

Evolution, the Purpose of Life and the Order of Society

How a Nurcu connects worldview and normativity in pseudo-biographical narratives

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At present an Islamic brand of creationism is popular in many parts of the Islamic world and perhaps even more so in the Western diaspora due to the propagation of this ideology on the internet by the Turkish author Harun Yahya (pseudonym of Adnan Oktar, born 1956).¹ In the first academic responses, scholars have explained this phenomenon as a consequence of the reception of American Protestant creationism.² This is indeed one important aspect; however, what Harun Yahya has adapted to the new medium from 1999 onwards is a creationist discourse which had emerged in Turkey in the 1970s and has a distinctly Islamic coloring, although many of the auxiliary “scientific” arguments supposed to lend credibility to his rejection of evolutionary theory had been borrowed from Western creationists.³

The Turkish Islamic current which formulated this ideology is the Nurcu movement, which is today split into a variety of factions. It began as the companionship of the scholar Said Nursi in the late 1920s. Said Nursi (born in the mid- or late 1870s) was a Kurdish scholar from the province of Bitlis in Southeast Anatolia. He first completed a traditional scholarly education by travelling from one *medrese* to another. Thereafter he gained fame as a skilled religious debater which earned him the honorary title “Bediüzzaman” (Miracle of the Age), by which his followers usually refer to him. He was also invited by two provincial governors to stay in their residences and use their libraries to educate himself auto-didactically on modern science and western social philosophies.

¹ Martin Riexinger, ‘Propagating Islamic Creationism on the Internet’, *Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology*, 2,1 (2008): pp. 99-112.; Anne Ross Solberg, *The Mahdi wears Armani* (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola); Salman Hameed, ‘Making sense of Islamic Creationism in Europe’, *Public Understanding of Science*, 24.4 (2015): pp. 388–399

² Taner Edis, ‘Cloning Creationism in Turkey’, *Reports of the National Center for Science Education* 19.6 (1999): pp. 30-35; Aykut Kence & Ümit Sayın, ‘Islamic Scientific Creationism: A new challenge in Turkey’, *Reports of the National Center for Science Education* 19,6 (1999): pp. 18-20, 25-29.

³ Taner Edis, *An Illusion of Harmony. Science and Religion in Islam* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2007) pp. 122-131.

He did not attract much attention elsewhere until he traveled to the capital İstanbul in 1908, where he presented a plan for a university which should combine religious and secular education. Although he failed to gain support for that project from the government, he became known in religious and intellectual circles of the capital. He was among those religious scholars who welcomed the Young Turk revolution. He hailed the abolition of Abdülhamit II's autocracy and spoke out in favor of the Constitution of 1876, which was reenacted in 1908. Nevertheless, he was legally persecuted along with other religious figures as a counter-revolutionary, though later acquitted. Thereafter he decided to withdraw to the Eastern Anatolian city of Van in 1912. In World War I he led a troop of volunteers and was taken prisoner by the Russian army in 1916. After his adventurous return via Poland, Germany and the Balkans, in 1918 he joined the resistance against the occupation of Anatolia by the Entente and Greece. He even traveled to Ankara to lend support to Mustafa Kemal's new republican government which had emerged out of the military resistance, but soon realized that the latter planned to secularize the country and therefore withdrew again to Van. There he was imprisoned after a round-up of religious scholars following the uprising of the Kurdish tribal leader Şeyh Sait.

Although not involved in the uprising, Nursi was forced to spend the next 26 years either in banishment in various Anatolian villages and small towns, or in prison. There he preached to followers from the local population and disciples who sought his vicinity after his reputation had spread in religious circles. His followers wrote down his sermons, hand-copied or hectographed them in order to distribute them secretly throughout the country. In 1951, about a year after the first free elections and the victory of the center-right *Demokrat Parti*, Nursi was released by the new Prime Minister Adnan Menderes who, after signing Turkey up to NATO in 1952, did away with most restrictions on religious life. Said Nursi and his followers could now act freely, and he was even granted the permission to publish his works, a collection of treatises known as the *Risale-i Nur* (Treatise of the (Divine) Light).

Said Nursi died on a trip to Urfa in 1960, two months before Menderes' government was overthrown by Kemalist officers in the May 27 coup. Whereas Menderes and two of his ministers were executed the year after, Nursi was posthumously punished by being disinterred

from his grave at the İbrahim shrine in Urfa and reburied at an unknown place.⁴

Already before WWI, Nursi had published books which were supposed to show that Islam is compatible with modern science and modern civilization, correctly understood. However, in practice he remained true to Sufi concepts like *waḥdat al-shuhūd*⁵ and the interaction between macrocosm and microcosm,⁶ as well as the rejection of causality (“nature is like a printing press not like a printer”) which is common in Ash‘arite *kalām*.⁷ Hence he was critical of the ideological orientation of the Young Turks based on Comtean positivism and the German “Vulgärmaterialismus” of Ludwig Büchner and Carl Vogt.⁸ However, his rejection of their ideology did not lead him to oppose their politics from the start.

In the decades to come he continued to address the same subjects as before, but he now also criticized the secularizing reforms of the Kemalist regime, such as the unveiling of women and the Turkification of Islamic rituals, without, however, calling for the overthrow of the new republican order.

Nursi never explicitly addressed the theory of evolution, but as a consequence of his rejection of independent causality he opposed the underlying concept of the self-organization of matter. One of his most popular sermons, the “pharmacy parable”, addresses this issue. In reply “To the question whether nature (*tabiat*) is able to produce anything independently”, Nursi tells his listeners/readers to think of a pharmacy with many jars and phials containing various different substances. Then one should imagine that a thunderstorm rages through this pharmacy and shatters all those vessels so that the substances they contain mix. But it is impossible to conceive that they come together in exactly those measurements necessary to make the emergence of a

⁴ While a critical biography of Said Nursi is lacking, there is an English biography based on the hagiographies common among Nurcus: Şükran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: an intellectual biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Syracuse: State University of New York Press, 2005) On the easing of the restrictions on religious life imposed by the republican government, see Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford: University Press, 2003), pp. 60-62.

⁵ Said Nursi, *al-Mathnawī al-‘arabī al-nūrī* (İstanbul, 1999), p. 398; Said Nursi, *Mektûbat* (İstanbul, 2002), p. 432.

⁶ Said Nursi, *Ishārat al-i jâz fî mazann al-îjâz* (İstanbul, 1999), p. 27; Said Nursi, *Sözler* (İstanbul, 2003), p. 871; Said Nursi, *Mektûbat*, p. 428.

⁷ Said Nursi, *al-Khuṭba al-shāmiyya* (İstanbul, 2003), p. 126.

⁸ Şükrü Hanioglu, ‘Blueprints for a Future Society: Late Ottoman Materialists on Science, Religion and Art’, in Elisabeth Özdalga (ed.), *Late Ottoman Society: the intellectual legacy* (London & New York, 2005), pp. 28-116. These intellectual influences would also become decisive aspects of Kemalism: Şükrü Hanioglu, *Atatürk: an intellectual biography* (Princeton & Oxford, 2011), pp 48-67; Frederick Gregory, *Scientific Materialism in Nineteenth century Germany* (Dordrecht: reidel, 1977). A global history of the influence of this intellectual current remains to be written.

living being possible. Therefore, the emergence of more complex forms is inconceivable without the interference of a higher being.⁹ In his discourses on social ethics Nursi occasionally also alludes to the principle of the struggle for life as morally reprehensible.¹⁰

In the first decade after Nursi's death his followers, known as Nurcus, concentrated on disseminating his ideas both in print and in reading circles or "lessons" (*ders*) where Nursi's sermons were ritually recited and their intricacies explained to new disciples.¹¹ In the late 1960s they began to address current issues on the basis of Nursi's teachings in books, pamphlets, daily newspapers and magazines.¹² In this decade they also became increasingly involved in the political conflicts which grew into an outright civil war during the 1970s. With few exceptions they supported Süleyman Demirel's center-right *Adalet Partisi* (Justice Party), and unlike the Islamists and right-wing nationalists they refrained from violent confrontation with the Left (Marxists, Kurdish nationalists and left-wing Kemalists).¹³ Instead, they argued that the materialist ideology of the Left should be undermined with arguments. This is the context within which they started their campaign against the theory of evolution, which had become the basis for the teaching of biology in the 1930s.

Thus, the Nurcus targeted "Darwinist materialism" because they were convinced that it forms the basis of Marxism. Hence they thought that by undermining the acceptance of the theory of evolution they could weaken Marxism and also Kemalism, which for them was not too far away from the former. Their attitude reflects that in the late Ottoman Empire the theory of evolution was not received directly from Darwin but via the materialist popularizations of Ludwig Büchner, Carl Vogt and Ernst Haeckel, all three of whom used the concept of evolution to further atheism (or in the case of Haeckel, "monism"). In order to undermine the theory of

⁹ Nursi, *Mathnawī*, pp. 252-253; Said Nursi, *Lemalar* (İstanbul, 2002), pp. 238-241, Said Nursi, *Asâ-yı Mûsâ* (İstanbul: Yeni Asya Neşriyat, 2002), pp. 142-145; the version from *Sözler* has been translated into Western languages: Ahmet Akgündüz, 'Said Nursis Sicht über die Ungläubigen und seine Methoden beim Aufruf zum Glauben', in Wolf D. Aries & Rüstem Ülker (eds), *III. Bonner Said Nursi Symposium: Gläubige Bürger in der pluralen Gesellschaft – Muslime im Dialog* (Berlin: Lit-Verlag, 2006), pp. 136-140; *Naturen – årsag eller virkning; fra Risale-i Nur Værksamling*, trad. Abdul Wahid Pedersen (København: Kilden, 2003); at present it is also directly referred to in connection with the theory of evolution: Şahinöz, Cemil, *Wer bist du? Die Reise des Menschen* (2nd edition, İstanbul: Nesil, 2005), pp. 24-25.

¹⁰ Nursi, *Sözler*, p. 170; Nursi, *Mathanwī*, p. 269.

¹¹ On the reading and recitation practices which are still common among Nurcus today: Cemil Tokpınar, *Risale-i Nur'u Okuma ve Anlama Teknikleri* (İstanbul: Nesil Yayınları, 2005); Yavuz, pp. 165-170. Given this high importance afforded to the oral explanation of the text, it is highly problematic to present the Nurcu movement as an outstanding example of a "print-based discourse": *ibid.*, pp. 151, 165.

¹² Yavuz, p. 173.

¹³ Yavuz, pp. 173-174.

evolution the Nurcus continued to argue in line with Nursi that the complexity of living beings necessitates the existence of a conscious creator (“argument from design”), and that the idea of the struggle for life contradicts the obvious harmony of creation. They now began to translate booklets and articles of Western creationist authors, for two reasons. First, they now regarded it as possible to substantiate in scientific terms what Nursi had said in flowery imagery. Second, the Western creationists allegedly proved that the arguments in favor of the theory of evolution were untenable: fossils of “missing links” do not exist or were forged, the emergence of cells in their complexity contradicts the laws of probability and thermodynamics, and last but not least the theory of evolution is not a scientific theory because it is not falsifiable (that this assertion contradicts their claim that it has been disproved is silently passed over).¹⁴ However, they selected only such creationist positions which were of use to them. Although most of the literature they consulted at that period came from the “young earth” faction of American creationism, the Nurcus never needed to restrict the age of the earth to merely some thousand years, since the Qur’an lacks any statement on that issue.¹⁵

In the 1980s, Nurcus could even find political support for their creationism. A minority faction supported the coup on September 12, 1980 after which the generals, under the leadership of Kenan Evren, reached out to religious groups in order to combat the Left. This group of Nurcus, led by Mehmed Kırkıncı (b. 1928) from Erzurum, went on to support the first civilian prime minister, Turgut Özal, and his *Anavatan Partisi* (Motherland Party), which claimed to continue the center-right tradition but also integrated many former Islamists and nationalists.¹⁶ His minister of education, Vehbi Dinçerler, one of those former Islamists, was sympathetic to the Nurcus’ campaign against the theory of evolution and invited Âdem Tatlı, a botanist affiliated

¹⁴ Martin Riexinger, ‘Islamic Responses to the Darwinian Theory of Evolution’, in Olav Hammer And James R. Lewis (eds), *Handbook of Religion and the Authority of Science* (Leiden, 2011), pp. 490-494; Martin Riexinger, ‘Turkey’, in Stefaan Blancke, Hans Henrik Hjermslev, Peter Kjærgaard (eds), *Creationism in Europe* (Baltimore, 2014), pp. 180-198. The argument that the theory of evolution does not meet Popper’s criterion for the demarcation of science, falsifiability, played a role in the American juridical debates and lawsuits on the teaching of the theory of evolution in public schools. The argument is, however, based on a misconception of Popper’s statements on the theory of evolution: Frank J. Sonleitner, ‘What did Karl Popper really say about Evolution?’, *Reports of the National Center for Science Education* 6,2 (1986): pp. 9-14.

¹⁵ Riexinger, ‘Islamic Responses’, pp. 492-493. In the *hadīth*, the reports on sayings and deeds attributed to Muḥammad, the age of the prophets and the time span between them are given and they add up to similar numbers to those in the Hebrew Bible: *ibid.*, p. 485.

¹⁶ On Evren’s and Özal’s approaches to Islam: Yavuz, pp. 69-76. Nevertheless, the majority of the Nurcus continued to support Süleyman Demirel and his *Doğru Yol Partisi* (True Path Party), on these splits among the Nurcus see *ibid.*, pp. 174-176. A sub-group of the Nurcus led by Fethullah Gülen was particularly close to the Özal government and developed into a movement in its own right, surpassing the traditional Nurcus in importance: *ibid.*, pp. 181-194, 198-202; Bekim Agai, *Zwischen Netzwerk und Diskurs. Das Bildungsnetzwerk um Fethullah Gülen (geb. 1938): Die flexible Umsetzung modernen islamischen Gedankenguts* (Schenefeld, 2004).

to Mehmed Kırkıncı, to write a report denouncing the theory of evolution and advocating its deletion from the national syllabi. The respective document is in large part based on the pamphlets *Evolution: The Fossils say no!* and *Have you been Brainwashed?* by the American biochemist and young-earth creationist Duane Gish. This attempt on the theory of evolution was partially successful insofar as the most controversial aspects – natural selection and the common origin of man and other living beings – were no longer taught, moreover the “theory of creation” and Lamarckism were suggested as respectable alternatives.¹⁷ Furthermore, polemics against the theory of evolution were introduced into the textbooks for the subject “Religious, Cultural and Ethical Knowledge” (*Din, Kültür ve ahlâk bilgisi*) which had become compulsory after the coup.¹⁸

When Harun Yahya started to publish books in the 1980s, his critique of evolution theory was also embedded in an anti-leftist discourse. He even presented evolution as part of a Jewish-Masonic conspiracy.¹⁹ He later put forward a more balanced political argument by asserting that the theory of evolution also directly inspired Hitler and Mussolini,²⁰ and finally, after September 11, he held the theory of evolution responsible for the attacks because it teaches that conflict is the basis of life.²¹

Nevertheless, political motivations alone do not fully explain the rejection of the theory of evolution. It has deeper, existential reasons. This becomes apparent after an analysis of the role of the theory of evolution in pseudo-biographical accounts. These accounts are a part of the growing trend among Nurcus to popularize the teachings of Said Nursi in a narrative form.²² In

¹⁷ *Evrin Teorisi hakkında Rapor Özeti* (Ankara, 1985); Nazlı Öztürkler, *Türkiye’de evrim eğitimin sosyolojik bir değerlendirmesi* (Yüksek lisans thesis, Ankara Üniversitesi, 2005). On Dinçerler: Yavuz, p. 75. On Gish: Ronald Numbers, *The Creationists: from Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 249-251; Larry A. Witham, *Where Darwin meets the Bible: Creationists and Evolutionistst in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 51-52, 59-64, 216-219.

¹⁸ *Liseler için Din kültürü ve ahlâk bilgisi* (İstanbul, 1994); Öztürkler, pp. 68-70, 82.

¹⁹ Harun Yahya, *Yahudilik ve Masonluk* (İstanbul, 1987), pp. 397-442.

²⁰ http://harunyahya.org/tr/books/595/Darwinizmin_Insanliga_Getirdigi_Belalar/chapter/4136;

http://www.harunyahya.com/en/books/658/Fascism_The_Bloody_Ideology_Of_Darwinism/chapter/1628.

²¹ http://harunyahya.org/tr/books/744/İslam_Teroru_Lanetler/chapter/6682;

http://harunyahya.com/en/books/735/İslam_Denounces_Terrorism/chapter/1659.

²² The first Nurcu novel, *Minyeli Abdullah* by Hekimoğlu İsmail, was already published in 1968, although it did not initiate a trend at that point in time. These accounts are, however, not the first examples of the rejection of the theory of evolution as the first step towards a pious life in the Turkish Islamic discourse. *Oğlum Osman* (‘My Son Osman’ 1973, dir. Yücel Çakmaklı), one of the first decidedly religious movies in Turkey, apparently follows a similar pattern: Savaş Arslan, *Cinema in Turkey: a new critical history* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 158-163. Another popular example from the Nurcu movement is the anti-feminist youth novel Gülay Atasoy, *Liseli Kızlar* (İstanbul: Nesil Yayınları, 2004). Here a religious student at a high school for domestic science leads a number of her materialist and sex-oriented fellow students onto the right path by confronting the godless ideology with which their teachers inculcate them.

the long run this could alter the character of the Nurcu movement, as the respective writers could become authorities in their own right and thus diminish the role of those whose authority is based on the length of time they have participated in the traditional Nurcu reading circles. In our context such narratives are important primarily because in them more than anywhere else the different aspects of the Nurcu worldview are knit together. These writings show how, according to them, the understanding of the order of creation implies certain normative decisions with regard to both one's individual life and the order of society. In order to illustrate these aspects of the genre of pseudo-biographical accounts, I will analyze two stories by Halit Ertuğrul (b 1956).

Born in a village in the eastern province of Adıyaman, Ertuğrul began his professional life as a primary school teacher. He later took courses in education and administration at various universities and was finally awarded a PhD in sociology from Sakarya Üniversitesi. He worked thereafter as a school director and in the administration of the Ministry for Education.²³

The communist in search for himself

As an author Halit Ertuğrul has specialized in the “dönüş hikayesi” genre, i.e. stories about the lives of people who underwent a profound change after becoming acquainted with the ideas of Said Nursi. He thus appeals to the common notion among the Nurcus that people once they have read the Risale are “born again” and see the world in a completely different light.²⁴

A representative example is his book *Kendini arayan adam* (A Man in Search for Himself) where the first-person narrator, who always serves as catalyst in that kind of accounts leads the communist Salih Gökkaya back on the right path. It is moreover a good example for how Nurcus propagate a conciliatory instead of a confrontational approach towards ideological opponents. Instead of being presented as merciless foes, communists are now shown as victims of a delusion from which they can be liberated by persistent efforts at persuasion.²⁵ The first person narrator, a schoolteacher, underlines this with a quote attributed to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: “Communism has been left with neither the cadre of the head nor the cadre of the

²³ <http://www.nesilyayinlari.com/yazar.php?id=17>

²⁴ Ümit Şimşek, *Barla modeli* (İstanbul, 2002), p. 86.

²⁵ The conversion of communists is a popular subject in Nurcu autobiographies: Mehmed Kırkınıcı, *Hayatım – hatırlarım* (İstanbul, 2004), pp. 226-228, 337-340, 358-362, 379-381; Agai, p. 144.

heart because it could not spread peace of mind (*huzur*) in the seventy years it reigned but only fear and terror.”²⁶

The first person narrator begins his account by praising the teaching profession, but he contrasts his ideal with that of Kemalist ideology, which feted the village teacher as agent of *mission civilisatrice* among the backward rural population. Instead he stresses that the teacher can only succeed by respecting the beliefs and traditions of the village population. Hence mosque and school should serve as the pillars of village life together.²⁷

One day when he traveled from Kayseri to Adana, a man about sixty years old boarded the same bus as the narrator. He caught his attention because he engaged the young man sitting next to him in a discussion about political and societal issues. Then he asked the driver for the permission to sing some songs.²⁸ After some emotional songs he began a political speech:

“Life means war, struggle. To put it differently: life is a battlefield. In order to live humans must win. The way to victory leads through the principles of war. However, one is unable to learn these principles alone, experience is necessary. Some experiences lead into dead ends and then life reaches its end already in its springtime.”

Then he addresses the *yoldaşlar* (fellow passengers, but also “comrades”) with the question whether they are satisfied with their lives or whether they just experience a sequence of situations of deprivation and depravity.²⁹ For the first-person narrator, the content and jargon of this speech demonstrate beyond doubt that this man is spreading communist propaganda, and he is shocked by the fact that he apparently succeeds in impressing the other passengers.³⁰ He does nevertheless acknowledge the education, the cultivated appearance and the psychological intuition of the agitator.³¹ Later he stresses again that this agitator, who knows Ottoman, is free

²⁶ Halit Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan adam* (İstanbul, 2005), p. 7. I was unable to authenticate this quotation.

²⁷ Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, pp. 8-10. In spite of the “republican” image of the village schoolmaster, Nurcu took this profession and used it for missionary work: Necmettin Şahiner, *Son Şahitler Bediüzzaman Said Nursi’yi anlatıyor* (4 vols, İstanbul, 1993), vol 3, pp. 327-335.

²⁸ Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, pp. 28-30.

²⁹ Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, pp. 31-32.

³⁰ Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, pp. 33-34.

³¹ Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, p. 35.

from the fanaticism and obstinacy which supposedly characterize Marxists.³² Hence he can conclude in the end, that the agitator belongs to the five percent of Marxists who struggle selflessly for the cause itself, whereas sixty percent strive for fame and luxury, another thirty percent for rank and money, while the remaining five percent just want to settle a personal score.³³

A break due to a flat tyre in the Taurus Mountains provides the narrator with an opportunity to engage the agitator, whose name the reader now gets to know, in a conversation. When the narrator tells Salih that he is a teacher, Salih responds with praise. Salih declares that he himself would take up that profession if he found another opportunity to get a job, because it makes it possible to save a nation from poverty and to lead a new generation onto an idealist path.³⁴ Our narrator remarks that Salih has a weakness: his spiritual void. Nevertheless he does not try to address that weak point directly with references to God and the Qur'an. Instead he chooses to address philosophical and economic issues first. This tactic turns out to be a brilliant choice because right in the beginning Salih has to admit that he had never reflected thoroughly on the origin of man.³⁵ In order to undermine Salih's materialism the narrator begins to quote from Nurcu pamphlets which claim to prove the existence of God by referring to findings of astronomy and particle physics: everything is ordered in perfect harmony and the structure of the solar system is reflected in that of the atom.³⁶ After Salih replies that God is not necessary because matter has always existed and will always do so³⁷ the young teacher scores a point with another argument: nature obeys laws, but laws need a lawgiver. Could one imagine Hammurapi's codex without Hammurapi?³⁸ He manages to impress his adversary even further by demonstrating that the Big Bang theory proves the *creatio ex nihilo* and thereby refutes the theory of the (pre)eternity of matter. He thinks that now the time has come to bolster his argumentation with extensive quotations from the *Risale-i Nur*.³⁹ After the proof of God they discuss further issues regarding which the agitator first appears obstinate: the resurrection of the dead and the theory of evolution.⁴⁰

³² Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, p. 51.

³³ Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, p. 109.

³⁴ Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, pp. 38-39.

³⁵ Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, pp. 40-41.

³⁶ Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, pp. 46-50, 54-56;

³⁷ Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, p. 54.

³⁸ Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, p. 57.

³⁹ Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, pp. 60-67.

⁴⁰ Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, p. 73.

Both continue their conversation on arrival in Adana. There the narrator explains to the agitator with the help of Nursi's pharmacy parable, that the universe had not come into existence by accident but due to the conscious will of a creator.⁴¹ After this discussion Salih concedes that he no longer rules out the possibility of the resurrection of the dead.⁴² In order to convince him, the narrator now refers to a book of Haluk Nurbaki, an author who without being a Nurcu has written very similar books on religion and science. According to Nurbaki, the DNA of all humans fits into one cup. God could throw this cup on the ground and express the order "ol" ("be" in Turkish for the Qur'anic Arabic "kun", especially in the eschatological context of 6:73), and all humans would resurrect.⁴³ The next morning the – now former – communist prays for the first time in his life.⁴⁴ His ideological orientation had not been overcome by a demonstration that price formation is impossible in a planned economy but by the refutation of materialism and the demonstration that the cosmos is based on a perfect and purposeful order.

After this successful conversion, the narrator reflects upon the spread of communism. According to him, this ideology exploits poverty and desperation though one has to admit that the behavior of many rich people provides material for communist agitation. Moreover, some groups irresponsibly call for brute violence with the slogan "fight against communism". Bediüzzaman has chosen a different approach instead, "by sweeping away the filth of doubt and denial (of God). Materialist ideas are shattered and annihilated with the help of scientific and rational proofs."⁴⁵

Two years later the narrator receives a letter. While visiting his son in the USA Salih has suffered a severe stroke. Now, face to face with death, he expresses his gratitude to the narrator that he has led him onto the right path.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, pp. 81-90.

⁴² Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, p. 93.

⁴³ Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, pp. 96-97. The identification of a person's individuality with their DNA, and the description of resurrection as a kind of cloning can also be found in other examples of modernized Islamic eschatology: Muhammed Bozdağ *Sonsuzluk Yolculuğu* (İstanbul: Nesil Yayınları, 2005), pp. 190-194; Shihābuddīn Nadwī, *al-Istīnṣākh al-jīnī yuṣaddiq ma'ād al-jasadī* (Bangalore: Furqan Academy, n.d.).

⁴⁴ Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, pp. 102, 118.

⁴⁵ Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, pp. 106-107; apparently a hint at the *Komünizm ile Mücadele Derneği*, (Association for the struggle against Communism).

⁴⁶ Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, pp. 118-128.

The turning of nasty Mehmet

In 2000 Ertuğrul published his second conversion story.⁴⁷ As in the case of *A Man in Search for Himself*, the first-person narrator serves as prompter who brings about the profound change in another person's life. In this report however, the one who undergoes the change even surpasses the one who leads him onto the right path. In this account the narrator is not a schoolmaster but a university lecturer. At the start of the semester he realizes that Mehmet, one of his students, is totally unwilling to integrate into the group and to obey his orders. Instead the young man declares, "this is a democratic country", hence he insists that all decisions have to be taken collectively. The teacher is therefore at most able to offer suggestions.⁴⁸ When the narrator intervenes Mehmet complains that he has been singled out as a scapegoat by him.⁴⁹ As it emerges from further conversations, Mehmet's issues cannot be explained by family or economic problems. Asked why he objects to all rules, he answers that he has read a lot and that he loves to become acquainted with very different people. Therefore he rejects a monotonous, regular lifestyle and wants to determine the rules according to which he lives himself.⁵⁰ Furthermore, his engagement with Darwinism has shown him that religion lags behind contemporary knowledge and that it prevents people from enjoying their life (*zevk ve keyif*).⁵¹ The teacher concludes that Mehmet consequently neglects the duties of service to others. Because he denies God, he is unable to feel obliged towards anybody.⁵² Again Darwinism as the denial of a purposeful order of the world is held responsible for disorientation, although here in an individual, ethical instead of an ideological case.

The lecturer realizes that he has to show Mehmet the right path, but again he does not begin with God and the Qur'an. Instead he refers to Alexis Carrel, who demands that first man has to know himself and therefore to study himself like a book. If a man who has not read himself knows the sublime secrets of the universe, he will remain ignorant nevertheless. Another student enters the discussion and points out that one does not have to travel to the West to gain

⁴⁷ Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, p. 149.

⁴⁸ Ertuğrul, *Kendini arayan*, pp. 13-14.

⁴⁹ Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet* (İstanbul, 2005), pp. 18-20.

⁵⁰ Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet*, p. 21.

⁵¹ Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet*, pp. 22f.

⁵² Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet*, p. 28.

such insights: Said Nursi has chosen quite similar words.⁵³ Now the lecturer too begins to quote extensively from Nurcu writings on the higher plan which manifests itself in every human organism.⁵⁴ However, his words do not immediately fall onto fertile soil. Mehmet concedes that he wants to live free and wild like an animal; according to the narrator this is the logical consequence of an education system that teaches that humans have developed from apes and that enjoyment and pleasure (*zevk ve lezzet*) make up the purpose of life.⁵⁵

However, the fact that the lecturer can hand *A Man in Search for Himself* to Mehmet helps his efforts considerably. Thus the obstinate student is taught that the universe has a beginning and an end.⁵⁶ In his last effort of a counter-attack Mehmet objects that nature functions according to its own laws. The lecturer retorts that this cannot be the case for everything in the universe bears witness to the highest degree of harmony.⁵⁷ During this discussion the teacher receives a call from a student who has come into trouble with his family because he prays. Mehmet hears the conversation and expresses his respect for the lecturer's commitment to his students. The teacher explains to him that his attitude results from the obligation he feels, both towards the student who trusts in him and towards his own teachers, whom he could trust so that he got a chance in his life.⁵⁸

After a cigarette break on the balcony (the lecturer, of course, does not smoke), Mehmet becomes aware of the edifying pictures and calligraphies adorning the lecturer's home. He now asks why God should have created the universe, since there would be much fewer problems without the world and mankind.⁵⁹ He receives the answer that the main reason is God's wish for his own spiritual beauty and perfection to be admired by others.⁶⁰ Asking why we then

⁵³ Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet*, p. 29. The eminent French physician Alexis Carrel was also an author of popular books in which he criticizes the modern West as decadent and in dire need of a spiritual renewal. In the West he was largely discredited after WWII because of his support for the Vichy régime and his advocacy for eugenics. Although he is one of the "Western crown witnesses against the West" to whom Muslim authors most often refer, a detailed analysis of his influence is lacking. Well attested is the central influence of Carrel on Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian Muslim brother: John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* (New York, 2010) pp. 91-92; John Møller Larsen, *A Western Source of Islamism: Soundings in the Influence of Alexis Carrel on Sayyid Qutb* (Aarhus: Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalisation, Aarhus University, 2011).

⁵⁴ Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet*, pp. 32-33.

⁵⁵ Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet*, pp. 42-43.

⁵⁶ Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet*, pp. 54-55.

⁵⁷ Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet*, pp. 64-65.

⁵⁸ Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet*, pp. 66f.

⁵⁹ Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet*, p. 69.

⁶⁰ Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet*, p. 71; an allusion to an uncanonical *ḥadīth qudsī* which is very popular among sufis: "I was a hidden treasure and wanted to be known. Therefore I created the world to become known."

cannot see God he is answered that man's sense of vision cannot perceive many things like microbes, electricity and ultraviolet light. Nevertheless, we believe in their existence, which shows that one has to differentiate between believing and perceiving.⁶¹ Resurrection turns out to be a tough nut in this case, too. But eventually Mehmet is convinced by the argument in Qur'an 36:78f., according to which the one who has created the bones is also able to call them back into life.⁶² Finally he is even persuaded that the soul waits before entering into the world, that it will continue to exist after death in the intermediate world (*barzakh*) where it sees, hears, understands, and will be punished or receive paradise-like rewards according to its merits. At the moment of resurrection, it will then reenter into the body to which it belongs.⁶³

After this conversation and reading *Âsâ-yı Musa* (a kind of "best of" from the *Risale-i Nur* containing the "pharmacy parable") and *The Man in Search for Himself*, Mehmet undergoes a fundamental change within a week. Formerly loud and restless he now appears quiet and introverted. After a further eight months of visits, conversations and readings he abandons former habits and his former circle of friends.⁶⁴ A little bit disappointed the lecturer waits for some recognition. He finally receives it when Mehmet prays for the first time and when his parents thank him because their son has changed for the better.⁶⁵

Only a short time later Mehmet is heavily injured in a bus accident which has claimed many lives. Lying in coma, he has a dream in which Said Nursi and his aide Zübeyir Gündüzalp visit him. In the dream, Nursi imposes on him to show his gratitude with fasting and by reading 50 pages of the *Risale* per day.⁶⁶ Mehmet's close encounter with death makes it clear to him that death is another form of existence and not a void.⁶⁷ He now follows a neatly regulated life consisting of only four hours of sleep a day, five days of fasting during the week, many prayers,

⁶¹ Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet*, p. 72. Ultraviolet is a popular example among Nurus for phenomena which exist although they are impossible. One of the Nuru publishing houses is therefore called *Morötesi*.

⁶² Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet*, pp. 77-78.

⁶³ Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet*, p. 89. On the persistence and re-interpretation of the elements of traditional Sunni eschatology among Nurus, see Martin Riexinger, 'Between Science-Fiction and Sermon: Eschatological Writings Inspired by Said Nursi', in Sebastian Günther & Todd Lawson (eds), *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2016) pp.1222-1266; id, 'Late Modern Transformation of Islam or Islamic Transformation of Late Modern Religiosity?: Use and Function of New Age Elements in the Writings of the Turkish Islamic Self-Development Author Muhammed Bozdağ (b. 1967)', *Numen* 64,1 (2017): 1-48, pp. 25-29.

⁶⁴ Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet*, pp. 101-103.

⁶⁵ Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet*, pp. 104-107.

⁶⁶ Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet*, pp. 108-111.

⁶⁷ Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet*, p. 115.

reading the Qur'ān and the *Risale*, and recitations of the *Büyük Cevşen*, a compilation of sufi litanies (*wird*) based on God's names which is used by the Nurcus, every other day.⁶⁸ The wild young man has finally become a "religious virtuoso" imitating the ascetic life of Said Nursi. On Friday November 11, 1999 Mehmet calls the lecturer on the mobile for a last time. Although the conversation is brief, he senses that Mehmet is extremely excited and wants to tell him something important. And what Mehmet tells him is indeed amazing: Bediüzzaman has appeared to him again in a daydream.⁶⁹ That evening the lecturer hears on the news that an earthquake has devastated the Black Sea town Düzce, where Mehmet lives with his family. After two days of unsuccessfully trying to contact Mehmet, the narrator decides to travel to Düzce, where he learns that he and his whole family have been extinguished by the quake. But the neighbors who searched for them found them on prayer carpets. Death struck them during prayer and hence in a state of the highest peace of mind (*huzur*). Mehmet is no longer the lecturer's student; he has become his teacher.⁷⁰

The internalization of the "order of creation"

In Ertuğrul's texts, statements on questions of science are not value-free. Knowledge of the cosmos is tied to, and evaluated on the basis of, normative concepts. In particular his accounts of the theory of evolution and related scientific issues such as the "Big Bang" are closely tied to evils at the lower and the higher levels of society. To acknowledge the correct vision of the world and one's own place therein is presented as the first, decisive step to a new life, purposeful for oneself and beneficial for society. In this respect this motive is closely connected to a different one that serves a similar purpose in both narratives: the *memento mori*. It figures prominently in other Nurcu writings and above all in the discourses of Nursi himself.⁷¹

This apparently contradicts a widespread notion in research literature on the Nurcus, according to which their ideology reflects a this-worldly orientation, and the movement should be

⁶⁸ Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet*, p. 123.

⁶⁹ Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet*, pp. 125-126.

⁷⁰ Ertuğrul, *Düzceli Mehmet*, pp. 130-135. In the Turkish religious discourse since the late Ottoman period the term *huzur* is juxtaposed to a lifestyle: Erika Glaßen, "'Huzur': Trägheit, Seelenruhe, soziale Harmonie: zur osmanischen Mentalitätsgeschichte', in J.L. Bacqué-Grammont (ed.), *Türkische Miscellen: Robert Anhegger Festschrift/ armağanı/ mélanges* (Istanbul: Editions Divit, 1987) pp. 145-166.

⁷¹ The most popular example are Nursi's words about the dancing girls in a schoolyard he saw from the window in Denizli prison: "In fifty years some of them will already be dead, others sick, worn-out and ugly", Said Nursi, *Sözler*, pp. 178, 186.

understood primarily in the political context of Republican Turkey.⁷² However, even Şerif Mardin, one of the exponents of this interpretation, has conceded that Nursi's teachings rarely address politics explicitly, mostly promise answers to "psychological quandaries", and address the individual rather than society as a whole.⁷³

However, it would be a mistake to fall into the other extreme and to dismiss these existential questions as politically irrelevant. They matter politically - not only because this discourse consistently influences educational policies in Turkey. It is part of a system of values through which political actions are perceived, according to which they are judged, and which functions as a basis for the formulation of alternatives to the adversaries' concepts. The discussion can only be understood if one does not take as given that – at least as Michel de Certeau argues – religion is not restricted to morals.⁷⁴ Religion is considered all-encompassing and hence it functions as a clue to and a yardstick for the knowledge of both the moral and the material order of the world. There is hence no distinction between facts and values. Empirical statements are judged according to the criterion whether they conform to the alleged harmonious order of the cosmos.

Since the order of the cosmos is allegedly harmonious, the order of society in which it ought to be reflected is considered to be the same, once humans have understood this relation and act accordingly. This applies on both the macro and the micro level: existing injustice cannot be overcome by seditious action and the uprooting of religious values,⁷⁵ as the old communist has to learn. Fulfillment is not gained by following the impulses of the lower self, but by accepting and respecting the authority of the elder generation. Thus the role of the theory of evolution resembles very much the role that it has played in the discourse of American fundamentalists in different periods. In itself "chaotic" and not purposive, it almost forced itself on those who experienced the shattering of pre-World War I society as anomic and longed for a brotherly

⁷² Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: the case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (Syracuse, 1989); Günter Seufert, *Politischer Islam in der Türkei: Islamismus als symbolische Repräsentation einer sich modernisierenden muslimischen Gesellschaft* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1997), p. 491.

⁷³ Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, pp. 16, 231. For a critical assessment of the politicized interpretation of the Nurcu movement from a Nurcu who tries to intellectualize the discourse of the movements, see Metin Karabaşoğlu, 'Text and Community: an analysis of the *Risale-i Nur* movement', in Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' (ed.), *Islam at the Crossroads. On the life and thought of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany, 2003), pp. 263-264.

⁷⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 125-147.

⁷⁵ Actually communism proper is hardly relevant in the Turkish context, and often referred to in religious discourse to attack Kemalism.

society.⁷⁶ The tendency to legitimize family values – in practice family hierarchy - with reference to the “order of creation” is common.⁷⁷

The emphasis on persuasion with reference to the order of creation has to be seen in the light of the attitude of the Nurcus to politics. In this field their approach differs markedly from that of the Islamists. Unlike them, Nurcus have never considered the reintroduction of an Islamic legal system as their main objective. This is already reflected in Nursi’s defence speech in court after he was presumably erroneously held for the participation in an attempt to overthrow the Young Turk government in 1909.⁷⁸ But if not the strong arm of the state, something else has to prevent individual ethical disorientation and anomy in society. This is apparently the insight of each individual into his duty as a part of society and creation. Hence, even if Ertuğrul and other Nurcu authors have society as a whole in mind, they must address individuals, and they need an audience which is receptive to their message due to their need for individual orientation. It would therefore be a mistake to focus exclusively on institutional aspects when the triangle of relations between state, science and religion is investigated, while ignoring the normative orientation of the population. This aspect has now become important beyond Turkey herself, since Islamic creationism has become a successful ideological export commodity.

⁷⁶ Martin Riesebrodt, *Fundamentalismus als patriarchalische Protestbewegung: Amerikanische Protestanten (1910-1928) und iranische Schiiten (1961-1978) im Vergleich* (Tübingen, 1990), p. 121; (*Pious Passion: the emergence of modern fundamentalism in the United States and Iran*, transl. by Don Reneau (Berkeley et al.: 1993), p. 89). The battlefield metaphor is also used by Abū l-A‘lā Mawdūdī, ‘Dārwin kā nazāriyya-i irtiqa’, in *Tafhīmāt* (Lahore: Islamic Publications 2012), vol. ii. pp. 243-250.

⁷⁷ Numbers, *The Creationists*, p. 370.

⁷⁸ Said Nursi, *Tarihçe-i Hayatı* (İstanbul: Sözlük, 2004), 59; Martin Riexinger, ‘Said Nursi und Maḥmūd Ṭāhā: Pazifizierung des Islams durch Entrechtlichung und die Relativierung der Vorbildrolle Muḥammads’ in Tilman Seidensticker (ed.), *Zeitgenössische islamische Positionen zu Koexistenz und Gewalt* (Wiesbaden, 2011), pp. 82-98.

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