

Why Muslims should Maintain their Dignity in Worldly Life: A Critical Consideration on Said Nursi's Insight on the Meaning of "Theology of Hope" as Reflected in His *Damascus Sermon*

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Abstract

"At one time Muslim culture led the world in knowledge and prosperity. Now, in most respect, it lags far behind. What are the factors that led to its rise and subsequent fall?" (Perkins, 2003). Muslims fell under the Western domination for many centuries. As a result, they have lost their authority to administer their own matters independently. Whereas Muslims believe that they should attain worldly contentment and after life happiness altogether, in reality, they gain only a modest attainment to improve their prosperity and accordingly lose their political as well as cultural dignity. They have been overshadowed by the West in many aspects of political and cultural affairs. But what made the West prosperous and triumphant over Muslim nations in general? To some extent, as one might believe, it is because they have adopted "prosperity theology." While the term itself is controversial among Christian theologians, the issue has roused a profound awareness among Western people about the importance of personal empowerment, proposing that it is God's will for humans to live prosperously. What did Nursi say about the necessity of cultivating prosperous life in Islam and what did he say about the demand to maintain dignity in this worldly life? This article tries to examine Nursi's idea on the necessity of gaining worldly prosperity for advancing Muslim civilization as well as of maintaining their dignity by examining his insights on the "theology of hope" as reflected in his "Damascus Sermon" and other works compiled in his voluminous Risalei Nur.

Keywords: Islamic civilization, Averroes, *Risalei Nur*, Theology of Hope

A. Introduction

John L. Perkins, in his short article entitled “Prosperity and the Rise and Fall of Islam” (2003), reveals the real condition that Muslims in general are encountering today. Muslims lag far behind the West in many respects of cultural life,¹ including political and economic domains. The advance of Western culture, as should be honestly admitted, is due to their successful rivalry in accumulating the material wealth. The Western nations benefited from their advance in science and technology to explore the world since the times of Renaissance, with their famous catchphrase “Knowledge is power.” The catchphrase, as proclaimed by Francis Bacon (1561-1626), reveals that knowledge is an essential instrument to gain the wealth and glory over the other nations. Since then, the Western nations have competed each other in order to venture their propensity to exploit the world’s material goods. This could be one of the reasons that led the West to achieve their domination over the other nations in the world today.²

With regard to the advance of Western culture and its superiority over that of other nations, Shepard B. Clough, in his work *Rise and Fall of Civilization*, writes:

Western Europe and the Western Hemisphere, the second great center of Western Culture, were richly endowed by nature with those resources, especially fertile land, coal, and iron, which were to play such an important role in economic activity. Improved method of transportation, however, made it possible for Western culture to draw upon the natural resources of the entire inhabited world. These means of transportation account for Western’s culture having removed India,

¹John L. Perkins, “Prosperity and the Rise and Fall of Islam,” <http://www.faithfreedom.org/Articles/perkins3032.htm>, retrieved February 7, 2014.

²Currently, there have been some works discussing the domination of Western culture over the others, such as Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty* (New York: Crown Business, 2012), and Prasannan Parthasarathi, *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011). In both works, the authors discuss some reasons as why Western culture grew rapidly since the last three centuries, overshadowing the rest of other human cultures. Another work worth of consideration is Khalid bin Sayeed, *Western Dominance and Political Islam: Challenge and Response* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

China, and Russia-Siberia from their isolation and for having obtained from these and other areas both techniques and goods.³

On the other hand, John L. Perkins, in his above mentioned article, suggests that in its early years, Islam spread very rapidly. Within less than a century, this new religion had successfully expanded its territory over a very vast region in the Middle East that consisted of Persia, Palestine, Egypt, and had swept across North Africa into Spain.⁴ This enormous expansion was partly a matter of conquest, under the authority of the Umayyad caliphs who administered their power from Damascus. Moreover, under the subsequent caliphs, Muslim community grew into a vast empire, and Islam became a world religion. This is because most of Muslims believe that God is concerned with politics, and this belief is confirmed and sustained by the Shari‘ah, the Holy Law, which deals extensively with the acquisition and exercise of power.⁵

B. Literature Review

For this literature review I will focus on two works on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, namely the one relating to his personal life, and the other one is about his *Damascus Sermon*. Currently, it is easier to understand Said Nursi’s life as there has been a comprehensive work written by Sukran Vahide, entitled *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (2005). The work is meant to provide the history of Nursi’s life and thought from his birth and childhood until the end of his life. Said Nursi was born in the village of Nurs, a township of Ispirit in Bitlis Province, eastern Turkey, in 1877. He died in 1960 in Urfa, also in eastern Turkey. His life spanned the last decades of the Ottoman Empire, its collapse after the First World War and the setting up of the Republic, followed by the twenty-five years of Republican Party rule. During this last period, there were harsh measures taken by the

³Shepard B. Clough, *The Rise and Fall of Civilization: An inquiry into the Relationship between Economic Development and Civilization*. (New York: Columbia University, 1967), p. 165.

⁴Perkins, “Prosperity and the Rise” (2003).

⁵Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (London: Phoenix, 2004), p. 7.

authorities against Islam in defense of secularism as the state ideology. He belonged to a “clerical” family. His father was an impoverished village *molla* with seven children and a small holding of land. Being a clerical family, there was some drive for status that appears from the title of *mirza* taken by his father, which could be an attribute of noble descent.⁶

With regard to his personal quality, Thomas Michel, in his *Insights from the Risale-i Nur* (2013), explains: Nursi “is probably the most influential Muslim thinker” in Modern Turkey. His life is “the story of a Muslim scholar and teacher at a time when the fortunes of the Islamic world had declined in the face of rising Western imperialism.” He devoted most of his life—with long time imprisonment under the authoritarian-secularized regime—to demonstrating that revitalization of the Islamic world would be made possible only by finding its basis in the Qur’an as a divine revelation.⁷ In line with this idea, Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi’, in his introduction to Vahide’s work, writes: “... Nursi was one of the most brilliant Islamic thinkers in the modern era, a man who consistently fought for his ideals by keeping Islam a dynamic religion in the modern world. ... Since his death in 1960, Nursi’s followers have taken up the challenge of disseminating his ideas throughout the world.”⁸ Now, in reality, Nursi’s ideas and teachings have been extensively studied by people, both Turkish and non-Turkish, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. This is because, among other things, his ideas always offer “warmth and generosity of spirit that is worth celebrating and should be better known.”⁹

⁶In addition to Sukran Vahide’s *Islam in Modern Turkey: Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (2007), and her “Brief Look at Bediuzzaman Said Nursi’s Life” available in the last part of her translation of the *Risale-i Nur Collection 2* (2001), there has been an extensive discussion made by Serif Mardin in his *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), especially chapters One and Two.

⁷See, an introductory remarks by Thomas Michel in his *Insights from the Risale-i Nur: Said Nursi’s Advice for Modern Believers* (New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2013).

⁸See, Ibrahim Abu-Rabi’ “Introduction” in Sukran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), pp. xiii-xvi.

⁹See, Ian S. Markham, author of *A Theology of Engagement*, in his particular note on the back cover of *Islam in Modern Turkey*.

Concerning his *Damascus Sermon*, there has been an interesting discussion provided by Thomas Michel in his work mentioned above. Michel dedicated one chapter in his work elaborating this *Damascus Sermon*. According to his study, the *Damascus Sermon* was a treatise originating from Nursi's Friday sermon delivered in the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus, in early 1911. In his lengthy exposition on the significance of this treatise, among other things Michel insists that the treatise was meant to express Nursi's apprehension about some misfortunes experienced by most Muslim people of his time. In this *Damascus Sermon*, Nursi expresses what he calls as the most agonizing question for believers of his time. He was highly puzzled by such a problem as: "Why are non-believers who have abandoned God and religious principles progressing so rapidly in material development, while those regions where religious faith is strong are stagnating and even regressing toward greater levels of backwardness and poverty?"¹⁰ This is the very fundamental inquiry to be further explored in this paper. It is in this treatise that Nursi, as alluded by Thomas Michel, formulates his so-called "Theology of Hope," to be compared with the idea of "Prosperity Theology" offered by some Christian theologians. Both ideas are in fact meant to propose a solution for the problems of backwardness and poverty commonly experienced by unfortunates in many parts of the world.

C. Methodology

This study is fully established on library research. This is because the subject matter to be discussed in this paper is entirely dealing with ideas and thought available in documents and works written by scholars and researchers having relevant issues with the topic of this paper. Technically, I will explore some works on the life of Said Nursi, his ideas on the necessity of maintaining the dignity in worldly life for Muslims, his concept of the theology of hope as reflected in his *Damascus Sermon*, and some commentaries made by other scholars on the life and thought of Said Nursi.

¹⁰For more complete exposition on the *Damascus Sermon*, see, Thomas Michel, *Insights from the Risale-i Nur*, pp. 85-95.

I will also explore some works on the concept of “prosperity theology” maintained by some Christian theologians, to be compared with that of theology of hope proposed by Said Nursi. Some works on cultural achievements and progress experienced by both Western people and Muslims will have a very significant attention in this study, as they will help clarify how Nursi perceives the difference of the two cultures. Having explored these works I will reformulate the ideas on the necessity of maintaining the dignity of worldly life for Muslims, so as it would be clear as how Muslims might be able to overcome their backwardness and poverty as the true puzzling issues overwhelming Muslim people for many centuries.

D. The Rise and Fall of Islamic Civilization

The Muslims’ success in expanding their authority, as explained in the Introduction above, may have been due to their ability to transcend the boundaries of nationality and race affiliation. Their provision of a common language and Islamic moral code provided a great advantage over tribal culture, assisting commercial relations among diversified nations belonging to multicultural origins. In addition, Muslim traders also successfully developed monetary and accounting systems and legal code which were very useful in adjudicating financial contracts and disputes. This expansion in trade, in addition to the open intellectual environment of early Islam, gave rise to the wealth of its civilization.¹¹

The advancement of Islamic culture in the medieval period reached its peak under the reign of Abbasid caliphate which ruled from Baghdad from 750 to 1258. The Abbasid’s greatest achievements were in the fields of philosophy, science and mathematics, in which they became the beacon of the world civilization of the time. They studied, preserved and translated numerous works of the Greek legacy to be widely known to Muslims and, later, to the world beyond. The Muslim world is justifiably proud of the great achievements, in which Muslim scholars provided major contributions to mathematics, algebra, trigonometry,

¹¹Perkins, “Prosperity and the Rise” (2003).

chemistry, physics, and medicine. This was a civilization that outshined all others in its prosperity and achievement.¹²

The advance of Muslim civilization might have also taken place due to the fact that in 529, Christian Emperor Justinian closed down the Athenian schools of philosophy. He did so because he believed that Greek philosophy contributed to the departure from the true faith, as it was deemed to have justified paganism and thus, endangered the Christian dogmas. More precisely, Majid Fakhry reveals, "In 529 the Byzantine emperor Justinian, as defender of Orthodox faith, ordered that school to be closed, because its teachings constituted a threat to Christianity."¹³ What followed was the Dark Age in Europe, in which there was no progress of science and philosophy for many centuries. Subsequently, the legacy of intellectual currents flowed away to the Islamic lands, where it found an asylum and suitable home for its progress.

While the ancient works of the Greek philosophers were neglected and forgotten in Europe, they got their way to find fertile soil so as to grow prolifically in the Muslim land. Some Muslim scholars were keenly interested in studying Greek science and philosophy because they were encouraged by their Holy Scripture to improve their intellectual capacity. Abundant of Qur'anic verses are understood as justifying their venture to expand their intellectual curiosity as to explore the subtleties of Greek philosophy and sciences. On the other hand, Muslims were also challenged by non-Muslim intellectuals in the areas being newly conquered by Muslim rulers to prove the veracity of their belief system and the validity of their religious traditions. They had no choice but to develop their intellectual training by adopting the Greek thought which could be the most effective means to encounter their competitors previously belonging to the different belief systems, be they Judaism, Christianity, or Zoroastrianism.

One of the most notable scientists and philosophers of ancient Islam was Ibn Rushd (d. 1198), better known in Western literature as

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Majid Fakhry, "Philosophy and Theology from the Eight Century C.E. to the Present," in John L. Esposito (ed.), *The Oxford History of Islam* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.270.

Averroes. He lived in Muslim Spain in the twelfth century. He made a great contribution to reintroducing the philosophy of Aristotle to Western scholars of the time. He was honored as the one who was responsible to the revival of Aristotelianism in Western Europe by the end of the twelfth century. He held a great reputation among the Jews as the outstanding interpreter of Aristotle. Before the end of the twelfth century Averroes' works were read in Arabic by Jewish scholars, whose philosophical culture was, quoting Renan, "nothing but a reflection of Muslim culture." However, a century later, his works were translated into Hebrew. Many Jewish scholars were involved in this project, such as Moses ben Tibbon, Jacob ben Abba Mari, and Simeon Anatoli. The Jewish phase was only the first in Averroes' westward migration. Later on, these works were further translated into Latin. Averroes' works were then better known in Latin translation, including his commentary on *De Caelo et Mundo*, *De Anima*, *De Generatione et Corruptione, Physica, Metaphysica*, and the paraphrase of *Parva Naturalia*.¹⁴

For Muslims, one of the most important legacies provided by Averroes was his attempt to harmonize between religion and philosophy. He believed that the Qur'an contained the highest truth. Nevertheless, he maintains that the Qur'anic words should not be taken at face value. They should be understood by reconsidering their *ta'wil*, or rational interpretation. In congruence with this idea, there should be a dual method of expounding theology, one exclusively for the learned and another for the masses in general. To the masses one must speak of religion, while for the enlightened few one may disclose scientific truth. Another interesting outlook genuinely proposed by Averroes was his concern about the fate of women in Islam. He was saddened by the ill-fated position of women in society, as there was no scope allowed for them to develop their talents. They seemed to have been destined entirely to childbirth and servility to their husbands. It is only understandable that his writings could be the reason for his disposal from his official post as the supreme judge

¹⁴ Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 274.

and physician to the ruler in Cordoba.¹⁵ This is because, among other things, some orthodox scholars might have felt uneasy (or envious) with his too rationalistic approach in understanding the Islamic doctrines.

Thereafter Averroes' commentaries on the philosophical writings of the Greek sages may be said to have become part of the Aristotelian heritage of Western Europe. Unfortunately, among the Muslims themselves, Averroes had no significant number of disciples or successors. The fact reveals further that Averroes' most important disciples were of the Western academic tradition of the time, including Maimonides, Siger de Brabant, Moses ben Tibbon, Levi ben Gerson, Albert the Great, as well as St. Thomas Aquinas.¹⁶ This could be the beginning of the passage of the Islamic cultural heritage from the Muslim land to the west. The West was so fortunate as they could rediscover their lost intellectual heritage of Greco-Roman civilization.

Additionally, as Perkins further argues, "in the Muslim world the teachings of Averroes were considered to be too rationalistic, and the religious orthodoxy was not further challenged by the philosophy."¹⁷ This idea, inevitably, has another crucial consequence as the independent thought was no more allowed, and thus Muslims were obliged to follow blindly the products of the intellectual exercises formulated by the previous scholars. Muslims fell under the intellectual stagnation, notoriously deemed as the closing of the gate of *ijtihad*, or free intellectual exercises, mainly in formulating the legal issues. The Islamic doctrine seems to have come to its final formula so as not to be debated or reexamined.

On the other hand, in Christian Europe, Averroes' teachings aroused much interest, and thus the philosophy of the ancient Greeks was rediscovered via the Muslim world. It took several centuries, however, to reconcile this philosophy with Christian belief. In the meantime, the universities began to grow in some principal cities in Western Europe resulting from the passage of the Greek intellectual

¹⁵ Perkins, "Prosperity and Rise", (2003).

¹⁶ Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, 275.

¹⁷ Perkins, "Prosperity and Rise", (2003).

legacy through the Muslim world. Accordingly, “the writings of Aristotle and Averroes’ interpretation of them became a subject of debate. This created turmoil in the minds of many medieval European intellectuals but helped sow the seeds of the Renaissance and stimulate interest in scientific investigation.”¹⁸

Although Muslim scholars maintain that the Qur’an urges quest for knowledge of nature by observation, and it has inspired the development of scientific methods, signifying that the truth itself may be revealed by empirical observation as well as from the Qur’an, there was a religious crackdown by the closure of the gate of *ijtihad*, or free intellectual exercise. As a result, scientific research largely ceased in the Muslim world, and it inevitably moved to Christian Europe, although it had initially to encounter a severe resistance from some religious authority there. Since the early of the 13th century the relative decline of Islamic civilization was seen in some areas of the Islamic empire. This decline was not, as Perkins suggests, due to external forces, but rather because of Islam itself. The closure of the gate of *ijtihad* was regarded as the main driving force for further decline of Islamic civilization. Furthermore, the intellectual environment became inhospitable to the open and honest exchange of ideas. Gradually, all of the advancements previously known to Muslims passed to Europe, reassuring some new inventions as signs of their cultural awakening.¹⁹

Disregarding the fact that whether Perkins’ argument is right or wrong, in reality, the Muslim world began to experience its decline as there was no more products of genuine thought or new scientific inventions. In addition, their political power also dwindled very significantly, followed by their diminution in economic life. When the Christian Europe began to develop their new awakening with some monumental invention to improve their life, by contrast, the Muslim world was dwindling almost in all aspects of cultural creativity. Many Muslims nations were then occupied and subjugated by some western states. Muslims fell under the domination of Western nations, and, still more miserably, their natural resources

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

were avariciously extracted by the way of imperialism. This is the beginning of real economic deterioration suffered by Muslim nations. As a result, many of them could not gain proportional advantages from their abundant natural resources available in their homeland for their own prosperity. It has been a common knowledge that abundant natural resources could recurrently be a curse rather than blessing for the people living in areas surrounding them.

Today, most of the Western states have successfully achieved their superiority over the Muslim nations, mainly because of their advancement in political, cultural as well as their economic progress. Unfortunately, however, some leaders of the Muslim nations remain very much dependent on the direction of the West, or otherwise they failed to maintain their own authority over their respective subjects. What happens in the Middle East today could be the real manifestation of how that dependence remains unbroken in determining their political and economic affairs. It seems true that it would take very long time for Muslims to recover their cultural dignity in front of the West. But, what really made the West triumphant in keeping their cultural superiority over the rest of the world? It would take a very long discussion to elaborate this issue, both historically and philosophically. Yet, some Christian theologians develop the idea of “prosperity theology” as an attempt to establish the sound argument to justify why it is necessary for people to live prosperously in this world. Nonetheless, such an economic prosperity could be viewed as an expression of their different cultural advancement. After all, as the historical experiences reveal, there are widening differences in living standards of people around the world. This might result in social jealousy and hatred among nations.

E. Prosperity Theology and Theology of Hope (Result and Discussion)

“Prosperity theology,” as Wikipedia explains, “is a Christian religious doctrine that financial blessing is the will of God for Christians, and that faith, positive speech, and donations to Christian ministries will always increase one’s material wealth.” The term is

sometimes called “theology of abundance” and “prosperity gospel.” Based on this idea, the non-traditional interpretations of the Bible suggest that the doctrine views the Bible as a contract between God and humans: if humans truly believe in God, He will deliver His promises of security and prosperity. Accepting the validity of these promises to be true is perceived as an act of faith, which God will honor. The doctrine stresses the necessity of personal empowerment, proposing that it is God’s will for humans to achieve happiness and prosperity. The atonement that signifies the reconciliation with God is understood to include the alleviation of sickness and poverty, which are considered as curses to be broken by faith. However, this could be obtained only through visualization and positive confession, and is often taught in mechanical and contractual terms.²⁰

Historically, the “prosperity theology” can be traced back to the Healing Revivals that began to emerge in the United States in the 1950s. However, some commentators linked the origins of its theology to the New Thought movement of the 1800s. Subsequently, the prosperity teaching figured more noticeably in the Word of Faith movement and 1980s televangelism. More significant progress took place in 1990s and 2000s, as the teaching was adopted by influential leaders in the Charismatic Movement and promoted by Christian missionaries throughout the world, sometimes leading to the establishment of mega-churches. Churches in which the prosperity gospel is taught are often non-denominational and usually directed by a sole pastor or leader, although some have developed multi-church networks that bear similarities to denominations. Prosperity churches often teach people about financial responsibility, although their advice in this matter was censured as misleading. The critics reveal that prosperity theology is irresponsible, promotes idolatry, and is contrary to scripture, as well as cultivates authoritarian organizations, with the leaders controlling the lives of the adherents.²¹

²⁰“Prosperity Theology,” Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology, retrieved November 29, 2013.

²¹*Ibid.*

It is true, therefore, that not all of Christian theologians readily accept this idea. The rejection is mainly held by those who maintain that Jesus, as revealed in the Gospel of Saint Mathew, has said: “You cannot serve both God and money” and “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” Based on these Biblical verses, the “prosperity theology” is therefore considered to be an “insipid heresy whose popularity among American Christians has boomed in recent years...” Cathleen Falsanai, writing in *The Washington Post*, even called this prosperity gospel as “The Worst Ideas of the Decade.” The idea is notoriously deemed as obtuse and thus named “Credo Dollar.” This is because the idea is dissonant with the harmony of orthodox Christianity, and very much focused on storing up treasures on Earth as a primary concern of faithful living. Moreover, the gospel of prosperity, as the critic goes further, turns Christianity into “a vapid bless-me club, with a doctrine that amounts to little more than spiritual magical thinking: If you pray the right way, God will make you rich.” Consequently, if a person could not live prosperously, does it mean that he/she is cursed by God? Are the poor cursed because of their unfaithfulness? In reality, according to Falsani, nowhere has the prosperity gospel flourished more than among the poor and the working class. It means that the prosperity gospel is only used to reconcile the poverty with the belief in the most gracious God, although it does not make any change for their misfortune.²²

It is clear, then, that the advancement of the West does not have any significant correlation with their doctrinal belief as formulated in the theology of prosperity, but rather because of some other factors beyond the religious consideration. After all, following the Western way of reasoning, the interference of religion into matters of economic policy is neither appropriate, desirable nor justified. To some extent, it may be referred to a doctrinal belief upheld by Christians as to “render unto Caesar the things which are

²²Cathleen Falsani, “The Worst Ideas of the Decade.” *The Washington Post*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/opinions/outlook>, retrieved February 10, 2014.

Caesar's; and unto God the things which are God's."²³ Religion has no role in determining a person as either economically prosperous or otherwise miserably deprived. More reliably, in terms of economics, religious belief could make no change in improving people's misfortune. On the other hand, the gap between rich and poor countries is not always increasing. Some poor countries are more fortunate than the others as they could improve their economic growth rapidly, while some others remain stagnantly disadvantaged. The reasons for this may vary from country to country. Sometimes it is lack of effective development policy, including the distribution of income. The distribution of income in many countries may be inequitable, but sometimes it inevitably happens as such. Taxation and welfare payments are considered to be an effective means of income distribution. Economic growth and development does not necessarily make the distribution of income more unequal or more inequitable.²⁴

While the term "prosperity theology" is surely unknown to the Muslim world, it seems irrelevant to question as whether or not the relative lower prosperity incurred by some Muslim nations is due to their misunderstanding of the true theological doctrines. Interestingly, however, Muslims have the so-called "theology of hope" as proposed by Tom Michel, referring to Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's thought. Michel's formulation of this so-called theology is based on Nursi's abundant expositions on this concept in his voluminous work, *Risale-i Nur*. It is Tom Michel who made it widely known to his audiences through his precious work *Insights from the Risale-i Nur: Said Nursi's Advice for Modern Believers* (2013).

Among numerous topics covered in this work, Michel puts an insightful discussion on Nursi's idea on the meaning of hope as the basis of positive attitude toward life, which motivates people to change, grow and develop. It is with the hope that Muslims could change their unfortunate condition. On the contrary, despair results in

²³Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East: 2000 Years of History from the Rise of Christianity to the Present Day* (London: Phoenix Giant, 1997), p.133, referring to Matt. 22:21.

²⁴John L. Perkins, "Islamic Economics, Politics and Prosperity," <http://home.alphalink.com.au/jperkins/IslamEco.htm>, retrieved February 6, 2014.

stagnation and the triumph of status quo. This idea was initially revealed by Nursi in his well-known Friday sermon delivered in Damascus, in early 1911.²⁵ Although one might say that such a formulation requires a critical examination to ensure its veracity, the theology of hope can be taken as an alternative. Yet, it cannot be viewed as a substitute or equivalent of “prosperity theology” being articulated by some Christian theologians.

In Nursi’s view, as Michel tells us further, Muslims were plagued by defects that prevented them from material progress. They could not develop effective social organization as a means to improve their condition. He realized how Muslims became so stagnant that made no significant progress vis-a-vis the Christian Europe. In his Damascus sermon, Nursi explained some illness afflicting Muslim societies that made Muslims remain stagnant in the Middle Ages, while European nations could make a great progress leaving Muslims far behind them. Nursi mentions six factors as the primary causes for Muslims’ stagnation: 1) despair, and the remedy is hope; 2) deceit, with honesty as the remedy; 3) enmity, for which the remedy is love; 4) disunity, whose cure is fraternal unity; 5) despotism, for which the remedy is Islamic dignity, and 6) selfish individualism, whose remedy is consultation. Nursi explains each kind of these sicknesses and then prescribes the remedy for them clearly.

However, of these societal diseases suffered by Muslims, Nursi gives more emphasis on the problem of despair or hopelessness. He devotes the most time to elaborate this issue, as every single person may agonize over despair, learned or men in the street alike. They express their despair by saying “there is nothing that we can do,” “nothing ever changes,” “what can I do? I am just one person,” “the problems are too deep-rooted and long-standing to fix,” or “it’s all a hopeless mess.” Nursi suggests that when people are sunk in such attitudes of despair, there is no point in looking more deeply into the basic problems of social life. This is because they will not be motivated to do something to improve their condition. According to Nursi, before people can commit themselves to work for change, first

²⁵ Thomas Michel, *Insights from the Risale-i Nur: Said Nursi’s Advice for Modern Believers* (New Jersey: Tughra Books, 2013), p. 226.

of all, they should have hope that things can be made better, that their hard work has a chance to gain success, that they can actually make a difference, and that their efforts are not determined for failure because of some adverse hand of fate.²⁶

For Nursi, since human desires are unlimited, his hopes are also unlimited. The fact reveals that human's hopes are not restricted to what they have gained. This is because the more they have the more extensive and ambitious are their desires for achieving more. According to Nursi, as Michel goes further, humans are cursed with a "short lifespan and dull mind, in the face of infinite pains and hopes." This is the fact that makes humans have to strive to sustain their life. Otherwise, they would have no chance to survive in this world filled with pains and agonies. Unfortunately, most of their hopes come to nothing. In order to be able to overcome this problem, Nursi suggests that humans should maintain their belief in the validity of the doctrine of resurrection and the coming of the eternal life in the hereafter. This belief, undeniably, plays a key role even in the pursuit of happiness for the current life on earth. The belief in the resurrection for the dead, as Muslims should uphold, signifies that human hopes are not an absurdity leading only to frustration and disappointment. It is God's promise that the good and the wicked will witness the value and the merit of every single action they have undertaken in this worldly life. Quoting the *Rays* of Said Nursi, Michel suggests: "Hope of eternal life transforms absolute despair into absolute hope, and gives believer the psychological and spiritual tools by which calamity and failure can be faced with equanimity."²⁷

There is a very lengthy discussion by Nursi on the role of hope in human life, which Michel tries to formulate it into the theology of hope. This hope bears the meaning of theology because it is to be based on religious faith that may fortify human's compassion in encountering lots of calamities, disasters and sufferings in his real life. Michel says, "When persons who are not fortified with religious faith meet setbacks and disasters, they have nothing to fall back on and are likely to get discouraged and eventually admit defeat.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

However, those who face life's vicissitudes with religious hope can see God's hand even in failed plans and accept it as part of human condition." This quotation seems to justify the reason used by Michel to call Nursi's exposition on the role of hope in human life as theology of hope. To some extent, this theology of hope can be compared with the one called the theology of prosperity proposed by some Christian theologians, as has been discussed previously. Of course it is by no means true that the two types of theology are comparable. Yet, it is interesting to consider that either theology of prosperity or theology of hope likely deal with similar realities being encountered by people wishing to overcome their impediments of life, especially with regard to economic insufficiency.

Economic insufficiency could be a trouble for everybody as well as for the society in general, since it can be a great obstacle to achieve a prosperous life. As far as we can observe from the historical facts, economic prosperity is a sign of cultural advancement. In Islam humans are ordained to strive for better life, both for this worldly life and for life in the hereafter. In terms of individual existence, material sufficiency could be an instrumental means for Muslims to maintain his or her personal dignity. Sufyan al-Thawri was a well-known ascetic scholar of the classical Islam of the Umayyad period. He was known for his expertise in science of Hadith or the Prophetic traditions. Yet, his asceticism did not prevent him from striving to achieve a prosperous life. One day, he was found holding ample of dinars in his hand. Being astonished with such a peculiarity—since people in the town knew him as a piously ascetic—one of his fellows asked him, why he should keep the dinars in his hand. Al-Thawri answered that without these dinars in his hand he would have been badly coopted by the authority. "(Otherwise) they would mistreat me like a piece of hankie to clean their hands." He needed these plenty of dinars to maintain his dignity in the face of the government officials. He would like to safeguard his independency from being abused by the wicked and ungodly emirs. These emirs used to consider they would be able to exert their influence to some public figures, like the *ulema*' or religious scholars, to win their favor. By so doing, they hoped that it would increase their personal fame and social

prominence. In spite of his occupation as a sincere and ascetic scholar, he spent much time to engage in business to the Yemen, by which he could obtain profitable income to fulfil his family's needs.²⁸

With regard to the societal dignity, economic prosperity also serves as an instrumental means for achieving cultural progress. Nevertheless, in Said Nursi's view, the cultural progress established merely on material ground would be deceptive and devious. Nursi was so critical toward modern civilization promoted by modern Europe, especially because it is merely built on materialist values. He maintains that those who promoted modern values claim that they are simply interested in providing a good life for the majority of the people. In his exposition of the concept of good life, Nursi maintains, as quoted by Michel, that it is one of deceptive, opiate fantasies of civilization. This is because the concept is limited to responding to bodily needs, supposing that if people have enough food in their stomach, a roof over their heads, and access to medical treatment when needed, they have achieved "the good life." Nursi argues that such a notion signifies a short-sighted understanding of the true needs of humans. In reality, humans also require spiritual needs to achieve psychological maturity so as they gain tranquility of life as a prerequisite of the true happiness. More precisely, Nursi writes:

O foolish friends! Do you suppose your life's duty is restricted to following the good life according to the requisites of civilization and to gratifying the physical appetites? Do you suppose the sole aim of the delicate and subtle senses, the sensitive faculties and members, the well-ordered limbs and systems, the inquisitive feelings and senses that make up your life are restricted to satisfying the low desires of the base soul in this fleeting life? (Nursi, *The Word*, The Eleventh Word).²⁹

Unfortunately, that modern civilization promoted by European nations has clouded people's minds so that they could not see the value of the spiritual life. As a consequence, they could not recognize something as a truth except if it is positively materialized in a physical form. This is because modern life only gives emphasis on the immediate and the temporal matters. Since religion is in

²⁸ Abdul Halim Mahmud, *Sufyan al-Thawri Amir al-Mu'minin fi'l-Hadith* (Kuwait: Dar al-Bayan, 1970), p. 23.

²⁹ As quoted by Michel, *Insights from Risale-I Nur*, p.56.

general very much concerned with spiritual qualities, those who adopt its teachings would be viewed as merely being oriented to otherworldly matters. Religion is nothing but a sublimation of unfulfilled yearnings, upheld by those being alienated from this real-physical world. According to Nursi, as quoted further by Michel, due to the domination of European civilization and the supremacy of natural philosophy, minds and hearts of the people have been scattered. Moreover, minds have become strangers to non-material entities, which lead people to engage in a race for seeking worldly fortune and material pleasures. They did not give any consideration to the notion of good life under the guidance of God.³⁰

F. Concluding Remarks

Did Bediuzzaman Said Nursi say something about “prosperity theology” in Islam? Of course, he absolutely did not. “Prosperity theology” is basically invented by some Christian scholars for justifying a materialist tendency, claiming that it is the will of God for humans to live prosperously by fulfilling their all material and worldly needs. Yet, the notion of prosperity theology remains debatable among many Christian thinkers. Some criticize it as a kind of heresy in Christian belief. Of course, there is nothing wrong with being rich. There is no body living in this world that does not want to be rich and enjoy prosperous life. For Christian ministries, that would signify more money to finance the mission. But, according to Rick Henderson, a pastor who writes his blog at churchismessy.com, “there is a line to how much money we as leaders should spend on ourselves. I don’t know where the line is, but it is somewhere before the ministry purchasing million dollar homes for us and our kids...”³¹

It is by no mean true, however, that Nursi is not concerned with the fact that many of his fellow Muslims are living in unembellished poverty. They all need help to elevate their disadvantageous provision. It is similarly true that in terms of material well-being

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Rick Henderson, “The False Promise of the Prosperity Gospel: Why I Called Out Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyer.” <http://www.huffngtonpost.com/pastor-rick-henderson/osteen-meyer>, blog being posted on August 21st, 2013, retrieved February 10, 2014.

Muslims are far behind the Western nations. Thus, Nursi expresses his compassion toward those who are deprived and ill-fated as can be deduced from his works. Nursi's approach seems to be so exceptional, since he did not provide a solution in an instant form, but rather through reviving and restoring his fellow Muslims' spirits. This can be seen, for instance, from his exposition on the matter of poverty found in many different parts of his *Flash* and *Words*. In his 17th Flash, seventh note, for instance, Nursi explains that due to poverty some Muslims fall into greed that leads them into impoverishment. More precisely, Nursi writes:

O crazy head and corrupted heart! Do you suppose that Muslims do not love the world, or that they do not think about the poverty into which they have fallen, and that they are in need of admonishment so that they do not forget their share of the world?

Your supposition is false, your surmise, wrong. Their greed has increased; that is the reason they are impoverished. Because for Muslims, greed causes loss and indigence. The saying: "The greedy is subject to loss and disappointment" has become proverbial.³²

Nursi suggests that the nation's poverty is not resulted from religious asceticism or laziness arising from abandoning the world. Nursi insists that it is a wrong deduction. There are many things calling and driving man to the world, like his soul and its appetites, and even the Devil as well as superficial enticement of the world. As a matter of fact, there are only few who call to the hereafter, which is a long-lasting, eternal life. Based on this notion, Nursi emphasizes that Muslims "are not in need of being encouraged and driven to the world and to greed." Of course, Nursi's idea is exactly in contrast with the notion of "prosperity theology" proposed by Christian theologians. With regard to the principle to be upheld by devout Muslims so as they could improve their life condition, Nursi insists that it can be brought about through observing faithfully the sacred commands of religion, and fear of God, and firm adherence to religion. After all, Nursi reminds all Muslims to revive and strengthen their belief in God while maintaining their will to

³² Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Flashes Collection*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Ankara: Ihlas Nur Nesriyat, 2003), p. 179.

improve the country's law and order, as well as the government administration. Nursi writes:

.... The people of Islam are not in need of being encouraged and driven to the world and to greed. Progress and public order cannot be secured in that way. They are rather in need of having their working conditions set in order, of security being established among them, and of having the principle of cooperation encouraged. And these needs can be brought about through the sacred commands of religion, and fear God, and firm adherence to religion.³³

After all, Muslims are plagued by defects that prevent them from material progress. As a result, they could not develop effective social organization as a means to improve their condition. Muslims seem to have been stagnant that they could make no significant progress vis-a-vis Christian Europe. Nursi depicts some causes why it happened to them, as he has clearly elaborated in his *Damascus Sermon*. The message of the sermon has been so reverberating that transcends the limits of time and space. It remains instrumental to be our reference today as a prescription to cure our defects.

So, why should Muslims maintain their dignity in worldly life? First of all, referring to the idea held by Sufyan al-Thawri being discussed in the early part of this study, Muslims should maintain their dignity in worldly life because they should not lose their independence against the powerful authority. Otherwise they would be easily coopted for some subjective interests of the adverse authority. As a result, Muslims would be obliged to follow the directions of their enemies, even if the directions are against their religious values. This is what really Muslims in general are experiencing right now. It is true that it would be never easy for Muslim nations to escape from this miserable condition. For Nursi, as has been extensively discussed previously, Muslims have to maintain their will to improve their society's law and order and to encourage the principles of cooperation among other nations. These are the necessary prerequisites for them to live in dignity so as they could break away from the calamity of being subjugated by other nations. The theology of hope, as formulated by Nursi, could be one principle

³³ *Ibid.*

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to be considered as a therapeutic treatment for Muslims to regain their dignity.

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