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Faith, Freedom and the Human Vocation

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I

THE LAMP OF BELIEF

(The illumination of the soul)

For those of us non-Moslems who have recently been introduced to Sa'id Nursi, his writings are enlightening. The more I read of his thought, the more attracted to him I become. His views and concepts should especially resonate with Orthodox Christians whose formation is rooted in the spiritual milieu of the near and Middle East.

Had I been able personally to dialogue with Nursi, I should want to have begun with a discussion of "relationships as the manifestation of belief and faith." When we in the Orthodox Christian community speak of "energies," this is precisely what we are referring to, so let me begin with a few words about energy as relationship. In both physics and Orthodox theology, this is the essential meaning of "energy." "Energy" is the manner in which our inner person relates to God and to other human beings. The uncreated energy of God is the manner in which He establishes His relationship with us. We call this uncreated energy of God "grace." The energy with which we establish our relationship with God, we refer to as "faith." Faith is a higher fruit of "belief," for belief opens our hearts toward God so that we can receive the illumination of faith by means of grace. Our energies form the mode in which we relate to other human beings, and this relationship is truly appropriate only when we have a vital relationship with God.

In the **Signs of the Miraculous**¹, if I understand Nursi correctly, he tells us that belief in God shines a light into our minds that allows us to seek a reconciliation with our own conscience. Belief is ultimately a gift to those who seek it. Once established in us, belief — which has opened for us the possibility of a relationship with God — provides us with consolation in the face of adversity, and the strength to endure even in the midst of suffering.

In the Orthodox context, we would refer to this light or lamp of consolation in belief as "the Holy Spirit." Though we express this gift in different forms, the end result, the "relationship" is the same. Here, then, we begin to see the fount of loving dialogue. Nursi would lead our souls to the green pastures that are ever verdant even when the world around us is perishing from spiritual drought and desiccation. This is a quest which is mutual for both Orthodoxy and Islam.

¹

. V3, p.50.

II. THE ILLUMINATION OF ÎMÂN/FAITH (Faith rather than religion)

My first teacher, the late Father John Romanides once said that "religion is a neurobiological illness and Orthodoxy is its cure." He said this with the actual meaning of Orthodoxy in mind — "right belief and proper praise of God." Having read from the writings of Nursi, I suspect that he would have agreed. Experience teaches us that there are many people who are very "religious," but yet have no living faith. They believe "about God," but not "in God." They have a knowledge, but do not have a relationship.

It appears to me that, in his *Letters* and *The Rays*, Nursi has something of the same conclusion. "Faith," he says, "is not gained only through knowledge."² Nursi tells us that we must metabolise knowledge in the soul, just as we metabolise food in the body. Each of our faculties must receive this spiritual nourishment in order for Faith to grow up within us.

Any form of religion can be established in the mind through only a minute amount of knowledge. Such religion can be idolatry, animism or any form of superstition, as well as Judaism, Islam or Christianity. That knowledge may never grow enough to lead one away from idolatry or superstition and toward a living Faith in the One True God Who created the heavens and the earth. I understand Nursi to be telling us that "head knowledge" is not fruitful unless it becomes "heart knowledge." So belief in God opens us to a relationship with Him, and by His illumining grace we gain knowledge and must allow it to be spiritual food that nourishes our faculties into a living and vital Faith.

Faith is above religion. We do not seek religion, rather we seek a vital relationship with God, that is manifest within us as the gift of a living Faith. It is upon a solid relationship with God that a proper relationship with humanity can be founded. Belief is a relationship with God, and Faith is a gift of the Illumination of the Divine Light that shines into us because of that relationship.

“God suffices for us.” “My grace is sufficient for thee.”

When I hear Nursi assuring us that “God is sufficient for all things,” I am reminded of Paul’s assurance of God’s promise that “my Grace is sufficient for you.” It is important to the quality of our lives and to our psychological well-being that we not only remember but also repeat this promise regularly, as Nursi himself does when he speaks in *The Flashes* and *The Rays* of the *Luminous Verse*, “for us God suffices.” Here again is a foundation stone upon which we can build our dialogue.

Again the words of this great teacher, bequeathed to us in his magnificent *Risale-i Nur*, resonate deeply with us when he describes the source of man’s value. Man’s value rests in

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. Letter 26, *The Letters*, p. 389.

the fact that God, the supreme Artisan, made him. We are reminded of the “Prayer of Entry” in the liturgy of the Orthodox Church which proclaims, “have mercy on us O God... for we are all the works of Thy hand and we call upon Thy name.” The substance of which we are made is perishable, Nursi says, and has very little intrinsic worth. What God did with this material is what gives it value.

In the same vein, then, true virtue is what man makes with the abilities that God has given to him. God has made us with a desire and an ability to believe, and He has embedded this possibility even in our brains. This gift, given to all mankind, places upon us certain responsibilities. The ability to believe makes it possible for us to have a relationship with God, but this relationship is not equal. We, being in this relationship, are obliged to be obedient to God and to strive for true virtue. We cannot maintain this relationship by doing nothing because we have the obligation to become artisans ourselves and fashion our virtues from the gifts and abilities, and the commandments, that God has given us.

In our dialogue with the teachings of Sa’id Nursi, we must ask each other, “what is virtue and how do we rise to it?” and then, “what are the responsibilities that belief and its illumination place upon us, and how do we rise to them?” The first answer is given by Nursi, “for us God suffices,” assuring us that God is sufficient for all things. Indeed, how could we begin to think of seeking true virtue while we live in the midst of a broken and infirm humanity and in a shattered, disunited and violent world? In the midst of grief and sorrow – and not just grief and sorrow about our own sufferings and difficulties, but also a grief over the condition of humanity – where do we find the strength, the comfort and the consolation that we need? “God suffices for us,” Nursi reminds us. In the face of all hardships, disappointments, sorrows, and even the ridicule of those who have no understanding, and in the face of our own inner fears, uncertainty and infirmity, God suffices for all things. In his wisdom, which is born of his own relationship with God, Nursi gives us hope and encouragement with these simple words, “God suffices for us.”

III

MAN AS MICROCOSM

Crucial to our dialogue is Nursi’s idea of man as microcosm. Such a concept places a unique vocation upon man that can be fulfilled only through belief and worship. John of Damascus and other teachers of the Orthodox community have expressed this idea directly. Man is a microcosm of the universe because he is composed of all of its elements. Man alone is both physical, spiritual and intellectual. He has been fashioned by the divine Artisan from the same elements as the rest of the universe, but on man alone did God bestow an intelligent soul. Man was given the desire and ability to know God and have a relationship with him through belief. It would appear that God has intended for those who believe to be a point of unity for all of his creation. If we are such a microcosm, then of all creation we are the most able to worship our Creator. Indeed, we can offer our worship on behalf of all creation.

Worship of God should not, however, be seen as only those times when we are called to prayer. We are called upon to walk in faith throughout our lives, and this means that our moral lives are also a form of worship. To have a positive regard and care for all that God has created is also a part of our worship of the great Artisan who has created them. If I properly understand this concept in the thought of Sa'id Nursi, then we should clearly have this theme for one of our dialogues with the *Risale-i Nur*. First of all, we can agree together that man is a microcosm, and that this fact calls us to a unique vocation. That vocation involves prayerful and humble efforts to work together for the healing of wounded humanity and the shattered world in which we live and which we know is also the work of God's own hand, as we pray in the Prayer of Entry, "we are all the work of Thy hands, and upon Thy name do we call..." "God is sufficient for us."

IV MAN AS INDIVIDUAL (The individual in society)

Sa'id Nursi was a profound theologian and faithful to Islam and he has made clear his deep devotion to the Qur'an. While Nursi would doubtless like to see all people become part of the Islamic Ulema, he clearly does not desire to see the individual reduced to only an object in the communal landscape. Nursi has far too much reverence for the artisanship of God not to respect the individual human person.

One of Nursi's students, Fethullah Gulen, has expressed this importance of the individual. It is the individual who must enter into the relationship with God through belief for it cannot be said that one has the illumination of the faith simply by belonging to a community. While Nursi speaks of metabolising knowledge in order to have actual faith, Gulen emphasises that attaching importance to individuals is possible by educating them and as Nevval Sevindi says, "only thus can a person blossom." Nazim Hikmet gives us a lovely metaphor which will, I believe, express the concept which both Nursi and Gulen wish to impart to us with regard to the relationship between the individual and the community. Hikmet says that he desires to "live free and single like a tree and in brotherhood like a forest." One is reminded that in Islamic mysticism the individual is referred to as "Allah's rose of beauty." A forest is not beautiful unless the individual trees in it are beautiful just as a society is not beautiful just because it exists. Societies and communities are the works of man but the individual is the work of God.

Nursi sees the individual as a miraculous work of divine art to whom two roads are open: the way to infinite ascent and the way to infinite descent, as he says in *The Rays*. Paving the road to infinite descent, he indicates hatred, the root of violence. It is only in the recognition of the individual that we can see man's potentialities. In Nursi's *Sunubat* he says, "man's potentialities and subtle faculties are not limited like those of the animals, and this may

lead narcissistic people with inflated, self-loving egos, who exist only for themselves and who act at the behest of their desires and caprices to behave wildly and aggressively.”³ To this, Mustafa Ulusoy correctly adds, “in other words, both constructive, disciplined behaviour and such attributes as compassion and kindness, and [conversely] unlimited destruction may result from man’s comprehensive capabilities.” Man is such a comprehensive creature that there are few limits to both the good and the evil that he is capable of. Thus we see that the individual is of great importance not only because of the natural freedom that he manifests, but also because every society and every community is composed of individuals who may enhance or undermine that group. The illumination, education and encouragement of each individual to move along the road of ascent is necessary not only in order to fulfil God’s work of art, but also for the survival of the group. Like Hikmet’s free-living tree in the brotherhood of the forest, while the structure of the forest impacts upon the trees, it is the trees that create the forest. To reverence the individual in the midst of a society requires sincere compassion, since it entails overlooking human weaknesses and being tolerant of differences.

Allow me to express an Orthodox concept of the relationship between the individual and mankind in general. I believe that by doing this we can see yet another avenue for fruitful dialogue between Orthodoxy and the theology and world view of Sa’id Nursi.

An Orthodox Concept of “the Individual.”

In philosophy in general, "essence" is more or less an abstraction while "existence" is more concrete. However, in Orthodox thought we use the term essence in a concrete way. With regard to man, essence signifies what is common to all and subject to the laws of nature, and we refer to this essence as "the human nature." All human beings belong to this one single nature of mankind, and this demonstrates the unity in which God created us. If man had only this common human nature and nothing else, then he could not be an individual, nor could he have personal responsibility, and he could not develop, through belief and faith, his vital relationship with God. Clearly then, we will not be able to adequately express the difference between the general essence of man and particular being of an individual person without introducing the ontological category of *hypostasis*. There could be no freedom without *self*. There must be a personhood capable of self-determination, for only in this way can we distinguish a free action from a mechanical reaction. We denote this personhood as *hypostasis*, and this expression is used to indicate the particular essence of the individual person as opposed to the general essence of humanity — the "human nature."

We are human because we are of that human nature. If the human nature was not single, that is, if there was not but one nature of all mankind which all humanity has in common and is shared by all, then we would have to understand human nature, not as an actual essence, but as an abstract concept. Not only would this have no existential dimension,

³. Nursi on hatred as the root of violence, in *Spiritual Dimensions of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi’s Risale-i Nur*. (Ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi) (State University of New York Press, 2008) p.193

but it could not provide any basis for conceiving that God created a single humanity and not the human individual as an isolated entity.

Nevertheless, let us, for the moment, create an apparent contradiction. If we speak of the "essence of humanity" as an abstraction in which the individual has no personal freedom, no authentic, independent personhood, we would still have an abstract idea with no existential content. We therefore can speak of essence only in the context of what is truly common in man, not what one becomes or forms from his own qualities. It is *hypostasis* that relates to what I might become and includes my personal differentiation and particularity. Our *hypostasis* signifies our freedom from nature or essence and our ability to rise above it through the illumination of faith and the Grace of God. From an Orthodox Christian point of view, this approach states that we come to know God in relation to our own being, our own awareness of our existence in the universe. It also signifies our God-given ability to pursue a moral mode of life in a genuine relationship with God. Seen in this light, one could suggest that the stuff (my intelligence, my will, my substance) out of which I make my personal self must arise from my being as an individual. Following this concept, what I will become is my personal being, how I will become that relates to my energies. My "Energy" is what I do with the "stuff" out of which I make my essential self.

I cannot move on without stipulating that the meaning of the "fallen nature" is essentially a proclivity to habitually misuse our energies. It is not some pan-human substratum or "entity" which has become totally depraved or evil. Man should have fulfilled a vocation as a unifying element in nature, for he is not only its crown, but the microcosm of creation, possessing within himself both its spiritual and physical dimensions. This vocation could only have been fulfilled through unselfish love and the absence of egoism. This would have constituted a proper use of man's energies. The fall really constitutes this proclivity to habitually misuse our energies, not the loss of them. If we had lost our *hypostasis*, our "personhood," and energies, if we were bound by a universal nature or essence subject to the laws of nature and had this only, then we might be bound irrevocably to the whole with little personal freedom. We might be bound to instinctive or automatic behaviour, even while our intellect carried our social structures forward. Since, as I have explained, we also have that particular essence which we call *hypostasis*, we also have moral freedom and a free will to act in ways which contradict or even oppose the common human nature or essence. We have the capacity of belief, faith and real spiritual ascent.

This is another matter about which I would have desired to dialogue with Nursi.

V MAN AS FREE MORAL BEING

If there was no [free] will, there could be no accountability (Sa'id Nursi).⁴

Sa'id Nursi certainly believed that man had the exercise of free will, at least in spiritual matters. I am not certain, but from as much as I have read of the thought of Bediuzzaman Sa'id Nursi, it would seem that he was well aware of those things that might limit the exercise of our free will. Having been in prison more than once, Nursi would also certainly have been aware of the inner freedom that one can have even while being deprived of his physical freedom. One is also inclined to think that Nursi had the wisdom and intensity of spirit to learn, grow and develop while in prison, and perhaps also to gain in compassion from his experiences.

The great Russian existentialist author Fyodor Dostoevsky was in prison in Siberia when he came to fully believe in God and turn toward the Orthodox Christian faith. He had been deprived of all worldly freedom both political and personal. He had not, however, been denied that free will which is in the very nature of mankind. Someone might assert, with reasonable cause, that our free will is crippled by the fallen condition of our nature, but no one can refute the fact that we do have free will. Dostoevsky came to believe precisely because he saw clear evidence of the essential goodness of humanity under the most dire and dehumanizing of circumstances.

When I speak of freedom to choose, I am not talking about political freedom or the spiritual freedom of *apathea*, nor am I speaking of the "glorious freedom of God's children" that Apostle Paul speaks of to the Romans. All these things are attained to by the faithful who, in the illumination of sincere belief, cooperate with divine grace and struggle toward them. I really am speaking about maintaining an inner freedom which allows us to exercise our free will in making essential choices to be for or against God, to honour moral values or reject them. Such decisions to exercise our free will take place within, in the depths of our being. It is possible to compromise such freedom, but we cannot claim not to have free will, no matter how we choose to exercise it.

The purposeful exercise of our inner moral freedom may be curtailed by all kinds of forces, the hypothalamus being chief among them, followed by temptations of Satan. Even our educational system can curtail the proper exercise of this freedom by confusing us about right and wrong, good and evil. The media certainly confuse the activity of our moral freedom by obfuscating the atmosphere in which free will decisions are taken. We advocate being aware of these things and having some idea what to do to free ourselves from certain influences to a level that we can exercise our free will to the greatest degree possible.

⁴. First Point, Fifth Ray in *The Rays*.

In the absence of political freedom, people have maintained an inner freedom, within themselves by becoming insulated in their souls from the forces which coerced their outward actions. These people have had freedom to exercise free will in a way that people who were overcome in spirit by these forces have not had.

Freedom which is not impinged by authorities who force upon one at least external compliance with a value system or religion is desirable, but even with external social or peer pressure, freely coming into accord with faith in the Living God is possible. It is a matter of the conscience, the "spiritual heart of man" rather than of an outward compliance hiding an inner indifference or even rejection.

As there can be no responsibility without freedom, so there also can be no authentic faith without freedom. We can believe *in* something in some passive or indifferent way but we cannot have a saving faith without making a free decision to have a committed belief and faith in God. A little later, I will assert that love without commitment is a lie; now I assert that faith without commitment is a delusion.

The catastrophe of "state religions" is sufficient to inform us that religion, faith and belief can be mere cultural affectations. Even without an official state religion, religion can become a cultural affectation.

Like authentic morality, faith cannot be coerced or forced. External compliance can be compelled, but there is no benefit without a full accord of the heart with the faith. Having a religion forced upon you or being compelled to fulfil its outward obligations is ultimately more conducive to indifference than to a sincere, heartfelt accord—a living, vital faith which leads to inner transformation of the heart.

It is really a denial of human free will to attempt to make people observe a given religion by means of coercion, force, fear, compulsion, all of which may obtain an outward conformity, but an inward resentment and rejection. It cannot produce actual faith, it cannot make one actually believe. Faith is a matter of an orientation of the soul, not a concord with a collection of "facts" or an exercise of external behaviour.

Morality and Freedom:

I am going to assert that *true morality consists in how well we care for one another, not what sort of behaviour we impose on one another.*

Correct behaviour can be demanded and enforced by law or strong social pressure. I might even go so far as to say that *external moral behaviour* can be enforced or coerced, but morality itself cannot. I agree with Ortega that the very existence of a state naturally curtails aspects of our freedom because the state of necessity enforces whatever concepts of behaviour are necessary for its survival, or more particularly, whatever concepts are to the best advantage of the most powerful classes in a given state.⁵

⁵. Jose Ortega y Gasset, *Concord and Liberty*. (The Norton Library, N.Y., 1963. Tr. Helene Weyl) pp.33-38.

Let me specify that I am speaking of the authentic morality which is part of our struggle for salvation, for the state of dispassion and internal purification, not a legalistic code of morality or collective "herd" behaviour. Moralism and "herd behaviour" can, in fact, be the result of psychiatric disorders. Legalistic moral codes have more to do with the self-interested preservation of a given social order than with the transformation of the human heart. And this is the crux of our issue.

From an Orthodox point of view, authentic morality is a matter of the transformation of the inner person.

One does not attain the transformation of the heart and conscience without conscious, willing effort in cooperation with divine grace. No power will force or coerce this inner transformation of a person alienated from the glory of God into a truly moral human being, regenerated by means of such a struggle. This profound inner moral struggle must be undertaken as a free will decision to enter into cooperation (*synergism*) with the the will of God, and to struggle, even at the cost of an ineffable spiritual suffering, to end one's alienation, one's exile from Paradise. Without subjective freedom, one cannot accomplish this, one cannot even consent to begin it. This struggle is an ontological necessity for us because Adam initiated the human proclivity for alienation or separation from God and from Paradise.

Yet, how can one desire to return to a homeland that he does not love? How could one endure such an effort to return to the household of a master that he does not love? How could one undertake the journey of such an often painful struggle to return to the embrace of a cruel spouse, unloving and unloved? Fear might send an abused wife back to the clutches of an abusing husband, but it could never sustain such a free moral struggle.

The struggle for true morality can be motivated only by love and undertaken only by a choice of free alternatives.

Let me add that no matter how much one might assert that he is in complete accord with the communal moral code, his accord is, first of all, a result of a subjective choice, and secondly, it is not complete. In the privacy of his own mind, in his own self-consciousness, he applies his own concepts of meaning, his own feelings and emotions to his understanding of that code. There will be differences, subtle and large with the understanding applied by others, unless one is a mere object in the communal landscape, a mental automaton incapable of any independent thought or emotions. If that is the case, he can never truly aspire to be an authentic moral human being.

VI

COMPASSION AS OUR VOCATION

(Belief and our vital relationship with the Living God
as the source of our vocation to compassion)

“Have mercy on us, O God, have mercy on us, for at a loss for any plea, we call unto thee, O God have mercy on us.” (Prayers of Entry).

We hope for the mercy of God, and we depend upon his compassion. How then could we not understand that we ourselves must be merciful and learn compassion from God himself? In the *26th Flash, 14th Hope*, Nursi suggests to us that through the “consciousness of belief” we come to understand that we are a manifestation of the Living One, the Creator Himself. If this is true then it must also be clear that we must learn how to be manifestations of His mercy and compassion. If we fail to do this, should we not understand that we have *not* been illumined by the consciousness of belief?

From an Orthodox perspective, we believe that the will of the most merciful God is that all mankind should be turned to repentance and live. If we are created as manifestations of the Existent One then should this not also be our desire? Should we not also be concerned with trying to give birth to belief within those who have not come into a relationship with God?

Our belief in the Living God must surely compel us to contemplate prayerfully and seek the best ways that we can successfully help guide people toward life-giving belief. It is not possible to force people to believe through fear or compulsion. Fear and compulsion can make people pretend to believe but it cannot make their hearts believe. In truth, we have seen how fear and compulsion can actually people lead away from God and even make them hate Him. Fear might bring about an external correct behaviour, but it cannot transform the human heart. Fear most often leads to hatred and violence, it cannot heal, it cannot establish a relationship between God and man. When we help someone establish a relationship with God through the illumination of belief, then a saving fear develops. This saving fear is a fear of losing that relationship, and therefore losing our humanity and passing into non-existence. Only when one is aware of the joy and the consolation of a relationship with God the most merciful, can one understand true humanity and fear to lose it and become a friend of Satan who must suffer from him for all eternity.

True compassion must, then, flow from our belief which has opened for us the door to our relationship with the most merciful God. There can be no greater compassionate act than desiring that all should come to believe, be illumined by that belief, and come into a life-giving relationship with the God of compassion Himself. But compassion goes far beyond this. Compassion causes us to be aware of our own failings and both mental and physical acts of unrighteousness; and through this awareness we learn to be compassionate toward the

weaknesses and the failings of others. Reaching out to others with compassion and mercy is the best way to lead people toward belief and faith.

As I mentioned earlier, Sa'id Nursi, in his teaching called *The Rays*, tells us that if there is no free will there could also be no accountability (*Ray 5, Point 1*). Let me go one step further and suggest that in those matters wherein a person cannot exercise his will there can also be no responsibility for his actions. True compassion compels us to affirm this. As Nursi teaches us in this same writing, "matters that are obscure, profound, and in need of careful study and experiment cannot be obvious." He continues by suggesting that such matters should not be affirmed randomly or simply out-of-hand. There are circumstances in which the actions of people are not within their own control. We do not expect a mentally ill person to use sound judgement in every case, nor can we hold accountable any person who fulfils an action under compulsion or torture. There are many other such circumstances and it would be unmerciful, lacking in compassion and even inhumane to demand accountability under such circumstances. If we ourselves cannot demonstrate the mercifulness and compassion of God, then why should anyone believe us when we speak about God and about belief? Consequently, in our dialogues we should discuss whether the person who is unmerciful and without compassion actually does believe in the Living God, or whether he is merely religious. I would like to suggest that the man who is unmerciful and has no compassion also has no relationship with God, and that his belief is a false belief so that in truth he worships an idol in place of the most merciful God. The idol is the person himself, because he has, in his own mind, reshaped God into an image of himself.

It appears that Nursi would desire the consolations and blessings of true belief for all of mankind, and this all believers should hold in common. This is another set of issues that I would have desired to dialogue about with the great teacher.

While I am speaking of dialogue, let me say that one of the most attractive features of the mind of Bediuzzaman Sa'id Nursi is his heartfelt desire for universal dialogue. In his study of Nursi's longing for this universal dialogue, Abdelaziz Berghout tells us that "Nursi knew that despite the global tyranny and mischief that had been inflicted upon innocent people in his time, humanity will give birth to a new deep human call for reconciliation, peace, tolerance, mercy, cooperation, justice, equality, understanding and dialogue. The fulfilment of such great hopes for mankind could only be fulfilled, according to Nursi, by people who believe, by people of faith, people to whom the belief and faith have given a true compassion. Thus, for Nursi the vocation of those who worship the true God is the healing of humanity and ultimately this means that the vocation of man is compassion. Only belief in the living God, according to Nursi, can produce that kind of compassion in the heart of man. With this I must agree.

Bediuzzaman Sa'id Nursi had both compassion and wisdom. God grant that we not be too blinded to see and learn from it.