



# A COMMON CARE FOR CREATION: SAID NURSI AND POPE FRANCIS ON ENVIRONMENT

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to delineate the major characteristics of Said Nursi's philosophy of the environment and try to compare and contrast it with Pope Francis views on the environment. Nursi contemplated both the manifest and hidden wonders of nature, and linked nature's secrets to the omnipotence and omnipresence of the Divine. Recently, Pope Francis, as the leader of the world's largest faith community, who is according to polls, one of the most trusted, popular and retweeted people on the planet, laid out the argument for a new partnership between science and religion to combat human-driven climate change. Therefore, to compare and contrast Nursi and Pope Francis' views on the deep meaning of creation and its implication for the environment would be very relevant for us and for the rest of creation.

**Keywords:** Said Nursi, Pope Francis, Environment, Climate Change, Religion, Islam, Christianity, Catholic, Poverty, Inequality

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I grew up in a small village as a child of a farmer in South East of Turkey. I enjoyed the beauty of natural environment with all its richness. When I saw the first but unfortunately the last wild wolf in my life, I was almost seven years old. At that time, I could still drink the water of creeks as it was crystal-clear. Years later, at about the same time, I learnt that, Rachel Carson was writing her seminal and groundbreaking book *Silent Spring*. This humble book sparked and triggered many creative and sensitive minds to look at the emerging environmental problems in a new way.<sup>1</sup>

However, it took us half a century to understand the full implications of Carson's argument as indicated and proved by a massive *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment*, sponsored by the United Nations, involving over 1,300 experts from almost 100 nations. Like Carson's book, this assessment is "a stark warning". It argues that "human activity is putting such strain on the natural functions of Earth that the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can *no longer be taken for granted*" (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005, italics in original).

Now, I have four children and two grandchildren. I never thought that my descendants might not enjoy the same kind of life that I had in my childhood. It seems they live in a different world. They have never seen a wild animal in nature, other than in documentaries and zoo. I have concerns about their future and the world they are going to live in. Therefore, environmental problems in general and climate change in particular are moral issues for me as I view our unsustainable practices as an infringement of the rights of future generations. Moreover, for me there is also a moral imperative as a Muslim to look beyond my immediate family and to see the whole creation as it has been created and sustained by the Creator.

Pope Francis declared an encyclical on integral ecology on 18 June 2015. It has been welcomed not only by Catholics but many concerned people around the world. The Pope boldly reminded us that it is time "for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life" before it is too late (Pope, 2015: §207, 152).

Considering the development of environmental awareness and its relevance to religious traditions, the meaning of the encyclical gets more attention around the world and also from member of other religions and faiths. Mary Evelyn Tucker, who teaches in Yale's schools

of Forestry and Environmental Studies, argues that the encyclical "is the most important thing" for many environmentalists. Moreover, Tucker underlines that as "science and policy are necessary but not sufficient to solve these problems, the moral and ethical issues of the environmental movement will be visible" and "taken seriously in a religious sense" owing to the encyclical (Tucker, 2014).

Muslims environmentalists also issued a declaration on 18 August 2015 as part of the two-day "International Islamic Climate Change Symposium" in Istanbul. Some commentators argued that *the Islamic Climate Change Declaration* could influence an even larger population than the Catholic decree (Merchant, 2015). It is great honor for me to be a member of the drafting team of this declaration. As Muslim scholars, we wanted to further exemplify the trend of faith-based climate activism ahead of the U.N. climate change summit on December 2015. The major points of *the Islamic Climate Change Declaration* can be summarized as follows: rejection of human greed for natural resources; respect of nature's "perfect but delicate balance," and recognition of the "moral obligation" to avoid waste (the Islamic Climate Change Declaration, 2015).

Briefly, we called on 1.6 billion Muslims to engage on the issue of climate change and take bold actions to stem its worst impacts. The declaration states that there is deep irony that humanity's "unwise and short-sighted use of these resources is now resulting in the destruction of the very conditions that have made our life on earth possible." We asked ourselves "what will future generations say of us, who leave them a degraded planet as our legacy? How will we face our Lord and Creator?" (ibid) However, being aware of Pope Francis encyclical, I propose it will be good opportunity to compare and contrast Said Nursi's (1877-1960) views with Pope Francis' perception of environment. In fact, Thomas Michel, a Catholic priest, inspired me to present Nursi's ideas as he considers Nursi "probably the most influential Muslim thinker in Turkey in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century" (Michel, 2013: 1; Vahide 2005).

Said Nursi, as a religious scholar of the highest standing, is a good example for our case here. Therefore, it is an original and powerful voice, who deserves to be heard in the context of the current environmental crisis. According Colin Turner of Durham University, to say that "Nursi stands like a colossus above twentieth-century Muslim scholarship in Turkey is no overstatement". Moreover, Turner argues that "both supporters and detractors alike would no doubt agree that Nursi is arguably the most important and influential scholar to emerge from Turkey in the past five hundred years (Turner 2013: 2-3). Presenting and discussing Francis and Nursi's ideas in the context of environmental problem may help us to

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understand these two great religious leaders and the relevance of their thinking for pressing problems of humanity.

## I. COMMON PROBLEMS FACING HUMANITY

Although the world's greatest problems are not all environmental, many of them in some way are a byproduct of environmental problems. We can argue that environmental problems are the root cause of deforestation erosion, floods, drought, hunger, racism, migration international and domestic terror, human rights violations, human trafficking, and even nihilism. The distinguished economist Sir Anthony Atkinson in his recent book also agrees that "the world faces great problems" and the biggest one is inequality (Atkinson, 2015: 1-2). Even in the most developed countries like the United States and Europe, "concerns about inequality trump all other dangers". Atkinson counsels us that "collectively we are not helpless in the face of forces outside our control" (Atkinson, *ibid*). Therefore, we need, once more, the advice of our religious leaders and respective traditions to respond to this challenge.

Needless to say, environmental, social, and economic threats are aimed at everyone without discrimination, whether Christian, Jew, Muslim, and Buddhist. The question is whether members of other religions, while preserving their differences, can work together to respond to these modern challenges to humanity or not. However, we learnt at a high price that we could not solve "new problems with old concepts" and that once effective concepts and tools "do not respond" (Laszlo, 2005: 2). In other words, "ideas and beliefs that were reasonable and productive at one time become irrational and nonproductive at another time" (*ibid*). Interestingly Einstein similarly reminded us earlier that "the problems generated by one way of thinking cannot be solved by that same way of thinking". Today, if we are trying to understand the deep implications of the messages of old sages like St. Francis of Assisi (1181/1182-1226) and Rumi (1207-1273), we need new frames and perspectives first to understand and then to solve our problems. Comparing and contrasting the visions of Nursi and Pope Francis will give us new and fresh ideas about how to respond our environmental problems.

As the Pope's views on nature are well-known in the West and the rest of world, this will focus more on Nursi as he is less known in the West. In fact, this study may be regarded as a respond to the Pope's call for new voices to be heard to counter the global challenge of

climate change and environmental problems. As the Pope makes clear "climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day (Pope, *ibid*, 20).

## II. PARADIGM SHIFT: FROM CONSUMERISM TO PRAISE

The first and striking feature of Pope Francis encyclical is the title *Laudato Si'* (Praise be to you, my Lord). The encyclical proposes a paradigm shift with regard to the whole tradition and understanding of the consumer-oriented culture of modern times. This dominant modern culture led us to see natural resources as commodities, which can be bought, sold, and consumed as goods and for their material value only. Pope Francis, relying on the Abrahamic tradition, reminded all humanity that the first step of a new paradigm and new understanding is to see the whole creation as God's bounties that deserve praise and gratitude.

The Qur'an portrays young Abraham not only as a man burning for knowledge but also as a man of faith, commitment, sincerity, hospitality, and integrity. In his search for meaning, Abraham finds his God as "the Sustainer of all the worlds", who has created us and guides us. In his own words, God is "the One who gives me to eat and to drink, and when I fall ill, is the One who restores me to health" (26: 79-80). So, the whole creation belongs to God and deserves praise.

Therefore, although Pope Francis and Nursi differ widely in their religious beliefs, interests, methods, and conclusions, they may have more in common than we think when we look at them from the perspective of Abrahamic tradition. Pope Francis, for example, commences his encyclical with the phrase "Praise be to you, my Lord". Then, he reminds us of Saint Francis of Assisi's wisdom that "our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us" (Pope Francis, 2015: 3). However, the first and most important commonality within the Abrahamic family is to see a personal responsibility and commitment to care for creation, which is a precious gift from God. The opening and first chapter of Qur'an starts with these words:

All praise is due to God alone, the Sustainer of all the worlds, the Most Gracious, the Dispenser of Grace". (Qur'an, 1: 1-4).

These verses of the Qur'an have shaped and formed Muslims' perception of universe as well as humanity in the past and present. Nursi, in the Qur'anic spirit, began his *magnum opus* the *Risale-i Nur* in the early spring of 1926 with following words: "*Bismillah*, 'In the Name of God,' is the start of all things good. We too shall start with it" (Nursi 2004: 15). For Nursi "all things act in the name of Almighty God, for minute things like seeds and grains bear huge trees on their heads; they raise loads like mountains". (ibid) Therefore, it is not surprising to see that Nursi's eco-theology, like Pope Francis's word (*Laudato Si'* means "Praise be to you, my Lord") understands the whole creation as praising God. Nursi also expresses his thought as:

All trees say: "In the Name of God," fill their hands from the treasury of mercy, and offer them to us.

All gardens say: "In the Name of God," and become cauldrons from the kitchens of Divine power in which are cooked numerous varieties of different foods.

All blessed animals like cows, camels, sheep, and goats, say: "In the Name of God," and produce springs of milk from the abundance of mercy, offering us a most delicate and pure food like the water of life in the name of the Provider. The roots and rootlets, soft as silk, of plants, trees, and grasses say: "In the Name of God," and pierce and pass through hard rock and earth (Nursi 2014: 16).

Since all things in the natural world say "in the Name of God," and bearing God's bounties in God's name, give them to us, Nursi, concludes that we too, should say "in the Name of God." This understanding of nature and its bounty establishes a moral ground and obligation for Muslims, in their daily life. Nursi argues that they should give "in the name of God and take in the name of God" (Nursi, ibid, 17). Meanwhile, Nursi wrote a treatise in early 1930 on gratitude for bounties and favors of God. He claims that, "the most important thing the Most Merciful Creator wants from His servants is thanks". Similarly, the Qur'an teaches us to thank God for His favors for us:

Will they not then give thanks? (Qur'an, 36:35; 36:73).

Will they not then give thanks? And we shall surely reward those who give thanks. (Qur'an, 3:145).

If you give thanks, I shall increase [my favours] to you. (Qur'an, 14:7).

Worship God and be of those who give thanks, (Qur'an, 55:13).

Nursi elaborates on the very nature of thankfulness and creation. The very concept of creation points to a Creator. So, Nursi argues "both the All-Wise Qur'an shows thanks to be the result of creation, and the mighty Qur'an of the universe shows that the most important result of the creation of the world is thanks" (Nursi, 2001: 428).

Nursi eagerly invites us to observe the universe carefully and deeply. Then, he argues, it will be apparent that "all things result in thanks in the way each is arranged within it; to a degree each looks to thanks and is turned towards it". Therefore, it is not difficult for Nursi to conclude, "the most important fruit of the tree of creation is thanks, and the most elevated product of the factory of the universe is thanks" (Nursi, ibid). In other words, not only various religious communities but also the inanimate world worship God by performing the natural functions commanded by God.

The absorption of each class of men in a mode of worship dictated by their innate dispositions, the species of worship engaged in by other animate beings, as well as inanimate beings, through the performance of their essential functions, the way in which all material and immaterial bounties and gifts in the cosmos become means inciting men to worship and thanks, to praise and gratitude; the fashion in which all the manifestations of the unseen and epiphanies of the spirit, revelation and inspiration, unanimously proclaim the exclusive fitness of one God to receive worship—all of this in most evidential fashion, proves the reality and dominance of a single and absolute Divinity (Nursi, 2002: 172).

Therefore, Nursi argues that the real price of goods cannot be the price we give the market owners when we buy them, which may be regarded as a secondary price for their labor. The real price, however, involves seeing all these commodities as the bounties from God:

the price the True Bestower of Bounties wants in return for those valuable bounties and goods is three things: one is *remembrance*, another is *thanks*, and the other is *reflection*. Saying, "In the Name of God" at the start is remembrance, and, "*All praise be to God*" at the end is thanks. And perceiving and thinking of those bounties, which are priceless wonders of art, being miracles of power of the Unique and Eternally Besought One and gifts of His mercy, is reflection (Nursi, 2004: 17, bold in original).

Reflecting on the book of universe with the insights from the Qur'an, Nursi, reaches the conclusion that "the most essential of the four fundamental principles of the way of worship and winning God's love, the highest and most elevated way, is thanks". He ends this small treatise with a humble and sincere prayer saying "*O God, through Your mercy, appoint us among those who give thanks, O Most Merciful of the Merciful!*" (Nursi, 2001: 432). Therefore, with these remarks in mind we can appreciate the implications of Pope Francis' encyclical in a deeper and more comprehensive way. The very title of the letter, *Laudato Si'* "Praise be to you, my Lord" comes from the canticle of Saint Francis, "LAUDATO SI', mi' Signore". As we see, from the outset Nursi and Pope Francis use a similar terminology and spirit of thankfulness to the Creator of the world. Both underlined the importance of respect and care for creation in the name of the Creator and Sustainer of the world.

### III. POPE AND CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME

Pope Francis' encyclical regarding environmental problems, with an emphasis on climate change, was expected since he chose the name of Francis of Assisi (1181/1182–1226) when elected in 2013 as new Pope. Pope Francis told thousands of journalists why he chose to be named after St. Francis of Assisi who, for him and Catholics around the world represents "the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation." Pope Francis, in the footsteps and spirit of St. Francis of Assisi, has established a reputation as an outspoken advocate for the environment and care for creation. He explains this point in detail:

I do not want to write this Encyclical without turning to that attractive and compelling figure, whose name I took as my guide and inspiration when I was elected Bishop of Rome. I believe that Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically. He is the patron saint of all who study and work in the area of ecology, and he is also much loved by non-Christians.

He was particularly concerned for God's creation and for the poor and outcast. He loved, and was deeply loved for his joy, his generous self-giving, his openheartedness. He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself. He

shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace (Pope, 2015: §10).

He enhanced that reputation with his talks, interviews, and a historic encyclical on climate change. The gist of his message, for our purpose here, could be summarized as follows: to protect human dignity and human rights; concern for treatment of the old, the young and immigrants; responsible stewardship of the Earth and its resources; reformed agricultural policies to feed the hungry; more green jobs to address youth unemployment problem, and addressing the "tragic rise" of immigrants fleeing poverty from environmental ruin in an age of climate change (Malamud, 2016, 49-74).

Moreover, Francis used the metaphor of "home" for the planet earth and reminded us of our "selfish lifestyles, marked by an opulence which is no longer sustainable and frequently indifferent to the world around us, and especially to the poorest of the poor." Moreover, "consumption," as a basic economic paradigm and life style threatens the planet, its resources, and more importantly the future of humanity. Pope Francis summarizes the problem at hand with these words:

Our Earth needs constant concern and attention. Each of us has a personal responsibility to care for creation, this precious gift which God has entrusted to us. This means, on the one hand, that nature is at our disposal, to enjoy and use properly. Yet it also means that we are not its masters. Stewards, but not masters. We need to love and respect nature, but instead we are often guided by the pride of dominating, possessing, manipulating, exploiting; we do not 'preserve' the Earth, we do not respect it, we do not consider it as a freely given gift to look after. Respect for the environment, however, means more than not destroying it; it also means using it for good purposes (Pope Francis address to the European Parliament, 2014).

Therefore, it is hoped that the Pope's message could force the global community to go beyond crisis management and lay out a long-term plan that recognizes the displacement of populations from climate destabilization. It is time for all of us to try to understand the full implications of the ethical and moral dimensions of environmental degradation — including climate change.

## IV. A GOD-GIVEN TASK CALL FOR UNDERSTANDING AND COOPERATION

While Pope Francis underlines very boldly the nature of our environmental and social crises, he invites not only Catholics, but also all Christian denominations, Jews, Muslims and members of all faith groups (as well as those of no faith) to respond to these global challenges with a spirit of understanding and solidarity. He stresses the need for “a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all.” (Pope, 2015: §14).

As Charles A. Kimball, the Presidential Professor and Director of the Religious Studies Program at the University of Oklahoma, argues, it is not difficult to observe “organized dialogue meetings” mainly among Abrahamic religions. Interestingly, these meetings have “proliferated at the local, regional, and international levels” since “the second half of the twentieth century” (Kimball, 2017). When we look at the nature and content of these initiatives it will be evident that “several motives have propelled the contemporary dialogue movement”: “the desire to foster understanding, to stimulate communication, to correct stereotypes, to work on specific problems of mutual concern, to explore similarities and differences, and to facilitate means of witness and cooperation” (Kimball, 2017).

What is crucial is that “the pragmatic need for better understanding and cooperation among adherents in the world’s two largest communities of faith-Christianity and Islam-is particularly acute” in modern times. “Together Christians and Muslims comprise almost half the world’s population, so the way in which they relate is bound to have profound consequences for both communities and for the World” (Kimball, *ibid*). The global nature of environmental problems and climate change impels us to re-think “structured encounters between Muslims and Christians” in the second half of twenty century. Pope Francis underlines the same point even went beyond a dialogue of members of the Abrahamic family as suggested by Kimball and others. The Pope, directs his call to whole humanity when saying “we require a new and universal solidarity” and adds that “all of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements, and talents (Pope, 2015: §14).

Reading the Pope’s encyclical as a Muslim scholar, I found many similarities and commonalities between him and Said Nursi. The encyclical provides a strong basis for interreligious collaboration in laying the spiritual foundations for positive solutions to

the environmental and social crises that threaten us with catastrophe. This recalls Nursi’s exhortation to his followers before World War I and again after World War II, amidst tensions and calamities caused by war to “be united also with the truly pious and spiritual Christians” and to oppose together humankind’s perennial enemies of ignorance, poverty, and disunity. As Thomas Michel underlines, “long before others were speaking of it, Nursi urged unity between his followers, students of *the Risale-i Nur*, and true Christians who were striving to follow the teachings and example of Jesus” (Michel, 2013: 2). As Michel observes Nursi “didn’t write about ‘dialogue’, because the word wasn’t yet in current usage; but he used an even stronger term, unity, encouraging true Muslims and Christians to achieve a kind of unity of purpose”. Here, “the truly pious and spiritual Christians” is reminiscent of the Qur’anic approach to “the spirituality of the humble monks and learned priests of the Christians” . . . for there are among them monks and learned priests, and they are not proud.” (Qur’an, 5:82). Mahmoud Ayoub argues that this Qur’anic passage “goes on to make two significant assertions, which can still serve as a good motivation for constructive dialogue between the two faith communities”:

The first is that the Christians are the nearest people in amity to the Muslims. The second is that Christian monks and learned priests recognize the truth when they hear it and shed tears of humble gratitude for God’s guidance. Furthermore, like the people of faith among the Muslims, these humble monks and learned priests covet God’s grace and pray that they be accounted among the witnesses to God’s oneness and guidance to the truth. Therefore, dialogue between them ought to be a dynamic and creative engagement among friends, not enemies, to which the Qur’an (3:64) invites the people of the Book. (Ayoub, 2004: 313-314).

Said Nursi’s view of Muslim-Christian relations in modern times can be understood within this background. According to Thomas Michel, Nursi’s views on living in peace with Christians and cooperating with them to defend religious values such as faith, justice, and moral uprightness were ahead of his time” (Michel, 2013: 32-33). Although he never uses the word “dialogue,” which implies that what Muslims and Christians ought to be doing is talking to one another, he speaks boldly of “Muslims being united, or coming into unity, with true Christians.” (Michel, *ibid*).

As Michel emphasizes, dialogue “was a daring concept when Said Nursi first enunciated

it a century ago, around 1911. However, Michel argues, Nursi “never wavered in his view, and down through the years Nursi continued to call for a cessation of hostilities and theological disputes—at least for the time being—so that Muslims and Christians might together confront the challenges of the modern world”. In this spirit, Michel considers Nursi’s practical initiatives to promote “greater understanding between the two communities” as “daring” as early as a decade before? Second Vatican Council which started on 11 October 1962 and closed on 8 December 1965 (ibid, 8).

In 1951, he sent a copy of the *Risale-i Nur* to Pope Pius XII in Rome, and received a letter of thanks from the Vatican dated 22 February 1951. Two years later, he visited H.B. Athenagoras, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch in İstanbul. Five years before his death, he supported the Baghdad Pact, noting that by it not only would Turks gain 400 million brothers and sisters among Muslim peoples, but that the international accord would also gain for Muslim Turks “the friendship of 800 million Christians” (Michel, ibid: 33)

In all this, Nursi offers original and thought-provoking insights on Muslim-Christian cooperation. His central thesis is that Muslims and Christians together can build a true civilization according to God’s plan in which human dignity, justice, and fellowship will be the norm. This is possible if they seek to ground their mutual relationships on love and understanding. Doing so, they may write “a new history, a new legacy for the world: from collision to coalition” (Baker, 1998).

Nursi’s emphasis on Muslim–Christian unity was based on a conviction that Muslims and Christians had a God-given task in society that could only be achieved by working together. A good example of this call for a mutual understanding is Thomas Michel himself. The insights a Christian can learn from *the Risale-i Nur* are expressed eloquently by Michel follows:

I myself am a Christian, in fact, a Catholic priest. One might ask why a Christian is spending his time studying and writing about the thought of a Muslim scholar. Does Said Nursi have anything to say to Christians or others who do not follow the religion of Islam? Are there any points of convergence or agreement between the views expressed in *the Risale-i Nur* and my own deeply held faith convictions?

Thus, one thing led to another and I found myself gaining many new insights from *the Risale-i Nur* that enriched my faith life as a committed Christian. There is a universal aspect to true wisdom, whatever its origin and by whomever it is expressed (Michel, ibid: 7).

In the rest of this paper, I will elaborate on Nursi’s major views on the environment and our planet as a home. I hope this paper may be a humble contribution to Nursi’s and the Pope Francis’ call for creating and founding a mutual and common ground to address common problems besetting humanity. Moreover, I hope that their call should be regarded by “pious believers” as a wakeup call to take the message of the Abrahamic tradition to create a new paradigm to respond to challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## V. NURSI: AN ENVIRONMENT-FRIENDLY LIFE

It is evident that Nursi was well aware of the challenges posed by the modern worldview not only to Islam but to the Abrahamic tradition as a whole. Therefore, he devoted his life to the revival of the traditional Islamic understanding of the universe and its moral implications for our time. To overcome modernity’s “materialistic and mechanical” understanding of nature, Nursi developed a God-centered view of the universe and articulated the Qur’anic notion of stewardship in his system of thought. (Ozdemir, 2003). Nursi’s cosmological views come to fore in his emphasis on the spiritual aspects of Islam. In this respect, Nursi stands out as a modern representative of the great saintly tradition embodied in the life of such figures as al-Ghazali (d. 1111), Ibn Arabi (d. 1242) and Rumi (d. 1273).

While studying Nursi’s views on the environment, one of the first things to strike an ecologically minded reader is Nursi’s personal close relationship with the world around him since his childhood. His love of nature grew together with the development in his ideas and later came to form the basis of his eco-theology. It is enough to look at the biographies of Nursi and the memoirs of his close students to see what a good observer of nature he was, even from his childhood and youth (Vahide, 2005). Nursi is said to have shared food with ants, cats, mice, and pigeons, and to have reprimanded a student for killing a lizard, asking him “Did you create it?” When arriving at Barla, his place of exile for seven years, he prevented a gamekeeper who was accompanying him from shooting the partridges, reminding him that it was their nesting time.



One of his teachings is that the nature is fundamentally “clean”, and that it is often little appreciated animal species who are responsible for keeping it that way:

It is not only the carnivorous cleaners of the seas and the eagles of the land which obey the commands proceeding from that sacred cleansing, but also its cleansing officials which gather up corpses, like worms and ants. (Nursi, 2009: 393).

When he was in prison, witnessing indiscriminate spraying of insecticides, he was very upset and wrote an entire treatise on the importance of flies and their role in eco- system. Nursi, therefore, opposed any killing of animals, even flies:

... flies are charged with duties of cleaning away poisonous substances and microbes which breed disease and are invisible to the human eye. They do not transmit microbes; on the contrary, through sucking up and imbibing harmful microbes they destroy them and cause them to be transformed into different state; they prevent the spread of many contagious diseases. A sign that they are both health workers and cleansing officials and chemists and that they exhibit extensive wisdom is the fact that they are extremely numerous. For valuable and beneficial things are multiplied. (Nursi, *ibid*).

Nursi’s argument extends to include mosquitoes as well, which also reminds us Francis concern for humble and small creatures like plankton:

Mosquitoes and fleas fall upon the turbid blood flowing in the veins polluted by harmful substances, indeed they are charged with consuming the polluted blood, so in hot weather when there is blood surplus to the body’s needs, why should they not be natural cuppers? (Nursi, *ibid*: 340)

He also claimed to be able, like Solomon, to understand animal languages, as in the following passage:

... one day I looked at the cats; all they were doing was eating, playing, and sleeping. I wondered, how is it these little monsters which perform no duties are

known as blessed? Later, I lay down to sleep for the night. I looked; one of the cats had come. It lay against my pillow and put its mouth against my ear, and murmuring: “O Most Compassionate One! O Most Compassionate One!” in the most clear manner, as though refuting in the name of its species the objection and insult which had occurred to me, throwing it in my face.

Then this occurred to me: I wonder if this recitation is particular to this cat, or is it general among cats? And is it only an unfair objector like me who hears it, or if anyone listens carefully, can they hear it? The next morning, I listened to the other cats; it was not so clear, but to varying degrees they were repeating the same invocation. At first, “O Most Compassionate!” was discernible following their purring.

Then gradually their purrings and meowings became the same “O Most Merciful!” It became an unarticulated, eloquent and sorrowful recitation. They would close their mouths and utter a fine “O Most Compassionate!” I related the story to the brothers who visited me, and they listened carefully as well, and said that they heard it to an extent (Nursi, 2008: 343 f.n.).

Therefore, Richard Foltz regards Nursi as belonging to “the minority of Muslims who believe that animal souls are eternal” (Foltz 2006: 95). However, Nursi deduces from sayings of the Prophet Muhammad that “the spirits of animals will live eternally”. Moreover, “certain individual animals, like the Hudhud of Solomon (PUH) and his ants, Salih’s (PUH) she-camel, and the dog of the Companions of the Cave, will go to the eternal realm with both their spirits and their bodies, and that each species will have a single body that may be utilized from time to time” (Nursi, 2002: 65).

Regarding animals, he even suggests, “natural carnivores should restrict themselves to eating the flesh of animals that are already dead, and that failure to do so will result in punishment in the hereafter”:

The licit food of carnivorous animals is the flesh of dead animals. The flesh of living animals is unlawful for them. If they eat it, they receive punishment. The hadith which states that “Retaliation shall be made for the hornless sheep on the horned on Resurrection Day” points out that although their bodies perish, among animals whose spirits are immortal there is reward and punishment in

a manner appropriate for them in the eternal realm. As a consequence of this it may be said that the flesh of live animals is unlawful for wild animals (Nursi, 2009: 339; Foltz, 2006: 95).

Nursi regards animals as mirrors and glorify God and reflect His attributes. For example, “all sorts of beings from microbes and ants to rhinoceroses, eagles, and plants? are diligent officials of the Pre-Eternal Sovereign; he regards these animals as cleansing and public health officials which collect the corpses of wild animals and since they act as mirrors to and have a relation with that Sovereign, the value of all things infinitely surpasses their individual value...” (Nursi, 2002: 20). According to him “everything, from the heavens to the earth, from the stars to flies, from angels to fishes, and from planets to particles, prostrates, worships, praises and glorifies Almighty God. But their worship varies according to their capacities and the Divine Names that they manifest; it is all different.” (Nursi, *ibid*). In short, Nursi established a form of relationship with all creatures around him based on wisdom, compassion, and kindness.

It is interesting to find similar points regarding animals in Pope Francis’ encyclical. He argues that “while human intervention on plants and animals is permissible when it pertains to the necessities of human life”; “experimentation on animals is morally acceptable only ‘if it remains within reasonable limits [and] contributes to caring for or saving human lives’”. He made it clear that “human power has limits” and that “it is contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer or die needlessly” (Pope, *ibid*: 96-97).

## VI. NATURE AS A BOOK

William W. Baker, a well-traveled Christian theologian and Biblical archeologist once argued that taken as a whole Islam and Christianity have “more in common” than we think (Baker, 1998). Pope Francis also highlighted this dimension of “the Judeo-Christian tradition” arguing that the word “creation” has a broader meaning than “nature”, for it has to do with God’s loving plan in which every creature has its own value and significance”. Moreover, “nature is usually seen as a system which can be studied, understood and controlled, whereas creation can only be understood as a gift from” (Pope, *ibid*: 55-56). By the same token, he underlines that “the world cannot be analyzed by isolating only one of its aspects, since “the

book of nature is one and indivisible”, and includes the environment, life, sexuality, the family, social relations, and so forth” (Pope, *ibid*: 6).

Nursi, as an ardent reader of the Qur’an, also regarded the whole universe as a book from an early age. He studied in wonderment the mountains, high plateaus, rivers, springs, plains, and all the living creatures found in them, while feeling a great love and compassion for them. Nursi, therefore, emphasized in his teachings that nature is most importantly a form of divine revelation, and that the signs in nature (*ayat*) are to be read like the signs of written language. He goes so far as to suggest that creation is the original form of revelation, upon which the revealed Qur’an is merely a commentary (*tafsir*).

Following Nursi’s line of reasoning, it could be said that when we destroy habitats and species, it is like burning the pages of the divine text, i.e. the Qur’an, by which God makes it possible for us to know Him. (Foltz, 2006: 94-96). Therefore, Nursi lays great stress on the metaphysical dimension of the universe, and this forms the basis of his world-view. To understand this, the theory of Divine Names in Islamic thought in general and in Nursi’s thinking should be explained briefly. To understand Nursi’s perception of universe as a book reflecting the power, wisdom, beauty, and glory of God, it is crucial to say something on his theory of Divine Names.

The origins and the fundamentals of Divine Names back to the famous Muslim theologian al-Ghazali (d. 1111), who was regarded by Nursi as one of his spiritual masters. Although, this theory has Platonic ramifications and roots, Ghazali introduced it and gave it a new content and shape in his seminal book *Al-Maqṣad al-Asna fi Sharh Asma’ Allah al-Husna* (The Noblest Aims in the explication of Beautiful Divine Names). In his work, al-Ghazali simply argued and explained the ninety-nine Divine names in accordance with the basic theological principles of Islam (al-Ghazali, 1995). However, as he clearly points out, and which is indirectly implied by the book’s title, the absolute goal of his explications of Divine Names is to illustrate how a person can be characterized by the characteristics of God Most High (Coban, 2010: 115-116).

Nursi develops this theory so that “he systematically explains almost every theological issue” in the light of Divine Names”. So, every creation, being a manifestation of God’s divine names and attributes, is shaped, changed and altered according to it. Here, we will highlight how Nursi utilizes this theory of Divine Names to develop a “deep” understanding of the nature and or moral obligations towards her. Expounding the verse, “*And there is nothing but it glorifies Him with praise*” (Qur’an, 17: 44), he makes the following basic points:

- a. Everything has numerous aspects that give onto Almighty God like windows.
- b. The reality of the universe, and of all beings, are based on the Divine Names.
- c. The reality of every being is based on one Name or on many.
- d. The attributes of things, and the arts in them, are all based on a Name. The true science of philosophy is based on the Name of All-Wise, true medicine on the Name of Healer, and geometry on the Name of Determiner, and so on.
- e. In the same way that all the sciences are based on and come to an end in a Name, so the inner realities of all arts and sciences, and of all human attainments, are based on the Divine Names (Nursi, 2008: 655).

In consequence, Nursi says that he agrees with the view of some of the Sufis that “the Divine Names constitute the true reality of things, while the essences of things are only shadows of that reality” (Nursi, *ibid*). From a hermeneutical point of view, two concepts important for an understanding of Nursi’s view of nature should be mentioned here, which he used whenever the subject arose. These are the concepts of the significative meaning of things (*manay-i harfi*) and their nominal meaning (*mana-i ismi*). According to Nursi, the Qur’an’s emphasis on nature and the universe was secondary. That is, the Qur’an does not mention the universe for the universe’s sake, but for the sake of its Creator and Owner, God. Just as the universe was created by God, so too all it contains are the signs and missives of God. That is, they point to him

Nursi considers these concepts to be “seeds” and “seed-beds” of his later works, as entitled *Risale-i Nur*. In one of his earlier work, *Mesnevi-i Nuriye*, which he wrote in Arabic, he argues:

In my forty years of life and thirty years of study, I have learnt only four words and four phrases. They will be explained later in detail, and here mentioned only briefly. What is meant by the words is ‘the significative meaning’ of things (*mana-i harfi*), ‘the nominal meaning’ of things (*mana-i ismi*), intention (*niyet*) and point of view (*nazar*). They are as follows:

All things other than God [the universe] should be looked at as having a significative meaning (*mana-i harfi*), and on His account. It is mistaken to look at them as signifying only themselves (*mana-i ismi*) and on account of causes.

Yes, everything has two aspects; one looks to the Creator and the other to the creatures. The aspect that looks to creatures should be [seen] as a veil which shows

the aspect looking to its Creator beneath, like a lace veil or a transparent piece of glass. In which case, when one looks at bounties, the Bestower of bounties should come to mind, and when looking at the art [in creatures], their Fashioner, and when looks at causes, the Truly Effective Agent should occur to one. (...) If material things are looked at on account of causes, it is ignorance, where if it is on account of God, it is knowledge of God (Nursi, 1994: 51).

Nursi suggests that if the natural world is observed through the Qur’anic lens, then everything in nature would appear as a book and letter which can be read and understood by any careful student of the Qur’an. Thus, Nursi reads the universe as a book:

one page of this mighty book is the face of the earth” and “one word of the line is a tree which has opened its blossom and put forth its leaves in order to produce its fruit. This word consists of meaningful passages lauding and praising the All-Glorious Sapien One to the number of orderly, well-proportioned, adorned leaves, flowers, and fruits (Nursi, *ibid*).

Nursi, therefore, calls the universe “the mighty Qur’an of the universe” and he repeats this in many places (Nursi, 2001: 428). In fact, Pope Francis also underlined in his Encyclical that “the book of nature is one and indivisible” and “includes the environment, life, sexuality, the family, social relations, and so forth” (Francis, 6).

Another noteworthy point is his emphasis on the order and balance in the universe. While he considers this order and balance as indicating God’s existence, he also draws people’s attention to the preservation and sustainability of this order and balance. For example, he argues, “there is no wastefulness, futility, and absence of benefits in the nature of things. Wastefulness, in fact, is the opposite of the Name of Wise.” So, when he argues that humanity should take lessons from eco-systems and lead a wise and frugal life, he also keeps in mind the verse: “Eat and drink, but waste not in excess.” (Qur’an, 7:31). According to him, there is no contradiction between the teachings of the Qur’an and the book of nature (Ozdemir, 2003). Here, it is not difficult to observe that Nursi, like Pope Francis, considers the Planet Earth as a home with its spiritual, aesthetical, as well as economic dimension. Here, we should underline that Francis also sees “throwaway culture” and consumer excess and waste which “affects the excluded just as it quickly reduces things to rubbish”. Therefore he suggests that “ a serious

consideration of this issue would be one way of counteracting the throwaway culture which affects the entire planet, but it must be said that only limited progress has been made in this regard” (Francis, 17-18, 31).

## VII. EARTH AS HOME

To understand Nursi and Pope Francis’ concept of the world as home, Charles Taylor’s concept of fullness may be helpful. When trying to understand the role of religion on individual in daily life and “what it’s like to live as a believer or an unbeliever” in this home, the Planet Earth, Taylor underlines the role of belief as follows: “we all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be” (Taylor, 2007: 4-5).

Interestingly, Nursi expresses the process of change in the universe and the sustaining power of these huge changes using the metaphor of house. For “veritable rooms (of the house) take shape and change each hour with the utmost order and ease, just as if clothes were being changed, or as if scenes were passing across a cinema screen. We can say even that numerous little rooms are constantly being created in each of those scenes” (Nursi, 2008: 70-71). Then, he turns to the universe and invites us to look at universe with the metaphor of house and see the whole picture. Just like a building, he argues, “the cosmos also requires an infinitely wise, all-knowing and all-powerful maker”. He further argues:

a house cannot arise without a builder, particularly a house adorned with miraculous works of art, wondrous designs, and amazing ornaments. As much art has been put into one of its stones as into a whole palace. No intelligence will accept that it could arise without a builder; definitely it needs a master architect (Nursi, *ibid*)).

In the same reasoning, according to Nursi, “the magnificent cosmos is a palace that has the sun and the moon as its lamps and the stars as its candles; time is like a rope or ribbon hung within it, on to which the Glorious Creator each year threads a new world”. Moreover,

“He has made the face of the earth a bounteous spread that He adorns each spring with three hundred thousand species of creation, that He fills with innumerable kinds of generous gifts” (Nursi, 1998, 71). Nursi, when praying to God humbly, opened his mind, heart and spirit and feeling at home, saying these:

My Compassionate Sustainer has made the world a house for me, the sun and moon lamps for it, and the spring? a bunch of flowers for me, and summer, a table of bounties, and the animals, He has made my servants. And He has made plants the decorated furnishings of my house. (Nursi, 2008: 338).

So, when trying to see the world as a home, it is not difficult to find spiritual and intellectual legacy in our respective traditions. As Pope Francis argues that “the urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can Change” (Francis, 10); therefore, the teaching of Nursi and Pope Francis are very relevant for us.

## CONCLUSION

As Pope Francis underlined, re-interpreting our Abrahamic tradition can allow us to propose and develop a new paradigm of understanding and sustainability, which includes all human fellows as well as all creation. Muslim thinker Said Nursi also articulates an environmentally friendly understanding of human-nature relationship which was formed and shaped by the Qur’an. According to this understanding, the universe was created and sustained by God with a particular order, balance, measure, beauty, and aesthetic structure. Nursi, while emphasizing the cosmological and metaphysical dimension of the Qur’an, also underlines the ecological messages of this teaching for us: the purpose of the universe’s creation is not solely anthropocentric; before everything, the universe is a missive, a book, showing its Maker. It therefore has a dimension, which transcends human.

Like Pope Francis points out, Nursi also believes that there are certain aims in the creation of all living beings; human’s prime obligation is to understand these, and act in conformity with them. Since there is no wastefulness and prodigality in the universe, human should not be wasteful in his life. The models of unlimited growth and unlimited consumption are

opposed to the spirit of the Qur'an. Pope Francis also underlines that “we fail to see the deepest roots of our present failures, which have to do with the direction, goals, meaning and social implications of technological and economic growth (Francis, 82). The ecological balances and systems that the Creator has placed in the universe must be respected and protected. Human will be called to account in the hereafter for what he has done in this world. Included in this will be his treatment of the beings in the universe, animate and inanimate.

Thus, Nursi challenged the mechanistic, materialist, and modern world-view, which has been dominant since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Francis also criticizes and blames “the modern myth of unlimited material progress” (Francis, 57) and suggests a new perspective to look at nature as bounties of God and pursue a more moral life towards nature with the encyclical. Moreover, Nursi's ideas regarding human-nature relationship, as we tried to summarize above, gain even greater importance in the light of the efforts of environmental philosophy to redefine the environment in terms of meaning. Nursi encourages us to take nature seriously by pursuing a meaningful life. He rebukes those who see the order, harmony, and measure in the universe, yet do not draw the necessary lessons and moral implications from it. Concisely, Nursi's eco-cosmology based on the Qur'anic *Weltanschauung* and demands an environment friendly life.

To conclude, it may be hoped with Thomas Michel that, Said Nursi who devotes so many years of his life—from the activism and idealism of youth, through the imprisonment and persecution of his middle years, to the pains and illnesses of old age—to the reading, study, and prayerful contemplation of the Qur'an, has much to teach all of us. He becomes an instrument by which God implants His guidance in the hearts of men and women” (Michel, *ibid*: 8).

Harvey Cox, an American theologian who served as the Hollis Professor of Divinity at the Harvard Divinity School, once reminded us the same truth with a great humbleness: “Being a Christian, I think we are at a moment in religious history in which we have an enormous amount to learn from traditions other than our own” (Cox, 2006: 220). Therefore, it is time, I think, to learn from each other and even, as Nursi and Pope Francis teach us, to read and learn from the great book of the universe.

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