foundation” of the work.<sup>34</sup> It might be noted here that his ideas about educational reform were far-reaching and radical. Besides the joint teaching of the religious and modern physical sciences, already mentioned, Nursi proposed reconciling and bringing together in the Medresetü’z-Zehrā, the three main educational traditions of the time, the

*medreses* or “religious schools,” the *mektebs* or “modern secular schools,” and the Sufi *tekkes*, and the disciplines they represented. It would thus heal the rifts between them and the resultant divisions of society, which he felt had “shaken the foundations of Islamic morality and spoilt the harmony of progress.” He was also a strong advocate of students specializing in subjects for which they had an aptitude, a radical departure from established practice.<sup>35</sup>

*Muhākemat* was the first work Nursi published dealing in detail with questions related to Qur’anic exegesis, and it aimed to clarify a number of matters causing confusion in the minds of the *ulama* particularly those of his native Kurdistan. Hence its second name of *Sayqal al-Islam*. He says in the work that since his youth he had wanted to “polish up” the truths of Islam and to “dispel the doubts of the enemies of religion (*ehl-i tefrīt*)” and to “repulse the ungrounded fears of the externalists (scholars) and those who go to excess (*ehl-i ifiāt*).” In later years, he also described the work as a *tefsir mukad-demesi*,<sup>36</sup> by which he probably meant that it sets out what he considered should be the chief principles of Qur’anic exegesis. Consisting of three main sections, “The Element of Reality (*Hakikāt*),” “The Element of Rhetoric (or Eloquence-*Belāgat*),” and “The Element of Doctrine (*Akā’id*),” it is highly original both in content and style.

Some of the main questions Nursi deals with in the first section are the introduction into Islam in the guise of religion of both *Isrā’iliyyat* and ancient Greek philosophy, and the confusion these had caused to externalists (*ehl-i zāhīr*) in particular; the literalist interpretation of metaphors and figures of speech; and the conformity of Islam and reason and modern science.

Nursi lays considerable emphasis on the latter, pointing out in the pre-ambles that it was the imaginary clash between “some of the externals of Islam and some questions of science” that had not only been the chief factor preventing the complete conquest of the Shari’ah in the past, but had also induced “despair” in the present and “closed the doors of learning and civilization to the Kurds and their likes.”<sup>37</sup> He thus frequently quotes questions of science (which to the people of the present are self-evident, such as the sphericity of the earth) to illustrate his points. It should be noted too that with his use of proof (*burhān*), inductive reasoning (*istikrā’-i tām*), and logic, Nursi may be seen as attempting to introduce a form of rationalist method. He pointed out that modern science (*hikmet-i cedide*) had “completely overturned and routed that despotic Greek philosophy,” so too “the key” to the Qur’ān’s miraculousness (*īcāz*) was to be found “only in the mine of Arabic rhetoric (or eloquence), not in the workshop of Greek philosophy.” The second section then “explains a number of matters related to the spirit of eloquence.” It demonstrates Nursi’s extensive knowledge of the Arabic language and the various branches of the science of rhetoric. The third section, which was not completed at that time, offers proofs for the four main aims of the Qur’ān, the



Single Maker, prophethood, the resurrection of the dead, and justice. Many of the arguments and matters he puts forward he reiterated in his commentary *Ishārāt al-Ījāz*, and subsequently in the *Risale*, so discussion of the important points they contain will be left to those publications.

Nursi returned to Istanbul by sea from Damascus via Beirut, to join Sultan Reşad's official visit to the Balkans in June 1911 as the representative of the eastern provinces. This final Ottoman attempt to rekindle feelings of loyalty in their Balkan subjects in the face of the swelling tide of nationalism was unsuccessful, but it afforded Nursi the opportunity to elicit the promise of support for his university in the east, the Medresetü'z-Zehrâ, and the eventual allotment of funds. The foundations were even laid on the shores of Lake Van, but the project had to be abandoned on the outbreak of the First World War.

There are other indications that Nursi spent much of the years preceding the First War in Van, teaching. His expositions on a work on logic have been preserved, having been written down on the margins of the work by his student Habib.<sup>38</sup> The same year, 1913, he began work on his Qur'anic commentary *Ishārāt al-Ījāz*, as was previously mentioned. Nursi enlisted the Ottoman side entering the war, and was appointed commander of the militia forces in the eastern provinces. His students also joined his militia. Accounts of visitors to his *medrese* describe how the walls were hung with "arms and books side by side."<sup>39</sup> But such was the importance he attached to his commentary that he continued to write it, even when on the front. He was captured by the Russians in March 1916 after the fall of Bitlis, and spent two years in captivity in Russia.

Present-day scholars have commented on the exceptional quality of *Ishārāt al-Ījāz*, regarding both the subtlety of Nursi's exposition of the Qur'an's word-order (*nazm*), which in places surpasses that of the great masters of the past such as 'Abd al-Qāhir Jurjānī,<sup>40</sup> Zamakhsharī,<sup>41</sup> and his explanations of the fine grammatical points,<sup>42</sup> and his propounding the rules of rhetoric (eloquence), logic, the principles of religion, and other sciences. In his preface to the work, Nursi states that due to the Qur'an addressing all peoples in all historical periods, and the fact that "it encompasses many sciences related to the physical aspects of the world," its exegesis and interpretation should be carried out at this time by a committee of specialist scholars. He had hoped for the formation of such a committee, but the urgency he felt and his forebodings of the coming war had driven him to write down points "concerning some of the Qur'an's truths and some indications to the miraculousness of its word-order."<sup>43</sup> Composed within the framework of the Qur'an's four main aims, it is a very condensed work. Employing the sciences just mentioned, it supplies proofs and explanations of the Qur'an's miraculousness and of the main truths it teaches. No doubt it was because of this, and its discussions of man, belief, unbelief, and worship, that Nursi later said that it was the only work of the Old Said that had an important place in the *Risale*.<sup>44</sup>

As in *Muhakemat*, in addition to his direct, almost conversational style, Nursi makes wide use of logic, reasoned argument, and proof. Again he points out the conformity of the physical sciences with the Qur'an,<sup>45</sup> and frequently cites science to prove his points.<sup>46</sup> He may also be said to lay emphasis on reason (*'aql*) and on the rationality of Islam: "[The Qur'an] indicates . . . that Islam is founded on reason, wisdom (*hikmet*), and logic . . ." <sup>47</sup> "The source of Islam is knowledge (*ilm*), its basis is reason."<sup>48</sup> "The Islamic Shariah is founded on rational proofs (*burhān*)."<sup>49</sup>

As evidence for God's necessary existence and unity, Nursi uses some of the classic proofs of philosophy and *kalām*, *dalīl al-<sup>ʿ</sup>ināya*, *dalīl al-ikhtirāʿi*, and *dalīl al-imkāni*.<sup>50</sup> But not only does he again cite modern science to support the proofs, he also uses them to reply to some of the claims of Materialism and Naturalism concerning nature, the pre-eternity of matter, and so on.<sup>51</sup> He also replies to a number of doubts and queries, and shows that "since the Qur'an was revealed for all men in all ages, these questions . . . are not defects, but evidence for the Qur'an's elevated miraculousness."<sup>52</sup>

## Istanbul and the Emergence of the New Said

Nursi received a hero's welcome on his return to Istanbul (June 1918). He was awarded a war medal and appointed to the Dar'ül-Hikmeti'l-İslāmiye, an institution attached to the Shaykh al-Islam's Office and newly founded to deal with some of the many problems facing the Muslim world, which temporarily made him neglect the inner awakening the first signs of which had previously appeared.<sup>53</sup> The Ottoman defeat, which as the holders of the caliphate was interpreted by the victors as a defeat of Islam, and the final demise of the Empire and occupation by foreign forces, as well as the long years of war and captivity, had all affected Nursi deeply and taken their toll on his health.

From his own descriptions, it was "the contemplation of death (*rabīta-i mevt*) and the overwhelming realization of his own age (in fact, he was forty-five) and the transitory nature of things that sparked off the mental and spiritual crisis that was finally resolved with the emergence of the New Said.<sup>54</sup> The transformation probably began in the second half of 1920 and was completed by the end of 1921. His contemplation of death set him off on an inner journey or spiritual quest that he depicted as a journey through the earth. The subterranean tunnel down which he traveled, and then the suffocating desert, were metaphors for "the way of philosophy." He only reached the light and truth through "manifestations of verses of the All-Wise Qur'an."<sup>55</sup>

This journey, he equates with the three 'ways' symbolizing the three phrases of the final verse of *Sūrat al-Fātiḥah*. The first way, indicated by the third phrase "Nor those who go astray," symbolizes Naturalism and is the way of those "who are submerged in nature"; the second is the way of those, like the Peripatetic philosophers, who rely on reason alone and believe causes and

intermediaries possess the power to create effects; while the third way is “the luminous highway of the people of the Qur’ān,” which is “the shortest, easiest, and safest way, and open to everyone.”<sup>56</sup> In another place he puts it this way: “the sciences of philosophy with which I had filled my head had plunged my spirit into the universe, suffocating it. . . . I could not find a gleam of light in those matters. . . . So it continued until the instruction in divine unity given by . . . the All-Wise Qur’ān . . . dispersed all those layers of darkness with its brilliant light, and I could breathe with ease.”<sup>57</sup>

An indication of Nursi’s state of mind at this time was his withdrawal into solitude and immersion in the supplications and invocations of ‘Abd al-Qādir Jilānī, the Gawth al-A’zam, and other spiritual masters. One of these was *Jawshan al-kabīr*,<sup>58</sup> ascribed to the Prophet Muḥammad, which consists of the divine names and was to be a constant source of inspiration for his future works. Two works that assisted him resolve his crisis were the Gawth’s *Futūh al-ghayb* and Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindī’s *Maktubāt*. It was through the guidance of the latter that he realized that he should take the Qur’ān as his “sole guide.”<sup>59</sup>

Another dimension of Nursi’s interior journey were the fierce battles waged between himself and his “soul and Satan.” It was this intense struggle, which was waged around such phrases as “There is no god but God” and “God is most great!” that yielded a series of works setting out the various truths that were inspired in his heart and resulted in “the resounding defeat” of his soul.<sup>60</sup> These were first works of the New Said. He later put them together under the title of *al-Mathnawī al-‘arabī al-nūrī*.

In the piece called *Habbe* (A Seed) he says that these treatises were also instrumental in the smashing of two ‘idols’ with which he had been battling for thirty years. These were the ego or ‘I’ in man, and ‘nature’ in the outer world. This battle had been won on the clarification of his ideas that he expressed in terms of “four words and four phrases.” These he describes at the beginning of *Katre* (*A Droplet*), the first piece he wrote at this time, as being the only things he had learned in his forty-year lifetime and thirty years of study. The four ‘words’ are related to method. He wrote: “All things other than God, that is, the universe, should be looked at as signifying something other than themselves (*māna-yi harfī*) and on His account. It is an error to look at them as signifying only themselves (*māna-yi ismī*) and on account of causes. . . . when looking at causes, one should think of the True Causer of Causes.”<sup>61</sup> The other two ‘words’ are intention (*niyet*) and point of view (*nazar*). Concerning the latter, Nursi says that “it can transform the physical sciences into knowledge of God and impel them towards their true goal.” This concept of viewpoint is fundamental to the thought of the New Said and to his method of comprehending divine unity (*tawḥīd*) by means of the universe and its beings. Thus, when the two “idols” of the ‘I’ and nature are regarded in this way, the former becomes “shadow-like and a mirror reflecting one other than itself,” while nature becomes “divine art and a code of natural divine laws.”<sup>62</sup> This in essence,

with its inner and outer dimensions is the way of reflective thought which, through the inspiration of the Qur'an, Nursi first embarked on at this time, and that was characterized by the combining of the heart and intellect.<sup>63</sup>

Notwithstanding his long absences from Istanbul life, Nursi performed memorable services in these bitter years, both scholarly, and in combating with his writings the forces of occupation. He published at least ten works in the first three years after his return, then another seven, together with various addenda, after the birth of the New Said. It was in recognition of his services to the independence struggle that he was repeatedly invited to Ankara, the seat of the national government, but only in the last months of 1922, around the time of the Turks' victory, did he consent to go. What he found in Ankara did not meet with his expectations. For while his intention had been to assist in making the new center of government a center of Islamic civilization, he found it dominated by supporters of Westernization and secularization. He says also that he was alarmed by a current of atheism that he observed to be spreading there.<sup>64</sup>

After remaining some eight months, during which time he actively supported the cause of Islam among the deputies in the Assembly and as a result had several stormy meetings with Mustafa Kemal, he realized that the prevailing current could not be countered through politics. He had anyway turned his back on 'the world' by this time. So he left Ankara for Van (17 April 1923), where he withdrew from social life, preferring a solitary life of prayer and contemplation. Following the Shaykh Said Revolt in February 1925, he was taken into custody along with many others and sent into exile in western Anatolia. He had played no part in the revolt, in fact had strongly advised its leaders to give up their attempt; his arrest and deportation were part of the government's plans for the elimination of the ulama's influence, and even of Islam itself. The caliphate had already been abolished by this time (3 March 1924), as had the Shaykh al-Islam's Office, and the *medreses* closed. After about six months in the western Anatolian town of Burdur, Nursi was sent to the remote village of Barla in Isparta Province.

While in Burdur, Nursi started writing again. The Arabic pieces, which he later added to his *al-Mathnawī*, are largely similar to his works of three or four years previously, but rather than looking inward are also intended for the guidance of others. In fact, he subsequently incorporated many of these pieces in the *Risale*. Some of them he put together in a book that he later called *Nur'un İlk Kapısı* (The First Door of the Risale-i Nur). It was the popularity of the daily instruction he gave, probably based on these, which caused the authorities to have him moved to more isolated surroundings.

### **Barla and the *Risale***

Contrarily to what the government had intended, the remoteness of Barla and Nursi's isolation did not cause him to sink into obscurity, but provided him

with an environment conducive to thought and writing. Here, absorbed in the Qur'an, he was finally successful in deriving from it a method by which to expound its truths in a way that, while gaining for a person firm and reasoned belief, refuted the materialist philosophy with which it was planned to replace Islam, and to answer the doubts and objections it raised. In doing this he had taken the ideas set out in the first works of the New Said and developed them into an original method that addressed all classes of people. The treatises he now wrote slowly spread, with the local people secretly writing out copies, in time giving birth to a unique movement that was to save and renew the religious belief of large numbers of people, ensuring that Islam retained its life and vigor in Turkey. For the plans to entirely remodel the country along secular, Western lines were being systematically implemented.<sup>65</sup> Repressive measures were taken, even if not always sanctioned by law, to prevent the dissemination and publication of religious ideas. Initially Nursi was relatively free to roam the mountains and countryside of Barla as he wished, and it was in these surroundings that much of his writing was done. The surveillance under which he was held and the curtailment of his freedom increased proportionately to the spread of his works and to the increase in the number of his students.

Nursi's mature thought was Qur'anic both in inspiration and in respect to method. We may now attempt to examine some chief features of his method. According to Nursi, the *Risale* is a true commentary on the Qur'an's meanings (*manevi tefsir*).<sup>66</sup> This may be explained by his comments about his treatise on resurrection, the Tenth Word, the first treatise he wrote in the spring of 1926. He said that it "consists of a few droplets filtered from hundreds of verses. And the rest of the treatises [of the *Risale*] are all like that."<sup>67</sup> That is, he extracted the meanings of hundreds of verses, rather than expounding the words and sentences they comprise. He says too that the *Risale* was "inspired directly from the Qur'an."<sup>68</sup> and "issued from the Qur'an."<sup>69</sup>

The question of viewpoint just mentioned, and the 'significant meaning' of things (*mana-yi harfi*) in particular, is essentially Qur'anic. For example, in *Ishārāt al-İjāz* he explains that the Qur'an mentions beings "not for themselves, but for another. That is, it speaks of the universe as evidence for (or to "deduce", *istidlāl*) Almighty God's existence, unity, and sublimity."<sup>70</sup> While in *The Flashes* he says: "According to the Qur'anic view, all the beings in the universe are letters, expressing through their 'significant meaning' the meaning of another. That is, they make known the names and attributes of that Other. Soulless philosophy for the most part looks in accordance with the 'nominal meaning' and deviates into the bog of nature."<sup>71</sup>

It is clear from this why Nursi should have made such frequent use of the descriptive metaphor of the universe as "a book." For seen in this way, it does indeed take on the form of a book the purpose of which is to be 'read' and understood. With its verses about the divine activity in the universe, the Qur'an is

thus “the expounder” and “interpreter” of the book of the universe, and the universe itself, by expressing the same meanings in physical form, becomes an embodied Qur’ān. The Qur’ān instructs man on how to read the words of beings “inscribed by the pen of power” on its pages.<sup>72</sup> The reading and comprehension of its words in turn expound or lead to deeper understanding of the Qur’ān’s verses, demonstrating the complementary relationship between them.

One who adopts this approach therefore may discover the reality of the universe, in distinction to “natural philosophy or science,” which ignoring the meanings, has “plunged into the decorations of the letters and their relationships, and losing its way has deviated from the path of reality.” This is an example of the ‘comparisons’ Nursi draws on various levels between the wisdom (*hikmet*) of the Qur’ān and the wisdom of philosophy and science, to show the truth and validity of the Qur’ān and its viewpoint, and the invalidity of the latter.

Observing the beings in the universe in the way just described, that is, interpreting them in the light of the Qur’ān, Nursi discloses numerous truths about the universe and man, and their purposes and functions, and from these deduces very many proofs of, and arguments for, what he calls “the truths of belief.” These truths, the divine existence and unity, and attributes and names, the resurrection of the dead, prophethood, and others, are thus seen to be the logical conclusion of the Qur’anic view of the universe. The main tenets of belief are not therefore abstract facts divorced from life and reality, that a believer has to assimilate from ‘outside’; they are living truths that spring naturally out of existence itself, of which man himself is a part.

Proofs of the divine existence and unity do not feature particularly in the works of the Old Said; what discussions there are, are based on the classic proofs known as *dalīl al-‘ināya* and *dalīl al-ikhtirā*, that were already mentioned. Emphasizing the order (*nizām*) of the universe on the one hand, on the other hand they aim to disprove in summary fashion evolution, the pre-eternity of matter, the formation of beings from the motion of particles, nature as creative power, and causality, the mainstays of the materialist philosophy that was being propagated in Turkey from the end of the nineteenth century. The focusing on the truths of belief and their detailed proof and exposition in the manner just described form the major difference between the two periods, and was demanded by the vacuum left by the disestablishment of Islam and ban on all forms of religious education. Nevertheless, some arguments and ideas—concerning the fundamental truths of belief—that appear in summary form in the earlier works, are expanded and reused in the proofs of the *Risale*, while a few others are transposed with little change. Investigation of these will assist in illustrating how his thought developed.

An example of the former is the proof called *tema’*,’ which in *Muhāke-mat* is said to “lie hidden in the shell of the verse, ‘If there were in the heavens and earth other gods besides God, there surely would have been confusion in

both” (21:22) and to be a proof of the fact that “independence is an inherent divine quality.”<sup>73</sup> In the wartime commentary *Ishārāt al-İjâz* there is passing mention of the proof; it is merely noted that it is sufficient evidence for the Maker’s unity and independence.<sup>74</sup> When it comes to the *Risale*, however, in some places the verse is interpreted in the same way, without naming the proof but with a page or so of explanation, and it is cited together with numerous other proofs of divine unity.<sup>75</sup> The lengthiest exposition of the verse, in the First Stopping-Place of the Thirty-Second Word, is worth mentioning since it illustrates a number of other important characteristics of the *Risale*: the use of allegory and explanation of sometimes obscure or unfamiliar truths in an easily accessible manner, and the incorporation of modern scientific knowledge.

According to Nursi, the allegories he uses in the *Risale*, which are mostly in the form of allegorical comparisons (*kiyas-ı temsili*), are a type of analogy that constitutes powerful proofs.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, they are essentially Qur’anic, being “a single ray from the comparisons of the Qur’ân.” Like telescopes, they bring close the most distant truths, leading to certain belief, and compelling “the intellect, as well as the imagination and fancy, and the soul and caprice all to submit.”

In the piece here, the allegory is another example of a comparison between ‘philosophy’ and Qur’anic wisdom. It is in the form of a conversation between the representative of the worshipers of nature and causes and the successive beings from a minute particle, red-blooded corpuscle, cell of the body, and so on, up to the globe, the sun, and then the stars. These beings all speak “on behalf of truth and reality, and with the tongue of wisdom,” rebutting with descriptions of their functions and the attributes these necessarily entail the representative’s claims of ownership and mastery over them. They thus prove through their interrelation, order, and functions that God is One and without partner.

The highly original method here allows Nursi to combine biological and other scientific facts and the truths of religion in a way that was not achieved in the works of the Old Said, although his stated aim was to ‘blend’ (*imtizâc*) them.<sup>77</sup> For there, as previously shown in the discussion of *Ishārāt al-İjâz*, the findings of science are merely shown to support and be evidence for, certain cosmic facts mentioned in the Qur’ân, such as the universe’s order and its “fruits.” The long footnote in the First Stopping-Place furnishes a further example of how as the New Said he combines these two sorts of knowledge. Another example, which will illustrate this important point further, is the Sixth Topic from the Eleventh Ray, where again making use of allegory it is shown how the sciences “continuously speak of God and make known the Creator, each in its own particular tongue.”

An example of proofs from the Old Said’s works that Nursi reused in the *Risale* with little change, are a series of ten proofs of the resurrection of the

dead that are based on such matters as the order in the universe, the wisdom and purposes followed in beings, and the absence of futility and absence of waste. These appear first in concise form at the end of *Muhākemat*,<sup>78</sup> then in more expanded form in *Ishārāt al-İjāz*,<sup>79</sup> in similar form in *Nokta*, first published in 1919,<sup>80</sup> and finally with little alteration in the Twenty-Ninth Word of the *Risale*.<sup>81</sup> However, Nursi points out that while in the Tenth Word about resurrection, “arguments are set forth that raise the heart to the level of perfect belief,” the proofs he reuses from his early works are “in the manner of the Old Said’s explanations . . . which convince and silence the reason only.”

The Tenth Word evidently held great importance for Nursi, for there are many more references to it in his writings than to any other part of the *Risale*. It was the first treatise in which he used a type of reflective thought (*tefekkiir*) that is based on the divine names and is a form of deductive reasoning, and that he subsequently used widely in the *Risale*.<sup>82</sup> It is most likely the combination of the allegory in the first part of the treatise, the persuasive style and manner of presentation, and the convincing arguments based on the divine names that led Nursi to claim that it “raised the heart to the level of perfect belief.” It should also be mentioned that Nursi coined a new term to refer to this kind of knowledge: “the sciences of belief (*ulūm-u imāniye*),”<sup>83</sup> by virtue of which a person could attain perfect belief, or “certain, verified belief (*imān-ı tahkiki*),” the sort of belief Nursi was aiming to gain for people. It is discussed further in the next section. The evidence for the hereafter of around thirty of the divine names is offered in different form in the Seventh Topic of the Eleventh Ray, written in Denizli Prison in 1944–1945.

The *Risale*’s method of setting out proofs of the truths of belief, particularly its proofs of the divine existence and unity, is also an effective way of disproving the concepts underlying materialist philosophy, such as nature and causality. According to this, the exposition of aspects of the universe’s ‘reality’ that forms the proofs very often disproves those concepts, but without mentioning them in detail. This is a departure from the former practice of the *ulama*, which was to set out the opponent’s arguments and then to demolish them. Nursi says that his intention in doing this is to avoid causing aversion.<sup>84</sup> One might add that being a popular work, the *Risale* would demand such an approach.

An example is the section about the third of the six ‘greatest names,’ *Hakem*, or “Sapient”, as Nursi interprets it:

Yes, one page of this mighty book is the face of the earth. Books to the number of the plant and animal species are to be observed on this page in the spring, one within the other, together, at the same time, without error, in most perfect form. A single line of the page is a garden. . . . One word of the line is a tree . . . in all its blossoms and fruits is a balance. The balance is within an order, and the order is within an ordering and balancing which are being constantly renewed.



The ordering and balancing are within an art and adornment, and the adornment and art are within meaningful scents and wise tastes. . . . And in the tree, which is a word, the point of a seed in a fruit—like a letter—is a small coffer containing the index and programme of the whole tree. . . . To continue the analogy, through the manifestation of the Names of Sapient and Wise, all the lines and pages of the book of the universe—and not only its lines, but all its words, letters, and points—have been made such miracles that if all causes were to gather together, they could make not a single point, nor could they dispute it. . . . in no way could confused chance, blind force, aimless, anarchic, unconscious nature interfere in that wise, percipient particular balance and most sensitive order. If they had interfered, some traces of confusion would certainly be apparent. Whereas no disorder is to be seen anywhere.<sup>85</sup>

The method is effective here, then, because by describing the orderly and purposeful processes of the natural world, one within the other, to which through familiarity and heedlessness one usually fails to give due attention, it persuades the reader of the necessity of their being the work of a Single Wise Maker; then indicating briefly the absurdity and irrationality of ‘philosophy’s’ explanations settles the matter, as it were. Nursi also wrote an independent treatise refuting Naturalism, which he included in the *Risale* as the Twenty-Third Flash.<sup>86</sup> There are also sections besides this that convincingly disprove causality.<sup>87</sup>

It will be useful here to explain briefly Nursi’s usage of the term *philosophy*. The term is used loosely in the *Risale*, and usually pejoratively. There are two reasons for this: first is its frequent use in reference to the materialist philosophies, including materialism, naturalism, and positivism, which originated in Europe and were introduced into Turkey in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were then propagated by a small number of disaffected intellectuals who, as supporters of Westernization, used them together with science to attack and discredit Islam, which accounts for Nursi’s hostile attitude toward them. Positivism, together with nationalism, was later adopted by Turkey’s new leaders and made the ideological basis of the state. The second main usage of the term is more general and refers to philosophy as a science or art, and, as the philosophical tradition. This is how it is used in the Thirtieth Word, for example, from where it is seen that for it to become a valid means of ascertaining truth or “reaching reality,” it has to follow divine revelation. That is to say, if Nursi condemns philosophy in this sense, it is because it has not submitted to revelation, therefore yielding results harmful for humanity. This explains his severe judgment of such geniuses as Ibn Sina and Farabi.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, he did feel constrained by the mid-1940s, when he was attracting students from among the teachers and pupils of the new secular schools, to differentiate between “the harmful philosophy” that the *Risale* attacked, and that which “serves human society and ethics, and man’s achievements,” and is “reconciled with the Qur’an.”<sup>89</sup>

This understanding of philosophy represents another main difference between the Old and New Suids, and was one of the fruits of his ‘discovery’ of the Qur’anic significant viewpoint. A brief look at the question of reason or intellect may explain it further. As was just noted Nursi emphasized in his early works the rationality of Islam and the conformity between the physical sciences and the Qur’an. When it comes to the New Said, however, his position is subtly changed. It is not that reason is demoted and loses its high status but that with the understanding that came to him of the human ‘I and its relation to its Maker and hence to His Word,—that is, when it is seen as merely “mirror-like” and as signifying its Maker—with submission to, and recognition of, revelation as God’s Word, the true nature of the reason is understood and it may perform its function correctly. Thus, Nursi defines the reason or intellect as “an instrument” that when used on account of “its True Owner [i.e., according to its significant meaning] . . . may unlock the endless treasuries of mercy in the universe, and all the vaults of wisdom.”<sup>90</sup> That is, it may gain an understanding of the world as it is in reality. It is because of this that together with the extensive use of logic and rational proofs in the *Risale*, and the fact that there is virtually no statement in the work that is unsupported by reasoned argument, Nursi condemns those “philosophers” who rely on reason alone.<sup>91</sup>

A few final points about the *Risale’s* way of ‘reality’ are illustrated by its comparison with Sufism, and with the science of *kalām*. Nursi was not opposed to Sufism; like in other matters that have been the cause of dispute and disunity in the Muslim *umma* he took a moderate stand; his view was that “the present age is not the age of the *ṭarīqa*.”<sup>92</sup> Of the various reasons for this, perhaps the most important was the failure of the *ṭarīqa* to withstand the assaults of “the misguided philosophical currents,” which he attributes to their either denying the true existence of the universe, or else being oblivious of it. Whereas the All-Wise Qur’an and the *Risale*, which follows it—“releases [the universe] from its purposelessness and employs it in Almighty God’s name, [so that] everything becomes a mirror yielding knowledge of God.”<sup>93</sup>

These are some main aspects of the method Nursi derived from the Qur’an, by means of which he “employed” the universe in God’s name, thereby gaining for those who follow that method, “certain, verified belief.” It is interesting to see that despite his criticisms of *kalām*—among other things, he says that because the scholars of *kalām* preferred reason to revelation, they had been unable “to express with clarity even ten of the Qur’an’s verses, or prove them”—<sup>94</sup> he places the *Risale* firmly in the *medrese* tradition:

Through their good works, worship, spiritual journeying, and asceticism, the people of sainthood [the Sufis] observed reality and the truths of belief from behind veils. The *Risale* however has opened up a way to reality within knowledge (*ilm*) in place of worship; it has opened up a way to the essence of reality through

logical proofs and scholarly arguments in place of spiritual journeying and recitations; it has opened up a direct way of 'greater sainthood' within the sciences of *kalām*, and 'aqida and *uṣūl al-dīn* in place of the sciences of Sufism and the *ṭarīqa* and thus it prevails over the misguided philosophical currents that have defeated the *ṭarīqa* and Sufi movements of this century."

Because the belief of the mass of believers had been only "imitative," they had wavered in the face of the attacks of atheistic science. The *Risale* had therefore become "an invincible fortress," defending their belief and saving them from doubts concerning Islam's veracity.<sup>95</sup>

It is worth recalling that the source of the *Risale's* strength here lies in the nature of the knowledge it contains. It is a way of knowledge (*ilm*), that is, intellectual knowledge, but it also contains "the sciences of belief (*ulūm-u imāniyye*)" and "the sciences by which one may attain certain, verified belief (*imān-ı tahkiki ilimler*)." According to Nursi, these sciences "do not resemble other sciences and knowledge (*ilimler ve maarifler*); they are the sustenance and lights of man's subtle inner faculties, besides his intellect."<sup>96</sup> That is to say, the knowledge of the *Risale* pertains to both the reason and the heart or intuitive faculties, so that the belief gained through it may infuse the whole human being, affording it an unshakable firmness and strength: "This sort of certain, verified belief does not stop at just the mind; it spreads to both the heart, and the spirit, and the inner heart, and to such subtle inner faculties becoming rooted there, that Satan's hand cannot reach it."<sup>97</sup>

It has been suggested by contemporary scholars<sup>98</sup> that with the *Risale*, Nursi created a new science of *kalām*, relevant to the particular needs of the present. Although Nursi does not generally express the purpose and function of the *Risale* in those terms, from this reference and from others scattered through his writings, it seems that with the new Qur'anic method he developed, by means of which he put forward rational proofs for all the main tenets of belief and other questions with which *kalām* was concerned, he considered the *Risale* to be a new form of that discipline within its general function of the renewal of belief.

In reply to one of his students who had written asking for instruction in *kalām*, he said: "You anyway receive such instruction. All the *Words* [parts of the *Risale*] . . . are lessons in that luminous, true science of *kalām*."<sup>99</sup> Another explicit statement is found in the preface to *Zeyl ül-Habab* (first published in 1923), but is in reference to the eight Arabic treatises that were the first works of the New Said. Here he says that it would be possible by arranging and elucidating these treatises, to "deduce from them a powerful, well-founded new work on the tenets of belief (*'aqā'id al-imāniyyah*) and science of *kalām*, in order to refute the currents of misguided thought of these times."<sup>100</sup> And in another place, he explains that the *Risale* had opened up and demonstrated that within the *medrese* was "a shorter way to the lights of reality [than in the

Sufi *tekke*] . . . within knowledge, the truths of belief, and the Sunnis' science of *kalām*."<sup>101</sup>

Certainly, his proofs of God's necessary existence, unity, attributes and names, bodily resurrection, and 'divine determining' or predestination, about which he wrote an independent treatise, the Twenty-Sixth Word, are particularly noteworthy. Brief mention has been made of the first matter. Concerning divine determining and humans' will, Nursi claimed to have solved "in two pages . . . so that everyone can understand" this problem, which had not been completely clarified even for advanced scholars by the leading *kalām* scholars of the past.<sup>102</sup> Be that as it may, certainly his proofs based on the "creational signs" of the universe are easily comprehensible and most convincing.<sup>103</sup> Thus, what Nursi did with the science of *kalām* was to release it from the narrow confines of the *medrese*, reformulate it in view of the deviant currents of thought of the present age, and address it to ordinary believers so that their thinking might be rectified, their belief renewed, and society might be reformed.

## The Beginnings of the Risale-i Nur Movement

The Risale-i Nur movement [henceforth referred to as the *Nur* movement], or a better word might be *fellowship*, is inextricably linked with the *Risale* itself, having slowly taken form as it was being written. Here, rather than giving a chronological account of the movement's growth over the twenty-five years of single-party rule, attempt will be made to describe a few brief facts about its formation, and some main points concerning its character and functions as they reflect Nursi's ideas.

When Nursi arrived in the small village of Barla in early 1926 he had no means at his disposal whatsoever. Only by degrees did he attract any students or assistants. Of these, those with sufficient education acted as scribes, writing down the pieces he dictated, which then began to spread among the local people. Again, those who could, recognizing the usefulness of these writings, wrote copies, and passed them onto others. In this way, Nursi's writings began to be disseminated throughout the area. Among these first students were people from various walks of life, willing to spend their limited time and resources on writing out the treatises, so that by 1935 and the roundup and arrests of some one hundred twenty of them prior to the trials and imprisonment in Eskisehir, they were being written out clandestinely in hundreds of households in the province of Isparta and beyond. This was the beginning of the *Nur* movement.

A novel aspect of this incipient movement was its being centered on a body of writing rather than on its author or interpreter.<sup>104</sup> In fact, Nursi considered himself to be a student of the *Risale* the same as the others. It is difficult to say whether or not he foresaw the growth of such a movement in this