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SERVING ISLAM PEACFULLY DURING THE AGRESSION AND SAID NURSI'S KALAMISATION OF POSITIVE ACTION FOR SOCIAL HARMONY

Salih Yucel*

Abstract: Injustice, oppression and tyranny are as old as human beings. Three types of responses can be made: a) to respond in the same or worse manner; b) to remain silent and accept the oppression due to weakness; or c) to take a path that is not based on revenge or acceptance of oppression and injustice, but redirects people's negative feelings towards a worthier cause, decreasing the propagation of evil. This third way does not involve envying the worldly goods or positions of others. Rather, it involves redirecting or transforming animosity for the common good. Said Nursi (1877-1960) calls this "positive action" (*müsbet hareket*). This article suggests Nursi's third way of responding to injustice, oppression and tyranny is proactive civil disobedience based on the Qur'an and Sunnah. By acting peacefully throughout his life, particularly in the "New Said" era, Nursi aimed to revive society "from the bottom up" and not from "the top down," an approach he felt avoided the injustice and oppression seen among political Islamists. Nursi called this *ilelebed müsbet hareket*, which means "acting positively forever." Given the context and manner through which it was practiced, I call this "kalamised (theologised) civil disobedience." This can be considered as *tajdid*, a peaceful way of renewal against injustice and oppression. This paper is divided into three sections. The first section examines positive action in Nursi's life and works. The second section details Nursi's third approach against aggression and will be viewed from theological and sociological perspectives. Finally, the third section suggests Nursi's way of positive action is highly idealistic and, while not impossible, is applied with difficulty in an individualistic and materialistic society.

Keywords: *Said Nursi, serving Islam, positive action, civil disobedience, aggressive secularism*

INTRODUCTION

Said Nursi witnessed the collapse of Ottoman Empire, the colonisation of most of the Muslim world and establishment of Republic of Turkey. In the early Republic era (1922-1950), the Turkish government engaged in an ambitious and Jacobin secularisation program that

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essentially sidelined Islam from all aspects of life¹ and oppressed religious leaders, including Nursi, in order to perpetuate its reforms. Within Nursian studies, there is a well-documented shift from the “Old Said” to the “New Said.”² This transformation is critical for understanding his positive action approach, which is based on constructive means and civil disobedience rather than destructive means and violence. To better understand this transition, it is necessary to look at the major changes during the establishment of the Republic.

In 1924, the caliphate was abolished constitutionally and remaining members and relatives of the last Ottoman Sultan were expelled overseas. The Muslim world was left without spiritual leadership. In 1926, Islamic courts were closed. This led to a new penal code being passed, one based on the Italian penal code. Similarly, during this time, a new Turkish civil code was established, one modelled after the Swiss Civil Code. These new codes were passed without regard to whether they were appropriate to the needs of Turkish society at the time. In 1928, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1871-1938) implemented a new alphabet for the written Turkish language, one based on a modified Latin alphabet, while abolishing the use of Arabic script. In 1932, the *adhan* – Muslim call to prayer – was outlawed in Arabic, with those that continued this tradition being arrested and imprisoned. The *adhan* was instead rewritten using Turkish words and forced upon the country’s thousands of mosques. This law remained in place for 18 years. Furthermore, attempts were also made to have the Qur’an recited in Turkish alone during prayer (*salat*) instead of Arabic, though this was unsuccessful.

Islamic studies at the universities, religious schools (*madrasas*), Qur’an courses, Sufi lodges and Alawi spiritual centres were closed. Some mosques were turned into storage areas or animal pens. Religious orders, such as Sufis, Bektashis and Alawis, were banned. All religious or spiritual non-governmental organisations (*waqf*) were closed and their activities banned. For a period, even teaching the Qur’an was forbidden and those who continued to teach were jailed for three to seven years. Many of the religious books that were written in Arabic script, including the Qur’an, were collected, burnt or thrown away. While some rights were given to non-Muslim religious groups, they too faced oppression. A significant number of their religious centres and schools were closed, such as those of the Greek Orthodox and Jews. Faced with this, some minorities fled Turkey due to oppression.

Leading influential scholars were imprisoned, exiled or chose to leave the country. Among them was the national poet who penned the national anthem, Mehmet Akif Ersoy (1873-1936). Some Islamic forms of headdress, such as the turban and fez, were outlawed in favour of Western-style hats. Turks not wanting to adopt a foreign style hat were punished and, in an extreme example, even the seaside city Rize was bombed by warships.³ The French *La Presse*

¹ Hans Küng, *Islam: Past, Present and Future* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), 434.

² A categorisation of Said Nursi’s life into ‘old’ and ‘new’ has now been standardised in his biographies as between 1924 and onward until he died.

³ On 25 October 1925, Atatürk introduced the ‘Hat Law’, which was part of the revolution. Instead of the *turban* or *fez*, it became mandatory for men to wear a hat in Turkey. Those who disobeyed were persecuted and jailed. When many people disobeyed the Hat Law in the Rize region, the city was bombarded by a warship: 17 people were killed, over 20 people sentenced to 20 years in prison and 14 people were executed. Nevzat Çiçek, “Şapka Yüzünden Rize’de Idamlar Bugün Yapıldı!” [Executions were done due to

newspaper editorial asked, “Is there a country that can be a republic if a person is hanged for not wearing on one’s head what the state wants? Don’t you have a parliament?”⁴

Hamidullah Suphi Bey, the Turkish Minister for Education in the early 1920s, said to missionary Stanley Jones, “Religion is not important for us. We hope that a day will come when there will be Turkish Protestants and Buddhists, but he will still remain a Turk.”⁵ Ahmet Kabaklı, in his book *Temellerin Durusması* (The Trial of Essentials), indicates that change of religion from Islam to Protestantism was discussed in the Cabinet in the national reforms program. However, Cabinet member and former general Kazım Karabekir (1882-1948) intensely opposed the idea, which led Atatürk to shelve it, never raising the issue again.⁶

After all of these changes, the General National Assembly deleted the clause in the constitution that declared Islam as the official state religion. Islam was replaced with Atatürk’s secular ideologies. All these changes were done in the name of Westernisation, a secularisation that was intended to ensure the new regime would stay in power and eliminate all threats against it. Sage Woolwort was a missionary in Istanbul during this period and, referencing the reform and religious situations in Turkey, wrote a letter in 1927 in which he states:

It seems it is impossible for Muslims to act according to the Quran and Hadith. Islam and its institutions are buried in history ... In public offices, praying and fasting have been outlawed. Those who wish to make the pilgrimage have to pay taxes that are equal to the journey expenses. The headscarf has been forbidden. Everything has been arranged according to the European lifestyle. At last, Christianity has been born again in Turkey.⁷

US professor John Dewey, educational consultant for the Turkish Ministry of Education in Ankara at that time, summarised the anti-religion’s reform as: “The Turks did not leave any of their Islamic or spiritual values.”⁸

These changes were not all welcomed. Those who rebelled against these changes, such as Sufi leaders, Alawi leaders and members of the general public, were dealt with swiftly. Some were imprisoned while others were executed or persecuted. Alawites in Dersim (Tunceli in modern day Turkey) were bombed, which Van Brunsain called genocide⁹ in the name of Westernisation and secularisation.

Despite the new secular ideologies supposedly separating mosque and state, the new government formed the Department of Religious Affairs. This was done with an aim to control mosques. Imams were limited in their freedom of speech and restricted to preaching government-approved sermons.

not wearing hat] , TimeTurk, December 12, 2012, accessed November 26, 2016, www.timeturk.com/tr/2012/12/12/sapka-yuzunden-rize-bugun-bombaladi.html#.VDfVXhbVh2k.

⁴ La Presse September 9, 1928.

⁵ Letters to the Editor, *Moslem World* 16, no. 3 (1927): 258.

⁶ Ahmet Kabaklı, *Temellerin Durusması* [The Trial of Essentials] (Istanbul: Turk Edebiyat Vakfi, 2013), 58.

⁷ Letter to the Editor, *Moslem World* 17, no. 2 (1928): 141.

⁸ Letter to the Editor, *Muslim World* 17, no. 2 (1928): 143.

⁹ See Martin Van Bruniessen, “Genocide in Kurdistan? The Suppression of the Dersim Rebellion in Turkey (1937-38) and the Chemical War Against the Iraqi Kurds (1988),” in *Genocide: Conceptual and Historical Dimension*, ed. George J. Andreopoulos (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 141-170.

All these extreme changes to religious society did not squash all religious activity. Some groups went underground, teaching the Qur'an and practicing their religion secretly. Nursi, living among this, became weary of these conditions. In the days of what he called "the Old Said," he strived to change the political course, but was unsuccessful. He decided to focus totally on working for his afterlife and committed himself to worship. Nursi withdrew to a cave on Mount Erek in the city of Van region, located in Eastern Turkey, far from political and social life. He would only go down the mountain to the city for congregational prayer on Fridays. He was called to join the rebellion led by Sheikh Said of Palu (1965-1925); however, Nursi declined because he believed a rebellion would cause the death of innocents. The rebellion was carried out and swiftly crushed. The rebels originating from Eastern Turkey were executed. Even though he did not take part, Nursi was seen as a threat for the new regime and exiled first to Burdur and then to Isparta. However, exile did not prevent people from wanting to learn from him, so he was exiled further into Barla, a remote village difficult to access since there was no formal road.

Instead of laying blame for such injustice and oppression, he says:

The officials here utilise the government influence in their grudges. But I offer a hundred thousand thanks to Almighty God, and by way of making known His bounties, I say this: All this oppression: and tyranny of theirs is like pieces of wood for the fire of ardour and endeavour which illuminates the lights of the Qur'an; it makes them flare up and shine. And those lights of the Qur'an, which have suffered that persecution of theirs and have spread with the heat of endeavour, have made this province, indeed, most of the country, like a *madrassa* in place of Barla. They supposed me to a prisoner in a village. On the contrary, in spite of the atheists, Barla has become the teaching desk and many places.¹⁰

The government worked to keep people away from him. When others who were exiled were granted amnesty, Nursi was denied this right. During his six years exile in Barla, he was not even permitted to go to the nearby village, which would have taken him 20 minutes on foot.¹¹ Nursi was watched, followed and harassed continuously during his exiles in Isparta, Barla, Kastamonu and Emirdag, as well as when he was in prison or travelling until he died. He stated:

I have known nothing in my life of eighty years of the pleasures of this world. All my life passed on the battlefield, in captivity, or in the courts and prisons of this country. There is no oppression, not a torment that I have not experienced...¹²

Despite experiencing extremely difficult conditions in Turkey and other countries, Nursi did not compromise his theological and philosophical principles. With his full capacity, he worked to live out these principles and enable others to live them peacefully.

Until the 1980s, over 1,500 cases were taken to the courts regarding Nursi's works. While the majority of the cases were dismissed or pardoned, sometimes the same case would be

¹⁰ Sukran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), 296.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Said Nursi, *Tarihceyi Hayat*, [Biography of the Author of Risalei Nur] (Istanbul: Envar Nesriyat, 1996), 629.

brought back to court repeatedly over a 60-year period, each time with a new defendant. Even though the courts ruled Nursi's works to be no danger to society, the persecution continued until he died in 1960.

Even after Nursi died in Urfa, the military government did not leave him to rest. From fear of his death inspiring others, they removed his body from the grave two months after burial and took it to another, currently unknown, place by plane and reburied him. Some speculate his body was tossed into the sea.¹³ However, some argue he was buried in a graveyard in the Isparta region. Nursi can be seen as a scholar who was not allowed rest in his life, like many other great scholars of Islam in history. Despite all the injustices, oppression, harassment, persecution and imprisonments of him and his students, he did not rebel nor allow his followers to rebel against the government. Instead, Nursi asked his followers to act peacefully. He prioritised social harmony, despite he and his students suffering for 35 years, and avoided responding violently. He saw acting peacefully as positive action and the right path to overcome such aggression.

NURSI'S ANTIDOTE AGAINST AGGRESSION: MUSBET HAREKET OR POSITIVE ACTION

The Turkish word *müsbet* means positive, established, proved and affirmed. It also bears the meaning of repairing or constructive.¹⁴ In Nursi's works, *Risale-i Nur, müsbet hareket* has two dimensions. The first is a method of guidance that is based on knowledge, learning, persuasion and conveying the teachings of Islam mostly through *temsil*. Ozcan Keles defines *temsil* "as the inadvertent overspill of genuine practice."¹⁵ The second is that of responding to aggression peacefully. Nursi viewed positive action as a duty of Muslims and states this in his *Emirdag Lahikası*.¹⁶ Positive action encompasses theological, psychological and social aspects. Delving into the psychological aspects of positive action is outside the scope of this article.

Rather, this article focuses on the *kalamised* (theologised) aspects of Nursi's positive action philosophy as this applies against the injustice, oppression and tyranny of aggressive secularists. By *kalamisation*, I mean, first, Nursi viewed the importance of positive action is equal to other obligatory duties of a Muslim. Second, he interpreted oppression and tyranny as the fertiliser for the growth of the idea of serving the faith. Third, he saw relative beauty in the consequence of all challenges, which he and his students faced. Fourth, by calling it "*ilelebed müsbet hareket*," or forever positive action, he crystallised it as a theory and put it in practice through his life. Calling it *ilelebed*, forever, shows it is not a tactic or strategy against aggression,

¹³ Kadir Aytar, "Said Nursi ve Müsbet Hareket Forumu Notlar" [Notes on Said Nursi and Positive Action Forum], *Risale Haber*, April 7, 2014, accessed April 8, 2014, <http://www.risalehaber.com/said-nursi-ve-musbet-hareket-panelinden-notlar-15923yy.htm>.

¹⁴ Alaattin Basar, "A Lifelong Principle: Positive Action," *Nur Web Pages*, April 17, 2006, accessed February 3, 2018, http://www.nur.org/en/intro/nurlibrary/A_Lifelong_Principle_Positive_Action_169.

¹⁵ Ozcan Keles, "Tamsil: The Inadvertent Overspill of Internalisation," *Ozcan Keles: Musings of a British Muslim Academic Activist* (blog), June 13, 2014, accessed July 3, 2018, <http://www.ozcankeles.org/tamsil-the-inadvertent-overspill-of-internalisation-21/>.

¹⁶ Said Nursi, *Emirdag Lahikası* [Addendum of Emirdag] (Istanbul: Enver Nesriyat, 1991), 241.

but an indispensable and core principle for serving Islam and humanity. Finally, he prioritised security and social harmony over his individual rights, including suffering under oppression and tyranny.

By doing this, Nursi did not invent something new, but revived a neglected or forgotten, yet important, Islamic principle for social and spiritual life. Nursi's emphasis on positive action is not without precedent, as it can be seen within the following selection of Qur'anic verses and examples from the life of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).¹⁷

Just like other faiths, Islam is no stranger to suffering assaults. The Qur'an refers to the struggle between those who believe in *tawhid*, one God, and those who are sternly against it exemplified particularly in the epic stories of Adam, Eve and Satan, Abraham, and Moses and Pharaoh. The Qur'an explains those who were against *tawhid* used every act and tool they had to inflict harm and persecute the believers in one God.

The Prophets are embodiments of positive action, which is essential feature of all prophetic traditions. This can be seen in the respective successes of Moses and Aaron against the Pharaoh, Abraham's approach toward polytheists, Jesus and his disciples in spreading his message, and Prophet Muhammad and his Companions in conveying Islam to three continents in the relatively short span of half a century.

The first humans as mentioned in the Qur'an, Adam and Eve, were deceived by Satan to eat fruits from the banned tree.¹⁸ This caused their expulsion from Paradise. According to Qur'anic exegete Al-Tabari (838-923),¹⁹ Adam and Eve did not blame Satan, but pointed the finger at themselves.²⁰ They did not rebel against God like Satan, but instead sought forgiveness and mercy from God. For contemporary Muslims, this example depicts the ideal reaction: to criticise oneself before blaming others.

The story of Prophet Abraham in the Qur'an was revealed when Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) faced death threats, persecution and harsh treatment at the hands of the polytheists of Mecca. When Abraham offered his father the guidance and advice of God, he rejected it and threatened to stone him to death.²¹ Despite such a threat from his polytheist father, Abraham was still kind in his speech and treatment towards him.²² In at-Tabari's (838-923) works, Abraham's

¹⁷ A part of this section is a summary of a section of chapter in Salih Yucel and Ismail Albayrak, *The Art of Co-existence* (New Jersey: Tugrah Books, 2014).

¹⁸ According to Islamic theology, prophets are infallible, but may commit mistakes unintentionally. Adam was a prophet who made a small mistake out of good intention.

¹⁹ All Arabic and Turkish sources are translated by the author.

²⁰ Muhammed Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari, *Jamiu'l Bayan Fi Tafsir al Qur'an* [Collection of Statements on Interpretation of the Qur'an], n.d, accessed February 8, 2013, <http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=0&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=7&tAyahNo=23&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

²¹ Qur'an 19:46.

²² Qu'ran 19:47. Al-Tabari, *Jamiu'l Bayan Fi Tafsir al Qur'an* n.d. accessed July 19, 2010, <http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=19&tAyahNo=47&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

response to his father's threat was "Even if you stone me, I won't harm you."²³ Ibn Kathir (1301-1373) extends this further, adding "I won't harm, insult or even disrespect you".²⁴

The story of Moses and Pharaoh is the most referenced narrative in the Qur'an. Pharaoh is mentioned as an extreme tyrant who committed all kinds of evil and injustice, from the killing of male children to the oppression of the Israelites. He went as far as to declare himself to be a god. Despite this, God commanded Moses and his brother Aaron to speak gently with Pharaoh "... But speak to him with gentle words, so that he might reflect and be mindful or feel some awe (of me, and behave with humility) ..."²⁵

All prominent historical and contemporary exegetes of the Qur'an agree that the two prophets followed this order, even when Pharaoh killed more of the believers and Children of Israel. Al-Qurtubi (1214-1273) interprets the command to mean speak gently, implying Moses should not use any word implying hatred or animosity. He goes on to state this is a general rule to be applied by those who seek to enjoin good and forbid evil.²⁶ Al-Qushayri (986-1072) extends this rule to cover not only a person's speech, but also their demeanour.²⁷ In another verse, believers are instructed to "...speak kindly and well to the people..."²⁸ At-Tabari interprets this verse as explaining the proper way – which is to say, the way that pleases Allah – to communicate with others. This includes speaking gently, using kind words, not being harsh and maintaining the best of manners.²⁹ Ar-Razi (1149-1209) stated this verse makes it a requirement for all believers to speak gently.³⁰ Ibn Kathir went further to say the overall approach to others should be gentle and non-provoking.³¹ Al-Qushayri even states a believer should respond with praise of the other party's positive characteristics.³²

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ismail ibn Umar Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al Qur'an al Karim* [Commentary on the Holy Qur'an], n.d. accessed February 27, 2010, <http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=7&tSoraNo=19&tAyahNo=47&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

²⁵ Qur'an 20:43-44.

²⁶ Imam Abu Abdullah Al-Qurtubi, *Al Jamiu'l Ahkam al Qur'an* [The Collection of Rulings of the Qur'an], n.d., accessed August 10, 2011, <http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=5&tSoraNo=20&tAyahNo=44&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

²⁷ Abd Ul Karim ibn Hawazin al-Qushayri, *Lata'if al-Isharat bi Tafsir al-Qur'an* [Subtleties of The Allusions], n.d. accessed August 10, 2011, <http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=3&tTafsirNo=31&tSoraNo=20&tAyahNo=44&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

²⁸ Qur'an 2:83.

²⁹ Al-Tabari, *Jamiu'l Bayan*, accessed August 10, 2011, <http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=1&tSoraNo=2&tAyahNo=83&tDisplay=yes&Page=4&Size=1&LanguageId=1>.

³⁰ Fakhr al Din al-Razi, *Mafatihul Ghayb* [Revealing of Unseen], n.d., accessed August 10, 2011, <http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=4&tSoraNo=2&tAyahNo=83&tDisplay=yes&Page=5&Size=1&LanguageId=1>.

³¹ Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al Qur'an al Karim*, accessed August 10, 2011, <http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=1&tTafsirNo=7&tSoraNo=2&tAyahNo=83&tDisplay=yes&Page=2&Size=1&LanguageId=1>.

³² Al-Qurtubi, *Al Jamiu'l Ahkam al Qur'an*, accessed December 13, 2011, <http://www.altafsir.com/Tafasir.asp?tMadhNo=3&tTafsirNo=31&tSoraNo=25&tAyahNo=63&tDisplay=yes&UserProfile=0&LanguageId=1>.

There are many examples from the life of Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) that can be considered a source of positive action for Nursi.

The Prophet travelled to Ta'if with hope, and sincerely addressed the leaders and people of Ta'if for ten days. They mocked him, disbelieving he was a prophet and ran him out of the city pelting him with stones. Bloodied and weary, he took refuge under the shade of a tree outside the city limits. According to Islamic historians, an angel appeared before him and asked if he wished for the city of Ta'if to be destroyed. However, the Prophet preferred the city might be saved, out of the hope that even one person might turn out to be an ally and seek the truth.³³ He continued, "My Lord, I complain only to You of my weakness, powerlessness and my being despicable to the people. If you do not have anger against me, then I don't mind the suffering, misfortunes and difficulties that I faced."³⁴ Towards the polytheist leaders who persecuted and killed the Muslims and harmed the Prophet through assassination attempts, direct assaults and heavy insults, the Prophet's response was only to raise his hands and say, "O Lord, I leave these to You."³⁵

It can be said that all great scholars responded to aggression with peaceful civil disobedience instead of violence in the history of Islam. Despite persecution and tyranny, Imam Azam (699-767), Imam Shafi'i (767-819), Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780-855), Imam Malik (711-795), Imam Bukhari (810-870), Imam Rabbani (1564-1624) and many others did not rebel nor recommend their students and followers to rebel. Positive action can be seen to be one of the characteristics of all *mujaddids* (revivers). They are revivalists, but not revolutionists. Similarly, Nursi followed previous great scholars' path, reviving their methodology as positive action according to the need of the time.

When Nursi was accused of rejecting the current regime, Nursi denied this. He said, "It's not our duty nor in our strength to reject the regime. However, we do not accept it or want it. Rejection is one thing; peaceful disobedience is another."³⁶ Nursi did not welcome the un-Islamic reforms or accept the persecution and exiles. His response was in the form of lawful civil disobedience.³⁷ That was his method of asking for justice. His form of opposition was non-violent, similar to Mahatma Gandhi's methods. Yildiz argues Nursi is the manifestation of Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1944), Martin Luther King Jr (1929-1968) and Malcolm X (1925-1965) in Turkey.³⁸ However, Nursi's civil disobedience is different from Gandhi, King and Malcolm X because he was expectationless due to the spiritual aspect of positive action.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibn Ishak, c 2, s. 61-62, cited in Mustafa Asim Köksal, *İslam Tarihi*, c.1. s. 692, accessed February 23, 2018, https://archive.org/stream/İslamTarihiTamamiAsimKöksal/İslam_Tarihi_-_Mekke_Devri_-_Asim_Köksal#page/n1/mode/2up/search/Taif.

³⁵ Müslim, c. 3, s. 1 418, cited in Köksal, *İslam Tarihi*, c.1, s. 694.

³⁶ Said Nursi, *Kastamonu Lahikası*, Letter 171, n.d., accessed March 21, 2018, <http://www.nur.gen.tr/tr.html#maincontent=Risale&islem=read&BolumId=7970&KitapId=4&KitapAd=Kastamonu+Lahikas%u0131>.

³⁷ Ahmet Özkilinc, "Bediuzzaman'ın Uc Yolu" [Three Ways of Bediuzzaman], accessed August 3, 2014, <http://www.iikv.org/academy/index.php/ulusalsemp/article/view/823>.

³⁸ Ahmet Yildiz, "Temel Hak ve Hürriyetleri gerçekleştirmede Said Nursi'nin musbet hareket metodu" [Application of Fundamental Human Rights in Said Nursi's Positive Action], accessed August 8, 2014, <http://www.iikv.org/academy/index.php/ulusalsemp/article/view/823>.

While his students were being imprisoned for reading or writing the *Risale-i Nur*, Nursi had full hope and declared a day would come when his books would be taught and studied in universities. Nursi could have mobilised his students and followers to rebel, but instead he recommended his students to be patient, law-abiding, and protective of social harmony. By doing this, he followed his spiritual master³⁹ Imam al-Ghazali (1058-1111), who stated, “A hundred years of tyranny is better than a day of chaos and anarchy.”⁴⁰ In Nursi’s case, this meant, even if the current regime was oppressive, people would not be doing any favours to themselves by rebelling. Instead, he recommended a peaceful struggle, which he called *manevi cihad* (spiritual jihad). His philosophy of positive action is inclusive with responsibility towards God, human beings and nature.⁴¹

Positive action necessitates focusing on the major problems, rather than prioritising minor ones, and attempting to solve them in a civilised way instead of blaming external causes. By doing that, Nursi applies Ibn Arabi’s (1165-1240) *al-insan al-kamil* (perfect human) model in the service of faith and humanity. He brought faith, Islam and humans together, then developed a productive and beneficial role model.⁴² He considered positive action as a characteristic of humankind, which can lead to perfection. This highlights that, for Nursi, there is a strong correlation between *al-insan al-kamil* and positive action.

Sometimes these social changes, especially when done by force and radically, lead to tension with the masses and social crisis becomes inevitable. Nursi did not react against the provocations. Through his letters, Nursi warned his students to beware of the provocations. This lack of negative reaction does not mean Nursi accepted the injustice. Instead, he saw greater value and benefit in positive action.

In such conditions, sometimes rules become oppressive and people, collectively and individually, become reactive even radical. Nursi’s approach and interpretation of events can transform radicalisation to piety and volunteering for common good.

Once, Nursi was stopped by police at the border of Ankara and not permitted to visit his students. Nursi considered this to be Divine mercy and was thankful to the officials. He hoped his students would not be offended at his not being able to respond to their invitations.⁴³ Many times he told police “we are the spiritual safeguard of the security.”⁴⁴ In 1959, Nursi travelled to Ankara for a second time and again stayed in the Beirut Palas Hotel. His visit was greeted

³⁹ Said Nursi’s views Imam al-Ghazali as one of his spiritual masters in his works. See: Nursi, *Emirdag Lahikasi*, accessed 22.06.2018

<http://www.nur.gen.tr/tr.html#maincontent=Risale&KitapId=3&islem=read&BolumId=4934&KitapAd=Dinizli+ve+Emirda%u011f+Lahikalar%u0131+I+-II&searchText=gazali&SearchType=1&SearchStyle=1&Books=0&pindex=2&Page=587>

⁴⁰ Al- Ghazzali cited in Mimat Hafez Barazangi, M. Raquibuz Zaman and Omar Afzal, *Islamic Identity and the Struggle for Justice* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996), 25.

⁴¹ Erdal Şahin, “Said Nursi perpectifinden siyasi musbet hareketi okumak” [Reading Positive Action from Said Nursi’s Perspevtive], accessed March 2, 2018, <http://www.iikv.org/academy/index.php/ulusalsemp/article/view/824>.

⁴² Aytar, “Said Nursi ve Müsbet Hareket Forumu Notlar.”

⁴³ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 476.

⁴⁴ Necmettin Sahiner, “*Son Sahitler*” C.4 s. 344. accessed 02.03.2018 <http://www.nur.gen.tr/tr.html#maincontent=Risale&islem=index&KitapId=458>

with sensational headlines in the newspapers such as “The Head Nursi is in Ankara, The Democrat Party Government is defending a fundamentalist.” Thousands of his followers poured onto the streets to greet him: the police was compelled to break up the crowd. The police overreacted and the hotel was surrounded a cordon of police and gendarmes, and the inside of the hotel was filled with them. That evening, Nursi gave a farewell *ders (lesson)*, which, among various subjects, impressed once again on his students the way of the Risale-i Nur is that of “positive action” and the maintenance of public order and security.⁴⁵

He asked his students and followers to forever act in accordance with the principles of positive action, which are derived from the Qur’an, sunnah and the commentary of first three generations of Muslims, known as the *Salaf Saleheen*. Regardless of whether the political and social conditions were to improve or become worse, whether they were free or imprisoned, wealthy or poor, strong or weak, Nursi encouraged them to not err from the path of positive action towards friends and foes.

Sener Dilek examined the positive action in Nursi’s works. He summarises six major points of positive action. To him, all of these major points are in conformity with the Divine Law. First, positive action is dynamic, meaning it is a living action that leaves permanent marks in social changes instead of sloganistic and superficial results. Second, it leads to tranquillity and peace in social life instead of hatred, revenge and animosity. Third, it is educative, instructive and expands the horizons in offering guidance. Fourth, the positive action not only has a worldly dimension, but also considers the hereafter. Fifth, its method is persuasive and not by force. Finally, it is not under the influence of negative, destructive currents, whether external or internal.⁴⁶

THE PURPOSE OF POSITIVE ACTION

The goal of positive action is not just physical, such as ending conflict, but also spiritual. It consists mainly in bringing a person closer to their primordial nature (*fitrah*), which detests evil and desires good.

After the above examination of positive action in Nursi’s life and works, in my humble view, there are six worldly and spiritual reasons for him and his students to peacefully bear the persecution, oppression and exile imposed on them:

1. The strategy of Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) and other prophets mentioned in the Qur’an was to form friendships and alliances instead of creating enemies or cementing hatred.
2. Nursi viewed securing safety and stability in a country as the duty and obligation of all Muslims.⁴⁷ He viewed peaceful society as necessary for material and spiritual progress.
3. Nursi viewed his persecutors as potential believers or future friends.

⁴⁵ Vahide, “*Islam in Modern Turkey*”, 476.

⁴⁶ Sener Dilek, “The Risale-i Nur’s Method and Aim,” Nur Web Pages, April 16, 2006, accessed March 1, 2018, http://www.nur.org/en/intro/nurlibrary/The_Risale_i_Nur_s_Method_And_Aim_148.

⁴⁷ Yakup Arslan, “Contents and Principles of Risale-i Nur Service according to the Works in The Third Said Period of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi,” *Kopru*, 112 (2010): 112.

4. Conveying the truth is the most important duty of a believer and community of believers. Where violence wreaks havoc, it is not possible to convey the truth and principles of faith. All other matters fall under secondary or lesser importance for Nursi.
5. If patience is not shown against oppression and injustice, and the response is a negative action such as violence, then it can lead to breaching the rights of innocent people. This, in turn, will cause more oppression and provoke further enmity. Nursi extolled the virtue of sympathy and pity for one's enemy for being off the right path.
6. Responding to injustice and oppression negatively will only harm the enforcers, women and children, not the people who decided and ordered the injustice. Civil wars are an example of this.

The aims of positive action are to build and keep social harmony and strengthen spiritual life. This necessitates taking steps for solving the problem instead of blaming or accusing the person who causes the problem. The steps should be taken in accordance with primordial nature (*fitrah*). Reactionary behaviour, such as violence that is contrary to positive action, will cause more damage to social and spiritual life.

ANALYSIS

Nursi's faithfulness to his positive action philosophy can be understood by looking at the hardest times in his life. While he was in court facing the judge, he saw it as an opportunity to convey his message. His positive action is spiritual goal centric. He interpreted all dislikeable actions, injustice and oppression in a positive way. For example, when his books were confiscated by the police or Intelligence Service for investigation, he felt the content would be read by those people. He called prison the *Madrassa Yusufiyyah* (School of Prophet Joseph) and his exile as Divine mercy for the concentration of writing *Risalei Nur*. Nursi revives and crystallises the philosophy of positive action in his works. There are three fundamental principles in his positive action.

The first principle is to be critical towards himself if any injustice, oppression or tyranny is done against him. Nursi questioned himself about his actions over whether they were done according to Islamic principles and for the Divine pleasure. As self-criticism leads to spiritual peace and tranquillity in the heart, Nursi saw this as being reflected as positive action.

The second principle is, instead of blaming or accusing others for the wrong, to take steps to solve the problem and show the right path through actions. For example, acting to light a candle instead of blaming the darkness.

The third principle is to act in conformity with the law of creation (it is called the law of nature in the West) and not contradict primordial human nature. Nursi takes aggression or unpleasant matters as a warning or indication of the degree to which his actions are in conformity with law of creation. He believes peaceful resistance is the best way against oppression and eventually leads to fruitful results.

Most peaceful resistances have led to success because of their conformity with the laws of nature, which Nursi calls the art of Allah the Most High and the code of His creational laws.⁴⁸ The natural disposition of things does not require assent to the one who opposes them. Nursi said, if an act is not done in accordance of the law of nature, it will fail and even sometimes become destructive.⁴⁹ He was aware that violent action is against Divine Law. It produces more violence and cannot be glorified as extremists do.

For an action to be positive, not only in its end or object but also the intention, must be just. Justice, in this context, lacks any self-interested motivation.⁵⁰ Nursi emphasised that positive action is a means to live “in accordance with Divine pleasure” and to assuring a harmonious and stable social order. For Nursi, not acting according to the *musbet hareket* principle will open the gate of great instability and harm social harmony.

Nursi’s positive action philosophy is not limited to Muslims only. Positive action also includes non-Muslims. Instead of using force against them, he strongly recommended using reason to persuade them. For external aggression, he prioritised peace instead of war, as Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) did in the Hudaibiyah treaty with the Meccan polytheists.

Positive action can be seen to be reflected throughout Nursi’s writings. He did not use a secular language, which can divide people and create conflicts. His criticism is based on philosophical and ethical principles. If he criticised a principle, he then showed an alternative way. *Marifatullah* (the depth knowledge of God) is the foundation of positive action. Wisdom, compassion, forgiveness and kindness are prerequisites of positive action. However, it can be said that positive action in Nursi’s works and life is a combination of the manifestation names of God, the Most Compassionate (ar-Rahman), the Wisdom (al-Hakim), the Pardoner (al-Afuw), and the Gentle (al-Halim). Without a deep or strong spirituality, complete positive action cannot be applied. According to testimonials from Nursi’s students, he would spend 6-8 hours daily reading the Qur’an, making *dhikr* and in contemplation, most of which was completed before dawn.⁵¹ Without such a lifelong devotion, it is very difficult to build a strong spirituality. In order to do this, it is necessary to be patient against aggression as it transforms negative energy into common good. However, some may see it as passivism and giving more opportunity to enemies for doing injustice, oppression and tyranny.

CONCLUSION

Positive action is derived from many Qur’anic verses and hadith, and gives regard to how injustice, oppression and tyranny can be managed and transformed into a common good. This principle is revived by the *mujaddid* (reviver) of every century according to the needs of the time. This important principle is often forgotten or neglected by rulers and peoples in the

⁴⁸ Said Nursi, *Signs of Miraculousness*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 2007), 169-172.

⁴⁹ Said Nursi, *Lem’alar* [The Falshes] (Istanbul: Sinan Matbaasi, 1959), 160.

⁵⁰ Dilek, “The Risale-i Nur’s Method and Aim.”

⁵¹ See Necmettin Sahiner, “Son Sahitler” [The Last Witnesses], accessed March 2, 2018, <http://www.nur.gen.tr/tr.html#maincontent=Risale&islem=index&KitapId=458>.

Muslim world. Nursi wanted to reset and renew (*tajdid*) the principles of positive action. He did so, not only in theory through his works, but also in practice through his actions at a time of crisis in the Muslim world.

Muslims experienced a great sense of hopelessness and demoralisation due to the decline of their civilisation and European occupation. This led to a wounded mentality among Muslim communities at large. Societies in such conditions tend to produce either radicals who cause great harm or apathetic and pessimistic generations. However, there are always some within those oppressed conditions who are better able to diagnose problems and believe in the power of strategic solutions. Unlike radicals who can be reactionary, the positive thinkers are more proactive, using even the negative energy of their surroundings for better outcomes. Through positive actions, accumulated synergy in human nature due to hatreds, animosity and oppression is transformed to common good.

When injustice, oppression and tyranny strike, humankind needs self guidance, as the alternative is that emotions, hatred and animosity control humankind, opening the potential for violence and destruction. This will do great harm to the society, cause division and create conflicts. Nursi's philosophy of positive action can be an antidote for such sickness when it is applied by the masses accordingly. Based on his sensitivity and uncompromised principles of positive action in his life, it can be said he theologised it. Before he died, he asked his followers to follow positive action principles as they follow Islamic law.

Nursi's philosophy of positive action is highly idealistic and the application is very difficult. For its application, it needs a deep spirituality, knowledge, lifelong patience and hope for better future. Thus, the majority of the people will not be able to practice and act according to the principles of positive action that Nursi lived. He resembles positive action like the sun, which brings light and removes darkness. It gives life. It warms the face of the earth where flowers can grow. In contrary, negative action resembles the storm that devastates houses and removes trees. Positive action can lead people to see the good and joy in all situations; it makes life worth living.

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