

# THE CONCEPT OF PREDESTINATION AND FREE WILL IN IQBAL AND NURSI

By:  
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## Abstrak

Makalah ini membincangkan konsep Takdir (*qadar*) dan Kehendak manusia (*irādah*) sebagaimana yang difahami oleh dua pemikir Islam moden, Muḥammad Iqbal (1876-1938) and Said Nursi (1873-1960). Persoalan kehendak manusia dan Takdir Ilahi merupakan antara isu dasar bagi para pemikir Islam sepanjang zaman. Iqbal dan Nursi telah cuba mengetengahkan isu ini dengan pendekatan mereka tersendiri. Walaupun Iqbal lebih cenderung kepada inspirasi falsafah Barat, namun pandangan beliau tentang isu ini adalah hampir kepada faham yang didokong oleh golongan Qadariyah dan Mu'tazilah. Sebaliknya, Nursi pula lebih cenderung kepada pendekatan Kalām Ash'ari dalam memperjelaskan isu berkaitan.

**Katakunci:** Iqbal, Nursi, Konsep Takdir, Kehendak manusia, kalām, Turkey, India, *Risāle-Nūr*, Ilmu Tuhan, Iradat Tuhan

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### Abstract

This paper deals with the concept of divine predestination (*qadar*) and human free will (*irādah*) as conceived by two modern Islamic thinkers, Muḥammad Iqbal (1876-1938) and Said Nursi (1873-1960). The problem of free will and divine destiny has been a perennial dilemma for thinkers throughout the ages, and Iqbal and Nursi have attempted to address the problem in their own respective ways. Although Iqbal turned to modern philosophy for inspiration, his views on the matter are akin to those of the Qadirites and the Mu'tazilites. Nursi turned to Ash'arite Kalām to resolve the dilemma.

**Keywords:** Iqbal, Nursi, predestination, free will, kalām, Turkey, India, *Risāle-Nūr*, divine knowledge, divine will

### 1. Introduction

This paper deals with the concept of divine predestination (*qadar*)<sup>1</sup> and human free will (*irādah*) as conceived by two modern Islamic thinkers, Muḥammad Iqbal (1876-1938) and Said Nursi (1873-1960). The problem of free will and divine destiny has been a perennial dilemma for thinkers throughout the ages, and Iqbal and Nursi have attempted to address the problem in their own respective ways. Although Iqbal turned to modern philosophy for inspiration, his views on the matter are akin to those of the Qadirites and the Mu'tazilites. Nursi turned to Ash'arite *Kalām* to resolve the dilemma.

<sup>1</sup> The term *qadar* (measuring out, divine determination) is used synonymously with *qudrah* (ability, power); and is used in ten verses which form the basis of the doctrine of predestination or divine destiny. I shall use these terms synonymously in this paper. Verses such as 2:256, 6:9, 54:49 and 15:21 suggest God's power and knowledge. See S. Murata and W.C. Chittick (1994), *The Vision of Islam*, New York: Paragon House. p. 104.

One of the issues that theologians discussed was whether God predetermines human activity or whether human beings are free to act. This is not just a theoretical question of a particular group or historical period, but has puzzled man throughout the ages. Today, the debate between nature and nurture among modern social scientists and philosophers questions whether nature determines human development, or whether people can change themselves substantially through education and training. It is not commonly realised that such contemporary debates continue in the same manner as earlier theological debates. I hope to demonstrate, in my comparison between Iqbal and Nursi, the continuity of the past, but also how the challenges of the present have shaped their views.

In discussing the contemporary attempts at reviving Islamic theology, Watt mentions the contribution of Ameer Ali, Muḥammad 'Abduh and Muḥammad Iqbal, but not Said Nursi.<sup>2</sup> These scholars felt the impact of modern philosophy and science and were not happy with the classical arguments, which they thought were not enough to challenge the new forces of materialism. Thus, Ahmad Khan argued that doctrines are today proven by natural experiments, not by analogous arguments as in former times,<sup>3</sup> and so he proposed a *Kalām* that harmonizes science and religion. Shibli Nu'mani (d. 1914), concerned with the challenges of atheism, questioned the relevance of *Kalām* arguments, such as the creation of the Qur'ān, the relation between attributes and essence and whether actions affect faith or not. He proposed that spiritual methods should also be recognised as part of *Kalām*. He was critical of Asharism, which does not emphasise reason and denies deterministic causality. Like Khan, he relied heavily on Muslim philosophers such as

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<sup>2</sup> W. M. Watt (1979), *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 176-177. This work was first published in 1962.

<sup>3</sup> Ozervali, 'Kalām in the Late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries', pp. 91-94.

Ibn Sīnā<sup>4</sup> for inspiration. In Turkey, İzmirli Ismail Haqqi (d. 1946) and Abdullatif Kharpūti<sup>5</sup> (d. 1916) were concerned with the revival of *Kalām*, but Ziah Gokalp (d. 1925) was more concerned with Islamic social theory.<sup>5</sup>

Kharpūti calls for a revival of theology by examining modern thought selectively in the light of Islamic principles. He states, 'Just as early Mutakallimūn reacted to Aristotelian philosophy selectively, today's Mutakallimūn should study modern thoughts accurately and choose according to Islamic principles what is necessary from them so that a new contemporary 'ilm al-kalām can be established'.<sup>6</sup> This would represent the third wave of *Kalām* after Ghazzālī. In his *Tānqīh al-Kalām* (Selection in Theology) he proposed a revelation-centred *Kalām*.<sup>7</sup> Nursi supported this idea, and worked on his *Risāle-i-Nūr* (*Treatise of Light*). Haqqi revitalised Islamic theology in his *yeni 'ilm-i-Kalām* (*New Theology*), in which he wrote on epistemology and divinity. He was inspired by Descartes and Comte and supplements them with classical Islamic sources. He held that the post-Ghazālī *Kalām*, which relies on Aristotle's philosophy, should be replaced by a new one; not in its content but its methods which rely on science and modern logic.<sup>8</sup>

Both Kharpūti and Haqqi were convinced that the old theological arguments were not convincing for the new age and that they should be based on scientific criteria. This is all intended to defend the faith; but there is the potential risk of changing the faith itself. Ibn Sīnā, Ibn Rushd and the Mu'tazilites held that God is limited in His knowledge of the particulars in classical times. Iqbal held the same view in modern times, but used different sources for inspiration. Thus, already, before Iqbal and

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98-99; cf. Rahman (1982), *Islam and Modernity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 153.

<sup>5</sup> Harold B. Smith, 'The Muslim Doctrine of Man', *The Muslim World*, (44) 1954: 210; H.A.R. Gibb (1975), *Modern Trends in Islam*, New York: Octagon Books, p. 91f.

<sup>6</sup> Ozervali, 'Kalām in the Late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries', p. 95.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

Nursi, there were already attempts by Kharpūti, Izmirli and Shibli to harmonise religion and science.

## 2. Muhammad Iqbal (1876-1938)

Following the new trend started by Khan and Shibli, Iqbal attempted to reconstruct Kalām and bring it into harmony with modern thought. Modern scholars such as Muḥammad Abduh stressed man's freedom of choice, which he exercises by a power within himself, and which makes him responsible for his actions. Iqbal goes further by asserting the uniqueness of the individual ego, which has the capacity for undetermined freedom. God has limited His own freedom for the sake of human autonomy. For his new Kalām, he drew upon the teachings of Alfred North Whitehead<sup>9</sup> (1861-1947) and Henri Bergson<sup>10</sup> (1859-1941).<sup>11</sup> Gibb calls Iqbal's thought as "heretical", probably making reference to the way he tried to undermine divine freedom.

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<sup>9</sup> Bergson was a French philosopher who had a strong influence on 20<sup>th</sup> century thought. In his *Creative Evolution* he stated that intuition is a surer guide than scientific analysis to the understanding of reality and truth. He believed that man discovers the universe to be a process of duration, the expression of an *élan vital* (life impulse), that is, the creative force of nature. In this work he interprets evolution as the continuous operation of a vital impulse, which is a manifestation of a single original impulse seeking to impose itself upon matter, which resists it. Latterly Bergson identified this force with a God whose being and purpose are love. We perceive matter through intellect, but it is through intuition that we perceive this life force, and the reality of time, which is an indivisible flow of experience and not as measured in units.

<sup>10</sup> Whitehead, an Anglo-American mathematician and philosopher, known primarily for his work in mathematical logic, philosophy of science and metaphysics. Whitehead used scientific concepts as a basis for his metaphysics, and extended it to explain ethics and religious values.

<sup>11</sup> Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, p. 81. The immutable soul in the classical perspective is the *rūḥ*, which is sometimes translated as 'Spirit' and sometimes 'Soul'. This is to be distinguished from the lower soul (*nafs*), which is the psychological part of the human personality, and which is capable of change and transformation with the passage of time.

## 2.1 The Ego and Free Will

In this section, I shall deal with two aspects of Iqbal's thought, namely his conception of the human ego and his concept of free will. An understanding of the former is essential for an understanding of the latter.

Iqbal departs from the classical view of the ego as a 'simple immutable soul-substance, different from our group of mental states and unaffected by the passage of time'.<sup>12</sup> For him, it does not 'reveal itself in experience', where the ego 'invades' the environment and vice versa.<sup>13</sup> The ego's energy comes from God as suggested in: 'And they ask you concerning the soul. Say, the soul proceeded from my Lord's command [*amr*]' (Q. 17:87). Thus, it has an independent will: 'Every man acteth after its own manner' (Q.17:86). Man is not a thing, but a will, with attitudes and aspirations, for he is made of 'fine clay' (Q. 23:12-14) and is of 'another make' (Q. 23:12-14).<sup>14</sup>

Iqbal believes that there is no dichotomy between body and soul. The ego is spontaneous, the body, repetitive. 'It [the body] is not its vehicle, it is the state of the soul',<sup>15</sup> which comes from the lower order of matter, and evolves to the higher level. The mental comes from the physical, but evolves gradually independently from it, reaching a higher level.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the soul is tied to man's physical experience, but it can

<sup>12</sup> Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, p. 100.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 103, 223.

<sup>15</sup> M. Iqbal (1966), *Javid Nama*, London: George Allen and Unwin, tr. A.J. Arberry, p. 33, line 381.

<sup>16</sup> Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, p. 105f. The *Ikhwān al-Šāfā* (Brethren of Purity) provide an exposition of man's spiritual evolution from mineral to plant, animal, human, angelic and Prophetic existence. The soul comes from God and wants to return to its Creator; its struggle in this world is to pass through all these levels of existence in order to come near to God. The level of man's soul might be akin to a lower order of creation, but by ascending the spiritual ladder, man transcends these lower levels and finally returns to his Creator.

transcend it according to its higher level of consciousness.

The ego is self-determined, not determined by God like the physical universe. Physical laws of nature are predetermined;<sup>17</sup> they are created with a fixed destiny as they have a fixed potential; but this does not apply to man.<sup>18</sup> To support his view that the ego acts freely and independently, Iqbal quotes verses such as, 'No soul shall labour but for itself, and no one shall bear another's burden' (Q. 6:164).<sup>19</sup> Prayer links man to the divine source of freedom, liberating him from mechanical behaviour. Adam's Fall does not signify man's downfall, but his rise to self-consciousness.<sup>20</sup> This free nature constitutes man's destiny. As all things have a destiny determined by their own nature, man too has a destiny that is determined by his own nature, but it is a destiny determined by itself, not by any sort of external compulsion. In his *Javed Namah*, Iqbal states:

The inhabitants of the earth lost their ego, and did not understand the secret of taqdir (fate). That secret is simply this; it (fate) alters when you reform yourselves. If you become mere dust, fate scatters you in space. But if you turn into stone, it drops you on the glass. If you become dew, your life is evanescent like the drop; but if you become an ocean, you survive forever.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> M.Z. Siddiqi (1955), *Iqbal and the Problem of Free Will*, in Professor Muhammad Shafi's Presentation Volume, Armaghan-I-'ilmi, ed. S.M. Abdullah, Lahore, p. 226f. Siddiqi however states that such an understanding of the universe is out of date and that the Heisenberg principle of indeterminacy in quantum physics refutes it. Siddiqi argues that if the position and speed of a particle can be determined presently, so can its future. The displacing of one ball by another makes the position of the first uncertain. Siddiqi states that Iqbal did not take into account such recent discoveries of modern science.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, *Muslim Doctrine of Man*, *op. cit.*, p. 207f.

<sup>19</sup> See also: Q. 6:164; 74:41; 8:28; and 17:7.

<sup>20</sup> Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, p. 85.

<sup>21</sup> Siddiqi, *Iqbal*, p. 230. Translation by Siddiqi.

Thus, man's destiny is the outcome of his own initiative; making him intimate with God insofar as his initiative determines God's will. Symbolically, the arrow man throws comes from God. Fatalism is a drug; man can overcome it by asserting his own will, and thereby change his own destiny. Prayer can change one's fate, which is potentially one fate out of an infinite number of fates.<sup>22</sup> *Tawakkul* or trust is to make one's effort and leave the result to God: 'The seed by nature does not want to remain within the darkness of the soil, but to grow out. Similarly, man must not suppress the function of his nature. This is not submission'.<sup>23</sup>

Iqbal was the first to reconstruct Islamic metaphysics on Qur'anic lines in recent times, but the structural elements of his thought are alien to the Qur'ān.<sup>24</sup> However, Iqbal did not slavishly imitate European philosophy. He did not accept Bergson's rejection of teleology. Unlike Bergson, where the vital impulse is not directed at a future end, Iqbal holds that man is a free agent, and tends to the future, like the constantly self-evolving universe.<sup>25</sup> God does not interfere with man's free ego, which evolves to become more and more like God. And the more he is like God, the more individual he becomes.<sup>26</sup> This free ego assumes human free will; man can choose and move, but his movement increasingly is purposeful, in the direction of God.

## 2.2 Divine Knowledge and Free Will

To Iqbal, the Ash'arites focused on the defence of Islamic belief, and the Mu'tazilites had reduced religion to logical concepts, rather than considering man's concrete experience.<sup>27</sup> However, like the Mu'tazilites, Iqbal also

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231f.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 234.

<sup>24</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, p. 132.

<sup>25</sup> Hasan, *Metaphysics*, pp. 66-75.

<sup>26</sup> M.G.S. Hodgson (1974), *The Venture of Islam*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 348.

<sup>27</sup> M. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, pp. 4-5.



defended human freedom and responsibility, and like some of them, held that divine foreknowledge, as a kind of 'passive omniscience' will deprive man of human freedom.

Iqbal states:

...a single indivisible act of perception which makes God immediately aware of the entire sweep of history, regarded as an order of specific events, in an eternal 'now'. ...There is an element of truth in this conception. But it suggests a closed universe, a fixed futurity, a predetermined unalterable order of specific events which, like a superior fate, has once and for all determined the directions of God's creative activity. In fact, Divine knowledge regarded as a kind of passive omniscience is nothing more than ... a sort of mirror passively reflecting the details of an already finished structure of things which the finite consciousness reflects in fragments only.<sup>28</sup>

This view of divine foreknowledge encroaches on human freedom, and leads to fatalism, as it suggests that all things have already been predetermined. The term 'passive' suggests that the human actions that follow from this knowledge are inalterable. By contrast, an active knowledge of God implies that God's knowledge is dynamic and changes with the changes in human action. This creative divine knowledge is subject to the existence of the object; suggesting an organic relation between God's creative activity and man's creative action. Furthermore, the unforeseen action of man implies man's autonomy on the one hand, and God's self-imposed limitation of His free will on the other. Iqbal states:

Divine knowledge must be conceived as a living creative activity to which the objects that appear to exist in their own right are organically related. By conceiving God's knowledge as a kind of reflecting mirror, we no doubt save his fore-

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

knowledge of future events; but it is obvious that we do so at the expense of His freedom. The future certainly pre-exists as an open possibility, not as a fixed order of events with definite outlines. ... Nor is it possible, on the view of Divine knowledge as a kind of passive omniscience, to reach the idea of a creator. If history is regarded merely as a gradually revealed photo of a predetermined order of events, then there is no room in it for novelty and initiation. Consequently, we can attach no meaning to the word creation, which has a meaning for us only in view of our own capacity for original action. The truth is that the whole theological controversy relating to predestination is due to pure speculation with no eye on the spontaneity of life, which is a fact of actual experience. No doubt, the emergence of the egos endowed with power of spontaneous and hence unforeseeable action is, in a sense, a limitation on the freedom of the all-inclusive Ego. But His limitation is not externally imposed. It is borne out of His own creative freedom whereby He has chosen finite egos to be participators of His own life, power, and freedom.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, God has limited His own freedom for the sake of human freedom. The directive nature of the finite ego proceeds from the directive energy of God, from His Spirit, which makes man a free personal entity. Iqbal supports his view with the following verses: 'The Truth is from your Lord; Whoever wishes, let him believe, and whoever wishes, let him disbelieve' (Q. 18:28); and 'If you do good, you do good for yourselves, and if you do evil, you do it for yourselves too' (Q. 17: 7).

Iqbal rejects the view of divine knowledge that suggests the predetermination of particular events, but he accepts that the future exists in God's mind only as an open possibility. Iqbal gives the analogy of a man who

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79f.

has an idea in his mind, but can only be worked out with the passage of time, for 'the intellectual working out of it is a matter of time'. The possibilities of the idea are present in the mind 'intuitively'. If a person does not know it at that time, it does not mean that his knowledge is 'defective' for there is no 'possibility to become known'.<sup>30</sup> Thus, God creates only as He knows, and His limitation in knowledge does not suggest a defect of divine knowledge. The same applies to God's power, which He Himself has limited,<sup>31</sup> but it does not a defect in divine power. This view allows man to be a participator in God's creative freedom.

From the foregoing we gather that Iqbal presupposes two things. One is that divine knowledge has a causal link with human action. So if man acts according to divine knowledge, he will not be free. The other is that divine knowledge of the possibilities of human action is possible, but not the details of human action, which have not yet been performed. These presuppositions imply a limitation on divine knowledge and power. Iqbal's analogy suggests this limitation. Iqbal does not seem to make the distinction between divine perception of concrete possibilities and human visual perception. Ibn Sīnā and al-Fārābī used this as a point of departure to explain this problem. Iqbal does not refer to them to support his explanation, and seems to agree with the classical libertarians (especially the Qadirites) who held that God has no power over man's innate freedom.<sup>32</sup> Iqbal did not seek support from these classical philosophers as he was not concerned with the problem of perception as much as he was concerned with the relationship of divine power and human action. His idea about the intuitive knowledge of the particular possibilities is not the same as the classical philosophers' idea about the universal knowl-

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>31</sup> Hasan, *Metaphysics*, p. 90f.

<sup>32</sup> F. Rahman (1963), 'Ibn Sīnā', in *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, vol. I, Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz, p. 502. In his *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah*, Ghazzālī attacked Ibn Sīnā on this very point, as he conceived it as repugnant to the Islamic notion of an all-knowing God.

edge of the particulars. For Iqbal, the knowledge of these possibilities is subject to their existence - if they exist in time, then they can be known. He states: 'If a specific possibility, as such, is not intellectually known to you at a certain moment of time, it is not because your knowledge is defective, but because there is yet no possibility to become known'.<sup>33</sup> Thus, divine knowledge is constrained by time; serial time. With the passage of time we know what is to be known as the things come into existence. For the classical philosophers, even if the thing is not yet in existence, God will still know of its existence, but not in the manner in which humans know it. Human perception of things is not becoming of God, who cannot be reduced to lower levels of perception. God's inability to know particulars in a particular humanly perceptual way is not really a reflection of his imperfection, but rather it is to suggest that God's perception is different from man's. Iqbal did not try to explain his dilemma in this way.

Iqbal rejects divine predetermination of human action. Destiny to him is the 'inward reach of a thing', its 'realizable possibilities' which may 'actualise themselves without any feeling of compulsion from without'. Thus each creature is endowed with 'a fixed potential', which it is free to realise or not. Man's creative capacity is evidence of his freedom, which is opposed to mechanism. Man can realise his own potential through his own free will and initiative. His potential is infinite, depending on what he realises and what he does not. He can change his destiny, which is not congenital, but acquired.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> M. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction*, p. 79.

<sup>34</sup> Smith, 'Muslim Doctrine of Man', p. 207f; cf. Mutazid Waliur-Rehman, 'Iqbal's Doctrine of Destiny' in *Islamic Culture*, 13, Hyderabad, 1939: 159. Waliur Rehman, however, finds this view of Iqbal somewhat contradictory to some of his poems that suggest the determined nature of the self as in: 'In Your world I am the ruled one, the constrained one, and in my world it is all Thy rule' (p. 160); also: 'None but God is the Creator of *taqdīr*, and *taqdīr* cannot be remedied by *tadbīr*' (p. 171). Nevertheless, in this paper I base my view of Iqbal primarily on his *Reconstruction*.

To justify his defence of the absolute free will of man, Iqbal quotes explicit verses from the Qur'an, but ignores the verses pertaining to divine determination. He defends human freedom at the expense of divine freedom. As mentioned, this in itself is not new, but what is new is the manner in which he explains the problem. He does not turn to Ibn Sīnā or Ibn Rushd for an explanation; there is no mention of these figures to support his argument in his *Reconstruction*, but he quotes from modern philosophers such as Nietzsche, Whitehead and Bergson.

### 3. Said Nursi (1977-1960)<sup>35</sup>

Said Nursi was a contemporary of Iqbal, but there is no evidence to suggest that they met or influenced each other. Iqbal did not know Turkish and Nursi did not know English. They reacted to the same intellectual challenges of the twentieth century in essentially two different ways. Iqbal reacted to the extreme fatalism of Indian Muslims and Nursi responded to the secularism of Turkish Muslims. Thus Iqbal emphasised man's capacity for undetermined free action. Nursi emphasised God's unlimited predetermination and arbitrary power. He was concerned with the intellectual defence of orthodox faith, and belief in divine destiny was part of it. Nursi was not a fatalist, but he tried to reconcile divine destiny with human free will, and took a position similar to the classical *kalām* scholars, but the manner in which he proceeded with his arguments were different.

I will attempt to show below that Iqbal rejected the classical Qadirites, who held that man has an unde-

<sup>35</sup> My exposition of Said Nursi is based mainly on Nursi, the 'Twenty Sixth Word: Treatise on Divine Determining', *The Words* 2. (Izmir, Kaynak, 1997). Since I found it clear and readable, the page references are to this translation. I also provide corresponding page references to Vahide's translation. I find it a more literal translation. See Said Nursi (1993). *The Words*, vol. 1 (from the Risale-i-Nur collection), tr. Sükran Vahide, Istanbul: Sözlür Nesriyat. I also supplement my understanding with M.F. Gulen's *Understanding and Belief: The Essentials of Islamic Faith*.

terminated free will, and also the classical Jabarites who held that man was completely determined, but supported the middle position of the Ash'arites. Unlike Iqbal, who derived inspiration from modern philosophy, Nursi was inspired by the classical Sunni view, which became the point of departure for his critique of the other extreme classical positions and the modern views of individualism and liberty. I will first explain his view of divine destiny and divine knowledge, and then his view of the relation between divine destiny and human free will.

### 3.1 Divine Destiny in Relation to Divine Knowledge and Divine Will

Said Nursi quotes the following verses in support of divine destiny: '*There is nothing for which We do not have the store-houses and sources, and we send it down only in a well-known measure*' (Q. 15:21); '*With Him are the keys of the Unseen. None but He knows them. He knows what is in the land and the sea. Not a leaf falls but He knows it, not a grain amid the darkness of the earth, naught of wet or dry but it is in a Manifest Book*' (Q. 6:59); '*It is We who bring the dead to life. We record what they send and what is left of them. All things they have kept in a Manifest Record*' (Q. 27:75). To him, divine destiny applies to the whole of creation including man's actions. Nursi believes in the divine determination (*qadar*) of all things before their creation. We can also call this 'predestination' or 'divine destiny'. To Nursi, it is a pillar of Islamic belief.

Destiny is almost identical to divine knowledge, which is called in the verse above the 'Manifest Record' (*imāmun mubīn*). This is called 'divine theoretical', where everything is pre-recorded on the Preserved Tablet. For Nursi, surah 6, verse 59 is confirmed by the harmony of the universe: 'All seeds, fruit stones, measured proportions and forms demonstrate that everything is predetermined before its earthly existence'. The form of a seed is already determined in the factory of *kun fa ya kūn* (Be and it is) of divine destiny. In this seed is the in-built life story of the plant. Its growth into a plant is due to

divine power, which arranges the right ingredients for the shaping of the tree. These ingredients have already been measured by divine destiny. Divine destiny makes up different proportions from the elements of plants and animals that are required for a particular form.<sup>36</sup> Verse 59 refers to the Manifest Record, which Nursi explains as follows:

The Manifest Record, which relates rather to the world of the Unseen than to the material world, is a description of one aspect of Divine knowledge and commands. That is to say, it relates rather to the past and the future than to the present. It is a notebook of Divine destiny, which contains the origin, the roots and seeds of things rather than their flourishing forms in visible existence.<sup>37</sup>

Divine destiny therefore means that God knows all things, right down to the most minute and everything within space and time, although He Himself is beyond space and time. God gives existence in His knowledge to all things, and assigns to each a particular shape, life span and certain peculiarities. Destiny therefore also means that God makes everything according to a certain measure.

Knowledge depends on the thing known, and divine destiny is like the kind of knowledge of the known; but there is no causal relation between divine knowledge and the thing that is known, for the thing known acts through divine power, not divine knowledge. Divine knowledge is pre-eternal knowledge: it is like a mirror that reflects the past, present and future all at once, and humans cannot claim to fall outside this. Nursi then gives the

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<sup>36</sup> Said Nursi (1997), *The Words*, 2. Izmir: Kaynak, p. 140; Said Nursi (1999), *Epitomes of Light* (Mathnawī al-Nūriya). (Izmir: Kaynak, p. 337; cf. Said Nursi, *The Words*, 1 (from the Risāle-I-Nūr collection), tr. Sükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sözlür Nesriyat, 1993), p. 483f; p. 123, where Nursi speaks of the manifest world (with its well-mannered portions) which is a comprehensive mirror of the Creator's Names. It indirectly confirms belief in divine destiny.

<sup>37</sup> Nursi (1994), *The Letters*, 1. London: Truostar, p. 42.

analogy of a mirror to illustrate his point about divine knowledge, where the past and present are all united in one.<sup>38</sup>

The destiny of a single seed has two aspects to it: One way of a seed displaying destiny is by divine knowledge and command, which is the Manifest Record (*Imāmun Mubīn*); the other way is by the divine will, which is the Manifest Book (*Kitābun Mubīn*). Nursi calls the former Destiny Theoretical, as the growth of the tree is written in the seed (in accordance with divine knowledge); and the latter, Destiny Actual, as the seed is actualised in the form of a tree (in accordance with the divine will).<sup>39</sup> Gülen explains this distinction between God's knowledge and God's power as follows: 'Everything eternally exists in God's knowledge. God knows all things with the exact peculiarities of each, and Divine Power clothes a thing in material existence according to Divine Will'.<sup>40</sup> The Manifest Record is therefore God's arrangement of all things in a 'a notebook of principles contained in the Divine Knowledge', which is at the level of the unseen world, and the Manifest Book is the notebook of Divine Power, which brings this eternal knowledge into the seen world.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, divine power registers man's deeds with the pen of destiny. They are lodged in his memory so he can recall them on the Day of Reckoning. From the many

<sup>38</sup> Nursi, *The Words*, 2, p. 135f; Sözlür edition, p. 481; cf. M. Fethullah Gülen (1997), *Understanding and Belief: The Essentials of Islamic Faith*. Izmir: Kaynak, p. 142, for the identical analogy and wording, which suggests that Gülen has used *The Words* as a direct source for his work. Moreover, that Gülen has been inspired by Nursi's ideas on predestination is also evident in the fact that Gülen has written a work specifically devoted to the subject, namely: M.F. Gülen (1995). *Kitap ve Sünnet Perspektifinde: Kader*. Izmir: Baski. A critical comparison of their ideas will establish the extent to which Gülen has developed his own ideas on the subject.

<sup>39</sup> Nursi, *The Words*, 2, pp. 140-141; Sözlür edition, p. 485.

<sup>40</sup> M. Fethullah Gülen, *Understanding and Belief*, p. 127; Nursi, *Epitomes of Light*, p. 203.

<sup>41</sup> Nursi (1994), *The Letters*, 1. London: Truestar, p. 43.



tablets, God writes the spiritual identities of mortals. If plants, having the simplest form of life, are dependent on predestination, then surely, humans could be too. Thus, since divine destiny governs all creatures, it also governs man, who is a perfect creation and vicegerent of God, and bears His trust. Although man's life history is also within divine destiny and knowledge, it does not compel him to act in a certain way.<sup>42</sup>

That divine destiny is applicable to man as much as it is to the universe:

Know, O distressed, restless soul! Like the rising of the sun in the morning and its setting in the evening, whatever will happen to you throughout your life, in whatever conditions you will be, has all been pre-determined by the Pen of Destiny and inscribed in your forehead. If you wish, you may strike your head against the 'anvil' of Destiny but only to see your distress and depression increase. Be convinced that the one who is unable to penetrate the regions, the depths, of the heavens and the earth, must willingly consent to the Lordship of the One Who has created everything and decreed its destiny.<sup>43</sup>

Here, man is unable to penetrate the heavens and earth, and should therefore consent to divine authority. God alone knows everything and has pre-destined all things. Man's reason cannot fathom the mystery of divine destiny.

What is the distinction between divine destiny and divine decree? The former pertains to divine knowledge and the latter to the divine will that brings it into reality, into the material world. But is God forced to bring His knowledge into reality? The answer is no. God cannot be compelled; He is absolutely free and powerful, so He

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<sup>42</sup> Nursi, *The Words*, 2, p. 141; Sözlür edition, p. 485; Nursi, *Epitomes of Light*, p. 203f; cf. Gülen, *Essentials of Islamic Faith*, p. 129.

<sup>43</sup> Nursi, *Epitomes of Light*, p. 203f.

sometimes rescinds the execution of His decrees. Thus, the law of destiny is sometimes prevented from enactment by His decree, and sometimes 'a universal law, which is the destiny of a species or group, is not enacted for a special member of that species'. A baby that survives a calamity that has brought destruction to many signifies that God is so free that 'He does whatever He wills and decrees however He wishes'. It is on account of the principle of divine sparing that something is excluded from the law of decree, and decree is sometimes excluded from the law of destiny.<sup>44</sup> God may therefore make changes to whatever He has recorded in the Manifest Book: 'God effaces whatever He wills and confirms whatever He wills, with Him is the Mother of the Book' (Q. 13:39). Thus, an awareness of such a possibility will lead the believer to appeal to God to spare him from whatever calamity God has decreed for him.

Nursi then proceeds to discuss the purpose of believing in divine destiny. According to him, it does not burden the free spirit, but brings it comfort and security. With divine destiny, man can throw his burdens on the ship of divine destiny and roam freely within its perfection. It removes the illusion of a free carnal soul and breaks its hold over man. A man who acknowledges the king's authority enjoys all the privileges of the palace. But the one who does not, and interferes with the affairs of the palace, will suffer. Similarly, man's acceptance of God's authority and predetermination will lead to his happiness, even if he faces calamities. From difficulty comes ease, and sometimes hardship revives the light of one's existence. Misfortune and pain should therefore be viewed as flashes of divine wisdom.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 339f.

<sup>45</sup> Nursi, *The Words*, 2, p. 142f; Sözlük edition, p. 486.

### 3.2 Divine Destiny in Relation to Man's Free Will [or Free Choice]<sup>46</sup>

Belief in predestination is not merely a theoretical issue, but it has practical value in that it provides security and comfort even in the face of calamities. Furthermore, it prevents pride and self-conceit in the individual, for he has to attribute all his good deeds and achievements to God. But one cannot blame God for one's bad deeds, but should acknowledge the reality of human free will and take responsibility for one's sinful actions.<sup>47</sup> The divine trust given to man is his free will, and so he will be held to account. To support free will, Nursi cites the verse; 'Does man think he will be left to roam at will, that he will be left uncontrolled' (Q. 75: 36), and to support accountability on the Day of Judgment he cites surah 4 verse 87. God cannot go against His promise, so man will surely be held to account, as God records all man's deeds, good and evil.<sup>48</sup>

If God destines all things, including human actions, then how is it that man will be made responsible for his actions on the Day of Judgement? Man is responsible because he has a free will, which is attested by human experience. Man therefore has an intuitive sense of his capacity for free will. He feels a sense of guilt when he does something wrong, makes choices all the time, and when he is wronged then he seeks justice in the courts of law. Further more, the Qur'an makes it clear that man possesses a free will, and there are many verses suggesting that man is being tested constantly. God would not test someone who does not have a free will and

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<sup>46</sup> Nursi uses the word "juz' ikhtiyār", which may be translated as "free choice" or more literally "particular choice" as opposed to "absolute choice". Hence Nursi seems to reserve the word "free will" (*irādah*) to God only since only God is absolute in his free will. We will use the word free will in this section for the sake of comparison with Iqbal; however, whenever we use the word free will, we imply a relative free will, or a particular free choice.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131f; Nursi, *The Words 1*, Sözlür edition, p. 477f.

<sup>48</sup> Nursi, *Epitomes of Light*, pp. 65; 251f.

cannot distinguish good from evil, and the lawful from the unlawful. History is a result of man's choice, but God creates the simple condition by which man can bring into effect His universal will.<sup>49</sup>

Nursi believes that man, because of his carnal soul, tends to deceive himself, thinking that good is from himself and evil from God. This is an attempt to escape responsibility. A man who believes correctly in divine destiny will not have this attitude. He will acknowledge his wrong and employ his free will in a positive way, that is, to obey and thank God.<sup>50</sup> Man is inclined to sin, so he is his own source of sin, and God is inclined to good, and so is the source of all good, and therefore cannot be responsible for man's evil. Although God is the creator of both good and evil, man acquires these qualities. God is the source of all good and intends only good; so even the evil that he creates serves a good purpose. For example, a man got hurt because of the rain, but because of his injury, he cannot say the rain has no benefit. Humans who commit evil are guilty of an act, which can be classified as 'ugly', as it originates in his free will. The action itself is not evil; God has created it, so it is free of evil, both with respect to the causes and the results. Thus Nursi states: 'It is on account of this subtle reality that willing and committing evil deeds is evil but creating them is not ... Ugliness in man's acts lies in his will and potential, not in God's creating it'.<sup>51</sup>

It might be argued that calamities and misfortunes contradict the view that divine destiny leads only to good, even if it appears to be evil. Nursi responds by stating that

... life, the most brilliant light of existence, grows in vigour as it resolves in different circumstances. It is purified and perfected in contradictory events and happenings, and it produces the desired

<sup>49</sup> Nursi, *The Words*, 2, p. 135; cf. Gülen, *Essentials of Islamic Faith*, p. 134f.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 134, 139; Sözlür edition, p. 480.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132f.

results through taking on different qualities, and thus gives testimony to the manifestations of the Divine names. It is for this reason that living creatures go through many states and experience situations in which they suffer misfortunes and hardships, so purifying their lives.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, man is tested by all these misfortunes, which ultimately purify him if he manages to face them with a positive attitude and not blame God, but accepts his pains as 'flashes of divine wisdom'.

So, since man has a free will or free choice, he should be made accountable on the Day of Judgement. Divine destiny, which is in a sense identical with divine knowledge, is capable of absolute justice, because it apprehends the primary, rather than only the secondary causes of human events. Human justice is on the other hand relative in comparison with divine justice because it only apprehends the secondary causes. Thus, the human judge may sentence a person to prison for a theft of which he is innocent. This is unjust. But God passes the judgement of murder on him who is guilty. This is just. Thus, while the court has done injustice for charging a man for a crime he is innocent of, God charges a man for the crime that he is guilty of. Thus, God is absolutely just while man is liable to injustice. Furthermore, divine destiny and its creation are absolutely free from evil and ugliness in the beginning and end of events, yet are the real cause and result of all happenings.<sup>53</sup>

Nursi reconciles divine destiny and free will [or free choice] as follows. God pre-records all things, including human actions, good and bad; God also creates all things, including good and bad human acts. Man has a free will, which makes him responsible for his bad actions. Although God creates even his bad actions (in the sense that he creates the physical conditions by which man can perform these actions), he does not wish that man

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133, 139; Sözlür edition, p. 478f.

commits evil acts, nor does he command them. God is not the author of evil; the evil of an action is because of a defect in the action, which should be attributed to human weakness rather than divine causality. Only the evil that consists in the destruction of some natural phenomena falls under divine causality. The form principally intended by God among created things is the well-being of the general scheme, which requires failure and weakness in some aspects of natural or human phenomena. So, creating a good collective arrangement, God consequentially, and, as it were, indirectly, causes the corruption of things. The order and harmony of the universe reflects divine justice, which demands that sinners be punished. Thus God is the author of the evil of human action, but not the evil of human fault. God is the creator of all acts, even the evil ones, but He is not responsible for the evil acts which man performs by his own volition. In other words, the power and being inherent in all evil actions come from God, but the defect of those evil actions comes not from Him, but from the defective secondary cause.

To reconcile divine destiny with free will or choice, Nursi starts off with the argument that the harmony of the creation is evidence of divine justice, which necessarily presupposes free will. He admits that it is difficult to fathom the exact nature of free will and its relation to divine destiny, but this lack of human understanding is no reason to deny divine destiny.

The distinction between divine knowledge and divine power has already been discussed. There is no causal relation between divine knowledge and the thing that is being determined, as the object of knowledge is determined by the divine power, not by divine knowledge. There is however causality between a particular cause and a particular effect: the particular cause is destined to lead to a particular effect. Therefore one cannot say that the murderer who shot a person dead is not responsible for his sins on the grounds that the victim was predestined to die, even if nobody shot him. This would be the Jabarite view, which Nursi rejects as 'that man is

actually destined to die as a result of being shot'. The man died by shooting, so that is the cause of his death. The murderer who caused it is therefore responsible for his actions. Destiny is therefore one; there is not one destiny for the cause and one for the effect. If the man was not shot, the Mu'tazilites argue that he would not have died; the Jabarites, that he would have died; and the Sunni school, that we do not know if he would have died at that time or not. Nursi supports the Sunni argument.<sup>54</sup>

Nursi cites two Sunni theological views, the Māturīdī and the Ash'arite, regarding whether man's inclination upon which his free will is based has real (actual) or nominal (formal) status. For Māturīdī it is nominal, which man attributes to himself, and as we mentioned in section 1 above, man's inclination or desire is a state within man, and has no external existence and is not therefore created. It is this non-created state which makes man an agent of his actions, and therefore responsible. For the Ash'arites this human inclination has real, external existence. It is not a thing that has been created, but it comes from man. However, what is theoretical according to them, is the 'power of disposal within inclination'. This inclination is a relative matter, which has no perfect cause as it would imply necessity and would nullify man's free will. Man does not create his own actions: if he did, he would be the ultimate cause that does not require a free will.<sup>55</sup> It is not impossible for man 'to make a preference without a necessary cause, it is an attribute of his free will to do such things.'<sup>56</sup> Nursi reveals the view that although man's free will is nominal, it is the condition for the effectuation of God's universal will.

The implication is that man's actions are created by God, but performed by man on account of his particularized will, which makes him the agent of his actions.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136f; Sözlür edition, p. 478f.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137; Sözlür edition, p. 482.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138; Sözlür edition, p. 482.

Man's will, which is relative, and not existential, enables him to acquire the action. This view is in harmony with the Ash'arite view of *kasb* (acquisition).

If God is the Creator of all natural and human acts, including evil human acts, then why should the killer be called a murderer? Nursi replies by stating that God creates man's acts in that he gives external existence to them; but he does not perform those acts.<sup>57</sup> In other words, God is the creator of the action of killing because he has given man the power to kill, but God is not responsible for a particular killing. The man who has killed is the murderer as he has committed the act of killing of his own volition. God therefore creates the act of murder, but man is the cause of it as he has acquired this power to act in this way. His free will is predetermined, but not his specific choice to kill, which comes from himself. Man, in this sense, bears his own sins. God gives him the capacity to sin, and if he chooses to do so, his action will be sinful and ugly on account of his own choice, and not because of his predetermined capacity. Therefore one can call the killer a murderer because he is responsible for his own sins.

Nursi's explanation corresponds to the Ash'arite view that God creates man's actions each time he performs them, but that man acquires the actions through his particularized will, which makes him the agent of his own actions. Although God creates the act itself, the mode of operation by which man acquires the act is from man. God is the cause of a human act in the sense that He is the ultimate cause of all things, and although he has created the act, He allows man to act according to his own will, which makes man responsible for his own actions.

For sure, man's faculty of will and power of choice are weak and a theoretical matter, but Almighty God, the Absolutely Wise one, made that weak and partial will a condition for the connection of His universal will. That is to say, He in effect says: My servant! Whichever way you

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.



wish to take with your will, I will take you on that way. In which case the responsibility is yours!<sup>58</sup>

That is to say, man's will which is theoretical, enables him to exercise a choice, which comes from himself and which makes him responsible for his actions. Although God creates the action, by the power He has given him, He made man's particularized will a condition for effecting His universal will. He guides man in whatever direction He wishes by the use of his free will, so that man remains responsible for the consequences of his choice. Nursi gives the example of a child being carried on the shoulders of an adult. The child decides to go to the mountain on a cold day (i.e. he instructs the adult to carry him there), and catches a cold. He cannot blame the adult for this. Similarly, God does not compel man to act in a particular way, as 'He has accordingly made His Will somewhat dependent on man's free-will'.<sup>59</sup> Thus, although man's will is limited, God allows him to act in a particular way, making him responsible for his actions.

Although Nursi attempts to explain this dilemma rationally, he admits that man cannot fathom the exact nature of free choice. Nevertheless, he appeals to man to make use of his limited free will or choice (no matter how weak it is in relation to God's will), and to act in a responsible manner as a Muslim. Nursi states:

O Man! You have a will known as the power of choice which is extremely weak, but whose hand in evil acts and destruction is extremely long, and in good deeds extremely short. Give one of the hands of that will of yours to supplication, so that it may reach Paradise, a fruit of the chain of good deeds, and stretch to eternal happiness. And give its other hand to the seeking of forgiveness so that

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138; Sözlür edition, p. 483. As mentioned, Vahide's translation is more literal compared to the Kaynak one. For example, the statement above commencing with 'My servant!' to the end of the paragraph does not appear in the Kaynak translation. Vahide's translation seems to correspond closely to the original Turkish.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138f. This is not mentioned by Vahide, but implied from the context.

it may be short for evil deeds and will not reach the *Zakkām* tree of Hell, which is one fruit of that accursed tree. That is, just as supplication and reliance on God greatly strengthen the inclination to good, so too repentance and the seeking of forgiveness cut the inclination to evil and break its transgressions.<sup>60</sup>

Thus, although man has a weak will that leads him to sin, he should use it to turn to God, and do good works so that he can attain paradise. He should also seek forgiveness and repent in order to purify his soul and be saved from Hell. Prayer and trust in God lead to good as they strengthen his inclination to good.

#### 4. Conclusion

Iqbal and Nursi have attempted to address the problem of divine destiny and free will in their own respective ways. Iqbal turned to modern philosophy for inspiration and Nursi turned to Ash'arite *Kalām* to resolve the theological dilemma. Like his precursor, Kharpūtī, Nursi produced a revelation-centred *Kalām* to address the challenges of secular modernity.

Like the Qadirites, who reacted against the fatalism of the Jabarites, Iqbal reacted against the fatalism of the Muslims of his time. This is evident in his poetry, which serves to liberate Muslims from sloth, slumber and fatalism. It is in his *Reconstruction*, where Iqbal compromises on Divine freedom in favour of human freedom, and it is here where he apparently clashes with Qur'anic metaphysics.

Unlike Iqbal, Nursi adhered to traditional Islamic teachings, although he was not a graduate of an Islamic seminary. His *Risāle-Nūr* is therefore not a product of institutional education, but of knowledge acquired by teachers and self-study, and knowledge endowed through inspiration. Like Iqbal, Nursi was also concerned about the practical effect of *Kalām* on human behaviour,

<sup>60</sup> Sözlür edition, p. 482.

and that it should provide a framework for positive action. Iqbal believed in man's undetermined free will, and wanted Muslims to liberate themselves from fatalism. Nursi believed in man's real, but limited, free will, and wanted Muslims to use it in supplication and repentance.

Unlike Iqbal, Nursi accept the belief in divine destiny in human actions. He maintained that there is no causal relation between God's foreknowledge and man's future action, but there is a relation between God's will and man's actions. God creates man's actions, but it is man who performs his own actions on account of his own inclination and desire. Although man has a weak free will, he acquires his actions through it. But the capacity for free will comes from God at the time of his action. Man performs an action out of his own volition, but he cannot be its creator.

Nursi attempts to reconcile divine will with human will rationally, using vivid examples. For him, it is important to belief in divine destiny and in free will. If one believes in divine determination one will attribute one's good acts to God: this will save one of pride and self-conceit. If one believes in free will it will make one feel responsible for one's sins, although free will comes from God. Thus, Nursi's theology accords with the Sunni Ash'arite perspective in that he accepts God as the Creator of all good and evil. Evil human actions, although created, are ugly as they come from man's volition.

Unlike Iqbal, who ignores the predestinarian verses, and only cites the verses that support his theory of human freedom, Nursi acknowledges the predestinarian verses as fundamental to Islamic belief and quotes them in his *Risāle-Nūr*. Nursi does not ignore the libertarian verses, but seems to give less attention to them than Iqbal. For Nursi, God predetermines all things: both nature and man, good and evil. This is not just an intellectual idea, but has practical value in providing man's soul with comfort and security. It also helps to curb the carnal soul that tends to attribute achievement to itself, not to God. Free will also has practical value; it

causes a person to supplicate to God to attain paradise, and to repent in order to purify his soul.

Thus, Nursi derived inspiration from Sunni theology, not merely for a rational defence of Islam, but also to bring about moral reform. He did not provide a new theology, but revived the old one, making it relevant to the challenges of secular modernity. His style is less technical than that of classical theology. It is both philosophical and anecdotal, and therefore appeals to the intellectuals and to the ordinary Muslim reader. Consequently, Said Nursi has left the legacy of a movement, which has widespread support, not only in Turkey, but also in many other parts of the world.<sup>61</sup> Iqbal, however, did not receive such a widespread support, partly because his philosophical writings appealed only to the intellectual elite, and partly because of his unorthodox theological views.

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<sup>61</sup> M. Hakan Yavuz (1999), 'Towards an Islamic Liberalism: The Nurcu Movement and Fethullah Gülen' in *Middle East Journal*, 53 (4); cf. Yavuz, 'Being Muslim the Nurci Way', *ISIM Newsletter*, 6/2000, pp. 4, 7. The author states that there are today 5,000 reading circles in Turkey, and quite a few in Central Asia, Germany, Holland, Austria, Belgium and Sarajevo. Altogether, there are five million Nursis in Turkey. There are at least six reading circles in Saudi Arabia; I thank Selim Hanife for taking me to four of them. There are two reading circles in Cape Town, South Africa, one conducted in Turkish and one in English.