There are bad inter-religious dialogues and there are good inter-religious dialogues. A bad inter-religious dialogue tends to make easy comparisons; it tends to frame the other with massive generalizations; it tends to oversimplify by insisting that the other is either completely wrong in every respect or completely right in every respect. A good inter-religious dialogue is the opposite of this: it sees complexity; it recognizes nuance; and it sees connections yet recognizes the obligation to live with differences. In this paper, I am seeking to model a good dialogue.

A good dialogue needs to decide on a particular question. So the focus is here is methodological: how do we do our theology? Now right here, we need to pause. It is not accepted by everyone that Muslims do ‘theology’ as understood by Christians. So in the first section of this paper, we shall look at the challenges of comparisons and the quest for equivalents in the dialogue. Then in the second section, we look at the particular views of the theological task within Islam and Christianity – to what extent are we doing the same work when we use the word ‘theology’? Then in the third section, we examine the Risale-i Nur. I shall argue that although much of Islam does not easily adapt into theological category, the work of Said Nursi is the major exception. Then in the fourth section, we finally do some comparative work and try to ask certain questions that are central within Christian systematic reflection and apply them to the Risale-i Nur.

The Challenge of Comparisons

We start then with the challenge of comparisons. In the Christian-Muslim Dialogue, easy comparisons are often misleading. So, to take a relatively trivial example, an Imam is often treated as the Muslim equivalent of a priest. The basis for this comparison is that both serve as a leader of a congregation. However, this similarity can often obscure more significant differences. A priest in the Christian tradition is expected to be the shepherd of the flock (to represent Christ – the Good Shepherd to a congregation). This expectation means that pastoral care is as important as preaching. However, an Imam is literally a prayer leader; leadership is seen differently; and there are not expectations around pastoral care (traditionally, Islam locates pastoral care much more within the extended family and the community and less so in the congregation).

To take another illustration, the Mosque and the Church are both treated as equivalents on the basis that they represent the congregations of gathered Muslims and gathered Christians. But again, this similarity actually obscures key differences. There are many Muslims who are very observant but rarely attend the Mosque. The ummah is not identified with the Mosque. While for Christians, the Church is the Body of Christ – it is the visible presence of Christ in the world. So although there are plenty of Christians who do not attend Church, conceptually, (within the logic of the Christian grammar of faith) all Christians are part of the Church and therefore an observant Christian must attend and join a Christian congregation.

To take a third illustration, the Qur’an and Bible are often treated as equivalents. After all, the argument goes, these two texts are the authoritative books of their respective traditions.
However, Christianity is a little more complex. The primary Word of God is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, while Scripture for most Christians (the exception being our evangelical and reformed friends) is the Word of God because it is the vehicle that tells us about Jesus (the primary Word of God). Scripture is secondary to the Incarnation. I have argued elsewhere that a more appropriate way to see the Bible is to see it as the equivalent of hadith. The Christian equivalent of the Qur’an is the Incarnation of God in Christ (the Word made Flesh), and the Bible is the text that illuminates that Word (in which the same way as the hadith illuminates the Qur’an).

Theology in Islam and Christianity

Aware then of the dangers and challenges of comparison, we move to the second section and start thinking about our question. To what extent is the theological task similar or different between Christianity and Islam? Now we all know that the word ‘theology’ comes from the two Greek words - ‘theos’ God and ‘logos’ word. For Christians, the work of theology is the task of thinking through our God-talk. It is the work of exploring the ‘grammar of the Christian faith’; it is the challenge of seeking to make sense of how the Christian worldview hangs together.

Now simplistic parallels instantly suggest themselves. So Wikipedia treats Islamic theology as aqidah, which expresses itself in the six articles of belief. However, interestingly the editors of Wikipedia had a note in June 2013 over the article seeking guidance from readers as to whether the article should be merged with the articles on ‘Sunni Islam and the Schools of Law’. This is significant because the primary vehicle of reflection in Islam has been sharia (law). While recognizing the dangers of generalizations, I think the case can be made that historically, the focus of Islam has been the implementation of the Qur’anic vision in society. It is sharia which has the focus of Islamic reflection. Beliefs have been assumed; the hard work of reflection has been the implementation of Islamic values within the community. Again to lapse into another potentially contentious generalization, Christians have been more worried about ‘orthodoxy’ (right belief), while Muslims have been more worried about ‘orthopraxis’ (right action).

This seems to be supported as one looks at the complex history over Kalam. Kalam seems to be explicitly involved in speculation and argument over belief. And as such, it has been controversial, with many early thinkers explicitly forbidding Kalam.

The Risale-i Nur as Theology

So now we come to the heart of the paper – the third section. The context of the Risale-i Nur is distinctive. The challenge for Nursi is ‘belief’. He is aware of how the twin threats of modernity and secularism are undermining belief. The fear of Islamic practice (a recovery of explicitly Islamic governance in Turkey) had led to a denial of the resurrection, the authority of the Qur’an, and even skepticism about God. Sukran Vahide explains:

Once Nursi perceived the intended course of Turkey’s new leaders, and that to further the
Islamic cause through political struggle would be counter-productive, he devoted himself entirely to finding a new way to serve it. This led him to conclude that henceforth he should concentrate all his resources on the question of faith or belief as taught by the Qur’an, and its revitalization and strengthening through new methods. … This new method was also derived from the Qur’an, and brings together its truths and scientific facts, as well as satisfactorily refuting such bases of materialist philosophy as nature and causality. It is a method of reflective thought on or observation of the phenomenal world by which beings are considered for the meanings they express, rather than for themselves.

The key characteristics, then, of the Risale-i Nur are to provide a commentary on the Qur’an that provokes ‘reflective thought’, which serves the ends of apologetics.

As a commentary on the Qur’an, Said Nursi is standing in the long tradition of \textit{tafsir}. Yet he does this work in a distinctive way; he makes rich use of allegory, images, illustrations, and parables. However, it is at this point we have a difficulty. How do you summarize this project? How do you organize his thought? How do you create a coherent system out of his thought?

I have lived with the Risale-i Nur for about a decade now. So the approach I took in \textit{Engaging with Bediuzzaman Said Nursi} suggests the following system.

- Said Nursi is a model ‘tradition-constituted’ theologian (to use Alasdair MacIntyre’s famous phrase) – overall approach.
- He challenges the presumption of modernity by insisting on a ‘grounded spirituality’ – key illustration of his overall approach.
- He insists a reductionist account of the universe is incomplete and everything points to the transcendent – defending belief.
- He defends the imperative of theism as the basis for ethics – belief and behavior.
- He believes a commitment to Islam is compatible with a commitment to pluralism, non-violence, and living within a secular state – belief and disagreement.

The system I have suggested is one that locates the project philosophically, makes the defense of belief central, and applies that approach to certain key and highly contentious areas.

Turning now Colin Turner and Hasan Horkuc, we find a different approach. Turner and Horkuc start by admitting that identifying the ‘major themes…… is no easy task’. However, they do believe that they have identified the ‘overarching themes upon which… the \textit{Risale} is constructed.’ And these are the six themes.

- ‘Nursi and “the most beautiful names”’

It is under this heading that Turner and Horkuc treat the centrality of theism and Nursi’s conviction that God can be seen through creation. It is also under this heading that the authors treat the relationship in Nursi between the cosmos as a book and the Qur’an as the revealed
This is the longest section. For our authors, ‘the second theme … is Nursi’s elucidation of the seemingly impenetrable mystery of ana – the ethereal amalgam of qualities and characteristics in man which constitute his I-ness or sense of self.’ It is true that Nursi has a complex anthropology. For Turner and Hockuc, this anthropology includes the extraordinary risk taken by humanity to have a sense of human self-consciousness and individuality – part of the divine ‘trust’. This human ‘I’ has the capacity to both appreciate the divine names of God and unlock the true nature and significance of creation. Naturally it is important for this ‘I’ to submit to God and a failure to do so leads to illusion of ‘self-ownership’ and a denial of the creator’s sovereignty. Although Turner and Hockuc deny that there is any particular order to their listing of themes, there is a certain logic here. They have started with the centrality of belief in God and then moved to the significance for the view for humanity. The next theme is to do with interpretation.

- The “self-referential” and the “Other-indicative”

Turner and Hockuc explain that ‘the third theme is Nursi’s elucidation of the twin concepts of ma’na-i ismi and ma’na-i harfi, representing the two diametrically opposed hermeneutical positions open to man as “reader” of the cosmic narrative.’ This theme captures the central insight that a strong dualism of response permeates the Risale-i Nur – one is either a person of faith or an unbeliever – one is either selfish or virtuous. They capture accurately the way in which, for Nursi, the theistic narrative is overwhelmingly suggested by the way in which everything in creation points to its divine source.

- Nursi and causality

This theme is where Nursi thinks through the relationship of providence to science. For Nursi, scientific materialism is incompatible with a belief in God. So our authors explain, ‘the created realm is one in which God’s works are constant and continuous.’ So for Nursi, God both creates ex nihilo and God creates in a ‘developmental’ way.

- Nursi on belief (iman) and submission (islam)

The point of this theme, according to Turner and Hockuc, is to stress the necessary connection between belief and practice. Both are essential for salvation. So belief in God needs to be accompanied by a commitment to pray. This is the first time practices and ethics become an explicit theme in the Turner and Hockuc system.

- Nursi and the “closed doors of creation”.

This is an interesting theme. For Turner and Hockuc, this theme is ‘an assertion which informs the whole Nursian endeavor.’ The idea here is that the human self does have the capacity (the
key) to unlock the secrets of the universe, but it is difficult because ‘the doors of the universe are
in fact closed.’ According to Turner and Hockuc, modernist philosophy has created an
epistemological difficulty; we have made it difficult to see the divine origin and nature of the
universe. Instead, modern philosophy creates the illusion that the immediate physical causation
is all there is. The net result is that we need the revelation of the Qur’an to see the transcendental
nature of the universe.

One key difference between the approach of Turner and Hockuc and the approach taken in
Engaging with Bediuzzaman Said Nursi is that I treat the ethical as an intrinsic part of this
system, while Turner and Hockuc see the ethical as emerging out of this system. So this means
in a very practical way, Turner and Hockuc treat the social implications of Nursi’s system in a
separate and subsequent chapter.

However, what we share is we do think it is possible to take this Qu’ranic commentary and turn
it into a systematic theology. Said Nursi is a challenge to the focus on sharia. He thinks this
preoccupation is inappropriate. And his focus on defending and explaining belief means that he
joins the ranks of some of the great Islamic theologians in the past as an expositor of the Islamic
tradition in ways that make it intelligible to the age in which he lives. So it is at this point, we
look at some of the debates that shape a systematic theology among Christian theologians.

Christian Theological Method

There are certain questions that Christians ask that will never be issues for Muslims. A primary
one is the nature and status of the Trinity. For some Christians, the primary starting point of the
theological task is the distinctive experience of God as Triune. To talk about God in an abstract
theistic way is considered totally inappropriate. Naturally this question will not adapt across to
Islam.

However, there are other debates which Muslims can understand. And I propose to focus on
three. The first is the relationship between divine revelation and human philosophy. For Justyn
Martyr (c.100-c.165), he felt that it was totally appropriate to seek to use secular philosophy to
illustrate and confirm the truths of faith. Meanwhile the Roman theologian Tertullian (c.160-c.
225) insisted that the worlds of Athens (representing philosophy and, for him, human
speculation) is completely different from the world of Jerusalem (representing faith and divine
revelation).

The second is linked; this is the status of natural theology. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), on the
one hand, argued that the creator made us in the “image of God”, thereby enabling all humans to
have a capacity to exercise their reason and realize that it is likely that God exists, the nature of
God, and the immortality of God. Karl Barth (1886-1968), on the other hand, insisted that
human sin made it impossible for humans to grasp such transcendental truths and only the divine
revelation can illuminate such truths.

The third is the relationship of theology to ethics. Paul Tillich (1886-1965) advocated a ‘method
of correlation’, where the contemporary questions within secular society are answered by the application of insights from the Christian tradition. The liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez (born 1928) insists that the setting out of which one interprets the Christian tradition often ends up shaping the conclusion. He insists the political dynamics of Scripture are often overlooked by readers in the affluent west. In both cases, the ethical is an intrinsic part of a good theology.

Now let us apply these three debates within Christian theology to the Risale-i Nur. I think the case can be made that Said Nursi takes distinctive positions in all three areas. On the first, he has a picture of the divine revelation that encompasses all that is good in the secular sciences and philosophy. So, for example, he sees the natural sciences completely compatible with the divine revelation, but also (and this is the distinctive part) as found in the divine revelation. So, he writes, ‘Things like the aeroplane, electricity, railways, and the telegraph have come into existence as wonders of science and technology as the result of man’s progress in science and industry. Surely the All-Wise Qur’an, which addresses all mankind, does not neglect these. Indeed, it has not neglected them.’ He combines an affirmation of the natural sciences as totally legitimate with a conviction that such developments are affirmed in the divine revelation (he believes that many of these technological advances are anticipated in the Qur’an). The insights that Christians have are already part of the divine revelation – as People of the Book. There is truth in other traditions, but these truths are already part of the all-encompassing revelation of God set out in the Qur’an.

Turning now to Natural Theology, Nursi at first sight reads in an uncomplicated way. So the famous Tenth Word makes the narrative of the two men strolling through the world central – one of whom can see that the order of the world is evidence of a Creator who oversees everything and the other who decides to ignore this evidence. Nursi explains that in the same way as a beautiful house needs an architect, so ‘the cosmos also requires an infinitely wise, all-knowing and all-powerful maker. For the magnificent cosmos is a palace that has the sun and the moon as its lamps and the stars as its candles.’

Yet I am persuaded by Turner and Hockuc that Nursi has a distinctive explanation for the inability of the unbeliever to see the order as evidence of God. Humans are the agents of ‘closing the universe’. Modernism is creating a debilitating blindness; we are shutting out God; and in so doing, we are finding the implausible plausible. It is almost as if Nursi thinks you need to live within the tradition of faith to see faith. In this respect, there is connection with the approach of George Lindbeck, the creator of the so called ‘post-liberal’ approach to theology.

The fact it is a commentary on the Qur’an is a key part of Nursi’s methodology. The Qur’an includes a whole host of non-Islamic traditions (Christianity, Judaism, and the natural sciences). The ability to see the true nature of the universe also requires a training within the liberating frame of traditions derived from the Qur’an. Revelation embraces both non-Islamic traditions and revelation embraces the capacity of reason to see the world aright.

This leads to the last and final area of deliberation. Is the ethical an intrinsic part of Nursi’s system? In my judgment, one misreads Nursi unless one sees the intrinsic nature of the ethical in
his system. Again it is grounded in his commitment to the Qur’an. Nursi writes, ‘Indeed since the Qur’an’s principles and laws have been from pre-eternity, they shall go to post-eternity. They are not condemned to grow old and die like civilization’s laws.’ He then weaves together wisdom about the damaging nature of greed as well as core social commitments about the dangers of ‘interest’ throughout the *Risale-i Nur*.

**Conclusion**

The result of this exercise in interfaith dialogue is now clear. One admits the complexity of the exercise; however, the results are interesting. As a result of inviting Said Nursi to the conversation in Christian theology about method one makes an interesting discovery. Said Nursi sees the world entirely through the lens of the Qur’an. And he invites others to engaging with his writing with the goal of enabling them to start seeing the world through the lens of Qur’an. To those tempted to dismiss the Qur’an as outmoded, incompatible with science and insights of modernity, his response is to illustrate that everything that is good in the modern world is embraced already in the Qur’an. To those tempted to dismiss the arguments for faith, his response is to see the rationality of faith by stepping into the circle of faith. And to those who cannot see the importance of ethical practice, his response is to illustrate the practical wisdom of the Qur’an in and through its ethics.

From further away, Nursi looks like a classical almost Roman Catholic natural theologian. Once one gets much closer, one discovers that he has much more in common with Karl Barth than one would have expected.

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