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**RECONCILING RELIGION AND NATIONALISM:
The Nur Movement in Modern Turkey
(2002-2018)**

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**Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in International Relations**

**School of Government and International Affairs
University of Durham**

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ABSTRACT

Nur movement has been one of the most influential socio-religious dynamics of the modern Turkey. It emerged during the formation years of the Turkish Republic, under the guidance and leadership of Said Nursi, a renowned Kurdish Muslim scholar and spread across the country in a short amount of time. The movement continues to be influential at grassroots level in contemporary Turkey. It is a faith-based movement aiming at strengthening the beliefs of Muslims in the face of secularization as a robust and global transformation. This created a deep tension with the Kemalist state whose main objective was the modernization of society by means of state power and violence. Although Nurcus and secular Kemalists diverge from each other regarding the place of religion in life, Nurcus adopted nationalism with ease which was also one of the pillars of the Kemalist doctrine; leading to twofold tensions: (1) sacred vs. secular, (2) universal vs. particular. Nationalism is mainly secular and particularist whereas religion of Islam is obviously sacred, and its teachings are chiefly universalist and egalitarian. This thesis basically asks how this juxtaposition becomes possible and aims at explaining how Nurcus alleviate the tension between these opposing ideational positions. In pursuit of these questions, Anthony Smith's theoretical framework, so-called 'sacred foundations of nationalism' is critically employed, however, an original approach has been developed which has a better explanatory capacity as to Nurcu case in Turkey. Based on the analysis of both online and fieldwork data including in-depth interviews with the members of the movement, it is concluded that Nurcus can be placed under the rubric of 'nationalist religious' as religion precedes and overrides nationalism in their identity.

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DECLARATION

I, Ahmet Abdullah Saçmalı, declare that this thesis, in whole or in part, has not been previously submitted for any previous application for a degree at this or any other university.

This thesis is solely and entirely my own work under the supervision of Prof. Claire Sutherland.

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Doctoral studies are always troublesome and mine is not an exception. It was quite a long and thorny journey, however, there was many people around me to make it easier. I would like to take this opportunity to thank these people that I can remember and mention. For those whose names I cannot mention here, I apologize in advance.

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I finished my thesis at the end of the write-up period. Therefore, I would like to thank Ensar Foundation for financially supporting me in this period.

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**To my mother, who always supports me
and whose endless optimism made me
got up each time I fell to the ground**

INTRODUCTION

This thesis focuses on the engagement of the Nur movement in Turkey with nationalism. This faith-based movement launched by Said Nursi, a significant Kurdish Muslim scholar (d. 1960), roughly at the time of the establishment of the Turkish republic, has still been quite widespread in modern Turkey. Even though Nursi's cause is based on Islam which is a world-religion, most of his followers are quite nationalist in their understanding of the world. The majority of the movement is composed of Turkish people and they champion Turkish nationalism whereas their master, the founder of the movement is ethnically Kurd, who signed his articles as Said-i Kürdî (Said, the Kurd) for a long time, until the adoption of the surname law in 1934. Therefore, with the objective of solving this puzzle, this thesis asks two research questions:

- a) *How do Nursi reconcile a universalist religion, Islam and a particularist ideology, Turkish nationalism?*
- b) *How do they juxtapose the sacred (Islam) and the secular (nationalism)?*

Without making a value judgment regarding their compatibility, it should be noted that there is an uneasy relationship between a religion with universalist tenets envisioning all people as equal and teaching fraternity along religious lines, with an ideology, nationalism, which is by definition particularist, aiming at establishing a new type of relationship within society, based on national identity superseding traditional ties, such as tribal, communal or religious. Therefore, it appears as a puzzle how can a person follow a universalist religion and a nationalist ideology at the same time.

In order to have a better understanding of the merge of identities, one needs to take a glance at the historical background. The Ottoman modernization started towards the end of the eighteenth century with the admission that the existing ways of perceiving the world has some shortcomings and inabilities in political, military and administrative senses. Following this contention, myriad reform attempts were undertaken in those fields in order to avoid a defeat in the face of rising powers in Europe. Regarding the continuation of these reforms, it will be a mistake to perceive the establishment of Turkish Republic as a rupture as the reforms did not interrupt in

this process¹, rather they were intensified. Therefore, it is a long historical process that has reached today, leading to many tensions in the identities of people, one of which is the tension between religion and nationalism. After the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, the newly founded republic as a successor, disrupted the balance in favour of modernization and secular lifestyle and way of thinking. Although, based on the new state ideology, these new understandings were indoctrinated to the masses, the wholesale secularization policy did not achieve its original objective. However, the conflict did also not end with the victory of traditional and religious value systems as well. In other words, it will not be true to argue that the project of the republic completely failed. Rather, it created a large section in the society, if not the majority, which is primarily secular in their perception of the world. On the other hand, the same process brought about a fusion of identities in the minds of religious people, one of which is the Nur movement. With relative ease, they integrated nationalism to their faith in Islam. After the death of Nursi, the founder, his movement survived to this day, although it went through many changes and transformations in the course of history.

There are some peculiarities of the movement which makes it interesting for students of Turkish politics. Firstly, it is the first widespread Islamic movement in Anatolia which is not based on Sufism. Although Nursi was a student of some Sufi scholars, he did not adopt this legacy, but still remained in the Sunni tradition. Secondly, the movement never took up arms against the state. Nevertheless, its members always resisted the secularist reforms of the republic. Thirdly, for a long time, until 1950, there were no Islamic movement, comparable to Nurcus in both number and social influence. Fourthly, despite all the changes in the political atmosphere of the country and the social transformations, they survived, having the capacity to reach the furthest capillaries of society. Considering these qualities of the movement, it appears that a scholarly work on it is quite significant and it might help understand the other religious movements both in Turkey and in the world.

The thesis started with two assumptions regarding the nationalism of Nurcus: (1) they believe in Turkish superiority and (2) they attribute this to the principles of Islam. Although the first assumption is proved to be true in my research, the second one is not, in that the findings acquired from the research based on fieldwork and online data

¹Erik Jan Zürcher. 2004. *Turkey: A Modern History*. London: I.B. Tauris. pp. 3-4.

demonstrated that they make this legitimation in different ways, details of which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Regarding the theoretical framework, this thesis offers a new approach which has a better explanatory capacity than the extant ones, with regard to Nurcus, and which can be applied to the other cases especially in Muslim countries. This new theoretical framework starts from the debates with regard to the emergence of nations and nationalism, about which there are basically two main approaches. The first group are modernists who are in support of the idea that these categories are modern phenomena which one cannot find in the pre-modern era. The opponents of this view maintain that they are actually primordial concepts which have existed from time immemorial up to now. In this thesis, the argument of modernists regarding the modernity of nations and nationalism is adopted, however their contention with regard to the mutual exclusivity of religion and nationalism is challenged. Rather than being a matter of theoretical debate, this co-existence is a social and political fact which is observable on the ground, to be explained by social scientists.

It should also be indicated that this study does not envision any possible tension between all religions and all different types of nationalisms. The tension mainly rises between universalist world-religions and powerful nationalisms. Some scholars, for instance Adrian Hastings, argue that Islam does not allow room for nationalism due to its own political model which is based on umma and religious fraternity.² Within the framework of this thesis, neither Hastings's argument on the existence of such an all-encompassing political model, nor his contention that this is the major reason behind the uneasy relationship between Islam and nationalism, are considered to represent truth. Rather, the universalist and egalitarian teaching of Islam, disregarding all the other attachments, including national belonging, constitutes an impediment for nationalism. Because Islam is this type of religion and Turkish nationalism is a powerful one, marked by longing for the 'good old days' of the Ottoman Empire, there is something curious in this relationship to be pursued. To understand better what is meant by "powerful nationalism" an example can be given from the foreign policy adopted during the AK Party (Justice and Development Party) era. This period, which started in 2002 and has still been continuing, marked by the coming of religious-

²Adrian Hastings. 2007. *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, and Nationalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 198.

conservative people at the centre of the political arena and the Turkish foreign policy adopted in this period, by itself, demonstrates the desire of both the party and its electorate, to be more influential, at least on geographically close Muslim countries. The policies followed, especially, via TİKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency) in the other Muslim countries, ranging from Balkans to the states with Turkic populations, established in the aftermath of the decline of the USSR, located in the Central Asia, are obviously not without any purpose. Rather, the activities such as building mosques or drilling wells for fresh water under the name of Turkish Republic serve to the increase of Turkish foreign influence in those regions. These activities are also loudly announced by the leaders of the party during rallies before the elections and they are well appreciated by the religious people. This exhibits that Turkish nationalism of religious people, as Ak Party mainly represents them in the political arena, is not the one confined within the boundaries of the nation-state. It has always been interested in the regions around Turkey, especially the countries which used to be part of the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, the nationalism of religious Turks can safely be considered a powerful nationalism, marked by a deep pride and superiority complex, whose coexistence with the religion of Islam teaching a sharp egalitarianism across human societies, truly requires an explanation.

With the goal of explaining the combination of these understandings, to some extent this thesis draws upon the approach of Anthony Smith, regarding what he called the 'sacred foundations of nationalism'. According to him, the nation is, above all a sacred communion of people, which is in effect a challenge to modernists who tends to see the nation as a secular society. He follows that the characteristics of the nations is not only its ideals and territorial unity, but its emphasis upon authenticity which acts as the sacredness of traditional religions. Therefore, this authenticity is derived from the older belief-system by the nationalists and it was adapted to nationalism which is a modern political religion for Smith. Together with authenticity, the other sacred foundations and cultural resources helped nationalists a lot to transform traditional communities to modern nations.³

This study diverges from Smith's analysis in two aspects. Firstly, he conceives nationalism as a belief-system, even calls nationalism a modern political religion. Secondly, according to him nations are sacred communities which inherited some

³ Anthony Smith. 2003. *Chosen Peoples*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 254-55.

sacred foundations and cultural resources of pre-modern peoples. Regarding the first argument, in this thesis, nationalism is accepted to be a belief system or religion, as it is a secular modern ideology. In line with Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann⁴, in this work, it is argued that the fact that nationalism borrows some qualities of religions is not sufficient to categorize it as religion. Secondly, in Smith's analysis there are two historical and social categories, namely nations and older sacred communities between which he establishes a continuation. However, this thesis applies his categories, the sacred foundations, namely, chosenness, heroes, golden age and sacred spaces to a modern sacred society differentiating from the non-sacred/secular segments of the nation. As a result of this analysis, the conclusion is reached that (1) Nurcus' religious attachment and nationalist feelings are inextricably intermeshed and (2) there is an ontological and hierarchical relationship between them. That is to say, the limits of nationalism are defined by religion all the time. However, in a way or other, they achieve to legitimate the particularism of their nationalism using some selected principles of Islam.

Regarding the methodology of the thesis, after discussing positivism, interpretivism and hermeneutics, a middle path is adopted as the methodology of this thesis which does not agree with positivism regarding the attainability of the absolute truth. It also does not envision the denial of reality as proposed by excessive relativists. The theoretical framework adopted throughout this thesis also does not have the claim to offer a flawless and comprehensive model which can be applied to any case. On the other hand, it has the claim to propose a viable explanation for Nurcus in modern Turkey. Due to the fact that rather than the amounts and numbers, the view and perceptions of people are concerned, qualitative methodology is adopted. The primary source analysed in the empirical chapters (Chapter 5&6) is composed of two elements: a) Fieldwork b) Online data. The fieldwork was conducted in January and February 2016 with 21 people who are members of the movement. They were composed of both men and women who are from different walks of the society, ranging from MP, to radio programmer and undergraduate student. Each in-depth interview was conducted face to face rather than remote video talk. Because the conversations took place only six months after the 15th July 2016 coup attempt, the nationalist tone was pretty salient.

⁴ Van der Veer, Peter, and Hartmut Lehmann. 2002. *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press. p. 9.

Nevertheless, the same process marked by the state of emergency did not make possible to convince most the Kurdish members of the movement. On the other hand, regarding the online data, the pieces mostly in the form answers to the questions published on www.sorularlailamiyet.com between 2002 and 2018 are analysed. This website was launched in 2002 by one of the branches of the Nur movement, known as Suffa Foundation. It is quite popular not just among Nurcus, but among the other religious groups as well. Within that category, in which the questions of the people regarding Islamic issues are replied, there is no alternative to this website published by Nurcus. Considering the fact that it is ranked 252⁵ in Turkey, it appears that the opinions shared on this website matters to have an understanding regarding Nurcus and even general religious orientation in Turkey.

The Plan of the Thesis

Taking a look at each chapter and their content, The first chapter introduces Said Nursi, the founder of the movement, going into details of his life as far as they are relevant in understanding his stance towards nationalism and the idea of Muslim unity. It is held that especially during the republican period, although he wrote in favour of nationalism, his main objective was strengthening Muslim fraternity by the help of nationalism. Then it is moved on to the discussion of how the movement evolved in the aftermath of his death in 1960. It is maintained that although Nursi cannot be thought of nationalist, the members of his movement are inclined towards the ideology of nationalism due to several reasons, one of which is the rising communist threat in 1970s Turkey.

The second and third chapters engage with the existing theoretical approaches to the relationship between religion and nationalism in a critical manner. First chapter firstly discusses different explanation models regarding the emergence of nations and nationalism. After giving an account of the sides in the debate, as modernists and their opponents, it takes a position which is close to the modernists accepting that nations are modern phenomena and nationalism is basically a secular ideology. Then, it moves on to the details of secularization theory according to which nationalism and religion are categorically different from and opposed to each other, so that as societies modernize, nationalism will rise, which will displace religion from the public space

⁵ SimilarWeb, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://www.similarweb.com/website/sorularlailamiyet.com>.

accordingly. This theory is criticized as Nurcus in themselves are a refutation because they accommodate both identities at the same time. Lastly, the question of whether nationalism is a religion is discussed and concluded that it should not be called a religion even if it has some qualities that can resemble some elements of religions.

In the third chapter, the concepts of universalism and particularism are specifically focused. The chapter compares and contrasts Christianity and Islam with regard to their approach to universalism and to what extent they are conducive to nationalism. Drawing upon the works of Hastings⁶ and Anderson⁷, it is argued that the translation of the Bible into vernaculars played a crucial role in the formation of modern nations. However, it diverges especially from Hastings, as for him, Islam is almost categorically opposed to the formations of nations and the ideology of nationalism⁸, arguing that although Islam does not pave the way for the ideology of nationalism, this is especially because its egalitarian teachings, as it is not easy to find a well-defined political model proposed in the fundamental texts of the religion, contrary to Hasting's claim. At the end of the chapter, a new approach in explaining the Nurcu nationalism in modern Turkey is developed with the claim of being a better model.

In the fourth chapter, titled, "Methodology", the research plan, the epistemological stance and the limitations of the research are discussed. Firstly, different epistemological approaches are elaborated, namely positivism, interpretivism, deconstructivism and hermeneutics and emphasizing that the approach based on hermeneutics has been adopted during the course of this study. Then the details of qualitative research method are explored as it will constitute the backbone of the methodology of this thesis. The weaknesses of this methodology is touched upon as well, however, it is concluded that despite some drawbacks it is the best fit considering the research questions of the thesis which have not to do with numbers or quantitative data. In addition, in this chapter, the online materials are addressed, which are triangulated with the fieldwork data to come up with a valid and solid argument.

The fifth chapter analyses the nationalist elements in the Nurcu identity, mainly drawing upon Smith's categories, namely, sacred foundations. In the first section, it is asked how Nurcus perceive the place of Turks among other Muslim nations and it is

⁶ Hastings. 2007. *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, and Nationalism*.

⁷ Smith. 2003. *Chosen Peoples*.

⁸ Hastings. 2007. *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, and Nationalism*. p. 201.

concluded that they unitedly think that Turks have a special and privileged position vis-à-vis the others. Then the sacred mission of the Turks to revive the *umma* is elaborated. They hold that Turks have a mission granted by God to rescue the Muslim world, however they do not think that Turks are chosen by name in the foundational texts, rather they earned this position by working hard. Regarding golden ages and heroes, they do have many golden ages and plenty of national heroes in their minds. However, the lifetime of the prophet Muhammad and his personality always takes precedence over the other periods and people. In addition, the most important criterion for the other golden ages and heroes is their relationship with Islam. Lastly, it is argued that both Anatolia and Istanbul are sacred in their eyes. Whereas the former is the land of history, the latter is the land of destiny in Smithian parlance.⁹

The sixth chapter is the second empirical chapter, where how Nurcu reconcile Islam and nationalism is analysed. The chapter elaborates both online and fieldwork data to reach a better understanding. Firstly, it tackles with how Nurcu engage with the idea of superiority of their nation in the face of the egalitarian teachings of Islam. It is contended that they do not explicitly accept superiority and suggest that all the different peoples in Anatolia are deemed to be Turkish. Secondly, it is discussed how they make the juxtaposition of Islam and nationalism and argued that although they see the existence of nations in accordance with Islam, they explain the exceptional position of the Turks, referring to non-Islamic mostly historical factors and the innate attributes of the Turkish nation.

The seventh chapter situates Nurcu nationalism within its wider regional and historical context. The main reason behind this is the intention to explore if the tensions between universalism & sacredness of Islam and particularism & secularity of nationalism are peculiar to Nurcu or they are shared by the other Muslim movement and communities. Firstly, it is given a historical account of late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries during which the idea of nationalism was introduced in the countries whose majority population are Muslim; and a comparison of Nurcu with Hamas in Palestine, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Egypt and the Iranian Islamic Revolution (IIR) is offered. The chapter concludes that although Nurcu are not Islamists as they do not have an objective of establishing an Islamic state, there are still important parallels with Islamism. For instance, although the aforementioned

⁹ Smith. 2003. *Chosen Peoples*. pp. 137-38.

movements namely, Hamas, MB and IIR are Islamist in discourse, they, along with Nurcus, uphold their own nation and legitimize their nationalist orientation employing plenty of religious arguments.

In the conclusion, the strands of the central argument are drawn together and conclusions that are reach at the end of this study are elaborated. Furthermore, this chapter discusses the possible areas of research in the light of the existing work that might shed light upon some areas which are not covered by this thesis.

CHAPTER 1: SAID NURSI, HIS UNDERSTANDING OF NATIONALISM AND THE NUR MOVEMENT

Introduction

What I have been striving to understand in this thesis is the complicated relationship between the religion of Islam and Turkish nationalism. Although I will discuss the fieldwork data in detail in the following chapters, this needs to be put in context of the life of the founder of the Nur movement, Said Nursi, as well as the historical trajectory of the movement itself. For this purpose, firstly, I will be discussing various features of *Nurculuk*, with which I aim at providing the necessary information to understand the movement. Secondly, I will give an account of the life of Said Nursi with a specific emphasis upon his ideas on nationalism and the political and historical context within which these ideas came into existence and evolved with time. Thirdly, I will go over the emergence of the Nur movement, the difficulties that its members experience and their stance towards nationalism which was to a great extent affected by political developments both within Turkey and in the world. I will conclude that, with regard to nationalism, the Nur movement represents neither their master, Nursi, nor the secular nationalism of the Kemalist elites. Rather it stands somewhere in between them.

An Overview of *Nurculuk*

Those who follow Said Nursi and adopt his ideas are called Nurcus or Nurists.¹⁰ To take this definition one step further, it might be asserted that those who consistently read the *Risale-i Nur* (i.e., Epistle of Light) Collection composed by Nursi and who

¹⁰ Nezir Akyeşilmen and Arif Behiç Özcan. "Islamic Movements and Their Role in Politics In Turkey". *Selcuk University Journal of Institute of Social Sciences*. 31 (1): 5.

endeavour to convince others to read the same books in collective reading circles known in Turkish as *dershanes* in an effort to disseminate the ideas elaborated in these works across Turkey and the wider world are called *Nur talebeleri* or *Nur şakirtleri*, both meaning students of Nur.¹¹ Still, the term Nurcu is the most widely used appellation for members of this movement.

The movement emerged simultaneously with the nascent Turkish Republic in the second quarter of the twentieth century and is arguably “the most powerful Islamic oppositional movement which seeks to preserve and reconstruct the Muslim personality”.¹² The leader of the movement, Said Nursi, is a respected Muslim scholar not only in the eyes of his followers but also by other Muslim communities for his deep Islamic knowledge¹³ and service to further the cause of Islam in the face of the numerous atrocities committed by Kemalists. This faith movement’s objectives are as follows: to harmonise Islam and science, to defend democracy while upholding rational deliberation in public affairs, to enhance an Islamic consciousness by reconciling reason and revelation and finally to secure the salvation of believers both in this world and the hereafter.¹⁴

As there is no legal entity representing the movement as a whole,¹⁵ there is no formal register for the movement, which consequently renders it quite hard to access reliable data. As a result, respondents doing fieldwork can only give rough estimates regarding the number of participants belonging to movement or the size of institutions associated

¹¹ Mehmet Ali Büyükkara. 2015. *Çağdaş İslami Akımlar*. İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları. p. 141.

¹² Zülküf Aydın. 2005. *The Political Economy of Turkey*. London: Pluto Press. p. 189.

¹³ Nezir Akyeşilmen, “Islamic Movements and Their Role in Politics In Turkey,” p. 5.

¹⁴ M. Hakan Yavuz. 2000. “Cleansing Islam from the public sphere”. *Journal of International Affairs (New York)*. 54 (1): 30.

¹⁵ Ali Mermer. 1985. “Aspects of religious identity: The Nurcu movement in Turkey today,” PhD diss., (Durham University). p. 9.

with it.¹⁶ Rather than having a formal identity recognized by the state, the movement's preferred *modus operandi* is to work in informal and clandestine settings that serve to protect members from mistreatment by state institutions, like the military, judiciary and even local administrators.¹⁷ In addition, although the movement had already been spread across Anatolia, there is no hierarchical relationship within the group, a fact especially true during the group's inception period until the death of Nursi. Followers have conveyed the message of the Risale-i Nur to other individuals who shared their economic and social statuses without receiving explicit orders to do so.¹⁸ The aforementioned reading circles, where people gather and collectively read and discuss parts of the Risale-i Nur,¹⁹ have played an important role in this process. Through the regular meetings held in these *dershanes*, members strove "to nurture an Islamic consciousness against Westernisation and alienation exemplified by Kemalism".²⁰ In Yavuz's parlance, *dershanes* evolved into textual communities where belonging is demarcated by the adoption of the main line of thought elaborated in the Risale-i Nur.²¹ The sessions held in these places help to update Islamic nomenclature with new concepts like democracy and human rights. They also provide accommodations for students who have come from other cities seeking education. Nonetheless, they are still purchased or rented buildings/flats that are not a part of any formal institution.²² Another function of these places is that they help democratise the abstract mode of thinking on the ontological aspects of Islam in particular. It might be argued that for the first time in Islamic history, lay people, farmers, workers, shopkeepers, artisans

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁷ Büyükkara, *Çağdaş İslami Akımlar*, p. 142.

¹⁸ Mermer, *Aspects of Religious Identity: The Nurcu Movement in Turkey Today*, p. 58.

¹⁹ Zülküf Aydın. 2005. *The Political Economy of Turkey*. London: Pluto Press. p. 190.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ M. Hakan Yavuz. 2002. "Towards an Islamic liberalism? The Nurcu movement and Fethullah Gülen". *Peace Research Abstracts*. 39 (3): 590.

²² Ibid.

and the like have participated in discussing the most abstract and difficult subjects of Islamic theology, like the existence and oneness of God, predestination and other philosophical concepts. Though we do not have up-to-date numbers of these *dershanes* today, Yavuz asserts that by 1999, their number surpassed 5,000 and that the total number of Nurcus as between 2 and 5 million.²³

In effect, opposing the reforms introduced by Kemalists is a notion shared by all Islamic and Islamist movements.²⁴

The first disciples of Nursi hold a specific place of repute in the eyes of Nurcus. They are all males and are appropriately called *ağabey* or *abi*, which means elder brother in Turkish. Furthermore, it is an expression of respect used for elder men even when there is no blood relationship between them. Though Nursi's first disciple was Hulusi Yahyagil, a retired officer, other *abis* who continued to be influential following Nursi's death in 1960 are Hüsrev Altınbaşak, Ceylan Çalışkan, Zübeyir Gündüzalp, Bekir Berk, Mehmet Feyzi Pamukçu, Bayram Yüksel, Mehmet Ali Birinci, Tahiri Mutlu, Said Özdemir, Mustafa Sungur and Mehmet Fırıncı.²⁵ Many different branches of the movement emerged after 1960, adopting different methods while carrying out their activities. These different methods are (i) explaining matters related to faith without becoming embroiled in politics, (ii) lending support to centre-right parties, (iii) cultivating religious cadres for state positions, (iv) struggling against Communism in an alliance with any party in Turkey and abroad and (v) disseminating the *Risale-i Nur* by manually copying the original Ottoman text.²⁶

According to Yavuz and several other scholars in the field, the movement is

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Aydın, *The Political Economy of Turkey*, p. 189.

²⁵ Büyükkara, *Çağdaş İslami Akımlar*, p. 142

²⁶ Ruşen Çakır. 2002. *Ayet ve Slogan: Türkiye'de İslamcı Oluşumlar*. İstanbul: Metis Yayınları. p. 85.

considered modernist as far as the well-known binary modernism-traditionalism opposition is concerned. He contends that “the movement represents the shift advocated by Nursi from oral culture to print and from rural to urban. It offers a set of idioms and networks for reimagining Islam under modern conditions”.²⁷ Although this shift may be considered a sign of modernisation, a more delicate analysis is needed to understand the movement. Serif Mardin, on the other hand, argues that Nursi’s ideas are in line with fundamentalist interpreters of Islam who are prone to consider all of historical experience to be religious innovations and therefore not to be accepted. In his words,

[F]or him, faith, "the heart," was essential in the Muslim's commitment. But this faith had to be an active faith, informed and guided by the specific injunctions of the Qur'an. The wide latitude allowed by the teachings of the mystics did not produce the mobilised Muslim he wanted to create. In this objection to mysticism, Bediüzzaman was dead centre in the orthodox scripturalist and fundamentalist tradition, as exemplified, for instance by the Muslim fundamentalist Ibn Taimiyya (1263-1328), who attacked the mystic's doctrine that "He who witnessed the Will of God feels no longer bound by the command of God"²⁸

For me, neither of these approaches reflect the true position of Nursi or the greater Nur movement. Neither Nursi nor the movement launched by him was ‘dead centre’ in the fundamentalist tradition; rather, they are at the intersection between traditionalists and modernists. This can even be inferred by the fact that the Nur

²⁷ Yavuz, "Towards an Islamic liberalism? The Nurcu movement and Fethullah Gülen". p. 591.

²⁸ Serif Mardin, Religion and Social Change, p. 208.

movement does not criticise Sufism itself, something that modernists, on the other hand, frequently do. That being said, Nurcus neither wholly embrace the Sufi methodology.

From the very beginning, Nurcus consistently refrained from involvement in party politics despite being subject to persecution at the hands of the single-party regime that reigned until 1950, at which time an opposition party was elected.²⁹ This is mainly based on the position adopted by Said Nursi based on his previous experiences during the late Ottoman Empire, when he had the opportunity to observe the consequences of the amalgamation of religion and politics: According to Nursi, fusing religion with a political party restricts the sphere of said religion's influence to the electorate of that specific party, whereas religion has the capacity and potential to spread to each and every segment of society, irrespective of ethnic, political, sectarian or regional identities. Consequently, Nurcus adopted a pro-freedom and pro-democracy political position.³⁰ Since they believe that administration should provide freedom to different groups in society, Nurcus believed that Islam should be experienced in the private and communal space rather than in the political sphere³¹. Indeed, Nursi himself preferred challenging "the philosophical foundations of the secularist *Weltanschauung* and, in particular, its ontology and moral philosophy"³², "instead of contesting the authority and legitimacy of the secularist state"³³. With this stance Nurcus stand in stark opposition to political Islamist parties³⁴, especially those established by Necmettin

²⁹ Zübeyir Nişancı. 2015. "The Dialectics of Secularism and Revivalism in Turkey: The Case of Said Nursi," PhD diss., (Loyola University Chicago). p. 411.

³⁰ Mehmet Kaplan. 2017. *Dini Gruplar ve Çatışma: Said Nursi ve Nurculuk Örneği*," MA thesis., (Süleyman Demirel University) p. 103.

³¹ Yavuz, "Towards an Islamic liberalism? The Nurcu movement and Fethullah Gülen". p. 593.

³² Nişancı, "The Dialectics of Secularism and Revivalism in Turkey: The Case of Said Nursi," p. 411.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Yavuz, "Towards an Islamic liberalism? The Nurcu movement and Fethullah Gülen". p. 593.

Erbakan, from which the Ak Party would emerge in 2002. Although Nurcus preferred not to involve themselves in politics, they openly lent their support to the Democrat Party led by Adnan Menderes in 1950. However, this act has never been interpreted as a direct involvement in politics or as a politicisation. Against the repressive secularist policies of the Republican People's Party, the Democrat Party was considered to be least of two evils by Nursi and his disciples because it allowed for religious freedom with a liberal understanding.³⁵ They succeeded in minimising state persecution towards them to a great extent by supporting centre-right parties.³⁶ With the exception of a few branches of the movement that emerged in the eighties and nineties, Nurcus eschewed radical action or discourse against state³⁷, which caused them to receive severe criticism from political Islamist circles and parties.³⁸

Nurcus see themselves different from the other Islamic orders. Although unlike Islamists, they refrain from denouncing Sufi orders (i.e., *tariqas*) they consider themselves superior to them because they believe the Risale-i Nur to be able to provide convincing answers to modern-day questions in defence of Islam.³⁹ Moreover, they consider themselves to be a movement as opposed to a sect. Although there is a plethora of branches, they regard members of each branch as members of the greater Nur movement based on faith.⁴⁰

In the next section, I will move on to the discussion of the emergence of the movement and Nursi's initial activities of spreading his ideas as well as the continues struggles with the secularist regime.

³⁵ Büyükkara, *Çağdaş İslami Akımlar*, p. 140.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Mermer, *Aspects of Religious Identity: The Nurcu Movement in Turkey Today*, p. 12.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Said Nursi and His Understanding of Nationalism

Said Nursi is a Muslim scholar who lived throughout the late Ottoman and the early Republican period. He was born to a Kurdish family in 1877 in Nurs, a village of Bitlis, located in the eastern part of Anatolia.⁴¹ His title ‘Nursi’ comes from the name of this village. He started dealing with Islamic sciences from his early childhood. After taking lessons from his elder brother⁴², he went to various different places in the region and earned *ijazahs* (diplomas) in the Islamic sciences, such as *tafsir* (exegesis), *hadith* (prophetic tradition), *aqaid* (Islamic creed), and *tasawwuf* (sufism). One of these *ijazas* is the one he received from *Sheikh* Jalaluddin in 1892, at the age of fourteen.⁴³ Thereafter, he continued his both religious and scientific studies in Van, Bitlis and Siirt, the major cities of the region, and achieved a reputation for his success and scholarly superiority. Due to these, he was invited by the governor of Bitlis, Ömer Pasha, to his mansion.⁴⁴ After a two-year-residence there, he arrived in Van in 1896 as a guest of Hasan Pasha. Tahir Pasha in particular, who was the successor of Hasan Pasha, profoundly affected the life of Said Nursi, who got the opportunity to read books on modern sciences and was able to observe what was going on in the world.⁴⁵ Following his command of Islamic sciences and growing interest in the modern sciences, ranging from mathematics and physics to geography, Nursi started reflecting

⁴¹ Some scholars claim that there is a connection between the name of the village, Nurs and the *Nur* movement. Camilla T. Nereid. 1997. *In the Light of Said Nursi: Turkish Nationalism and the Religious Alternative*. Bergen: Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies. p. 21. Şerif Mardin, referring to Necmeddin Şahiner, points out that “[d]etractors [of the Nur movement] have pointed out that the name of the village is pronounced “Nors” and that Said Nursi used “Nurs” to be able to use the similarity with “Nur” (light), which is a key concept in his speculations.” Şerif Mardin. 1989. *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*. Albany: State University of New York Press. p. 42.

⁴² Said Nursi, *Tarihçe-i Hayat*, p. 48.

⁴³ Alpaslan Açıkgöç. 1994. *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*, s.v. “Said Nursi.” İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları.

⁴⁴ Şükran Vahide. 2005. *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*. State University of New York Press. p. 24.

⁴⁵ Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, pp. 75-76.

on education, and developed a university project called *Medresetu'z-Zehra* wherein both types of sciences, modern and Islamic, would have been taught together. This institution would have been, in a sense, a counterpart to *Al-Azhar* University in Cairo, as was clear from its name, as *Zehra* and *Azhar* are feminine and masculine forms of the same Arabic word, meaning bright or radiant. Nursi stated that *Medresetu'z-Zehra* would have been in the position of *Al-Azhar's* sister.⁴⁶ In order to realize the project, he went to Istanbul in 1907 and met Sultan Abdulhamid II to ask for financial support. However, he was not able to receive a positive answer. This visit also made him known to the *'ulama* of Istanbul. Upon rejection of his fund request, Nursi openly reacted to Abdulhamid II. As a result of this act against the sultan, he was hospitalized in a mental asylum. But, after a short while, he received a doctor's note stating that he was mentally sound, then he left there.⁴⁷

The sultan was not able to hold the power single handedly in the face of rising opposition to himself with the accusation of despotism. Behind the promulgation of the constitution in 1908 against the will of the sultan Abdulhamid II was the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP, *İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti*) which was founded in 1889 and lasted until the end of the First World War. Among the founders of the committee were soldiers, intellectuals and scientists. Firstly, they demanded the democratization and liberalization of the regime, so they wanted to reinstate the constitution that was suspended by the sultan in 1876. The members of the party were widely supported and called Young Turks in Europe. Another abbreviation to qualify them was 'Unionist', *İttihatçı* in Turkish. Most of its members were educated at universities in London, Paris and Berlin. Although they might be called Westernist

⁴⁶ Said Nursi, *Münazarat*, p. 507.

⁴⁷ Said Nursi, *Hutuvat-ı Sitte*, p. 382.

and secular, their movement was supported from all sections of society as a reaction to the strictly authoritarian regime of the sultan, who established an intelligence service collecting information about his opponents. Censorship was so widespread that it was possible to see long blank columns in the newspapers, and opposition was frequently expressed in a poetical and satirical manner. Said Nursi, who was quite a famous Muslim scholar by then, sided with Unionists along with many other Muslim scholars, during the process of the promulgation of the constitution in 1908. In support of this political revolution, he published articles in a daily, *Volkan*, known for its Islamist tendencies, and gave speeches to the people on various occasions.⁴⁸ He even called the CUP people ‘freedom supporters’ (*hürriyetçis*).⁴⁹ In April 1909, a counter-revolution, the so-called 31 March Incident, in support of the sultan was organized against the restoration of the constitution and the CUP regime. Nursi maintained his support for the CUP during this coup attempt as well. In the aftermath of this event, on 1 May 1909, Nursi was taken to the high court, *Divan-ı Harp*, however he was acquitted in 1910. Later, he published his defence against the charges with the title *Divan-ı Harb-i Örfi*.⁵⁰ The main accusation against him was about his alleged involvement in the ‘pro-*sharia*’ and reactionary (*mürteci*) upsurge against authority. Even his frequent usage of the term *meşrutiyet-i meşrua* was mentioned as a reason for accusation. This term literally means legitimate constitutionalism, however, the Arabic word *meşru* ‘ is derived from the verb *şer* ‘ which is also the root of the word *sharia*. Therefore, Nursi in effect was not a supporter of constitutionalism in a liberal

⁴⁸ Vahide contends that “Nursi therefore did whatever he could to maintain public order and harmony so that constitutionalism could become established and its benefits be obtained.” Şükran Vahide. 2005. *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*. New York: SUNY Press. p. 61.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 36.

⁵⁰ Alpaslan Açıkgenç. *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*, s.v. “Said Nursi.” Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, İstanbul 1994.

sense, but he advocated a constitutionalism within the limits of sharia, Islamic law.

He was not apologetic about this issue whatsoever:

... [A]t the beginning of the Second Constitutional Period, a number of religiously-minded deputies said to the Old Said:

“You make politics the tool of religion and the Shari‘a in every way possible and make it serve religion. You only support freedom on account of the Shari‘a. And you favour constitutionalism in so far as it is in conformity with the Shari‘a. That means one cannot have freedom and constitutionalism without the Shari‘a. It is for this reason that they included you among those who said ‘We want the Shari‘a’ during the Thirty-First of March Incident.”

The Old Said told them: “Yes, it is only through the truths of Islam that the Islam will prosper and flourish. Islamic society can function only through the Shari‘a of Islam and its worldly happiness be achieved. Otherwise justice will disappear, public security be overturned, immorality and base qualities prevail, and everything be run by liars and sycophants.”⁵¹

Nursi’s relationship with Unionists was not long-lived due to their secularization policies and quite harsh policies in accordance with the Turkist ideology, and the

⁵¹ Said Nursi. 1996. [1911] *Damascus Sermon*, Translated by Şükran Vahide. İstanbul: Sözler Neşriyat ve Sanayi A.Ş. pp. 67-68. Here is the original of this passage:

“İşte, sabık temsil gibi, eski zamanda, Hürriyetin başında bazı dindar mebuslar, Eski Said'e dediler: "Sen her cihette siyaseti, dine, şeriata âlet ediyorsun ve dine hizmetkâr yapıyorsun ve yalnız şariat hesabına hürriyeti kabul ediyorsun. Ve meşrutiyeti de meşrutiyet sûretinde beğeniyorsun. Demek, hürriyet ve meşrutiyet şeriatsız olamaz. Bunun için seni de 'Şariat isteriz' diyenlerin içine Otuz Bir Mart'ta dahil ettiler."

Eski Said onlara demiş ki:

Evet, millet-i İslâmiyenin sebab-i saadeti yalnız ve yalnız hakaik-i İslâmiye ile olabilir. Ve hayat-ı içtimayesi ve saadet-i dünyeviyesi şariat-ı İslâmiye ile olabilir. Yoksa adalet mahvolur. Emniyet zîr ü zeber olur. Ahlâksızlık, pis hasletler galebe eder. İş yalancıların, dalkavukların elinde kalır.” Said Nursi. 2012. [1911] *Hutbe-i Şamiye*. İstanbul: Söz Yayınları.

authoritarian methods they adopted during their rule. One of the three critical leaders of the committee, Cemal Pasha is notorious for his persecution of Arabs in Syria from 1914-17. He publicly hanged some of his opponents, which could have triggered an Arab rebellion against the Ottomans according to some scholars.⁵² Although Nursi was critical of the Unionists, to some extent he shared some of their opinions, one of which was Ottomanism. With this ideology the Unionists aimed to achieve a twofold objective; union of the Ottoman peoples in the face of nationalist-separatist movements all over the Empire and progress under the guidance of Western modernization. Indeed, these concepts made their way into the very name of the CUP. Firstly, *Tanzimatists*⁵³, those who were in support of modernization of the state and emancipation of especially the non-Turkish subjects of the Ottoman Empire in the first half of the nineteenth century, developed the idea of Ottomanism, and it was also embraced by the Young Ottomans who might be called the pioneers of the Young Turks, as an ideal. Basically, its main goal was to unite all the people of the Empire under the sovereignty of the Sultan, comprising various people of different confessions and ethnicities as one Ottoman nation. The meaning of the word “*millet*” underwent a change and the religious groups within the Empire, previously called *millet*, started to be defined as *cemaat* (community) or *unsur* (ethnic element). In 1839, in Istanbul, a royal decree, called *Tanzimat Fermanı* (Edict of Gülhane) was proclaimed by the sultan Abdulmecid I which launched the so-called Tanzimat period. As per this edict, non-Muslim subjects were, from that time on, considered citizens as members of the Ottoman nation and attached to the Ottoman state with equal political

⁵² M. Talha Çiçek. 2016. *War and state formation in Syria: Cemal Pasha's governorate during World War I, 1914-1917*. pp. 47-51.

⁵³ Tanzimat means regulations, as through the edict, the regulation and reorganization of the state in accordance with the modern values was envisioned.

rights with the formerly dominant Muslim subjects.⁵⁴ As successors of *Tanzimat* people, Unionists, following their rise to power, strove to unite everybody around a highly centralized authority disregarding religious and ethnic diversity. However, this policy received severe criticism and reactions from both the minorities and the European powers due to the Turkishness of the Ottoman dynasty and the higher place of Islam in the ideology of Ottomanism.⁵⁵ Considering the rise of nationalism and strong separatist tendencies for around a century, Ottomanism appeared to be an impossible dream.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Said Nursi and people from different circles wholeheartedly gave their support with the hope of halting the dismemberment of the Empire. 1910 marked a shift in the policies of the Unionists from Ottomanism to Islamism as the non-Muslim nations proclaimed their independence one after another. Following the Balkan wars during which the lands populated by non-Turkish Muslim people were lost, their connection with Ottomanism faded and they adopted Turkish nationalism as the basis of their state policies since the Empire had shrunk to the lands inhabited by almost only Turkish people.⁵⁷

Taking the historical context into consideration, it becomes easier to understand why Nursi adopted such a clear position vis-à-vis nationalism. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he experienced the consequences of the rise of nationalism and its highly destructive power, which was even able to pave the way for the dismemberment of a long-lived Empire. This period witnessed the separation of many Muslim nations from the Empire. This was quite at odds with the ideal of Muslim

⁵⁴ Ahmet Yıldız. 2001. *Ne mutlu Türküm diyebilene: Türk Ulusal Kimliğinin Etno-seküler Sınırları (1919-1938)*. Çağaloğlu, İstanbul: İletişim. p. 61.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁵⁶ Recep Duymaz. 2004. *Üç Tarz-ı Siyaset ve Düşünce Akımları*. İstanbul: Türk Dünyası Araştırmaları Vakfı. p. 77.

⁵⁷ Şükran Vahide. 2005. *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*. Albany: State University of New York Press. p. 58.

unity (*ittihad-ı İslam*) which disappointed Nursi and the other people who were championing this ideal at the time. His initial support for the Unionists was due to his concern for promoting the unity of the whole Muslim world. On the other hand, the CUP later relinquished this policy, in a sense betraying their own name.

By the end of May 1909, after his acquittal of the accusations levelled against him concerning his involvement in the rebellion, Nursi returned to the East and visited the major cities of the region where he explained the benefits of constitutionalism and how it was indeed in line with Islamic principles.⁵⁸ Afterwards, he compiled his conversations with the members of tribes (*aşirets*) in these cities in his book, titled *Münazarat*, meaning debates. During his talk with the Kurds included in this book, he once offered to ask them questions, rather than answer their questions. He asked whether Armenians were more courageous than Kurds. They replied that it was impossible. He further asked then why Armenians refused to disclose the secrets of their committees and to snitch on their friends, whereas, Kurds used to tell all the secrets if they were stabbed, which is completely contrary to bravery. He asked for the explanation of this contradiction. Upon their failure to explain, he suggested that the amazing courage of an Armenian fighter comes from his attachment to his nation due to his enthusiasm for the idea of nationalism. This specific attachment gives him strength, making him forego his self-interest and promoting the interest and good of his nation. For this cause, he can sacrifice even his life.⁵⁹

It should be quite understandable, especially for a Kurdish nationalist, to extrapolate from this advice that Said Nursi was making an effort to provoke the national sentiments of the Kurds back then. If the following sentences are disregarded, this

⁵⁸ Ibid., pp. 83-89.

⁵⁹ Said Nursi, *Münazarat*, pp. 489-490.

interpretation can be accepted. Nonetheless, just after these statements, Nursi speculates that if Kurds had adopted the Islamic idea of nationalism, they would have made all the world admit their valour. In the following sentences he continues to lay stress upon the Islamic nature of the nationalism that he promoted and talks about the nationality of Islam. The context implies that in effect he means *ummah*, all the Muslims all over the world. This phrase is quite self-evident regarding what he means by the nationality of Islam: "...to the Islamic nationhood (*İslam milliyeti*) which is worth many treasures, providing brotherhood and spiritual assistance to three hundred million Muslims..."⁶⁰ [my translation from Turkish]. On the other hand, in the same book, he mentions nationalism with an inclination towards progress, justice and reason as tools which will strengthen Kurds to defeat their enemies. Although his emphasis is upon the religious aspect of nationalism, it would be unfair to dismiss his stress upon the concept of the nation itself as a beneficial quality for people. Ahmet Yıldız makes an interesting point, arguing that actually Nursi does not suggest people should be nationalist. Instead, Nursi is drawing attention to some qualities of this ideology, such as providing people with a sense of belonging and evoking the sentiment of solidarity among them.⁶¹ With regard to Kurds, according to Yıldız, Nursi sees nationalism as a convenient instrument to go beyond tribal solidarity and to bring people to an broader identity which will increase the zeal and ardour of a Muslim individual. Therefore, nationalism does not replace religion, it can only play a partial role within upper and broader religious attachment.⁶²

After finishing his travels in the Eastern cities of Anatolia, Nursi headed towards

⁶⁰ Said Nursi, *Münazarat*. p. 490. Here is the original phrase: "...hazinelere değer olan İslâmiyet milliyetine, yani üç yüz milyon İslâmın uhuvvetlerini ve mânevî yardımlarını kazandıran İslâmiyet milliyetine..."

⁶¹ Ahmet Yıldız, "Said Nursi'nin Milliyetçilik Anlayışı Üzerine Kısa Bir Mülazaha". p. 10.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Damascus in 1910 and delivered a sermon in the Umayyad Mosque to a community consisting of many Muslim scholars.⁶³ The sermon was about the difficulties that the Muslim world was going through. In addition, he discussed possible solutions to these problems in the same speech. Although he emphasized the importance of unity and progress as a treatment to the sicknesses of the Muslim world at that time, he preferred not to elaborate on constitutionalism that much, and less than in his previous writings and speeches. Considering the increasing pressure on the non-Turkish subjects of the Empire in accordance with the new tendency to privilege Turkism over Ottomanism, Nursi's preference makes more sense.⁶⁴ In these very years, especially because of the concerns of dismemberment of the Empire, the CUP (Committee of Union and Progress) tightened the bureaucratic and political centralization⁶⁵ triggering some unintended consequences, and the practice of privileging Turks for official posts started really disturbing local people. Although lots of Arabs were among the founders of the Committee, this did not prevent huge unrest against Istanbul. The impiety of some officials⁶⁶ and the replacement of Arabic with Turkish in official correspondence also contributed to the uneasiness, which took on an anti-Turkish tone.⁶⁷ As expected, the domination of one nationalism was creating its opposite and leading to an escalation of conflict between different communities.

In this sermon, in accordance with his conversations with the members of Kurdish tribes mentioned in *Münazarat*, Nursi stressed solidarity emanating from nationalism and the importance of the Islamic nature of this nationalism. As a Kurdish Muslim

⁶³ Alpaslan Açıkgenç. *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*, s.v. "Said Nursi." Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları, İstanbul 1994.

⁶⁴ Şükran Vahide, *An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, p. 95.

⁶⁵ Hasan Kayalı. 1997. *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918*. Berkeley: University of California. pp. 102-103.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

⁶⁷ Kayalı, pp. 102-103.

scholar, he was addressing Arabs who were subjects of the Ottoman Empire administered by a Turkish dynasty at a very hard time, marked by suffering all around the Muslim world. The effect of this specific context had a visible impact on his style and selection of topics. On the one hand, while he promoted nationalism and highlighted the good attributes of Arabs, on the other hand he stressed the brotherhood between them and Turks as well as Kurds. Needless to say, he envisioned this connection as a religious one. Whenever he mentioned nationalism, he added its Islamicness almost all the time, holding that Islam is the one and only cement having the ability to keep these different nations together. In light of the emergence of plenty of nation-states for more than a century, his insistence upon this aspect can easily be understood. How passionate he was about the unity of Muslims is clear in the following passage:

O my brothers here in this mosque and my brothers forty to fifty years later in the mighty mosque of the world of Islam! Do not suppose I have mounted this place of delivering lessons in order to give you advice. I have done so to claim my rights from you. That is to say, the interests and happiness in this world and the hereafter of small groups are bound to masterly teachers like you, the Arabs and Turks, who are a vast and esteemed body. We, the Muslim groups who are your unhappy small brothers suffer harm through your idleness and laxity.

Especially the Arabs, who are esteemed, numerous, and either have been awakened or will be! First and foremost, I address you with these words. For you are our teachers and leaders, and the teachers and leaders of all the peoples of Islam, and you are the fighters of Islam. It was later that the mighty Turkish nation assisted you in that sacred

duty.⁶⁸

As a Kurdish Muslim scholar, without refraining from expressing the virtues of Muslim brothers of the Kurds, namely Arabs and Turks, he actually gives an example of brotherhood between the Muslim communities that he envisaged. This very attitude stood against the actual meaning of nationalism which posits “us” in opposition to the others. After praising the good deeds of two major Muslim nations, he started to remind them of their insufficiencies, laziness and responsibilities later in the same speech:

Therefore, due to laziness your sin is great. Your good acts and deeds are also great and exalted. In particular we await with great expectation from Divine mercy the different Arab groups entering upon exalted circumstances in forty to fifty years’ time, like those of the United States of America, and your being successful like in former times in establishing Islamic rule in half the globe, indeed, in most of it, which at the moment is in captivity.⁶⁹

He preserved his hope regarding the possibility of this idea: “If some fearful calamity does not soon erupt, the coming generation shall see it, God willing.”⁷⁰ After some

⁶⁸ Said Nursi, *Damascus Sermon*, p. 53. Here is the original in Turkish: Ey bu camideki kardeşlerim ve kırk-elli sene sonraki âlem-i İslâm mescid-i kebirindeki ihvanlarım! Zannetmeyiniz ki, ben bu ders makamına size nasihat etmek için çıktım. Belki buraya çıktım, sizden olan hakkımızı dâvâ ediyoruz. Yani, küçük taifelerin menfaati ve saadet-i dünyeviyeleri ve uhreviyeleri, sizin gibi büyük ve muazzam taife olan Arap ve Türk gibi hâkim üstadlarla bağlıdır. Sizin tembelliğiniz ve füturunuzla, biz bîçare küçük kardeşleriniz olan İslâm taifeleri zarar görüyoruz. Hususan, ey muazzam ve büyük ve tam intibaha gelmiş veya gelecek olan Araplar, en evvel bu sözlerle sizinle konuşuyorum. Çünkü, bizim ve bütün İslâm taifelerinin üstadlarımız ve imamlarımız ve İslâmiyetin mücahidleri sizlerdiniz. Sonra muazzam Türk milleti o kudsî vazifenize tam yardım ettiler. Said Nursi, *Hutbe-i Şamiye*, p. 557.

⁶⁹ Said Nursi, *Damascus Sermon*, p. 54. Here is the original in Turkish: Onun için tembellikle günahınız büyüktür. Ve iyiliğiniz ve haseneniz de gayet büyük ve ulvidir. Hususan kırk-elli sene sonra, Arap taifeleri, Cemahir-i Müttefika-i Amerika gibi en ulvî bir vaziyete girmeye, esarete kalan hâkimiyet-i İslâmiyeyi eski zaman gibi küre-i arzın nısfında, belki ekserisinde tesisine muvaffak olmanızı rahmet-i İlâhiyeden kuvvetle bekliyoruz. Said Nursi, *Hutbe-i Şamiye*, p. 557.

⁷⁰ Said Nursi, *Damascus Sermon*, p. 55. Here is the original in Turkish: Bir kıyamet çabuk kopmazsa, inşaallah nesl-i âti görecek. Said Nursi, *Hutbe-i Şamiye*, p. 557.

time spent in Damascus, he left for Istanbul by sea with the intention of finding the necessary funding and support for his university project. In 1911, upon the instruction of the CUP, Sultan Mehmed Reşad, who reigned between 1909-1918, travelled to the Balkans with numerous people, including statesmen and prominent figures. Said Nursi was one of them, as a representative of the Eastern cities. The main objective of this journey was to consolidate the attachment of the people living in these provinces to the capital. According to Vahide, “Niyazi Bey, an Albanian ... and prime movers of the Constitutional Revolution, figured on the trip, which had been advised by the CUP, and presumably it was at their suggestion that Nursi joined it, as the representative of the Eastern Provinces—all the ethnic minorities were represented.”⁷¹ In the wake of nationalism, Muslim nations also started to establish their own nation-states. Only a year previously, in 1910 Albanians had rebelled against the central authority.⁷² Nursi relays a dialogue between him and two students of modern secular schools recently founded by the state while on the train with the Sultan Reşad to the Balkans:

They asked me: “Which is more necessary and should be stronger, religious zeal or national zeal?” To which I replied:

With us Muslims religion and nationhood are united, although there is a theoretical, apparent and incidental difference between them. Indeed, religion is the life and spirit of the nation. When they are seen as different and separate from each other, religious zeal encompasses both the common people and upper classes, whereas national zeal is felt by one person out of a hundred, that is, a person who is ready to sacrifice his personal benefits for the nation. Since this is the case, religious zeal

⁷¹ Şükran Vahide, *An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, p. 101.

⁷² Şükran Vahide, *An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, p. 101.

must be the basis with regard to the rights of all the people, while national zeal must serve it and be its fortress.

This is especially so since we people of the East are not like those of the West: our hearts are governed by the sense of religion. The fact that it was in the East that pre-eternal Divine Determining sent most of the prophets indicates that only the sense of religion will awaken the East and impel it to progress. A convincing argument for this is the era of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and those who followed after him.

O my friends who are studying with me in this travelling school called a train! You asked me to which one should give more importance, religious zeal or national zeal. And now, all you who received secular education and are travelling with me towards the future in the train of time! I say the following to you as well:

Religious zeal and Islamic nationhood have completely fused in the Turks and Arabs, and may not now be separated. Islamic zeal is a luminous chain which is most strong and secure and is not born of this world. It is a support that is firm and certain, and will not fail. It is an unassailable fortress that cannot be razed.⁷³

⁷³ Damascus Sermon, pp. 59-60. Here is the original in Turkish: Benden sual ettiler ki: "Hamiyet-i diniye mi, yoksa hamiyet-i milliye mi daha kuvvetli, daha lâzım?" O zaman dedim:

Biz Müslümanlar, indimizde ve yanımızda din ve milliyet bizzat müttehiddir. İtibarî, zahirî, ârizî bir ayrılık var. Belki din, milliyetin hayatı ve ruhudur. İkisine birbirinden ayrı ve farklı bakıldığı zaman, hamiyet-i diniye avam ve havassa şâmil oluyor. Hamiyet-i milliye, yüzden birisine (yani, menâfi-i şahsiyesini millete feda edene) has kalır. Öyleyse, hukuk-u umumiye içinde hamiyet-i diniye esas olmalı. Hamiyet-i milliye, ona hâdim ve kuvvet ve kal'ası olmalı. Hususan, biz şarklılar, garplılar gibi değiliz. İçimizde kalblere hâkim hiss-i dinîdir. Kader-i ezeli ekser enbiyayı Şarkta göndermesi işaret ediyor ki, yalnız hiss-i dini Şarkı uyandırır, terakkiye sevk eder. Asr-ı Saadet ve Tâbiîn bunun bir burhan-ı kat'isidir.

Ey bu hamiyet-i diniye ve milliyeden hangisine daha ziyade ehemmiyet vermek lâzım geldiğini soran bu şimendifer denilen medrese-i seyyarede ders arkadaşlarım! Ve şimdi, zamanın şimendiferinde

One should read these words keeping in mind the prevailing political context and that the main purpose of this royal trip was “to reawaken feelings of patriotism and solidarity among the various peoples of Macedonia and Albania in the face of the upsurge of nationalism, and to secure social calm”.⁷⁴ Whereas Nursi did not disregard the importance or power of national zeal or of the solidarity born from nationalism, he enthusiastically stressed the tight connections between national and religious attachment, especially with regard to Muslim people. Because the question was quite precise in asking the difference between two sources of zeal, his answer turned out to be more satisfying as to his opinion about them. From the formulation of this answer, it can be extrapolated that his previous juxtaposition of these two concepts, and his coinage of interesting and extra-ordinary phrases, such as Islamic nationalism (*İslamî fikr-i millîye*), Islamic nationhood (*İslam milliyeti*) and the true Islamic nationhood (*milliyet-i hakikiye-i İslamiye*)⁷⁵ are not coincidences, but their usages are a consequence of a deliberate conceptual analysis.

On this trip, Said Nursi was successful in persuading the Sultan to support his university project and secured a grant for its realisation. The foundation stone of the *Medresetü'z-Zehra* was laid in the presence of prominent statesmen in 1913 in Van, a faraway province located in the eastern-most part of modern Turkey on the Iranian border.

Nursi kept the idea of *Medresetü'z Zehra* as a kind of utopia throughout his life. Even

istikbal tarafına bizimle beraber giden bütün mektepliler! Size de derim ki:

"Hamîyet-i diniye ve İslâmîyet milliyeti, Türk ve Arap içinde tamamıyla mezc olmuş ve kabil-i tefrik olamaz bir hale gelmiş. Hamîyet-i İslâmîye, en kuvvetli ve metin ve Arştan gelmiş bir zincir-i nuranîdir. Kırılmaz ve kopmaz bir urvetü'l-vüskadır. Tahrip edilmez, mağlûp olmaz bir kudsi kal'adır" Said Nursi, *Hutbe-i Şamiye*, pp. 562-63.

⁷⁴ Erik Jan Zürcher. 2004 *Turkey: A Modern History*. London: I.B. Tauris. p. 104. Şükran Vahide, *An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, p. 101.

⁷⁵ Said Nursi, *Hutbe-i Şamiye*, p. 556.

when he realized that its material realization was no longer possible, due to the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of a secular nation-state which first and foremost aimed at dismantling the Islamic institutions, he envisaged his students representing the meaning and the mission of this unfulfilled dream. In his book, *Münazarat*, he details his vision about this university. For him, the word *medrese* should be included in its name, rather than *darü'l-fünun*⁷⁶ which is the translation of ‘university’ into Ottoman Turkish or *mektep* whose literal meaning is ‘school’, but implied only modern secular schools in the late Ottoman Empire context. The main reason behind this concern was the fact that the concept of *medrese* directly evokes something Islamic as to its content and education. However, according to Nursi, it would have played a role in the mission of combining three different branches, namely *mektep*, *medrese* and *zaviye*, which represent three different understandings that are in conflict with each other.⁷⁷ While the conflict between *medrese* and *zaviye* was between the ‘*ulama* or scholars and the *sufis*, the students and graduates of the newly-founded modern secular *mekteps* were belittling the *medrese* people, accusing them of being old-fashioned and narrow-minded. One of the main aims on founding such a university was to bring them together for the good of the Muslim community. Nursi neither took a hostile position towards the scientific advances taking place in the West, nor did he turn his back on the Islamic scholarly tradition.

According to Nursi’s vision, professors of Kurdish origin or those who were familiar with the culture of the region should have been employed at this university. In addition, the abilities, qualities and the specific conditions of Kurds should have been taken into consideration in the curriculum.⁷⁸ Another quite interesting quality of this

⁷⁶ This word is the translation of ‘university’ into Ottoman Turkish.

⁷⁷ Said Nursi, *Münazarat*, pp. 508-510.

⁷⁸ Said Nursi, *Münazarat*, p. 508.

university, especially regarding the issue of nationalism, was the language of education. According to Nursi, while new sciences would be intermeshed with the Islamic sciences taught in *medreses (ulum-u medaris)*, at this university Arabic would be obligatory, Turkish necessary and Kurdish elective. This vision was quite broad and forward-looking and a very brave attempt at halting the negative effects of the separatist tendencies of nationalism. According to Vahide,

Nursi intended for it [the university] to play the central and unifying role in Asia that al-Azhar performs in Africa. Besides combating racialism and nationalism by acting as a centre of learning and attracting students from ‘Arabia, India, Iran, Caucasia, Turkestan, and Kurdistan’ and thus contributing to the development of a sense of “Islamic nationhood,” this large Islamic university would also “reconcile the sciences of philosophy and those of religion, and make peace between European civilization and the truths of Islam.”⁷⁹

Nursi’s effort to bring these three nations together through their languages right in the middle of the Middle East is quite meaningful, in that the Kemalist ruling elites under the leadership and guidance of Mustafa Kemal targeted first and foremost Kurds and Arabs as national others. Although Kurds were mobilized during the independence war from 1919-1923 together with the Muslim nations in Anatolia, with the objective of rescuing the sultanate and caliphate, right after the victory and establishment of the state, harsh assimilationist policies were implemented chiefly against Kurds.⁸⁰ Nursi became a victim of this process, both as a pious Muslim and as a member of Kurdish nation.

⁷⁹ Şükran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, p. 326.

⁸⁰ Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey A Modern History*, pp. 170-171.

Though the university's financial structure, sources of revenue and expenditures were planned, the project failed to materialise due to the First World War erupting in 1914 shortly after the commencement of the project.⁸¹ One more time Nursi's hopes failed. At this point, it would be illuminating to draw attention to Mardin's point this project and Nursi's alleged nationalism. In his book, he partly discusses Nursi's attitude towards nationalism and he felicitously argues that Bediuzzaman is critical of Turkish nationalism and supports solidarity among Muslims.⁸² In addition to his criticism of Turkish nationalism, according to Mardin, "the accusation that Bediüzzaman was a Kurdish nationalist in the 1890s should be taken with a grain of salt". For Mardin, the university project Nursi drafted, to be established in Eastern Anatolia is not enough for this claim.⁸³ Although Mardin is so clear in this argument, he does not go further and he even does not touch upon the nationalism of Nursi's followers.

Turning back to the historical incidents, the Great War was centred on and emanated from Europe, however, it deeply impacted every corner of the world in political, economic and social terms. When he was drafting the university project, Nursi did not expect such a big catastrophe for the Ottoman Empire leading to a decisive defeat. After the commencement of the war, however, almost all the men were mobilized and called to arms. The big coalitions were swiftly formed, and the Ottoman Empire joined the Central Powers alongside Germany and Austria-Hungary. The enemy was the Entente, namely, Britain, Russia and France. At the inception of the war the USA was impartial and they called it a 'European War'. However, US involvement towards the end of the war had a profound impact on determining the victorious side. The Ottoman

⁸¹ Şükran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, p. 102. *Risale-i Nur Külliyatı Müellifi*, p. 95.

⁸² Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, p. 172.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

Empire initially wanted to side with Britain and the Entente, but their offers were rejected. Then, especially through the Germanophile Unionist leaders like Enver Pasha, who was one of the three major leaders of the Committee of Union and Progress along with Talat and Cemal Pashas, the Ottoman Empire entered the war on the German side. The treaty between the parties was signed secretly on 2 August 1914. The delegation representing the Ottoman Empire was formed by a group of Young Turks.⁸⁴ The First World War, at the end of which Ottomans, Habsburgs (Austria-Hungary) and the Romanovs (Russia) were all dissolved, was representing the end of the empires in the face of rising nation-states in the world history.

Right after its commencement, Nursi joined the war and fought against Russians and Armenians on the Eastern front together with his students. Reportedly upon the command of Enver Pasha, he formed his militia and he was probably related to the *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* (Special Organization). This organization had been formed by the Unionists before the war in order to take action in case of a defeat. It played an important role in the Independence War during the Armistice Period (1918-1923) especially while smuggling arms from Istanbul to Anatolia. Russians were attacking the North-Eastern part of Anatolia and they were to a great extent successful. Furthermore, they made a great effort to provoke an Armenian rebellion in the region. A considerable number of Armenians had already deserted the army. In 1915 the attempts proved to be successful and the rebellion started in Van. Nursi and his students were not in the city at the time Armenians launched the insurgency. Rather than involving themselves in suppressing the revolt, they preferred to protect women and children suffering from the war conditions.⁸⁵ In the other phases of the war, Nursi

⁸⁴ Şükran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, p. 111.

⁸⁵ Öke, *Yüzyılın Kan Davası*, p. 132.

continued to protect the defenceless civilians against any possible retaliation attempt.⁸⁶ In March 1916, defending Bitlis, Nursi was hurt and captured by the Russians while leading his students and volunteers. After a short while, Bitlis fell to the invading army. After being kept in Bitlis for two weeks, he was taken to Russia.⁸⁷ In 1918, the year marking the end of the war, Nursi escaped after two years in captivity and arrived in Istanbul. During his flight, at the age of forty-one, he started undergoing what he himself described as a mental transformation. This transformation was marked by a transition from a politics-oriented *Weltanschauung* to an inner-world-oriented understanding. Nursi called the period prior to this journey Old Said and accordingly the period after this turning point New Said.⁸⁸ Nursi was welcomed by the statesmen in Istanbul. Especially Enver Pasha honoured him in the presence of other prominent people. Several positions were offered, however he did not accept, with the excuse of being tired due to the exhausting conditions of his captivity.⁸⁹ He told Enver Pasha that he could not accept any position for worldly gain, however one regarding science and knowledge might have been of interest to him.⁹⁰ Later, in the summer of 1918, without his knowledge, he was assigned as a nominee of the army to *Darü'l- Hikmeti'l-İslamiye* (The House for Islamic Wisdom or Islamic Academy) upon the personal request of Enver Pasha.⁹¹ This institution had been established in association with the office of the *sheikhu'l-Islam*. In his new job Nursi continued to author books.

In autumn of 1918, the Mudros Armistice was concluded between the Allies and the

⁸⁶ Abdurrahman, *Tarihçe-i Hayat*, p. 36.

⁸⁷ Şükran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, p. 123.

⁸⁸ Karabaşoğlu considers this transition, not as a rupture, an overnight revolution, but as an intensive process from 1911 to 1927. Metin Karabaşoğlu. 2004. *Tehlikeli Denemeler*. İstanbul: Karakalem Yayınları.

⁸⁹ Nursi, *Rays*, 453.

⁹⁰ Şahiner, *Bilinmeyen Yönleriyle Bediüzzaman*, pp. 182-183.

⁹¹ Şükran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, p. 133.

Ottoman Empire. It signified the end of one of the Empires which ceased to exist after the Great War along with Austria-Hungary and Tsarist Russia. The day after the conclusion of the armistice, the famous trio of the CUP fled to Berlin on a sub-marine. After a while, Istanbul was *de facto* invaded by the Allied fleet formed by the British, French, Italian and Greek ships. A number of secret agreements were already concluded among the Allies.⁹² Due to the Bolshevik Revolution, Russia had stepped back from the war, and was replaced by the Italians. Upon the promise of Izmir, in the western extremity of Turkey, and some of the Aegean parts of Anatolia, Greeks also became involved in the war. The conclusion of the armistice, antithetical to its meaning, overlapped with the invasion of Anatolia by different Western countries. British forces were in the capital and they held the Dardanelles. They and the French invaded the South-Eastern cities. While Italians landed at Antalya, Greek troops made critical progress in Western Anatolia. This also ignited the fire of resistance in the country, contrary to expectations due to the grave losses and fatigue emanating from long-lasting fighting on various fronts.⁹³ Initially, the Muslim forces were dispersed in the face of severe attacks by the invading armies. This fragmentation was both in a military and political sense. In a military sense, there was not a regular army centrally administered from one headquarters. Politically, not everybody agreed upon the idea of resisting the occupying forces. Many politically important figures, including some members of the *'ulama*, Muslim jurists and scholars, thought that it would not be for the good of the people to resist and fight with the invading armies. For them, a treaty, irrespective of its conditions, should have been accepted in order not to lose more territory and people. Despite all these oppositions, a regular army was established under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal and everybody was called to support and resist

⁹² Shaw and Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire*, vol 2. p. 320.

⁹³ Erik J. Zürcher, *Unionist Factor*, p. 105. Lewis, *Emergence of Modern Turkey*, pp. 241-242.

by force of arms in the face of occupation. In April 1920, the Grand National Assembly was inaugurated in Ankara and received support from Istanbul as well. On these developments the British forces *de facto* invaded the city and arrested a number of people.⁹⁴ The Sultan dissolved parliament and the *sheikhu'l-Islam*, in cooperation with the British, issued a *fatwa*, which is a legal ruling, against the national forces in Anatolia, ordering their killing.⁹⁵ To fight with them, another army was raised by the Istanbul government called *kuva-yı inzibatiye*.

During the occupation years (1918-1923) Nursi stayed in Istanbul and maintained opposition to the Entente. He even published a pamphlet entitled *Hutuvat-ı Sitte* (Six Steps [of Satan])⁹⁶ criticizing the occupation forces. At the same time, he put his support behind the nationalist movement in Anatolia in their fight against Greeks who occupied Western Anatolian cities, advancing towards interior regions. The aforementioned pamphlet played a significant role in changing the minds of many members of *'ulama* who had previously supported the British occupation against the national resistance in Anatolia.⁹⁷ According to Nursi, the British plan to provoke the local power groups against one another, namely the Unionists, *'ulama*, the national resistance and the members of the Freedom and Accord Party (*Hürriyet ve İtilaf Furkası*) was spoiled partly due to this publication.⁹⁸ However, this claim is not corroborated by other sources.

During this independence war, Nursi was not tempted to promote the cause of an autonomous or independent Kurdistan in cooperation with and under the tutelage of

⁹⁴ Macfie, *End of the Ottoman Empire*, p. 194.

⁹⁵ Mısıroğlu, *Kurtuluş Savaşında Sarıklı Mücahitler*, pp. 297-298.

⁹⁶ These six steps actually referred to the six steps mentioned in one of the Quranic verses. "And do not follow in the footsteps of Satan" (Quran, 2:168).

⁹⁷ Nursi, *Rays*, 453.

⁹⁸ Nursi, *Rays*, 445.

Western powers. Writing two separate articles in a daily journal, *Sebilürreşad*, he harshly criticized a Kurdish notable, Şerif Pasha, who had reached an agreement on setting up a Kurdish state with the Armenian representative Boghos Nubar Pasha in the Paris Peace Conference on 26th February 1919:

The most eloquent, silencing reply to the agreement signed by Bogos Nubar and Şerif Pasha has been provided by the telegraphs sent by the Kurdish tribal leaders of the Eastern Provinces. The Kurds would never leave the Islamic community. Those who say the opposite are a handful of people who follow their own aims and have no authority to speak on behalf of the Kurds.

The Kurds have [recently] sacrificed five hundred thousand of their number to uphold the honor of Islam, proving once again their loyalty to the caliphate.

The Kurdish cause is meaningless, because before everything the Kurds are Muslims, and with their firm adherence to religion, which is so firm as to be bigotry, they are truly Muslims. So they would never bother even for an instant about whether or not they belong to the same race as the Armenians. Islam is opposed to the idea of racialism [since] it is contrary to Islamic brotherhood...

There is talk of the autonomy that will be given to Kurdistan! The Kurds would rather die than accept autonomy under a foreign protectorate. If their freedom of development has to be thought of, the Sublime (Ottoman) State will think of it, not Bogos Nubar and Şerif Pasha. In short, the Kurds are in need of no one's mediation or

intervention in this matter...⁹⁹

Thus, he showed an example of being a supporter of Islamic nationhood rather than parochial nationalisms promoting separatism, which would harm Islamic unity in this specific case. This is important. Since he was a renowned Kurdish Muslim scholar, his support or denial would have had a deep impact in the formation of public opinion, especially with regard to the Kurds. In other words, he put into practice what he had theoretically elaborated previously in his books and speeches. In the same period, he continued his severe criticisms of the British, especially through the columns he wrote in *Sebilürreşad*. This drew the attention of the British and made them want to get rid of him.¹⁰⁰ Both due to his pamphlet, *Hutuvat-ı Sitte* and probable connections with the resistance movement in Ankara, the leaders of the resisting forces, including Mustafa Kemal and Marshall Fevzi Çakmak, summoned him to the parliament. Upon this invitation, Nursi secretly left Istanbul for Ankara in November 1922.¹⁰¹ Had he not left the city in time, most probably he would have been arrested by the British, on the grounds of his active public support for the resistance and his involvement in smuggling arms from Istanbul to Anatolia.¹⁰² After a short residence in Ankara he left the city, since he was unhappy with the secular orientation of the new power-holders. He rejected a posting– to the Ministry of Religious Affairs for the eastern provinces of Turkey. Then he returned to Istanbul, and soon afterwards in May 1923, he arrived in Van where his old *madrassa* was located, that he had used to educate students of

⁹⁹ Abdülkadir Badıllı, Nursi, vol 1, pp. 517, 519. cited in Şükran Vahide, *An Intellectual Biography*, pp. 148-149.

¹⁰⁰ Şükran Vahide, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 152.

¹⁰¹ Mesut Aydın. 1992. *Milli Mücadele Döneminde TBMM Hükümeti Tarafından İstanbul'da Kurulan Gizli Gruplar ve Faaliyetleri*, Cağaloğlu, İstanbul: Boğaziçi Yayınları. pp. 145-148.

¹⁰² For further information on arm smuggling and the relationship between Istanbul and Ankara through the secret organization Karakol run by the old Unionists, see; Nur Bilge Criss. 1999. *Istanbul Under Allied Occupation, 1918-1923*. Leiden: Brill.

Islamic sciences until 1914. However what he saw was no more than a gutted city.¹⁰³

When he was in Istanbul, the transition from Old to New Said was still continuing, but his health was poor and he preferred to keep contact with other people to a minimum. He selected high places to stay, such as Çamlıca and Yuşa Hill where he could reflect and meditate more easily. In this period, he maintained his writing activity and published a series of short books: *Isharatu'l-I'jaz* (1918), *Hakikat Çekirdekleri 1* (1919–20), *Nokta* (1918–19), *Hutuvat-ı Sitte* (1920?), *Qızıl Ijaz* (1920–21), *Şuaat* (1920–1), *Rumuz* (1920–21), *İşarat* (1920–21), *Tuluat* (1920–21), *Sünihat* (1919–20), *Lemeat* (1921), and *Hakikat Çekirdekleri 2* (1920-21).¹⁰⁴ They all carried the traces of this transition period, in between the ‘old,’ more politically oriented Said and the ‘new’ Said, more focused on faith and the inner world of the human being.

A Kurdish rebellion under the leadership of Sheikh Said erupted in 1925. The rebellion was atrociously squashed by the state, then the parliament passed a law called *Takrir-i Sükun* (Law on the Maintenance of Order) allowing the newly founded state not only to punish those involved in the rebellion, but also to silence all the opposition.¹⁰⁵ In this atmosphere, many Kurds were deported to the Western regions. One objective for this policy was preparing the ground for the mass assimilation of the Kurds in the country. Even though he was not involved in the rebellion and actually declined to give it his support to it, Nursi was among those relocated. He was first exiled to Burdur, then to Isparta and ultimately to Barla, a remote small town of Isparta in 1927. During the group’s formative years, not all of Nursi’s disciples were from this town. For instance, “[o]ne of the most prominent followers of Said Nursi during

¹⁰³ For a detailed account of this scene see; Said Nursi. 2004. *The Flashes*. trans. Şükran Vahide. İstanbul: Sözler Publications. pp. 389-397.

¹⁰⁴ Şükran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, p. 153.

¹⁰⁵ Erik Jan Zürcher. 2004. *Turkey: A Modern History*. London: I. B. Tauris. p. 171.

this period was Colonel (İbrahim) Hulusi Yahyagil who was born in 1896 in the Eastern Anatolian city of Elaziğ.”¹⁰⁶ Nursi, who was in a sense forcefully isolated from society, started publishing the books that would later be called the *Risale-i Nur* (The Treatises of Light) Collection. His main goal was to save the faith of believers in a milieu in which positivism had the upper hand and was dominant in the intellectual world of Turkey. His first book in this *magnum opus* was his Treatise on Resurrection (*Haşir Risalesi*).¹⁰⁷ Both Nursi and his disciples endeavoured to strengthen faith by reflecting on the universe through the lens of divine revelation. For them, this approach was called *iman-ı tahkiki* (faith based on investigation) and they believed that the faith of Muslim individuals not based on evidence would be left vulnerable to materialist attacks.¹⁰⁸

Eventually people began following Nursi and regarding him as a *mujaddid* (a reformer of Islam) for the twentieth century. Accordingly, they started distributing his writings all over the country through a secret network that they had established to circumvent the restrictions imposed by the state.¹⁰⁹ In their view, the specific conditions of the modern period required to them to engage in ‘jihad of the pen’ rather than jof the sword mainly because the basic theological foundations of Islam were under relentless attack by the irreligious people.¹¹⁰ The first students of Nursi were not for the most part learned individuals. However, there were few of them who had received formal training. One such individual was Hafız Tefvik of Damascus, who would play a major role in writing and circulating these treatises. The majority of the *Risale-i Nur*

¹⁰⁶ Nişancı, “The Dialectics of Secularism and Revivalism in Turkey: The Case of Said Nursi,” p. 392.

¹⁰⁷ Ahmet Özkılınç. 2011. *Akrebin Kıskacında*. İstanbul: Nesil Karakalem. pp. 35-39.

¹⁰⁸ Nişancı, “The Dialectics of Secularism and Revivalism in Turkey: The Case of Said Nursi,” p. 386.

¹⁰⁹ Mermer, *Aspects of Religious Identity: The Nurcu Movement in Turkey Today*, p. 1.

¹¹⁰ Nişancı, “The Dialectics of Secularism and Revivalism in Turkey: The Case of Said Nursi,” p. 386.

collection was written by dictation. As Nursi spoke out loud, the scribes around him dictated what they would hear. These first dictations constituted the master copies of the treatises from which millions of further copies were then produced.¹¹¹ Because the Arabic script was prohibited from being used in 1928, the printing and distribution of these books were also outlawed.¹¹² The danger to members of this movement, despite being completely non-violent, by opposing forces only increased after this point. The technique used to duplicate these works was quite innovative. The original pages were placed “on specially prepared (small low reading desks), the tops of which were covered with glass through which light would shine, enabling the person, unable to read or write, to copy the page by tracing the letters underneath.”¹¹³ This allowed the movement to employ a massive labour force that were otherwise unqualified for the task at hand, as many were illiterate. Eventually, they succeeded to distribute copies of the Risale-i Nur to different regions across the country, allowing the Nur movement to “spread to almost every city, finding support particularly from amongst the religiously inclined university students with rural backgrounds”¹¹⁴.

The government during the single-party period (Republican People’s Party - RPP) vocalised its opposition to these activities and attempted to impose strict control over them. Attorney generals pressed charges against both Nursi and his followers for their rejection of certain reforms like the compulsion to wear a Western-style hat in public places and the ban on using Arabic letters instead of Latin. Many people, including Nursi, were imprisoned, and not necessarily as a result of any court decision. Eventually, Nursi was taken to the city centre of Isparta from Barla in 1935 and then

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 380.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Mermer, *Aspects of Religious Identity: The Nurcu Movement in Turkey Today*, p. 24.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

again to Kastamonu, a city located on the Black Sea in 1936 under permanent police supervision in a house opposite the police station until 1943. All of these policies were in accordance with the single-party policies imposed throughout the country in every sphere of life, including religion and the treatment of minorities. The reason behind these relocations was the administration's desire to supervise his actions more closely, as doing so was not that easy in rural areas.¹¹⁵ However, these decisions led to other unintended consequences, and the movement grew faster in different regions of the country.¹¹⁶ Also in 1935, Nursi recommended his disciples to increase the number of *dershanes*, as these places served as spaces in which the *Risale-i Nur* was read and discussed, as allowing the message of the movement to be disseminated among the people.¹¹⁷ In city centres, Nursi gained access to copiers and printing machines by which they were able to print the treatises much faster compared to manual copying. Furthermore, *dershanes* "eased the mobilisation of the movement by serving as connecting points and places of collective action between the members of the movement. These places served as places of proselytisation as well"¹¹⁸.

Around 1950, Nursi allowed his followers to print the *Risale-i Nur* in Latin script. Previously they had been copied and printed in Ottoman letters despite having been officially banned in 1928.¹¹⁹ The main reason behind this is that although Nursi placed great importance on Arabic letters themselves, calling them Qur'anic letters, disseminating his ideas was more important for him than the actual script. Moreover, the number of those able to read and write Ottoman Turkish had dramatically

¹¹⁵ Nişancı, *The Dialectics of Secularism and Revivalism in Turkey: The Case of Said Nursi*, p. 397.

¹¹⁶ Aydın, *The Political Economy of Turkey*, p. 201.

¹¹⁷ Nişancı, *The Dialectics of Secularism and Revivalism in Turkey: The Case of Said Nursi*, p. 396.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 398.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 408.

decreased by that time. When Nursi allowed the Risale-i Nur to be printed in the Latin alphabet, one of his closest students, Husrev Altinbasak, opposed him, insisting that the work should continue to be written by hand in Arabic script.¹²⁰ Though this did not appear to be a grave problem at the time, it would be a harbinger to the first great split that would occur between Nursi's followers following his death in 1960.

In the meantime, an MP of the Democrat Party who was also a student of Nursi succeeded to convince the Presidency of Religious Affairs to issue a report stating that the Risale-i Nur collection was not against the Turkish law. This official report paved the way for printing the treatises in Latin script.¹²¹ One of the first books published was *The Guide for Youth* (Gençlik Rehberi)¹²², which shows the amount of importance Nursi attached to the youth in Turkey. Nursi harnessed both the print media and conventional networks to create a counter-public against the Kemalist regime.¹²³

Nursi eschewed the idea of establishing an Islamic party, even considering such a party to be against Islam. He did, however, support the existence and expression of religious ideas in the public sphere.¹²⁴ Based on the conviction that religious freedom would be secured by an opposition party, Nursi gave partial support to the Democrat Party, which won the 1950 elections against the RPP, since they promised some freedoms like removing the 1932 ban on reciting the *adhan* in Arabic.¹²⁵ This was crucial for the religious people in Turkey, as for the first time in Muslim history that

¹²⁰ Fulya Atacan. 2001. "A Kurdish Islamist Group in Modern Turkey: Shifting Identities". *Middle Eastern Studies*. 37 (3): 115.

¹²¹ Büyükkara, *Çağdaş İslami Akımlar*, p. 140.

¹²² Nişancı, *The Dialectics of Secularism and Revivalism in Turkey: The Case of Said Nursi*, p. 408.

¹²³ M. Hakan Yavuz. 2000. "Cleansing Islam from the public sphere". *Journal of International Affairs (New York)*. 54 (1): 30.

¹²⁴ Yavuz, *Towards an Islamic liberalism? The Nurcu movement and Fethullah Gülen*, 592.

¹²⁵ For a full discussion of Bediüzzaman's stance towards politics in the example of Democratic Party see; Metin Karabaşoğlu. 2012. *Geleceğe Dönüş*. İstanbul: Nesil Karakalem. pp. 175-187.

the recitation of *adhan* (the call for prayer) was prohibited from being given in its original language of Arabic. Its symbolic effect is immense as it is deemed one of the signs of independence as well. Even today, the RPP cannot risk criticising the *adhan*. In November 2018, for example, one of its MPs defended the practice of calling the *adhan* in Turkish on a television programme for which he was subsequently dismissed from the party.¹²⁶ Although the Turkification of the *adhan* was carried out by Atatürk himself, modern-day RPP politicians do not dare even mention this historical event because it draws an incredible amount of public wrath. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that the *adhan* is mentioned in the national anthem as a symbol of Turkey's independence.

Nursi himself called the period after 1946 that of the Third Said where he would contact politicians and declare his political opinion publicly without, however, being directly involved in politics. The period following the Second World War had several dramatic effects on both Turkey and Nursi's positions. First of all, Turkey allied herself with NATO against the USSR. This alliance with Western powers led to the democratisation of the politics that would allow opposition parties to come to power only a few years later.¹²⁷ Both Nursi and the greater movement took advantage of this comparatively free social and political atmosphere. On the other hand, Nursi stood against the rise of Soviet-sponsored communism in Turkey. This opposition was based on religious concerns rather than economic reasons.¹²⁸ Since state-backed institutionalised atheism was completely unthinkable for them, they strove diligently to thwart the expansion of communist ideas across the country. Anarchy was yet also

¹²⁶ Hürriyet, 20th November, 2018, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/son-dakika-chp-ozturk-yilmaz-hakkinda-kararini-verdi-41025354>

¹²⁷ Mermer, *Aspects of Religious Identity: The Nurcu Movement in Turkey Today*, p. 26.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

the result of the communist activities in their eyes.¹²⁹ Given the movement's emphasis on positive action, maintaining public order and denouncing violent opposition, their reaction to anarchy becomes more understandable.

In this period, Nursi made an all-out effort to reach large masses. For instance, in pursuit of this objective, he talked with the head of Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs, Ahmet Hamdi Akseki, and started to reach out to greater segments of the population. This was a stark contrast to his previous attitude, which had been marked by an absence of interest in either internal or external politics.

Nursi sent letters to members of parliament in order to be able to affect their opinions and change the course of events. One of them was written in October 1946 to Hilmi Uran, the interior minister. In the letter, he talks about two dangerous currents at that time, one of which is to break the ties with the Turkish nation and Islam. Nursi drew attention to “the inseparable nature of Islam and the Turkish nation and the grave error of trying to replace Islam by “civilization”—that is, of uprooting religion and imposing philosophy in the form of positivism and nationalism.”¹³⁰ The aim of the second current is to divide the Muslim world into smaller pieces in order to dominate all these regions. Most probably he was referring to the British by these words. According to him, this aim would be carried out by demonstrating Turkey as irreligious, and therefore not eligible to be at the centre of the Muslim World.¹³¹

In the Third Said period, Nursi maintained his cautious but precise attitude towards nationalism, all the time upholding Islam by associating the Turkish nation with Islam. He brought forward the brotherhood and commandership of Turks, by which he

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 27.

¹³⁰ Şükran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, p. 279.

¹³¹ Ibid.

emphasized the strong relationship between Muslim communities. He latently implied that he considered Muslim Turks as brothers of Kurds. Even if he did not express this explicitly, it can be extracted from the context. Furthermore, he, without any inferiority complex, qualified Turks to be 'heroes' and 'commanders'. However, this should not lead one to conclude that he was a supporter of Turkish nationalism. Rather, two results can be extrapolated from this attitude, one of which is that he, as a Kurd, did not hesitate to praise members of another Muslim nation. In other words, he taught a lesson to all Muslims to have this kind of affirmative attitude towards their 'brothers'. Secondly, both of the qualifications he attributed to Turks are directly related to religion, namely, Islam. Therefore, the value of Turks or any other nation is dependent upon and correlated with their service to Islam.

In 1960, Nursi left for Urfa, hiding the license plate of his car because of the ban on travelling to the east of Ankara. In March 23, he died in this city. A week after his funeral, some military people exhumed his body and buried it in a place unknown to anybody.¹³²

The Nur Movement After the Death of Said Nursi

Two months after the death of Nursi, the first coup d'état of modern Turkish history took place on 27 May 1960. The leader of the incumbent Democrat Party, Adnan Menderes, along with the other prominent figures were hanged by the putschists following judgements made by kangaroo courts. As expected, the Nurcus became the major victims of this new period following their heyday under the libertarian period during Democrat Party rule.¹³³ An official crackdown instituted against them. Public prosecutors opened more than 400 cases against Nurcus across the country in an effort

¹³² TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi, Said Nursi.

¹³³ Mermer, *Aspects of Religious Identity: The Nurcu Movement in Turkey Today*, p. 8.

to curb the movement's continued expansion, as it was considered a counterforce to the Kemalist revolution.

Following the death of Nursi, tens of thousands of his followers remained without a leader. Crucial, here, is that Nursi had not named a successor for the period following his death, although various groups thought that their own leader had been implied by Said Nursi during his lifetime.¹³⁴ The reason that he did not name a successor to lead the movement after his death was certainly not due to a timeless decease. Rather, it was simply because he emphasised the text over personalities.¹³⁵ During this period, the *ağabey*s, or so-called elder brothers, played a major role in the management of the movement. The same period also witnessed the introduction of an increasingly hierarchical structure within the movement.¹³⁶

The very first division took place between the mainstream part of the movement and those who claimed that copying the *Risale-i Nur* by hand in Arabic script was superior to all other deeds. This group was led by Ahmet Husrev Altınbaşak, who was, and is still called the second master (*üstad-ı sani*) by his followers, and is commonly referred to as Husrev Efendi. Serving multiple long prison sentences with Nursi, Husrev Efendi won favour in Nursi's eyes. Upon Nursi's instructions, Husrev Efendi succeeded in writing the aptly called *Tevafuklu Kur'an* (The Concordant Qur'an), believed to be miraculous, in which certain words are arranged in vertical lines.¹³⁷ He "considered himself to be the sole leader of the Nurcu movement; anyone who disputed his leadership was considered to be a traitor and in opposition to the *Risale-i Nur*."¹³⁸ This

¹³⁴ Metin Karabaşoğlu, *Saidleri Ararken*, p. 109.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Büyükkara, *Çağdaş İslami Akımlar*, p. 142.

¹³⁷ Mehmet Kaplan. 2017. *Dini Gruplar ve Çatışma: Said Nursi ve Nurculuk Örneği*, MA thesis., (Süleyman Demirel University) p. 90.

¹³⁸ Atacan, *A Kurdish islamist group in modern Turkey: shifting identities*, p. 115.

part of the movement, known as the Copyists (i.e., Yazıcılar), increasingly resembled *Sufi* orders in how the relationship between a single master and his disciples was structured, which was also at odds with the other members of the Nur movement who continued to take text as their sole reference point. The Copyists continue to function, focusing mostly on teaching Ottoman Turkish via various institutions and publications. However, they cannot be considered an influential branch of the greater Nur movement.¹³⁹ Another important point to be made regarding this group is that, in contrast to mainstream Nurcus, they have never been supportive of democracy, even at the theoretical level. Along with the Copyists who stressed reproducing the Risale-i Nur in Arabic letters and entirely rejecting the Latin script, other smaller groups broke apart from the main body. Still, the main body called the Readers (i.e., Okuyucular)¹⁴⁰ continued to maintain their unity throughout the 1960s.¹⁴¹ According to Kutlular, one of the prominent *ağabey*s, there are two main reasons behind divisions in the movement. While the first is the indirect involvement of the state through intelligence services, the second is the incorrigible habit of opposition within the movement. Kaplan disputes this, contending that the lack of tolerance towards opposition within the movement itself has been the primary factor triggering divisions.¹⁴² For him, the differentiation in political preferences has been the most important element leading to divisions.¹⁴³ On the other hand, Karabaşoğlu has come up with a more interesting and equally convincing explanation for the same phenomenon. According to him, the students of Nursi “went through a test on keeping the balance between abundance and unity, individuality and collectiveness, individual

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Büyükkara, *Çağdaş İslami Akımlar*, p. 142.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 110.

¹⁴² Kaplan, *Dini Gruplar ve Çatışma: Said Nursi ve Nurculuk Örneği*, p. 91.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

and community”¹⁴⁴ during the aftermath of his death. On the one hand, the different interpretations of the text have led to further division and atomisation where one group would prefer to gather around one person whose interpretation, they considered to be authoritative.¹⁴⁵

During this period, whereas the inner unity was maintained by Zübeyir Gündüzalp, a renowned student of Nursi, the movement was represented by a famous lawyer, Bekir Berk, to the outside world.¹⁴⁶ While Nurcus were dealing with these problems, they were simultaneously trying to prevent the larger part from dividing further. The Readers, who constituted the main body, were based in Istanbul and most of the major *ağabey*s remained a part of this group¹⁴⁷ instead of lending support to Hüsrev Altınbaşak. In 1960, modern Turkey experienced her first coup d’état, which led to the hanging of then Prime Minister Adnan Menderes and two members of his government. Between 1950 and 1960, the state’s grip on Nurcus had been loosened and there was relative freedom for them to move within society. The years following the coup witnessed relentless state oppression levelled against the Nur movement. Mainstream media of the time would also attack Nurcus, accusing them of being reactionary individuals who wanted to carry out a counter-revolution against the nascent regime. After these publications, police raided *dershanes* and arrested many people across the country. Since there were only a few Islamic media outlets that offered partial support to the Nurcus,¹⁴⁸ this situation propelled them to establish their own newspaper in 1964 named Zülfikar¹⁴⁹ before being shut down in the very same

¹⁴⁴ Karabaşoğlu, *Saidleri Ararken*, p. 109.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Kaplan, *Dini Gruplar ve Çatışma: Said Nursi ve Nurculuk Örneği*, p. 92.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ Zülfikar is the “name of a most celebrated sword possessed by the caliph Ali; it is figured as cleft or double-bladed.” James Redhouse. 1890. *A Turkish and English Lexicon*.

year.¹⁵⁰ Within fifteen days of Zülfikar's suspension, they began publishing Uhuvvet (i.e., Brotherhood), though it also did not last long.¹⁵¹ Ittihat (i.e., Unity) was founded after Uhuvvet and remained active until 1971 when a military memorandum forced them to suspend their activities indefinitely.¹⁵² One year before Ittihat was shut down, Nurcus founded another newspaper called Yeni Asya (i.e., New Asia) which continues to operate today. This name eventually became generic term used to call all Nurcus at that time except for the Copyists.¹⁵³ Although Nurcus' primary occupation was publishing and disseminating the Risale-i Nur, their involvement and extraordinary success in the realm of publications contributed to their reputation among Islamic groups. This is especially because the crackdown conducted by the military regime was indeed severe and there were very few Islamic publications that risked standing against the regime.¹⁵⁴

Another important point to be noted regarding this period is the simultaneous rise of communism within Turkey and of anti-communist feelings among the religious people. Among Nurcus, Bekir Berk, the famous lawyer who defended Nursi and other Nurcus in court, was the major architect of the nationalist-conservative discourse within the movement. In other words, he orientated Nurcus towards a more nationalist *modus operandi* with the help of the prevailing state of affairs marked by the spread of anti-communist discourse in the face of the immediate Soviet threat during the Cold War. Although this discourse proved to be useful at the time, especially in the eyes of those outside the movement itself, it was eventually internalized by the members of the movement as time elapsed. However, this new nationalist orientation continued

¹⁵⁰ Kaplan, *Dini Gruplar ve Çatışma: Said Nursi ve Nurculuk Örneği*, p. 93.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid. p. 101.

¹⁵⁴ Çakır, *Ayet ve Slogan: Türkiye'de İslamcı Oluşumlar*, pp. 88-89.

to gain strength and traction within the movement following the 1970s.¹⁵⁵

As expected, 1971 was a critical point in the history of the Nur movement in that a publishing house was established and a new daily newspaper was circulated in the name of the entire movement. The publishers of were presented as the representatives of the entire *Risale-i Nur* movement, despite Said Nursi's not having taken any similar actions during his own life and having even mentioned the possible risks of these types of institutions in his books. However, despite these textual predicaments and some dissenting voices from within the movement, the publication house and the newspaper occupied a significant place within the movement. In April 1971, only two months after the memorandum, Zübeyir Gündüzalp, the de facto leader the movement following the death of Nursi, passed away.¹⁵⁶ Upon his death, all the other prominent figures assembled and decided that the community would be managed based on the principle of *meşveret* (i.e., mutual deliberation).¹⁵⁷ At the end of the first *meşveret*, in which many important figures participated, Mehmet Kutlular was elected to execute tasks related to the newspaper, the publishing house, and social issues.¹⁵⁸

During these changes taking place in the administrative level, within the same decade, the movement was split into around ten different fragments, and to a great extent this was a result of the recent attempts for institutionalization. This was because it deteriorated the flexible and porous structure of the community, by consolidating the centre around the institution, thereby restricting the room for different opinions on the same text. In other words, the movement had got an official publishing house and an official interpretation of the *Risale-i Nur* collection.¹⁵⁹ The centralization in the

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁵⁶ Kaplan, *Dini Gruplar ve Çatışma: Said Nursi ve Nurculuk Örneği*, p. 95.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Çakır, *Ayet ve Slogan: Türkiye'de İslamcı Oluşumlar*, p. 115.

1970s brought about twofold consequences, the first of which was that whenever the opposition was strong enough compared to the hard core, either they fought with them within the same institution or broke apart and formed a new one. Secondly, if the opposing people were weaker than those who were in charge of the institutions, they were expelled from the main body.¹⁶⁰ This pattern has been repeated in every new formation emerging after these divisions, resulting in many groups of different sizes.

All in all, although the movement maintained its unity in the 1960s, the next decade witnessed many fragmentations mainly due to the strict centralization, ironically leading to further discontent among the members. Zübeyir Gündüzalp, the foremost student of Nursi, was the critical factor in maintaining unity in that he did not adopt any tendency to institutionalization and stuck to the principle of ‘unity within diversity’. Furthermore, his emphasis upon the authority of the text rather than specific people and institutions played a significant role in this phenomenon.¹⁶¹

Following divisions, the parts broken off from the main body got rid of the burden of clashing with the others and found the opportunity to expand towards outside via various activities. In other words, each smaller group focused on one aspect and adopted a different style of engaging with the Risale-i Nur collection. Similarly, the main body also found a new space in which lots of different activities could be carried out, saving time and energy from the inner conflicts. The dynamism and flexibility derived from these divisions ultimately brought about expansion of the whole movement within society, mostly in its religiously oriented parts.¹⁶² For instance, one of the groups started translating Risale-i Nur into different languages, which was not that easy to convince the leading elites of the movement to do before the divisions

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 116.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 117.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 118.

came about.

An extremely important development took place during the same decade; another community from within the greater Nur movement began to flourish and would eventually become the single most powerful and widespread Islamic community in the following decades. Eventually to become known as the Gülen community, the leader of this movement, Fethullah Gülen, began his activities in Izmir and slowly gained influence in the Western-most region of Turkey. Though his birthplace is Erzurum, known to be one of the most religious and nationalist cities of the country located in the Eastern part of Anatolia, Gülen “worked most of his life in Izmir, the most modern Turkish city. In 1966, he was appointed to the Kestanepazarı Mosque in Izmir”¹⁶³. He managed to create a strong *dershane* network in the city, making the most of the advantages found in that region thanks to its comparative industrial development and international connections. Contrary to the other Nurcu groups, he did feel limited to the works of Nursi; rather, he made use of the works of other eminent conservative and nationalist writers, such as Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, Nurettin Topçu and Sezai Karakoç.¹⁶⁴

In the mid-70s, with encouragement and support of several businessmen, Gülen left the Yeni Asya group, the main body of the Nurcus at that time. He justified his action arguing that the upper echelon of Yeni Asya were obsessed with the Justice Party (*Adalet Partisi*), the center-right party of the seventies, and that they had neglected their primary duty of spreading truths of faith.¹⁶⁵ Different from all the other branches of Nur movement, Gülen prioritized his own books and sermons over the writings of

¹⁶³ Yavuz, *Towards an Islamic liberalism? The Nurcu movement and Fethullah Gülen*, p. 593.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Çakır, *Ayet ve Slogan: Türkiye'de İslamcı Oluşumlar*, p. 103.

Nursi, and this is why some scholars consider this group to be neo-Nurcu.¹⁶⁶ In the 1973 elections, Gülen did not support the Justice Party, offering his support instead to political Islamists, which offended the other Nurcus.¹⁶⁷ However, supporting or opposing a specific party was not that important for Gülen. Instead, he focused on forming his own group identity and made increasing his influence and power a priority. By having people establish new endowments, associations and private teaching institutions for university entrance exams, Gülen demonstrated the importance he attached to the young generation.¹⁶⁸ During all these activities, he deliberately hid concealed his relationship with the Nur movement and the Risale-i Nur in order to avoid state persecution. In cases where he felt obliged to make references to Nursi's works, he preferred not to mention his name.¹⁶⁹ All the time he preached obedience to the state for two reasons. First, he was a sincere nationalist and statist. Second, he was exceedingly cautious to preserve his organisation, which always risked becoming the target of power holders within the state.¹⁷⁰ He equally opposed radical Muslims and communists during this period, both of which were enemies of the state.¹⁷¹ Despite his positive relationship with the state, he never ceased to take precautionary measures or working clandestinely.¹⁷²

This decade also witnessed the rise of political Islam. Under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan, the National Order Party was founded and sought the support of religious communities in society. However, based on Nursi's general analysis of and suggestion to avoid politics combined with his warnings about the risks of enmeshing

¹⁶⁶ Büyükkara, *Çağdaş İslami Akımlar*, p. 142. Yavuz, *Towards an Islamic liberalism? The Nurcu movement and Fethullah Gülen*, p. 592.

¹⁶⁷ Kaplan, *Dini Gruplar ve Çatışma: Said Nursi ve Nurculuk Örneği*, p. 98.

¹⁶⁸ Çakır, *Ayet ve Slogan: Türkiye'de İslamcı Oluşumlar*, p. 103.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 107.

¹⁷² Ibid.

religion with politics, the Nur movement refrained from supporting the Islamists,¹⁷³ an act that caused long-standing discontent between the two sides that continues until today. However, ironically, this reaction also led to an interaction. In the face of the criticisms of the members of the National Order Party, a significant portion of the Nur movement felt the need to respond to critiques levelled against them, and this inevitably led to a politicisation of the group. As a reaction to the figure of Necmeddin Erbakan, they stood with Süleyman Demirel, head of the Justice Party, located on the centre-right of Turkish politics. This political orientation was legitimated based on the fact that the Justice Party was a moderate party that made no religiously-based political claims based, whereas the National Order Party openly sought to establish an Islamic state. Nevertheless, this very legitimisation paved the way for further divisions later.¹⁷⁴

During this period, Nurcus began to receive general criticism as political Islam, whose members were openly challenging the oppressive policies of the state, began to gain momentum in Turkey. They were accused of taking a quietist attitude in the face of the brutal measures taken by the state against religious people. One should remember the rise of Islamic awareness all over the world at that time, the most immediate reflection of which manifested in Iran in 1979, which culminated in the toppling of the secular Shah's regime and the establishment of an Islamic republic. To defend themselves against similar criticisms, some groups within the Nur movement started to employ a more political discourse. Those with Kurdish nationalist inclinations particularly championed this shift.¹⁷⁵ This new discourse not only empowered Nurcus over other Islamists, it also became helpful in their confrontation with leftist groups.

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 112.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁷⁵ Metin Karabaşoğlu, *Saidleri Ararken*, p. 113.

The main argument made by members of this branch, known as Med-Zehra, was that Turkish Nurus had purposefully distorted the Risale-i Nur and removed parts related to Kurdishness and Kurdistan. Based on this claim, they established another publishing house and started publishing the treatises that included those parts they claimed that had been removed.¹⁷⁶

Until the 1950s, the Risale-i Nur movement was the only Islamic movement that resisted the persecution of the young republic's secular policies. This resistance, however, was not an armed one, one that sought to direct involvement in party politics or one that organised rallies against government policies. Nonetheless, they refused to follow the letter of the law, which caused many of them to be sent to prison. With the introduction of democracy in later periods, other communities started emerging one after another. However, until the 1970s, Nurus continued to be the main actor within Turkish Islamic communities. The 1970s witnessed the prevalence of the Nationalist View (i.e., Milli Görüş), the ideology espoused by the Islamist political movement led by Necmeddin Erbakan,¹⁷⁷ pushing aside Nurus. Though at face value, it looks like it a nationalist movement, this wording seeks simply to conceal its primary, Islamic identity in order to remain safe from any possible threat from the secular state. Islamists' way of engaging in politics and the discourse that they have developed to deal with global trends has gained the upper hand among other Islamic groups.¹⁷⁸ Accordingly, the Nationalist View received substantial support from various groups of religious people in Turkey.

Besides the developments regarding the structure of the movement, there was another issue at stake. Despite the expansion of the movement, and the increase in the number

¹⁷⁶ Çakır, *Ayet ve Slogan: Türkiye'de İslamcı Oluşumlar*, p. 122.

¹⁷⁷ Metin Karabaşoğlu, *Saidleri Ararken*, p. 113.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

of members, there was an apparent deficiency in the intellectual arena. Even the opponents of Said Nursi admit the intellectual depth of his books. However, his followers were not successful in carrying out high quality commentaries on the foundational text. Considering these shortcomings, the movement engaged in some activities between 1975 and 1980, such as supporting the publication of reference books, academic studies and some journals. In addition, some crucial academics were contacted, and a few academic institutions were established, both in Turkey and abroad. Popular journals, especially the series on science and technology, became quite crucial in spreading the influence of the movement, especially among youth at schools and universities. In a nutshell, the movement has aimed to reach intellectuals in Turkey, secular parts of society and abroad.¹⁷⁹

Post-1980 Period – Great Schisms

In the 1970s, as aforementioned, there was a lack of tolerance for different views from the main body of Nurcus as well as all these openings towards outside, culminating in many divisions. However, in the aftermath of Turkey's 12 September 1980 coup, the biggest schism in the history of the movement took place in 1982, the year in which a referendum for a new constitution prepared by the military took place. Later periods witnessed further divisions in these bigger bodies. The primary factor behind this big division was the difference in views on the military administration and the new constitution drafted by the army. One of the fragments of the Nur movement voted 'yes' to this constitution and stood by the state, while the other had some reservations about the military intervention. In addition to this political factor, opposing interpretations of the reference text, *Risale-i Nur*, and a selective approach to it played a critical role in these divisions.¹⁸⁰ Although the main body retained its strength until

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 119.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 121.

1982, the different stances vis-à-vis the coup led to deep disagreements. One of the most prominent figures, Mehmet Kırkıncı from Erzurum, the same city where Gülen was born, opposed Mehmet Kutlular, the acting leader of Yeni Asya. He and those who would follow him lent unconditional support to the putschists and the coup itself.¹⁸¹ According to him, the generals performed a surgical operation through which they cleared the homeland of communists and anarchists.¹⁸² Gülen matched Kırkıncı in his support for the generals. In fact, we even wrote editorials in his group's well-circulated monthly magazine Sızıntı where he praised the coup on the grounds that they army had ended anarchy in Turkey. Many of the other Nurcu groups, including the Copyists, shared similar concerns.¹⁸³ Particularly important for these communities was the fact that the putschists made Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge a mandatory course in Turkish schools, and this development was cited as their reason for supporting the coup d'état.

The rise of the Gülen movement in Turkey also coincided with this decade. His importance comes from the fact that although he and his movement cannot be considered an organic branch of the wider Nur movement, as the sole reference point of all the other groups was Risale-i Nur, they were seen and even called Nurcus by Islamists in general and the National View movement in particular. Over the previous three decades, the Gülen movement was the most powerful and influential social and religious movement in Turkey with their private schools both in the country and abroad. After around 2012, the movement clashed with the AK Party government over their share of power in the bureaucracy. After the alleged involvement of the Gülenists in the failed coup attempt in 2016, all the members of the movement were purged by

¹⁸¹ Çakır, *Ayet ve Slogan: Türkiye'de İslamcı Oluşumlar*, p. 91.

¹⁸² Kaplan, *Dini Gruplar ve Çatışma: Said Nursi ve Nurculuk Örneği*, p. 102.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.* p. 99.

the government.

However, it is safe to argue that Gülen's movement began to prevail over the other branches of the Nur movement in the 1980s, especially in attracting the brightest students from the lower-middle class. Gülen was successful at addressing the conservative people who wanted their children to become both successful and pious in their social and private lives.¹⁸⁴ Though Nurcus universally agreed on the general importance of the positive sciences, differing from the others, Gülenists attached a specific importance to education, schools and dormitories. Their university preparation schools also fulfilled an important function in recruiting new members to this flourishing community. Although there is an esoteric atmosphere in almost every religious community, the charisma of the leader and the resulting cult of Gülen are quite predominant in this movement, which would become crucial in attracting new people to their circle. Furthermore, differing from conventional branches of the Nur movement, the emphasis was on a single person and not the text. Therefore, the main activity of this specific community's members was listening to Gülen's recorded sermons rather than reading any book, which is interesting considering the movement's emphasis on education. Although there are books authored by Gülen, most of which are prepared using transcriptions of his talks, listening to him became one of the most important practices for his followers. Another secret in Gülen's extraordinary power in attracting people is his long descriptions of the lives of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, contrary to the relative negligence of these issues by the rest of the Nur movement. Indeed, this lack of emphasis on the 'golden age' of Islam has received abundant criticism from other Muslim communities as well. Parallel to the rise of Islamic movements all over the world and in Turkey, the National

¹⁸⁴ Metin Karabaşoğlu, *Saidleri Ararken*, p. 122.

View movement led by Necmeddin Erbakan, was on the rise as well, by regularly increasing their votes in the elections. In 1994, the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*)¹⁸⁵ had great success in municipal elections, their “candidates for mayor won in 28 municipalities, including the two large cities, Istanbul and Ankara. The party strategies then carried the Welfare Party to power in a coalition government after the 1995 elections, from which the party emerged with the highest percentage of votes and Erbakan became the prime minister in 1996.”¹⁸⁶ In accordance with this political achievement, the social influence of the National View movement represented by the Welfare Party in the political arena was also deepened with the passing of time against the social space occupied by the Nur movement. The rise of this Islamist movement was stopped by military intervention, often called the post-modern coup in February 28, 1999, leading to the removal of the prime minister Necmettin Erbakan from office. This date also marks the tightening of measures against all the religious communities in Turkey. The performance of the Welfare Party both when they were in power and after the intervention did not satisfy the religious people in society and conventional Nur movements started to regain the influence and prestige that they lost within the social sphere.¹⁸⁷ On the other side, whereas this date marks the fall of one project-oriented political Islamic movement, the Welfare Party, the same political turmoil spurred the rise of another project-oriented pseudo-social community, the famous Gülen movement. Their cadres filled the government positions after the purge of Welfarists. Moreover, due to the closure of *Imam-Hatip* schools, which are public religious schools in Turkey, the private schools founded by Gülenists became the

¹⁸⁵ Because of the ideological distance between this movement and the state, their parties were closed down at quite regular intervals due to their engagement in reactionary (*irticai*) activities. The Welfare Party was the third after the National Salvation Party and the National Order Party.

¹⁸⁶ Binnaz Toprak, “Islam and Democracy in Turkey”, in Ali Çarkoğlu and M. Rubin Barry. 2006. *Religion and politics in Turkey*. London: Routledge. p. 30.

¹⁸⁷ Karabaşoğlu, *Saidleri Ararken*, p. 124.

centre of attraction for the children of religious people, from both higher and lower echelons of society.

With regard to the rest of the *Nur* movement and other Islamic communities, a convergence took place in the 1990s, putting the different opinions aside due to quite grim social and political experiences that everyone went through in the previous decades. This convergence intensified after the AK Party (Justice and Development Party) under the leadership of Tayyip Erdoğan came to the office in 2002. During the long years of this party, many incidents took place which have created traumas in the minds of religious people, incessantly reminding them of the ‘bad old days’ of the severe Kemalist era. Just a month after the AK Party won the 2002 elections, some of the generals in the military were involved in a seminar during which a military coup plan was discussed and drafted. Five years after this election, in 2007, the military delivered a memorandum against the government upon the election of a president whose wife wears the *hijab*. June 2008 witnessed a case against the ruling party demanding its closure based on being the centre of reactionary activities. It was rejected by the Supreme court with a slight majority. Most probably it was an unintended consequence but all these developments aimed at religious people in Turkey brought them closer to each other, including the members of the Nur movement who started interacting with the other religious groups. It had at least threefold effects: (1) increase in inner solidarity within religious communities, (2) greying of borders between these communities (3) considerable increase in their support to AK Party, especially to the charismatic personality of Tayyip Erdoğan. In the aftermath of the coup attempt in June, 2016, the Gulenists were purged from everywhere, ranging from state positions, to private sector and the civil society. While nationalist sentiments were arising all over the country, the Nur movement

increasingly engaged with the AK Party government and received considerable support in return, in accordance with the mutual relationship between them.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to give the necessary background information regarding the Nur movement. For this purpose, I began with an overview of the movement in which I explained the fundamental aspects of the movement, like Nursi's political ideologies, their mission and the methodologies. Then, I moved on to elaborate the life of Nursi, placing it in the context of the developments that impacted his views on nationalism. His life started towards the end of the nineteenth century and ended in the second half of twentieth century, during which quite major world-historic developments and regional changes took place, ranging from the First World War marking the end of the Ottoman Empire, to the fragmentation of the Muslim world into nation-states, and the establishment of the Turkish Republic on the seat of a past caliphate. Despite all these changes, it is safe to argue that Nursi never relinquished the idea of Muslim unity. Whereas it was a political ideal until the end of the Great War, it transformed into a spiritual one in the New Said period. The republican period created an atmosphere that urged him to speak and write in favour of the nation, as nationalism was popular among religious people as well. However, as far as I understand, Nursi struggled to make use of this ideology for the sake of Islam and Muslim unity, by mentioning nationhood or the idea of nationhood each time he refers to the religion of Islam.

After Nursi's death, the movement faced multiple challenges in addition to finding itself without a successor. First of all, it was divided into two groups, though one was quite marginal. The developments in the subsequent decades had a decisive impact on the movement. The introduction of democracy, the simultaneous rise of the left and ,

as a reaction, of the right and the increasing popularity of political Islamism affected Nurcus in more than one sense. As time progressed, the movement would lose its upper hand and fell behind rival Islamic communities.

Although or Nursi, religion always preceded nationalism and everything else, this is not the case for his followers. Although religion overrides and defines the limits of nationalism for them too, it should be noted that their nationalist tone is quite pronounced. It appears as if the Cold War era and the rise of communism as an ideology in Turkey reinvigorated the trauma of being invaded and dismembered, which in turn led to rise of nationalism among religious people, including Nurcus. Last but not least, the period following the coup attempt on 15 June 2016 witnessed a surge in nationalist sentiments, especially among religious segments of society because it targeted the conservative government. Here, I also would like to add that this atmosphere has to a great extent eroded religious people's ability to think rationally, which has had a profound impact on how they perceive national and global developments.

CHAPTER 2: QUESTIONING THE SECULARIZATION THEORY: IS NATIONALISM A NEW RELIGION?

Introduction

Nationalism and religion have long been studied in the literature, both separately, and in connection with each other. Here are a few fundamental methodological questions posed in the field: What is nation? What is religion? What drives people to adopt a national identity? What is the nature of the interplay between religion and nationalism? Are they essentially incompatible and mutually exclusive? Or can they co-exist? These questions can be multiplied. However, I would like to focus on the problem that I aim to deal with throughout this thesis, which is the complex relationship between religion and nationalism. Within the scope of this thesis, I will narrow this broad topic down to the relationship between Islam and nationalism. The first problem that I pose is how to reconcile a universalist worldview (religion) with a particularist one (nation). Even though this might not cause a grave contradiction for local religions, say, of a specific ethnic group, it constitutes a serious challenge for the great traditional religions, such as Islam and Christianity. Because Nurcus are both Muslim and nationalist, this challenge holds true for them as well. The second problem that I will deal with is the juxtaposition of a belief-system, religion and a modern secular ideology, nationalism, the debates around which I will discuss within the chapter.

The chapter will be revolving around the relationship between religion and nationalism in general, Islam and nationalism in particular. However, as Benedict Anderson rightfully pointed out, in order to have a better understanding of nationalism in the contemporary world, we need to go back and closely look at the social forces behind the emergence of nationalism.¹⁸⁸ Therefore, I will firstly go over the existing explanation models regarding the birth of nationalism, with a specific emphasis upon the factor of religion. To ensure this purpose, I will exclude the approaches that do not touch upon religion and its relationship with nationalism. Secondly, I will elaborate upon the precepts of secularization theory, after which I will demonstrate the opinions of the critics of this theory. Within this section, I will also be searching for an answer

¹⁸⁸ Benedict Anderson. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso. p. 4.

to the question as to whether nationalism can be considered as a religion.

The Emergence of Nationalism: A Departure from Religion?

How and when nations and nationalism were born has been one of the most heated debates of the social sciences. Some scholars, such as Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm contended that nations are historically constructed, some others drew attention to the roots of nationalism and put forth that it is possible to find these social phenomena in the pre-modern era as well. Although Anderson states that nations are modern according to historians and primordial for nationalists, it is possible to find scholars of nationalism who argue for the ancientness of nations.¹⁸⁹

Modernist Approach

Ernest Gellner envisioned quite a sharp distinction between the modern and pre-modern period of human history as far as the emergence of nations and nationalism is concerned. Adopting a functionalist approach, he defends the view that the rise of nations was closely connected to the transformation of traditional societies into industrial ones, requiring a homogenous culture to ensure the sound operation of the society.¹⁹⁰ Industrial societies are dependent upon a certain kind of division of labour, which would be impossible in the absence of a shared culture, namely, nationalism.¹⁹¹ Although division of labour is also valid for premodern populations, in modern societies it turns out to be a “complex and persistently, cumulatively changing”¹⁹² one. Thus, atomized individuals could come and work together ensuring the maintenance and survival of the modern society. In a nutshell, nationalism filled a gap, replacing the functions of the erstwhile forms of *Weltanschauung*. This new ideology created nations, which are the objects of the ideology itself.¹⁹³ Nation-states are also the reflection of this social transformation in the political sphere. According to Gellner, they were scientific entities, a quality placing them in competition with religions,

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁹⁰ Atalia Omer and Jason Springs. 2013. *Religious Nationalism: A Reference Book*. Oxford: Abc-Clio. p.71.

¹⁹¹ Peter Van der Veer, and Hartmut Lehmann. 2002. *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press. p. 5.

¹⁹² Ernest Gellner. 1983. *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher. p. 24.

¹⁹³ Benedict Anderson. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso. p. 6.

apparently because they are based on faith rather than human rationality.¹⁹⁴

According to Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann, while religions are definitely not modern phenomena, it is beyond dispute that nations came into existence in the modern period.¹⁹⁵ For them although nationalism as an ideology is a modern phenomenon, it “feeds on a symbolic repertoire that is already available but also transforms it in significant ways”¹⁹⁶. Developing this argument, Atalia Omar holds that ethnicities and nations are historically produced and constructed. However, she also puts forward the view that religions are not an exception to this generalization.¹⁹⁷ Arguing in favour of the historical constructedness of nations, Omar admits that they are real at the same time. In other words, there is no obligatory causal relationship between constructedness and falsity.¹⁹⁸

Anderson also draws attention to the spontaneity of the nations as new social formations; however, he adds that they became subject to social change. In his parlance,

the creation of these artefacts [nations] towards the end of the eighteenth century was the spontaneous distillation of a complex 'crossing' of discrete historical forces; but that, once created, they became 'modular,' capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations.¹⁹⁹

Thus, even if nations are modern phenomena, they are not independent of social dynamics. Therefore, they are to be explained with the categories of social sciences. By emphasizing the modular structure of nations, Anderson also responds to the criticisms of envisioning a rupture between pre-modern and modern periods, about which I will give more details in the next section. Nevertheless, up until modern times, classical communities, such as religious groups, e.g. *umma* were defined by their

¹⁹⁴ Anthony Smith. 2003. *Nationalism and Modernism*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis. p. 189.

¹⁹⁵ Peter Van der Veer, and Hartmut Lehmann. 2002. *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press. p. 4.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁹⁷ Atalia Omer and Jason Springs. 2013. *Religious Nationalism: A Reference Book*. Oxford: Abc-Clio. p. 50.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁹⁹ Benedict Anderson. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso. p. 4.

unique sacred languages as well as their capability to include others much easier than when nations had been predominant structures.²⁰⁰ In the face of developments in Western Europe especially, such as geographical explorations, Enlightenment and the French Revolution, classical communities started to decline. Nations were considered to be sovereign, because they appeared in an age when the aforementioned classical structures, which were divinely ordained and represented by the dynasties, started to break up.²⁰¹ Another reason for the decline of sacred communities was the fact that beginning with the Enlightenment, as the modernization spread out, the world was gradually going through a great social transformation by which the ways human beings had been apprehending the world were subject to substantial changes.²⁰²

According to Anderson, the gradual demotion of the sacred language of medieval times, which was Latin, was responsible for the transition from classical sacred communities to modern nations. Therefore, it also marked the ebbing of the social significance of religion in the society as a social force providing its integration. However, the counterpart of Latin in the Muslim World, which is Arabic was not losing its significance as the intermediary language between different Muslim societies, and as being the language of the holy book, Qur'an. Bloch noted that Latin was the only language taught in regular education processes in Europe, implying that it was the only one worthy to be passed down to posterity.²⁰³ However, things started changing in the sixteenth century. While most of the printed books were in Latin, the balance changed in favour of the vernacular languages in this century. In his words, "at no less dizzying speed, Latin ceased to be the language of a pan-European high intelligentsia." Even in the sixteenth century, those who wrote in the 'truth-language' of Latin acquired a fame across the continent due to its widespread use.²⁰⁴ The seventeenth century, on the other hand, was the one announcing the victory of the vernaculars over Latin, especially due to print-capitalism, according to Anderson.²⁰⁵ In a nutshell, the fall of Latin as a sacred language was the harbinger of the fall of great sacred communities sticking together to keep religion at the centre of the human

²⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

²⁰¹ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁰² Ibid., p. 22.

²⁰³ Ibid., p. 18.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

life.²⁰⁶ Here it should be noted that, although Anderson very successfully made a point that a transition transpiring at the linguistic level had a profound impact on changes at the social level, he does not cogently explain why print-capitalism, by which he refers to the process starting in the sixteenth century marked by very rapid spread of books across Europe thanks to the introduction of printing machines²⁰⁷, gave rise to vernaculars rather than Latin, keeping in mind that it is just a technological advancement which did not operate in favour or against any certain language.²⁰⁸ To put in a different way, why were those reading and writing in Latin not successful in promoting their language against their ‘rivals’? Therefore, it turns out to be an egg-chicken problem, leading to a confusion regarding the order of cause and effect.

In sum, classical sacred communities had three basic qualities. Firstly, there was a sacred-script language, e.g. Latin in Christendom and Arabic in Muslim world, which used to function as a medium to access the truth. Secondly, monarchs, kings or sultans were considered to be divinely ordained, thereby obedience to them was beyond a worldly action. Lastly, the history of humanity was linked to the cosmology in the minds of people. These three played an important role in making sense of the fatalities of everyday life, such as death and after-life.²⁰⁹ The fall of the classical communities with these qualities, led to the disappearance of this traditional mechanism of making sense of the world, which, in turn, brought about the possibility of ‘nation’ as “imagined political community- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign”.²¹⁰

Although these points proved to be true for Europe, I have doubts if they can be generalizable to the rest of the world. For instance, during the same period, in the Ottoman *madrasas*, the higher educational institutions, the language of education was in both Turkish and Arabic. Many books were written in both of the languages at the

²⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

²⁰⁸ Although Anderson claims that nations firstly emerged in Latin America, he singles out Europe regarding the birth of nations and nationalism. The following passage best describes his position vis-à-vis the importance of Europe: “I bring up these perhaps simpleminded observations primarily because in Western Europe the eighteenth century marks not only the dawn of the age of nationalism but the dusk of religious modes of thought. ... [F]ew things were (are) better suited to this end than an idea of nation. If nation-states are widely conceded to be 'new' and 'historical,' the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future. It is the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny.” Ibid., pp. 11-12.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 36.

²¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 5, 36.

same time, a paragraph in Arabic was followed by a Turkish one. Therefore, it is debatable that these transformations had happened all over the world in the same period. Nevertheless, I also agree with the main point of Anderson that nations are modern phenomena, because in spite of the temporal differences, it might be held that most of the world went through similar processes, even if they are not in the same pace and in the same form. This position is crucial for the research questions laid out at the beginning of the thesis which presumes a discrepancy between world religions and modern nations. In addition, theoretically speaking, I merge the approaches of Anderson and Smith by borrowing the modernity of nations from the latter and by applying the categories, namely, the sacred foundations of nationalism, of the latter to a religious community as part of a modern nation.

Challenges to Modernism

In nationalism studies, although there are renowned scholars who are in favour of the modernity of nations in temporal terms, some other scholars come up with criticisms towards this approach emphasizing the ancientness of nations. Modernists, some of whom are Kedourie, Gellner and Hobsbawm, defend the view that nation is not a social formation that can be thought of prior to the eighteenth century, and accordingly, the category of nation is not responsible for the rise of nationalism as a modern ideology. Rather, the process is reversed, meaning firstly nationalism were born, and then they created their respective nations.²¹¹ This modernist approach was challenged by especially medievalists in the field of nationalism.²¹² Adrian Hastings, a historian of Great Britain, goes against this approach, arguing that he is “not convinced by the great divide between the pre-modern and the modern and I [he] certainly do[es] not think that nationalism is, as such, a door, let alone the main door, from the former to the latter”.²¹³ In support of this view based on the continuation between pre-modern and modern time as far as the birth of nations are considered, Omar stresses that there were political leaders who instrumentalized religion to reinforce the communal bonds, eventually serving to maintain their power.²¹⁴ Despite the instrumentalization of religion for many purposes including securing communal

²¹¹ Adrian Hastings. 2007. *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, and Nationalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 9.

²¹² Ibid p. 2.

²¹³ Ibid p. 9.

²¹⁴ Atalia Omer and Jason Springs. 2013. *Religious Nationalism: A Reference Book*. Oxford: Abc-Clio p. 26.

identities, it is not persuasive that one should regard these communal identities to be national identities. Interestingly enough, Hastings contends that nation formation and nationalism just accidentally appeared in modern times. He denies any causal relationship between these social phenomena and the other qualities of modern times in Western Europe, such as industrialization, rapid urbanization, prevalence of scientific thought and so on.²¹⁵ Furthermore, he maintains that a sound understanding of nationalism is dependent upon the rejection of any rupture between pre-modern and modern times regarding nations and nationalism.²¹⁶ Although it is not an overnight transformation, against Hastings, I argue that the critical changes in every spheres of life taking place in modernity had certainly a profound impact upon the way human societies stick together and maintain their existence. For instance, how can one imagine a nation formed by its members who were imagining a monolithic group of people to which they were attached, whereas even the greater polities, such as empires used not to envision their subjects as one great nation? In addition, it is also quite reasonable that in order to be able to mention the concept of nation, there should be a linguistic unity in a territory at a minimum level. Otherwise, how can different ethnic groups speaking different languages and dialects view themselves to be a part of larger human society, which was the case in the premodern ages when the print-capitalism and similar rapid production and transportation systems of modern times had not yet been discovered?

In his book, *Nationalism and Modernism*, Anthony Smith takes a softer position, claiming that “[e]ven if the nation is modern and perhaps ‘invented’, it does not, cannot, emerge out of nothing.”²¹⁷ However, for me, Smith is not right in his criticism since the defenders of the modernist approach are not that sharp in their arguments. For instance, Benedict Anderson, repeatedly refers to the cultural sources of nations and nationalism, with references to death, destiny and so on.

Within this debate, I adopt the position defending the modernity of nationalism as an ideology and nations as social formations. Otherwise, the original question of this thesis loses its meaning, which assumes a tension between religiosity and nationalism, due to the fact that whereas the former is an ancient phenomenon, the latter is

²¹⁵ Adrian Hastings. 2007. *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, and Nationalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 205.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²¹⁷ Anthony Smith. 2003. *Nationalism and Modernism*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis. p. 113.

apparently modern. Departing from this assumption, I have been making an effort to come up with an explanation to the juxtaposition of these ‘different’ understandings. There are at least two potential tensions within their co-existence, namely, sacred vs. secular and universal vs. particular.

Religion and Nationalism

Secularization Theory

While the above debate has been going on regarding the time of the emergence of nations and nationalism, in modern social sciences there is another broader theoretical approach which is called secularization or secular replacement theory. I will go into details of the approach, elaborating upon the argument of both its defenders and critics in pursuit of laying out a clear picture. The main purpose to discuss this debate is that it is directly related to the main topic of this thesis which is trying to apprehend and explain the nationalism of a religious group in a modern society, which is Turkish society in the contemporary period. The Nurcu community stands as an exception to this approach, therefore, without tapping into this debate and cogently rejecting its main principles, it would not be possible to carry out a sound discussion of *Nurcus*. Therefore, in this section, I will take up the debate on the secularization of societies and will show that this cannot be generalized to all over the world, as *Nurcus* do not fit into that framework, being religious and nationalist at the same time.

Having said that, one of the primary claims of the theory is that societies used to be more religious than today.²¹⁸ Émile Durkheim is the most cited father of the social theory regarding secularization, as he suggests that advanced societies are the secular ones, in contrast with the traditional ones defined by religiosity. However, he is not alone in this type of reasoning, the other prominent figures of the classical sociology and psychology, such as Comte, Marx and Freud were in favour of the claim of the decline of religions.²¹⁹

Another main argument of this theory is that “religion in modern societies loses its social creativity and is forced to choose between a sterile conservation of its premodern characteristics and a self-effacing assimilation to the secularized world.”²²⁰

²¹⁸ Bryan R. Wilson. 1975. *The Debate over "Secularization": Religion, Society, & Faith*. London: Encounter. p. 78.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Peter Van der Veer, and Hartmut Lehmann. 2002. *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and*

Although they are not immune from criticism, Steve Bruce comes up with some common qualities of the secularization process. In his account, in secularizing societies, the religious institutions start weakening and waning. Eventually, the religious rules lose their authority and validity regarding the actions of human beings, the properties of religious institutions are confiscated by secular nation-states, and the religious consciousness of the members of traditional communities is replaced by the one defined by its rationality and empirical manner. In addition to the actions of individuals, social activities also start to be governed by the secular institutions and rules. Lastly, the time that people used to spend for religious rituals, prayers and sacraments goes through a significant decrease, as they are displaced from the lives of the modern beings within modern societies.²²¹ As is clearly seen, these are very assertive and sweeping points to be made, however, another significant scholar of secularization studies, Jose Casanova, defends the view that secularization theory can still be quite useful as an analytical category in understanding the secularization of European societies and comparing and contrasting them to the rest of the world.²²² Nevertheless, he adds that this comparison should be carried out “as long as the outcome of this transformation is not predetermined by the theory, and as long as we do not label as religious fundamentalism any counter-secularization, or any religious transformation that does not follow the prescribed model.”²²³

Keeping in mind that the *Nurcu* case is one of the cases which does not follow the prescribed model, as a Muslim religious movement, which has been keeping its rooted religious attachment in the face of modernization, it is crucial to look at the relationship between secularization and the religions. According to Weber, both Judaism and Christianity, especially Protestantism, had secularizing effects in the regions where they had been prevalent. Even though, it looks odd that a religion should function as a social force playing a secularizing role, he makes a differentiation, even a hierarchical relationship between religions and indigenous magic and folk religions. In Weber’s account, Judaism and Christianity led to disappearance of these kinds of

Asia. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press. p. 10.

²²¹ Steve Bruce. 2011. *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 2.

²²² José Casanova. "Public Religions Revisited," in Grace Davie, Paul Heelas, and Linda Woodhead. 2008. *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures*. Aldershot: Ashgate. p. 19.

²²³ José Casanova. "Public Religions Revisited," in Grace Davie, Paul Heelas, and Linda Woodhead. 2008. *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures*. Aldershot: Ashgate. pp. 18-19.

practices among people.²²⁴ However, he does not mention Islam as a great religion playing a similar role, probably due to a lack of knowledge. Islam, indeed, functioned in a very similar manner, in different parts of the world. When it emerged in the seventh century in the Arabian Peninsula, it brought about the elimination of the animistic faiths of the Arab tribes. This process was repeated during its spread in Indonesia and Malaysia. In these regions, Islam advanced against the local folk religions. This also holds true for Turkey, as much as Islamic faith is rooted in the society. Nonetheless, it should be admitted that Islam obviously constitutes a serious problem in the face of modernity compared to Christianity and Judaism, especially because of its all-encompassing character organizing all spheres of life, ranging from politics to the everyday details of the life of a human being. Within this context, the juxtaposition of religiosity accompanied with daily observance of the Islamic rituals and nationalism, which is quite a worldly ideology, stands out as an enigma to be solved.

According to the scholars defending the secularization theory, there are some indices demonstrating the fall of religion and the religious thought in the face of the advancement of rationality within modern societies. Bruce claims that the opponents of the secularization theory argues that it is impossible to know how religious were the past societies. He does not accept this criticism on the grounds that “[t]hanks to work of historians, we actually know a great deal about the past. And, because religious institutions were often pioneers of statistical reporting and record-keeping ... we probably know more about religion than about any other sphere of human life.”²²⁵ Then, comparing and contrasting church-attendance figures in the past years and today, he holds that secularization as huge social transformation is not something peculiar to some developed and secular European countries, but also it is observable in Canada, Australia and New Zealand.²²⁶ In addition, Ireland which is thought to be strictly Catholic country has also been going through the same process.²²⁷ However, despite all this change, in his account, secularization theory is an exercise on the history and has no promise for the future of societies.²²⁸ If the non-Western societies

²²⁴ Max Weber. 2011. [1905] *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Talcott Parsons. London: Routledge. pp. 111, 115.

²²⁵ Bruce. 2011. *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory*. pp. 4-5.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

experience the same conditions which led to the secularization of the Western societies, on the other hand, they might go through the same process which displaces religion from the centre of human life and mind.²²⁹

Taking a glance at the debates on Turkish modernization, there are some scholars contending that Turkey has also been going through the secularization process which started in the Western world. According to Behçet Batur, the secularization taking place in Turkey is especially peculiar to urbanized regions, especially to metropolises such as Istanbul and Ankara. In addition, for him, this process does not occur at the same path and density all over the country. However, considering the fact that by the year 2014, the proportion of those living in cities went up to 91.8%, it will be plausible to argue that secularization is a common phenomenon for almost all regions of the country, if at different paces.²³⁰ This change also triggered another one at cultural level. The neighbourhood culture, at the centre of which is religion, is replaced by the urban culture marked by economic interests and power conflicts. This social transformation can be interpreted as different appearances of secularization, according to Batur.²³¹ Tayfun Atay, on the other hand, draws attention to the secularization of Islamists. For him, whereas headscarf was a religious or political symbol till the end of 1980s, starting from 1990s, it increasingly became cosmetic accessories for Muslim women.²³² After 2000s, the political Islam started weakening and 'commercial' Islam started to replace it. While previously Ramadan was a sacred month during which believers fasted, it started to be an occasion for entertainment. In the tents set around the Blue Mosque, various activities were carried out to enjoy the visitors. Muslims started spending most of their time with these events rather than joining the *tarawih* prayer inside the mosque.²³³ In line with Atay, Batur also claims that in Turkey, the number who prays five times a day regularly decreases. Quitting daily prayer might be a factor which cuts the ontological ties between the individuals and the supreme being that they worship. For him, fasting as a worship, gradually loses its prevalence among Muslims, especially when Ramadan coincides with summer season. However, the same decrease is not observed in the prayer of sacrifice, during which Muslims

²²⁹ Ibid., pp. 2, 3, 4, 23.

²³⁰ Behçet Batur. 2015. "Sekülerleşme Türkiye'de", *Journal of International Social Research*. 38 (8): 564.

²³¹ Ibid., p. 565.

²³² Tayfun Atay. 2004. *Din Hayattan Çıkar*. İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları. p. 81.

²³³ Ibid.

slaughter some certain animals for the sake of God and gives away some of the meat to the poor. According to Batur, this should be explained by the fact that this prayer also functions to meet a specific need of people which is meat consumption.²³⁴ However, this explanation is not that persuasive on the grounds that firstly it is only dependent upon a subjective opinion which is supported neither by qualitative nor quantitative data. Secondly, it is obvious that people can meet their need to consume meat in many different ways. For this purpose, they are not supposed to celebrate Eid al-Adha (Festival of Sacrifice).

Regarding the future of the world, from the perspective of secularization theory, it is predicted that as the power and social significance of the religions wane, both the number of religious people will go down accordingly, and the extent to which they are pious will be in decline, because it will be harder and harder for families to bring up their children in religious settings.²³⁵ The all-encompassing secularization will also lead to loosening of the existing religious inclinations by blurring the boundaries of them in the minds of people. Different forms and denominations of the extant religions will proliferate which will also lead to the rise of relativism and indifference to the rightfulness of one particular religious path.²³⁶

In sum, defenders of secularization theory have a conception of linear history running from the past to the future, in a manner unavoidably requiring the disenchantment of the world and a departure from religious thought to rationality. They barely make differentiation based on regional differences. Last but not least, although religions survive in the modern societies, their survival is considered to be a function of their submission to secular institutions. In consequence, in a secularized world, religion is either about to completely disappear or it will retreat from its erstwhile predominant position. However, looking at the contemporary world, there are many developments disproving this theory, showing the influence of religion on society and politics. The next section will elaborate upon the arguments showing the weak sides of the secularization theory, especially when it is applied to the non-Western world.

²³⁴ Batur, "Sekülerleşme Türkiye'de", pp. 568-69.

²³⁵ Steve Bruce. 2011. *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 2.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

Challenges to the Secularization Theory

Especially towards the end of the twentieth century, plenty of scholars challenged to the conventional view regarding secularization. In this section, I will provide an overview of these criticisms accompanied my points showing the weak points of the theory especially as far as Turkish and Nurcu cases are considered. In pursuit of this perspective, I will also make specific references to the history of religious movements in modern Turkey starting from 1923 up until today.

If the secularization theory has been losing its persuasiveness, argues Asad, this is because the categories of religion and politics are more intermeshed than what we used to think. The increasing amount of knowledge about nation-states only confirms this argument. The modern nation-states show us that the concept of secular can barely survive without the idea of religion.²³⁷ Although to a great extent, they are at odds with the rooted world religions, especially for the purpose of ensuring their legitimacy, they make use of many instruments and resources mainly belonging to these religions, ranging from chosenness to the sacredness of the homeland. On the other hand, contrary to the basic principle of the secularization theory, religion did not lose its importance everywhere. In classical sociology, it was assumed that in the transition from rural communities to modern industrial societies, religion as the primary sign of moral unity will decline. Nevertheless, antithetical to this approach and prediction, the nineteenth century witnessed the proliferation of new and organized religious movements both in the Netherlands and in England. Criticizing the analyses based on the church attendance as argued, for instance, by Bryan Wilson, Van der Veer holds that “the question about church attendance and membership cannot even be raised, since there are no churches. The organization of religion, the place of religion in society, and the patterns of recruitment are so different that not only secularization theory itself but also the empirical and theoretical problems derived from it in the context of Western Christianity become meaningless.”²³⁸ Van der Veer also draws attention to the question of the relationship between religion and the public space. According to him, the modern subject is produced with the modern public. Therefore, religion which has been quite influential in shaping of the individual ethics and

²³⁷ Peter Van der Veer, and Hartmut Lehmann. 2002. *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press. p. 192.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

conscience, certainly plays a significant role in the creation of modern public space.²³⁹ Religion, indeed, is the major source of rational and moral individuals as well as an important organizational aspect of the public space produced by these people.²⁴⁰ Accordingly, many religious movements ranging from Bible societies to cow-protection movements play an important role in the creation of public spaces which have been quite critical in the formation of national identities.²⁴¹

Regarding the relationship between the secularization theory and nationalism as modern ideology, Omar holds that the nationalism as a carrier of secularism is not a replacement of religions in modern era. It only draws upon and instrumentalizes the elements of traditional religions.²⁴² Even if she does not openly express, the following implication can be extrapolated: The fact that religious elements are used by nationalism neither makes it a form of religion, nor a replacement of the great religions. At the same time, the nationalism of especially lower classes are heavily intermingled with religious elements and agenda. Taking the contemporary Greek nationalism as an example, for the economically backward segments of the society, under the impact of the clergy, the glories of the Byzantine Empire in the wars against (Muslim) Turks were much more important than the genius of the ancient Athenians.²⁴³ In the modern era as well, we observe the rise of both nationalism and religion especially after the end of the Cold War in 1990.²⁴⁴ In many of the post-colonial states, against the secular-authoritarian state power, religious identities were integrated into the national identities, however not in a fundamentalist form but in a participatory manner.²⁴⁵ This demonstrates that, in more than one way and in multiple contexts, religions survive in the political spaces dominated by secularism. It is also in a close relationship with nationalism, contrary to the predictions of the defenders of secularization theory.

As Lehmann and Martin finely argued, the question is not a binary one, namely secularization vs. return of religions. Rather, it is a more complicated process in which

²³⁹ Ibid., p. 20.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 39.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Atalia Omer and Jason Springs. 2013. *Religious Nationalism: A Reference Book*. Oxford: Abc-Clio. p. 60.

²⁴³ Anthony Smith. 2003. *Chosen Peoples*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 16.

²⁴⁴ Willfried Spohn. 2003. "Multiple Modernity, Nationalism and Religion: A Global Perspective". *Current Sociology*. 51 (3/4): 265-286. p. 265.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 279.

both of the transformations take place in different times.²⁴⁶ In other words, secularization of a society might halt at one point in time and it might start desecularize. The best example for this is the rise of Islamic awareness especially in 70s and 80s in Turkey. Whereas previously there was even no students at the universities with headscarf, then they started joining undergraduate programs and their visibility rapidly increased. Most of the time, especially Kemalist elites in Turkey longs for those times, when everybody used to wear Western clothes and take a walk in Istiklal Avenue in Taksim, one of the most secular districts of Istanbul, historically populated by non-Muslim minorities, say, Ottoman Greeks, Armenians and Jews. Therefore, it is not a process of dissolution during which religion is disintegrated by the secular forces. Instead, one can talk about two processes that might follow each other in accordance with the social and political context under the influence of societal dynamics. On the other hand, Hutchinson rightfully emphasizes that due to the grave inequality between different social classes and injustices taking place in society, some members or segments of the greater societies might take religious orientations.²⁴⁷ So, it is quite a dynamic process.

One can find some examples to support this claim in modern Turkey as well. For instance, despite the fact that husband is the head of the family according both to the religion of Islam and traditional conventions; today it is not something easily defensible in public space, as it is simply contrary to the prevalent secular discourse envisioning a strict equality between genders. Especially regarding the place of women in society and the protection of their rights, there are important developments in contemporary Turkey. They are quite challenging as empowering woman against man, nevertheless, the voice of the religious opponents is quite weak, especially as religious arguments are not as powerful as they were in the past. On the other hand, one should keep in mind that this is not a unidirectional process moving on a straight line flowing from religiosity to secularity. Rather, the line is a fluctuating one, and the movement is not always in the same direction. What I mean is that especially after the promulgation of Turkish Republic in 1923, Turkey went through an intense secularization especially because of the state-sponsored measures, which were not so democratic. All the religious movements were suppressed and those who went against

²⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 269.

²⁴⁷ John Hutchinson. 1994. *Modern Nationalism*. London: Fontana Press. p. 95.

the new reforms were harshly punished. For instance, an important Muslim scholar, İskilipli Atıf Hoca, was hanged based on his refusal to wear a hat. Many of those scholars were in exile and the Sufi orders were officially outlawed. Within such a social atmosphere Nur community under the leadership of Nursi was the only opposition movement operating at grassroots level, deliberately avoiding engaging in politics. Until around 1950, they were alone in their opposition and religiousness was identified with being Nurcu. If a person starts praying five times a day, one of the pillars of Islam, he or she used to be called Nurcu, although observation of this worship is only a sign of a practicing Muslim. In 1950, for the first time, the opposition party (Democratic Party) won the elections and the one-party regime ended. The new period witnessed flourishing of the new religious movements and communities as a natural consequence of freer political atmosphere. Even if they were still outlawed, Sufi orders started functioning under the name of some associations. An Islamist political party, National Order Party was founded in 1972. As aforementioned, female college students wearing headscarf was a new phenomenon in 1980s, and it was a new challenge to secularist state as the daughters of traditional-religious families used not to go to universities in the past. However, in that decade, this demand came to the surface, and the visibility of Islam started to increase, which accordingly increased the threat perception of the state. Wearing a headscarf was banned in 1984. After a long and painful struggle, this problem has been resolved by the Ak Party government very recently, in 2011.

This process shows us at least two different tendencies, the first of which is defined by the increase of secularization of a staunchly traditional society. However, this process halts in the second half of the twentieth century and religiosity and religious visibility start rising. It reaches an apex after the Justice and Development Party came to power in 2002. Even though the party was not that powerful then, in around a decade or so, it achieved almost exclusive control of state power. This was perceived as the return of religion in general, Islam in particular, leading to a grave disappointment and uneasiness of the secularist segments of society. Nevertheless, something unusual and unpredicted started to take place: the secularization of the religious people. The increase in the power and wealth of conservative people brought about an estrangement from religion, especially the practices such as veiling and daily prayers. Deism was on the rise among students in Islamic Divinity High Schools. In

2018, a foundation called İKDAM Education Association issued a report, with the intention of warning the state authorities, drawing attention to the widespread tendency among students towards deism, an ideology teaching to believe in a creator, which does not intervene in the universe, in Konya, one of the most conservative cities of Turkey.²⁴⁸ These debates are still quite heated. Therefore, now we can talk about a new dynamic of change which is departing from religiousness to secularity. Although it is not easy to predict how long this process will continue, or whether there will be a change in the direction or not; it can safely be argued that the Turkish case demonstrates that a unidirectional approach to secularization of societies is not persuasive and it does not hold true all over the world.

In the previous section, I elaborated the main arguments of the secularization theory and in this section, I addressed its criticisms. As I have aforementioned, even if secularization as a social process of modernization is part and parcel of modernization, it cannot be generalized across the world. The Turkish case simply stands as a challenge to its main precepts. Although it is a fact that Turkey has been going through a very deep secularization process, the overarching process of social transformation is multi-layered, including different movements in different directions. Nurcus stands out as a religious community resisting this wholly state-supported and top-down indoctrination process. However, to a great extent they do not show any sign of doubt when it comes to embracing the ideology of nationalism. So, then we are to pose the same question again: How does this become possible? In what way do they keep their religiosity as practicing Muslims together with nationalism which is apparently a modern ideology whose main objectives concerns this world rather than the hereafter?

Is Nationalism a Religion?

As the relationship between nationalism and religion is debated, one of the key issues is whether nationalism is a form of religion or a completely secular ideology. Most of the scholars who wrote up until the 1980s defended the idea that nationalism is a replacement of the traditional religions in the modern era, for reasons which I will discuss below. Then some other scholars opposed this idea and argued that the existence of similarities between them does not solely demonstrate and prove that

²⁴⁸ “Gençler deizme kayıyor,” Milliyet, Accessed June 26, 2019, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/gencler-deizme-kayiyor-gundem-2639815>.

nationalism is a religion.

The proponents: Nationalism is a religion

The proponents of the idea that nationalism is a type of religion are mainly dependent upon the opinions of Emile Durkheim who is one of the founding fathers of Sociology as a modern science. According to him, Christianity was in the process of secularization and in its absence modern society needed a new religion to replace Christianity.²⁴⁹ The new religion of the modern times was in effect nationalism. To show the roots of this new religion he refers to the French Revolution:

Nowhere has society's ability to make itself a god or to create gods been more in evidence than during the first years of the Revolution. In the general enthusiasm of that time, things that were by nature purely secular were transformed by public opinion into sacred things: Fatherland, Liberty, Reason. A religion tended to establish itself spontaneously, with its own dogma, symbols, altars, and feast days. ... In a specific case, we saw society and its fundamental ideas becoming the object of a genuine cult directly-and without transfiguration of any kind.²⁵⁰

Durkheim touched upon a concept of a religion making itself which is contrary to the traditional religions attributed to the divine powers. In other words, it was the religion of this life rather than the hereafter. In this quote, and in the whole book, he does not mention the word nation or nationalism. However, scholars like Wallace interpreted this as nationalism and argued that in Durkheim's understanding, patriotism and nationalism are the civil religions of modern societies.²⁵¹ Gellner also is another scholar who followed the traces of Durkheim in the definition of nationalism and its relation to religion. According to him, nationalism functions very much like the erstwhile traditional religions in society. However, he places specific emphasis on culture rather than society itself. The celebration and sanctification of culture represents nationalism. Anthony Smith, from whose theoretical approach I will partly

²⁴⁹ Jose Santiago. 2009. "From Civil Religion to Nationalism as the Religion of Modern Times: Rethinking a Complex Relationship". *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2009) 48(2) p. 396.

²⁵⁰ Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religion*, pp. 215-16.

²⁵¹ Jose Santiago. 2009. "From Civil Religion to Nationalism as the Religion of Modern Times: Rethinking a Complex Relationship". *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (2009) 48(2):394-401. p. 396.

draw upon in the last section of this chapter, also adopts the basic approach of Durkheim and treats nationalism as a form of religion. In his book, *Nationalism and Modernity*, he states that “nationalism becomes the ‘religion of history’, sacralising the authentic past of the community in its ancestral homeland.”²⁵² As is seen, he has no doubt as to whether nationalism is considered to be religion or not. Rather, according to him, nationalism is the religion emanating from and based on historical sources. In another work of his, he regards nationalism to be a political religion.²⁵³ He further explicates his position approaching nationalism in different levels. For him, while nationalism is undoubtedly a secular doctrine at the level of official ideology, on the other levels, such as cultural and popular levels, it draws upon the sacred sources of historical religions.²⁵⁴ It seems that his opinion about religious character of nationalism is not stable and fully consistent.

One of the champions of the thesis that nationalism is a religion is Carlton Hayes who published his work titled *Essays on Nationalism* in 1928, in which he struggled to prove that nationalism is the new religion of the modern times. As many other scholars, he also adopted a Durkheimian interpretation and definition of religion and nationalism with a specific emphasis upon the resemblances of the functions of these two worldviews. The primary quality of a religion, for Hayes, is its capacity to evoke emotions inside human beings. In modern times, nationalism, very much like religions, demonstrated the same capability.²⁵⁵ The similitude between these qualities is enough to call the latter a religion for Hayes, in adopting a functionalist approach. Furthermore, because a religious sense is so rooted and ingrained, each and every individual needs to believe in a faith. In case they are not content with the existing belief, they switch to another.²⁵⁶ Therefore, in the face of the waning historical religions, nationalism acquired the capability to draw people, being an alternative to them as it can also convince people to sacrifice their lives for the sake of their nations. To support his argument, Hayes asks rhetorical questions: “May it not be that we shall here find the most convincing explanation of the strength of modern nationalism, the zeal of its apostles, and the devotion of its disciples? Is it not a demonstrable fact that nationalism has become to a vast number of persons a veritable religion, capable of

²⁵² Anthony Smith. 2003. *Nationalism and Modernism*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis. p. 115.

²⁵³ Anthony Smith. 2003. *Chosen Peoples*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 7.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁵⁵ Carlton Hayes. 1928. *Essays on Nationalism*. New York: The Macmillan Company. p. 95.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

arousing that deep and compelling emotion which is essentially religious?”²⁵⁷ It appears that Hayes has almost no doubt with regard to the question whether religion and nationalism can be identified or not.

Drawing the attention to their similarities, Hayes elaborates on the new symbols of the new religion created and counter-posed against religion after the French Revolution. The tricolour cocarde was representing the liberty, the Phrygian cap was standing for the Declaration of Rights and of the Constitution and the altars were corresponding to the homeland.²⁵⁸ In addition, many rituals of Christianity were replaced with their alternatives towards the end of the eighteenth century in France. For instance, altars were raised for the fatherland on which an inscription was placed, reading “the citizen is born, lives, and dies for la Patrie”²⁵⁹. Civic marriages were introduced instead of the ones carried out with a marriage contract based on religious principles. Likewise, alongside the religious funerals organized according to the Christian conventions, ‘civic funerals’ appeared as a new phenomenon.²⁶⁰ Following the framework of Durkheimian functionalist approach, Hayes argues that nationalism fulfils a social function very much like religions, which are manifested especially as public rites carried out in the name and for the sake of whole society.²⁶¹ From his perspective, the nation or the homeland started fulfilling the same function with Gods in religions, by saving the members of the nations from evil and by granting them a life greater and longer than their own individual life.²⁶² In addition, in line with the historical religions, members of the nations are supposed to take part in the public ceremonies to show and prove their allegiance to the greater nation.²⁶³

Hayes also gives some concrete examples of rites, comparing the ones in nationalism and religion. Firstly, he touches upon two holy objects of nationalism, the national flag and the national anthem. Both of them are venerated by people, actually everybody is required to respect them to be an acceptable member of the nation. For him, they are not profane, rather quite holy representations of the soul of the nation. When a national anthem is performed, despite some differentiations, the audience are

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 103.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Ibid., p. 105.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid., p. 107.

supposed to change their postures, generally to stand up and to take off anything covering their heads.²⁶⁴ This point appears, to some extent, to prove true in Turkish case, since both national anthem and Turkish flag are venerated by almost all segments of the Society, excepts some of the Kurds and Islamists. However, there are some unexplained sides of this issue which I will discuss in the next section where I elaborate the opposing views. Another point Hayes made is that nationalism has its own holy days as opposed to the holy days of religion, by which he means basically Christianity.²⁶⁵ This might be considered to be valid in especially official Turkish nationalism. While the predominant religion, Islam, has two main holy days, namely, *eid al-adha*, and *eid al-fitr*, the official state ideology has four different holidays which are all emanating from historical developments which took place between 1919-1923, the formation period of the Turkish Republic. In addition to the alternative holy days, Nationalism has its own temples and a specific theology whose principles are deduced from the teachings of the crucial people in the emergence of the nation-state.²⁶⁶ These also can clearly be observed in Turkey, in that the grave of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, “the one and only founding father” of the nation is like a secular temple for especially those who believe in his ideology, whose number cannot be underestimated. During almost all the critical events, statesmen pay a visit to his grave²⁶⁷, called Anıtkabir, located in Ankara, the capital city. The foreign diplomatic guests are also taken there and an official ceremony is conducted. As the graves of the fathers are officially venerated and respected, criticizing them is not allowed in the textbooks.²⁶⁸ One can find many examples of this claim from Turkey as well. Not only Atatürk, but the other military and political figures who contributed to the foundation of the republic are also officially protected. However, not all the people involved in the process, but only

²⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 108.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Recently, in 31st March, 2019, local elections were held in Turkey. Contrary to the common sensical predictions, the very little-known candidate of the opposition achieved to win the election by a quite slight difference which is less than 0.1 percent. This led to a long process of objections taking more than two weeks and finally he was granted the mandate. While the objections were going on, he made a move and went to Ankara and paid a visit to Anıtkabir, where he left a note on the official diary of the tomb, signing it as the municipal mayor of Istanbul. Because this ritual is a symbolic action which is carried out following the election of the winning candidates, this created a resentment and discontent on the side of the ruling party. In return, the president had the Ministry of the National Defence to remove the diary signed by Ekrem İmamoğlu, the winning candidate. This recent incident palpably demonstrates that the grave of Atatürk is quite sacred in the eyes of both sides, so the actions taken regarding that grave is paid utmost attention.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 113-14.

those accredited in the eyes of the state are granted this privilege. It is a must to exalt these historical figures and also it is a must to denounce those against whom the founders fought. The best example is the last sultans of the Ottoman Empire, as the republic was founded both against the Western Powers and also the Empire, which is the *ancien régime*.

Another quality of nationalism which should be emphasized is the strength of its appeal to persuade millions of people to die for the sake of the nation. Hayes considers this as the supreme sacrifice, which is definitely a sign of a zeal comparable to the emotional intensity aroused by religions.²⁶⁹ One of the reasons for this is the fact that nation, in the eyes of the nationalists, is found at an ontologically upper level, above the material world, therefore people wholeheartedly sacrifices their own lives. It is widely believed that even though the members of the nation are fallible, and they are capable of committing the worst crimes, the nation composed of all of its members is pure and distant from all the bad qualities. In other words, it represents the ultimate truth.²⁷⁰

In short, according to some of the scholars that I have discussed above, nationalism is a religion, or it is a form of religion. To a great extent, they adopt the functionalist approach of Durkheim and adopts the assumption that religions used to fulfil certain functions in the society, and they meet some needs of the members of the society. Accordingly, because nationalism has some similarities with religions and it fulfils the same functions, it also came to be regarded as a religion. In the coming section, I will discuss the arguments of the opponents of this conventional approach. Then, in a critical manner I will come up with my own analysis arguing that nationalism is not a religion.

The opponents: Nationalism is not a religion

Whereas some scholars argue that nationalism is a kind of religion taking over the functions of the historical ones, this approach is deeply criticized by others. They level criticisms based both on the methodology carried out by the opposing theoreticians, and the content of the arguments by questioning the basic assumptions inherent in them.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 114-15.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

As aforementioned, following the Durkheimian understanding, most of the defenders of the first view assumed a necessity of a worldview or ideology which will provide the unity of the society, for the sake of maintaining cultural integration. This assumption was challenged by Fenn, coming up with two counter-arguments. Firstly, for him, because conceiving the society as a whole entity is baseless, modern societies do not necessitate a religion. In other words, even if religion helps society keep in one piece, because modern societies are not mono-block entities, there is no place for religion in these types of communities. Secondly, contrary to the unsupported assumption, Fenn claims that religions are indeed incapable of fulfilling the function of providing cultural integration.²⁷¹ Another critic of this approach, Turner, also comes up with a criticism regarding methodology and argues that the presence of some so-called common practices between nationalism and religion does not prove that nationalism is actually a religion. According to him, the defenders of this view are not able to convincingly demonstrate the actual connections between the sacral rituals of nationalism and how they provide the integration within industrial societies.²⁷² Piette also draws attention to another logical fallacy which is making judgments based on analogies. He critiques “the use of a methodology of analogy which is neither developed nor tested empirically, theoretical proposals biased by ideological prejudice and the use of metaphorical discourse which is never developed, and illegitimate shifting from one level to another”.²⁷³ On the other hand, Jose Santiago, claims that the approach envisioning cultural cohesion as a condition for social integration proves not to be true. Adopting the Weberian understanding, he suggests that religious standards and values are not needed for social integration, because the modern society is the end product of the process of rationalization. According to him, “[i]n the modern world, the coordination of social action may be the result of the mechanics of political domination or of the economic constraints of capitalism, neither of which need a cultural or religious framework. Social integration, therefore, does not require a shared sacred centre.”²⁷⁴ In short, Santiago criticizes the very foundations of the arguments proposed by the theoreticians in favour of the identification of nationalism and religion. Van der Veer, however, throws light to another side of the issue and admits

²⁷¹ Jose Santiago. 2009. “From Civil Religion to Nationalism as the Religion of Modern Times: Rethinking a Complex Relationship”. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48(2) p. 399.

²⁷² Ibid., p. 400.

²⁷³ Piette, Albert. 1993. *Les religiosit'es s'eculieres*. Paris: PUF. p. 4. Cited in Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

that sacralization of the idea of nation is true in the modern world. However, for him, by itself this does not take us to the conclusion that nationalism is a religion.²⁷⁵ Actually, for him, this claim requires (1) to specify the main constitutive elements of a religion, (2) then to search and find them in nationalism. Then he poses some rhetorical questions: “Which of these [constitutive] elements do we find in modern nationalism? To be sure, nationalism defines the past of a people, their future, or salvation, and the sacrifices necessary in order to claim salvation and win the future. Are these ingredients enough to qualify nationalism not as a substitute for religion (a quasi-religion, or *Ersatzreligion*) but as religion authentic and proper?”²⁷⁶ Definitely, his answer to these questions is not positive, on the grounds that similarity in qualities and practices is not enough to prove such a strong generalization.

Along with van der Veer, Santiago and the others, I also do not think that nationalism is a religion despite all the similarities in practices and qualities that can be specified. First of all, those adopting this approach are inclined to generalize the ideology of nationalism to the whole society, whereas societies are, to a great extent, multi-layered and composed of different segments and classes. Accordingly, the way each segment engages with and experiences nationalism may profoundly differ from another. To have a look at the analysis of Hayes regarding the symbols of the new “faith” as opposed to the historical religions, he mentions different symbols such as tricolour cocarde and a specific type of cap representing some values of nationalism, such as liberty or homeland. As aforementioned in the previous section, it is possible to find counterparts of these in Turkish case, such as the flag or the poster of the founding father, Atatürk. However, taking a glimpse at Nurcu reaction to the nationalism of the secular state, one would notice that it is not possible to talk about a sharp opposition between official Turkish nationalism, or new faith, vs. the historical religion which is Islam in this case. Rather, the members of this community engage in the nationalism of the state in a very complicated manner in which both inclusion and exclusion operate as parallel mechanisms. Although it is a complicated process, it is not bereft of a pattern and consistency. Looking more closely, it will be noted that these people adopt nationalism, even of the secularist state, as it converges to Islam and stay away from it as it diverges from and/or goes against their religious faith. Returning back to

²⁷⁵ Peter Van der Veer, and Hartmut Lehmann. 2002. *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press. p. 9.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

examples of the flag and Atatürk himself as venerated and sacred national symbol, they take differing and even opposing attitudes toward these symbols. The Turkish flag is composed of two elements, namely a crescent and a star with five corners. While these elements are in white, they are placed on a red background. The crescent is generally associated with Islam, as it is found in the flags of most of the Muslim countries. The star, on the other hand, symbolizes the martyrs who sacrificed their souls for the sake of Islam and the homeland. The red background, as it might be easily predicted, stands for the blood shed from those martyrs. Even there is a most probably fictional story combining these elements circulating among people and even found in the elementary and secondary school textbooks. According to that story, during the First Kosovo War fought between the Ottomans and the Serbians in 1389, thousands of soldiers died on the Ottoman side, although they won the battle. On 28th July 1389, Jupiter and the Moon in the form of crescent were reflected on the lake of blood formed in the battlefield and they formed a shape similar to the modern Turkish flag.²⁷⁷ Therefore, the flag by itself turns out to be a symbol combining the concerns of a secular nationalism and the values of religion of Islam. The existence of and reference to the religious symbols, leads to sympathy of Nurcus to this symbol of nationalism, which is the flag. Even though the secularist nationalism takes a quite adverse position and adopts oppressive policies against especially the visibility of Islam in the public space and the observance of the Islamic practices, Nurcus, without any hesitation, embraced the Turkish flag and still keep and hang it in their premises. However, the same thing does not hold true for the image of Atatürk. This is simply because, despite some attempts of some of today's Kemalists²⁷⁸, it is quite hard to constitute a positive relationship between Atatürk and Islam. Instead, he introduced a variety of reforms ranging from replacing Arabic letters with the Latin ones, to the compulsion of wearing a hat for men, to the shutdown of Islamic educational institutions and the tombs of the saints. Even these reforms are placed under the rubric

²⁷⁷ "Türk Bayrağının Hikayesi," Ata Kurumsal, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://www.atakurumsal.com/turk-bayraginin-hikayesi>.

²⁷⁸ In order to convince especially religious people in Turkey to embrace Kemalist principles, at least to persuade them to be grateful to Atatürk, some of the Kemalists argue that actually he was the protector of the religion as he did not shut down the mosques and allowed the observance of daily prayers. In addition, he committed one of the most distinguished Muslim scholars, Elmalılı Hamdi Yazır, to write a new exegesis (*tafsir*) of Qur'an. For them, Atatürk was only opposed to the *sufi* orders and organized Islamic communities which allegedly intervening between God and the Muslims and instrumentalizing religion for their own ends.

of Kemalist revolution, which obviously targeted both the experience and the institutions of the *ancién regime*, definitely marked by the prevalence of Islam. In addition, during this very period, because Said Nursi was the one and only charismatic Muslim scholar opposing the authority of Atatürk, he was specifically targeted. Although I will give a more detailed account of his life in the sixth chapter, it should be noted here that he spent twenty-seven years in jail and in permanent custody. Taking all these into account, it becomes more understandable that Nurcus did not develop any sympathy to this important symbol of modern-secular Turkish nationalism. However, this did not prevent them from cherishing the Turkish flag. Here it should be noted that Nurcus do not treat Turkish nationalism to be a standalone religion. If they think so, they would completely repudiate this separate religion which is invalid and unrightful as one and only rightful religion is Islam in their eyes. However, they do not treat nationalism in this way. Rather they carefully engage with this ideology and adopt its elements which are, they think, in accordance with while rejecting the secular parts which are at odds with Islamic principles.

Another example of the symbols of nationalism is the national anthem. Hayes argues that although there might be some linguistic and textual mistakes in them, they are exempt from criticism simply because “a national anthem is not a profane object and does not admit of textual criticism. It is holy. It is the *Te Deum* of the new dispensation; the worshippers stand when it is intoned, the military at "attention" and the male civilians with uncovered heads, all with external signs of veneration and respect.”²⁷⁹ Although these are applicable especially to the official ceremonies carried out by the state authority in different occasions, it would not be right to suggest that religious people are to make choice between their own religious inclination and nationalism’s sacralised principles. Contrary to the image of Atatürk and his busts, religious people in general, Nurcus in particular wholeheartedly embrace the Turkish national anthem. This is certainly not due to a coincidence. First and foremost, the poet who wrote the anthem is very well-known Islamist, Mehmet Akif Ersoy, who self-exiled to Egypt due to his discontent with the secularist reforms during a formative period of the republic. Furthermore, the references within the poem are quite religious which makes it more sympathetic to the religious people. Here is just one stanza from the poem titled Anthem for Independence:

²⁷⁹ Carlton Hayes. 1928. *Essays on Nationalism*. New York: The Macmillan Company. p. 108.

“O Lord, the sole wish of my heart is that,
No infidel's hand should touch the bosom of my temple.
These adhans, the *shahadah* [testimony] of which is the base of the religion,
Shall sound loud over my eternal homeland.”²⁸⁰

As is seen clearly, in just four verses multiple religious symbols are mentioned. Firstly, he addresses the Lord, then he laments that infidels violated the honour/chastity of his temple, referring the mosque. Thereafter, he adds that adhans, calls to prayer, chanted five times a day from the minarets of the mosques, signify the survival of religion and they will be incessantly chanted in the homeland forever. There are at least five different religious symbols in this part of the poem, and they are inextricably intermeshed with national symbols such as homeland and its survival in the struggles fought against ‘infidels’, referring to imperialist powers. At this point, what should be emphasized is that although Hayes is right in that the text is conceived to be sacred and it includes sacred elements, this sacredness does not emanate from and belong to nationalism as a religion. Rather, it is directly related to the historical religion, Islam in that case.

On the other hand, interestingly enough, there is another anthem authored and composed in the tenth anniversary of the republic in 1933. Although it is not ‘the’ national anthem, especially during the periods of conflict between secular and religious political sides, it is chanted by the seculars as a protest against the religious people or parties. It functions as a litmus test to demonstrate one’s embrace of the secular nationalist ideology or not. Not only Nurcus, but also other religious communities in Turkey distance themselves from this anthem, needless to say, they never chant it. This anthem mainly emphasizes achievements after the establishment of Turkish republic as well as the superiority of the Turkish nation over the other ones. In addition, it dates the emergence of the Turks back to time immemorial putting forward that Turks had existed since the pre-history and they will be continuing to exist after the end of history. In it, there is no single reference to Islamic symbols or values.²⁸¹ This ideological differentiation and conscious choice helping us explain

²⁸⁰ “Turkish National Anthem,” University of Michigan, Accessed June 26, 2019, <http://umich.edu/~turkish/links/manuscripts/anthem/english.htm>.

²⁸¹ Here is an exemplary part of this anthem, showing its secular nationalist tone, which even can be called racist at times: We went out of all the wars with our head held high in the last ten years. / We

why religious people have no sympathy for it and why secular nationalists embrace the same anthem. Therefore, it appears that the approach envisioning a replacement and a binary opposition between historical religion and nationalism as modern religion does not prove to be true one more time. As I mentioned above, the engagement of secular and religious people with nationalism differs from each other and that engagement and the experiencing nationalism is far from being simple, namely, a full rejection or entire embracement.

The functionalist approach conceiving nationalism or religions as worldviews which fulfil some function in the society in order to provide social and cultural integration in the modern societies, is also far from being persuasive and explanatory approach in the case of modern Turkey, considering the multi-layered structure of the society. In their understanding, nationalism and historical religions are placed in opposition to each other, and the former is thought to fulfil the functions of the latter in its absence. In a way, a zero-sum game is envisioned in which only one of them prevails, pushing the other to the margins and taking over its functions and practices. What they miss is that the way a secular individual who is not committed, even hostile historical religions experiences nationalism is very different from a pious person's engagement with that ideology. Indeed, there are serious differences. For religious people there is no such a question, forcing to choose between them. They quite successfully merge, fuse and experience both of them at the same time.

This demonstrates that it is not convincing to consider two separate and competing understandings, namely, religion and nationalism. Rather, there are many factors and dynamics determining the actions and engagements of religious people, Nurcus in our case, with nationalism. Instead of developing a wholesale attitude towards nationalism, they adopt a selective one which is sharply defined and determined by their attachment and commitment to Islam. This means that they do not consider nationalism as a separate and alternative modern religion, as they embrace and even champion some parts of it which can be reconciled with the fundamentals of Islam. Otherwise, obviously, they would undoubtedly distance themselves from nationalism, which is definitely not the case.

created fifteen million young people at every age in the last ten years. / Under the leadership of the supreme commander venerated by the whole world, / We knitted all the corners of the homeland with the iron nets [railways] (*my translation*)

Conclusion

I have discussed in this chapter firstly, the emergence of nationalism, with a specific emphasis upon its relationship with religion. Although I do not agree with the opinion that there is a sharp rupture between the pre-modern and modern times with regard to the emergence of nations, I also accept that nations as sovereign and limited communities within specific territories circumscribed by borders enforced by law are modern phenomena, and also nationalism as a political ideology was born in the modern ages. In an age when nation as a political community was missing, it is not possible to argue that the ideology of nationalism can be dated before modern ages. This is important as far as the research question of this thesis is concerned in that, theoretically speaking, I posed this modern ideology against Islam as a great religion due to their inherent differentiation in terms of both their emergence and their capability to include people. In other words, Islam is definitely a pre-modern religion as it was born in the seventh century and its message can be deemed contrary to the ideology of nationalism, which includes only the members of its respective nation.

The second debate that I have touched upon was the secularization theory which basically proposes that as of the beginning of the modern age there is a sweeping secularization process going on all over the world, marginalizing the religions and leading to loss of their social significance. Because most of the theoreticians think that nationalism fills the gap left by the religions, this debate is directly related to the primary community of this thesis which is under my scrutiny. Nurcus disprove this theory just by their existence as their members are quite religious people, practicing the daily prayers and so on and at the same time they are strictly attached to their nation which allows one to call them nationalist.²⁸² Therefore, this situation makes the research question meaningful, as it assumes that the Nurcu case constitutes an exception within the conventional theoretical frameworks.

Last, but not least, I took up the question of whether nationalism is a religion or not. Based on the similarities between the practices and the elements of religion and nationalism, there is a predilection among some scholars towards the idea that nationalism is a religion. This is also problematic from my point of view, since if this

²⁸² However, I do not call them nationalist although they share many characteristics of nationalism on the grounds that the defining features of their identity is definitely religious. So, nationalism, for them, can be used as an adjective but not a noun.

statement is accepted as true, accordingly it should be accepted that the experience of Nurcus is a fusion of religions, Islam and nationalism, with which I do not agree. Drawing upon the approaches of some scholars such as Piette, I claim that taking the similarity between the practices as evidence is a methodological pitfall.²⁸³ Therefore, the tension between Islam as a universalist religion and Turkish nationalism as a particularist ideology is still there.

In the next chapter, I will move on to the coexistence of religion and nationalism with a specific emphasis upon the concepts, universalism and particularism, after which I will elaborate my own approach.

²⁸³ Piette, Albert. 1993. *Les religiosités séculières*. Paris: PUF. p. 4.

CHAPTER 3: ADDRESSING THE TENSION BETWEEN UNIVERSALISM AND PARTICULARISM: THEORETICAL INSIGHTS

Introduction

The tension between the universalism of the great world religions and the particularism of nationalism constitutes the bedrock of this thesis. Therefore, in the previous chapter I have discussed the debates around secularization theory which prepares the ground for any discussion on the relationship between nationalism and religion. As clearly stated in the Introduction, I have been trying to understand the dynamics enabling the juxtaposition of these two understandings of the world. With that in mind, firstly, assuming that the coexistence of religion and nationalism is not something given due to basically two tensions, namely (1) sacred vs. secular and (2) universalism vs. particularism, I will discuss the ways religion and nationalism coexist around the world. Then, I will come up with my theoretical approach based on the observations of the Nurcu community. While I will draw upon the analytical tools of Anthony Smith's sacred foundations of nationalism approach, I will also take a critical position vis-a-vis his model and propose my own explanation. While Smith treats nationalism and religion as separate categories and draws a line connecting them as a sign of continuation, I will argue that these two worldviews are actually fused with each other and the relationship between them is not a horizontal one. Rather it is (1) a hierarchical and (2) ontological relationship in which nationalism is placed under religion.

Universalism vs. Particularism

In this section, I will look at the nature of the relationship between nationalism and religion from the perspective of the tension between universalism and particularism. First and foremost, I would like to emphasize that when I use the concept of religion, I mainly refer to the world religions such as Islam and Christianity. This is because, in this regard, we can split religions in two: ethnic religions and world religions. While the former contribute to the particularization of local ethnic identities, the latter, to a great extent, has the capacity to bring about the retreat of the parochial identities in the face of larger religious identities.²⁸⁴ Even if this is not a unidirectional and deterministic relationship, it is obvious that it has always been laborious to

²⁸⁴ Adrian Hastings. 2007. *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, and Nationalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 175-76.

accommodate these two identities.

As mentioned in the first chapter, Hayes argues that nationalism is a universal religion in itself. In his words, it “has a large number of particularly quarrelsome sects, but as a whole it is the latest and nearest approach to a world-religion.”²⁸⁵ Although it is true that during both the twentieth and twenty first centuries, nationalism kept its predominance as an ideology all over the world, it is not a world-religion for at least two reasons. Firstly, I do not agree with the idea that nationalism is a religion for the reasons I have detailed in the previous chapter. Secondly, it is not the case that there is an ideology of nationalism separated or evacuated from its object, which is the nation. Because there is always a nation to be upheld for each nationalism, the ideology does not have the capacity to include everybody in the world independent of their identities, which is an indispensable quality for world religions. Therefore, nationalism can be considered to be neither a religion nor a universal ideology. On the other hand, although Hayes makes an excessive claim that nationalism is a universal religion, he is right to point out that the general cult of nationalism is based on a tribal-like attachment and its practical manifestations. The good of one’s own nation always precedes and overrides the good of humankind.²⁸⁶

James Moorhead, on the other hand, draws attention to another tension within nationalism, which is its emphasis upon both one’s own nation and that nation’s universal claims. He considers this tension to be a contradiction and contends that it “has been the ascription of universal significance to the inherently limited experience of a single nation.”²⁸⁷ One might find some examples to support this argument from modern Turkey. Especially during the 1930s, the formation years of the republic, the so-called sun-language theory was quite popular and officially promoted by the state, according to which all the languages in the world are rooted in Turkish. In other words, all of them are the off-shoots of Turkish language. In order to provide a basis to this theory, many attempts were undertaken, trying to constitute etymological relationship between Turkish words and their counterparts in the other languages.²⁸⁸ In a way, the

²⁸⁵ Carlton Hayes. 1928. *Essays on Nationalism*. New York: The Macmillan Company. p. 117.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

²⁸⁷ James Moorhead, “United States: The American Israel: Protest ant Tribalism and Universal Mission”, in *Many are Chosen: Divine Election and Western Nationalism*. ed. William R. Hutchison, and Lehmann Hartmut. 1994. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. p. 146.

²⁸⁸ One of the examples was the effort to attribute the word ‘parallel’ to a Turkish word ‘beraber’. According to Atatürk, they were similar in their pronunciation and intonation, which is a strongly

newly founded state was trying to universalize what is actually quite particular and parochial. It is another space of tension embedded and inherent in nationalism. Hastings also elaborates on this normative side of nationalism, putting forward that nationalisms cannot universalize their excessive claims on a rational basis. It is technically not possible for him. He also makes a comparison with religions and argues that based on rationality they can come up with universalistic claims.²⁸⁹ Here, however, I diverge from the reasoning of this type. Although, just as in his argument, I also claim that world religions are universalistic in nature, I do not think that this is so because their arguments are based on rationality. The same approach holds true for nationalism as well, meaning nationalism is not a universalistic ideology because it operates on an irrational basis. Rather, I am looking at the claims and arguments by themselves. In the example of Islam, according to the main sources of the religion, for instance the deeds and sayings (*sunna*) of the Prophet Muhammad, everybody is equal, and nobody is superior over the others in the humanity.²⁹⁰ However, according to Turkish nationalism, Turks are the true creators of world civilization, so they are superior to other nations. Therefore, rather than making an effort to assess if these arguments are rational or irrational, I prefer to look at only their contents, which clearly demonstrate their position in this debate.

I have discussed the tension between the universalism of great religions and particularism of nationalism above in general terms. Having done that, I move on to the discussion of these concepts with regard to Christianity and Islam.

Christianity: A favourable religion for nations?

Because I take Islam as a world-religion with universalist tendencies, I will also take a closer look at Christianity as another world religion with more followers than Islam, in order to have comparative analysis. However, I will not devote a separate space for Judaism and nationalism, basically because, although it is the first of Abrahamic religions, its universalism is much thinner compared to Islam and Christianity. This is especially because in Judaism, Jews, as an ethnic community, are chosen by God and there is a covenant between him and his people that a particular land in the Middle East is promised to them. So, because there is even no claim of universality even at

sufficient clue showing that ‘parallel’ is modified version of ‘beraber’ which is a Turkish word.

²⁸⁹ Adrian Hastings. 2007. *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, and Nationalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 32.

²⁹⁰ Vehbi Ünal. 2006. Peygamber Efendimiz’in Veda Hutbesi. İstanbul: Rağbet Yayınları. p. 177.

theoretical level and due to almost inexistence of a tension which I have been pursuing in this study, I will confine my discussion only with Islam and Christianity.

In the literature, it is widely argued that nationalism is primarily a Christian phenomenon. Although it is debatable if the nation as a community came into existence for the first time within Christian societies, it is important to have a closer look at this religion due to both its size and universalist claims. For instance, according to Hayes, since nationalism appeared among Christian peoples, it borrowed many of its practices and principles and adapted them for its own purpose. Likewise, he constitutes a parallel between the national states and the medieval Christian churches, emphasizing a historical continuity between a world-religion and a modern ideology.²⁹¹ Hastings also makes a similar point claiming that a study of nationhood requires first and foremost Christian peoples. For him, it is not because his work is limited with the European territory, rather “[t]he nation and nationalism are both ... characteristically Christian things which, in so far as they have appeared elsewhere, have done so within a process of westernisation and of imitation of the Christian world, even if it was imitated as western rather than as Christian.”²⁹² This takes us to the modernization process of Turkey and the adoption of nationalism by the religious Turkish people in general, Nurcus in particular. It seems to me that because the knowledge of Hastings about Islam and Muslim world is limited, he inclined to make generalizations. Regarding Nurcus, even if it is obvious that there is a westernization weaker than the secular segments of society, it is not convincing to argue that their nationalist tendency is a sign of their Christianization. In my perspective, their particular historical, political and social circumstances play a more important role in this process, which I will discuss in further detail in the seventh chapter titled “Reconciling Religion and Nationalism”.

On the other hand, Anderson accentuates the two poles within Christianity, namely universal claims and specificities. He argues that “[w]hile the trans-European Latin-reading clerisy was one essential element in the structuring of the Christian imagination, the mediation of its conceptions to the illiterate masses, by visual and aural creations, always personal and particular, was no less vital.”²⁹³ In his account,

²⁹¹ Carlton Hayes. 1928. *Essays on Nationalism*. New York: The Macmillan Company. p. 105.

²⁹² Adrian Hastings. 2007. *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, and Nationalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 185.

²⁹³ Benedict Anderson. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso. p. 23.

although the religion and the lands where it was predominant was quite vast, it was capable of manifesting itself to local peoples. That was due to the juxtaposition of the cosmic and the mundane.²⁹⁴ Hastings also emphasizes the same point and draws attention to the classical approach envisioning a distinction between the two swords namely, the state and the church. However, according to him this is a quality of especially Western Christianity in which that kind of dualism prevailed for a long time.²⁹⁵ However, in due course, the balance between these two ends was broken in favour of particularism especially due to the emergence of autocephalous state-churches in Europe. In his words, “[t]he total ecclesiastical autonomy of a national church is one of the strongest and most enduring factors in the encouragement of nationalism because it vastly stimulates the urge to tie all that is strongest in God's Old Testament predilection for one nation and New Testament predilection for one church contemporaneously to one's own church and people.”²⁹⁶ Just to make a comparison with the development of nationalism in Turkey, up until the twentieth century, it is not easy to find a counterpart to state-churches as the manifestations of institutionalized religion. In the aftermath of the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the Presidency of Religious Affairs was established in 1924. Although it represented, to some extent, a Turkish interpretation of Islam, its main function was and is taming a universalist religion with “excessive claims” in public space as well as to make it more suitable to the secular nation-state. In this sense, it might be argued that it contributed to the particularization or nationalization of Islam in the Turkish case. Nevertheless, religious communities in Turkey, including Nurcus, have almost always approached this institution with suspicion. Therefore, it would not be that persuasive to claim that the Presidency played an important role regarding the adoption of nationalism by religious people in Turkey, who have accommodated both understandings for a long while.

Another important point to be made regarding the fact that Christianity paved the way for nationalism is that the translation of the Bible into vernacular languages played a crucial role in the rise of nations and nationalism in Europe in the Reformation period.²⁹⁷ Despite the fact that the main idea was to provide equal access to everybody

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Adrian Hastings. 2007. *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, and Nationalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 203.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 196.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 24.

who did not speak Latin, in other words, it was aimed that the content of the book, or the word of God will be available to all Christians; as an unintended consequence this translation process brought about the rise of national awareness through revitalization of vernaculars. The local languages which used to be employed only for oral communication were carried to the level of the medium of written religious literature, which contributed to the nationalization of the ethnicities, if not it was the one and only determining factor.²⁹⁸

In conclusion, it might be argued that according to the existing literature, Christianity is one of the crucial dynamics behind the rise of nations and nationalism in Europe. Although the universalist claims of Christianity are a fact, in due course, together with the specific historical circumstances, the particularist side of it got an upper hand vis-à-vis the other side. At this point, I will move on to examine the same theme in relation to Islam, asking if this is the case or not in it.

Islam: A religion of strong universalism?

If Islam is a religion envisioning a strong universalism, not allowing room for debate has long been an object of heated debates in the scholarship. Whereas some theoreticians are quite positive that there is no room for particularism in Islam, others contend that it is actually conducive to particularistic tendencies, including nationalism. In this section, I will take up the opposing views regarding this issue and at the end I will conclude that even if it would be an excessive claim to argue that Islam does not allow the emergence and rise of nationalism whatsoever, it should be admitted that there are many ontological barriers within the theology of Islam with which a nationalist Muslim is supposed to deal and resolve.

Remembering that nationalism is a secular ideology of modern times, Ernest Gellner points out that Islam is characteristically opposed to secularism, and so to nationalism at the same time. He further argues that it differs from the other world-religions as there is no other religion which is as resistant as Islam to secular modernization.²⁹⁹ However, some scholars, especially Muslim ones, in a somehow apologetical manner hold that Islam is actually compatible with modernity and modern values. According to them, a meticulous examination of Islamic history demonstrates that in Muslim

²⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

²⁹⁹ Ernest Gellner. 1997. Encounters with Nationalism. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing. pp. 178-79.

countries, spaces of religion and state are separated from each other, and the former practically is in favour of human rights and democratic values.³⁰⁰ In my opinion, it is both debatable to establish a relationship between a pre-modern religion and the values of modern times, and even if this holds true, this does not prove by itself that nationalism is an ideology promoted by Islam.

On the other hand, Hastings claims that, contrary to Christianity, which is quite conducive to nationalism, Islam by no means paves the way for nationalism. In his words, “Christianity has of its nature been a shaper of nations, even of nationalisms; Islam has not, being on the contrary quite profoundly anti-national. A great deal of vague discussion about the relationship between religion and nationalism is blighted by the easy assumption that every religion is likely to have the same sort of political effect. It is not so.”³⁰¹ He attributes this to the discontinuity between the old Hebrew scripture, namely the Old Testament, and Muslim tradition. Islam, despite the recognition of Abrahamic roots, does not accept and inherit the Old Testament.³⁰² The main reason behind this is that according to Islam the erstwhile scriptures revealed to Moses and Jesus are distorted in the later centuries. Therefore, although they are sacred in essence, they are not credible due to distortion, according to Muslims. O’Brien, however, thinks in a different way from Hastings and claims that the Judeo-Christian impact on the Islamic position with regard to the tension between universalism and particularism is crucial.³⁰³ According to Hastings, in the religion of Islam, there is a strictly defined political model in the scripture, contrary to the Christianity in whose scripture this space has been left quite vague. In his account, the strictness of Islam in the definition of the form of state and the ambiguity of it in Christianity respectively led to an inflexible universalism and a convenient setting for nationalism.³⁰⁴ Both Hastings and Mark Juergensmeyer, who is renowned with his book titled, *The New Cold War - Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State*, in which he almost associates religious nationalism with militant Islamism, cited an

³⁰⁰ Atalia Omer and Jason Springs. 2013. *Religious Nationalism: A Reference Book*. Oxford: Abc-Clio. p. 64.

³⁰¹ Adrian Hastings. 2007. *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, and Nationalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 187.

³⁰² Ibid., p. 201.

³⁰³ Conor Cruise O'Brien. 1988. *God Land: Reflections on Religion and Nationalism*. New York: Harvard University Press. p. 8.

³⁰⁴ Adrian Hastings. 2007. *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, and Nationalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 198, 201.

Islamist, Kalim al-Siddiqui:

Today we come face to face with perhaps the greatest evil that stalks the modern world - that of nationalism . . . The path of the ummah and that of the Islamic movement within the ummah is blocked by nation-states. These nation-states are like huge boulders blown across our path by the ill wind of recent history. All nation-states that today occupy, enslave and exploit the lands, peoples and resources of the ummah must of necessity be dismantled.³⁰⁵

It appears that rather than trying to have a holistic approach and a careful examination, Hastings and Juergensmeyer preferred to bring up an extreme example which does fit their framework, but which is not representative of the whole, which is the religion of Islam and Muslim peoples. For instance, having a glimpse at Nurcu case, it will be observed that the members of the community do not see any contradiction between the interests of the Turkish nation-state and umma. Indeed, both the late leader of the movement and his followers have been championing the ideal of Muslim unity, which clearly demonstrates that for them these two ideals are fully compatible. As a critique of the views of Hastings and Juergensmeyer, Talal Asad maintains that even if the concept of ummah stands for all the Muslims on the surface of the Earth, it “is ideologically not "a society" onto which state, economy, and religion can be mapped. It is not limited nor sovereign: not limited, for unlike Arab nationalism's notion of *al-umma al-'arabiyya*, it can and eventually should embrace all of humanity, and not sovereign, for it is subject to God's authority. It is therefore a mistake to regard it as an "archaic" (because "religious") community that predates the modern nation.”³⁰⁶ In line with Asad’s critique, it should be added that it is quite anachronistic to consider *umma* as a comparable entity to modern nations as there is no political sovereignty attached to it. In addition, it should also be remembered that contrary to the quite hasty and groundless assumption of Hastings, it is inaccurate to pinpoint a well-defined and uncontested political model in Islam. That is why, in the aftermath of the Prophet Muhammad, the unending political debates and conflicts started between the opposing sides who were all the companions of the Prophet. Furthermore, the manner by which

³⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 201-02.

³⁰⁶ Talal Asad, “Religion, Nation-State, Secularism”, in *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*. ed. Peter Van der Veer, and Hartmut Lehmann. 2002. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press. p. 190.

each of the first four rightly-guided caliphs was elected was different from each other. If there had been a uniform political model envisioned by the scripture or the customs of the Prophet, there would not have been those severe disagreements between the political rivals.

Consequently, although I disagree with Hastings and Juergensmeyer regarding their contention that it is not possible to speak of any particularism in Islam, I also argue that it is somehow not that easy to champion nationalism within the religion of Islam. However, contrary to them, this is not thanks to the existence of any sharply defined political model in Qur'an, but it is because in Islam, the equality of each Muslim regardless of their race, colour, gender, lineage or ethnicity is quite crucial, which constitutes a problem or contradiction with especially powerful nationalisms. At this point I find the following rhetorical question quite meaningful: "Does any powerful nationalism ever really hold that other nations matter equally with one's own?"³⁰⁷ In addition, the following argument holds true to a great extent: "Nationalism's kingdom is frankly of this world, and its attainment involves tribal selfishness and vainglory."³⁰⁸ Keeping in mind that Turkish nationalism has an imperial background, it is also a powerful nationalism. Accordingly, as will be seen in the empirical chapters, Nurcus are also quite proud of their Turkishness and they are almost positive that Turks have a superior place among the other nations. Therefore, I observe a tension between the universalism of Islam which is not of political kind, rather corresponding to a humanitarian egalitarianism, and the particularism of nationalism in singling out one's own nation.

My Approach

Up to now, I attempted to discuss different approaches to understand the complicated relationship between religion and nationalism. With that objective, I dealt with the debates regarding the emergence of nationalism, secularization theory, the coexistence of religion and nationalism and the tension between universalism and particularism. In this section, I will try to come up with my own framework that I think has better explanatory capacity vis-à-vis the others, especially for the Nurcu case in contemporary Turkey. I will come up with a criticism of the extant approaches due to

³⁰⁷ Adrian Hastings. 2007. *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, and Nationalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 197.

³⁰⁸ Carlton Hayes. 1928. *Essays on Nationalism*. New York: The Macmillan Company. p. 125.

their inadaptability to the Turkish case in many respects.

Firstly, my research question which is asking what makes the juxtaposition of religion and nationalism possible, assumes an underlying difference in quality between these categories. Therefore, first and foremost I agree with those arguing that nationalism is not a religion. Otherwise, the research question loses its significance on the grounds that there is nothing curious in the co-existence of two understandings which are either same, or of same kind. This idea is defended by Carlton Hayes and Anthony Smith drawing upon the functionalist approach of Durkheim, especially making references to the similarities in the practices and qualities of religion and nationalism. However, admitting that sacralization of some of the national objects, practices and rituals is a truism, I do not agree that similarity, by itself, is sufficient to prove that nationalism is a religion. This point is also made by Van der Veer, arguing that nationalism, above all, has no conception of hereafter, without which it almost not possible to think of a religion.³⁰⁹ As noted in the Introduction, in this thesis, by the concept of religion, I mean trans-national world-religions, a category in which Islam is also included.

Especially modernists in the debates regarding the emergence of nationalism observe a comparatively sharper differentiation between religion and nationalism. Some of them have gone so far that it is a zero-sum game and religion will be replaced by nationalism as the secularization process proceeds in the societies. Although I do not agree with this approach, and although I do not claim that they are categorically opposite to each other, it should be admitted that their co-existence is somehow uneasy basically due to two possible tensions: a) sacred vs. secular b) universal vs. particular. Another point that should be mentioned here is that realistically I observe their co-existence and try to come up with an explanatory framework. On the other hand, it should also be kept in mind that it is nearly impossible to witness any contradiction or conflict between national identities and parochial religions. The best example for this is Judaism. Even though, in some respects there are some disagreements between the pious Jews and the nationalist Zionist for instance regarding the treatment of Palestinians, it is not a tension between a universalist religion and a particularist nationalism.

The extant approaches rarely touches upon the relationship between universalism and

³⁰⁹ Peter Van der Veer, and Hartmut Lehmann. 2002. *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press. p. 15.

particularism. Moreover, they do not go into details of the reasons and dynamics behind that. Rather than problematizing this issue, they do not see any curiosity to be explored and examined. They do not think that either a religious Muslim or a Christian is supposed to reckon with this challenge and they actually develop responses to that uneasy relationship. Contrary to them, I assume that there is a tension in this identity fusion, even of psychological manner with which religious people cope drawing upon various methods. The historian of Great Britain, Adrian Hastings, for instance, repeatedly and robustly argues that because Christianity allowed translation of the scripture into various vernaculars and in the Bible, it is said that people are created as different nations. What he misses is that the existence of favourable elements for nationalism or particularism does not by itself explain the co-existence of nationalism and religion – Christianity in this setting – since the universalist teachings of the same religion are still valid. Despite the fact that translation of the scripture into different vernaculars contributed to the rise of national awakening, nationalism, in most of the cases, is not content with exceptionalism. This is soon followed by a collective feeling of superiority which stands at odds with the universalist, so egalitarian principles of the religion. However, Hastings does not pursue this dilemma, which is quite crucial to my mind.

The uncritical approach holds true for Anthony Smith as well. Regarding the fusion of nationalist sentiments and religious emotions in Greek and Russian lower classes, he writes as follows:

The popular nationalism of the lower classes in Greece, under the tutelage of the lower clergy, did not look back to the glories of ancient Athens, but to those of the Byzantine Empire and its Greek Orthodox community. For them, the struggle against the Ottomans was more a matter of war against the infidel Muslim than against the alien Turk. Similar popular ethnonational sentiments could be found among the peasantry and lower classes in Tsarist Russia, spurred by the late seventeenth-century split in the Russian Orthodox Church and carried, in part, by the communities of Old Believers. Unlike the Westernizing nationalisms of the intellectuals and bureaucrats, the Slavophile intellectuals turned to the traditions of Orthodoxy and the peasantry for their inspiration. Such cases reveal the limitations of the idea of nationalism as a secular

replacement of religion *tout court*.³¹⁰

As is seen, he comes up with these two examples showing that they constitute an antithesis to the secular replacement theory, which indeed they do. However, as Hastings, he does not take one step further and go into analysis of how and resorting to what kind of arguments these lower classes accommodated two different identities at the same time. In other words, how did they manage to stop an eruption and assuage the tension between them?

Moving on to the content of my approach, as aforementioned, I will critically draw upon some of the concepts employed by Smith. He basically detects some elements of nationalism which he thinks have some sacred foundations in history. Upon his alleged discovery that there is a parallel between those elements, he concludes that (1) the relationship between modern and pre-modern times is marked by continuity rather than discontinuity, and (2) modern nationalisms are the ideologies of sacred societies. Differing from Smith, I argue that nationalism is both a modern and secular ideology leading to tension for religious communities who embrace a universalist and divine worldview. Then, I look for four of these sacred foundations in the members of Nur community, namely, heroes, golden age, sacred territory and chosenness. My study demonstrates that all of these elements are also found in the nationalism of Nurcus. As previously noted, Smith treats religious communities and national communities as separate categories and establishes a link between them. Based on the fact that some qualities of modern nationalism are found in pre-modern religious peoples, he comes up with a horizontal and causal relationship between them. However, my approach envisions an ontological and vertical relationship between them. To make my point clearer, the following example will be helpful. Nurcus are neither a community who have their own national heroes against Islamic historical personalities, nor do they favour some prophets or Muslim heroes as opposed to the national heroes of modern Turkish nationalism. This does not fit into Anthony Smith's categories. Rather, Nurcus embrace both Turkish and Muslim heroes in history, even from time to time considering non-Turkish Sufis, commanders or scientists to be a part of their identity and history. However, all the time the religious both precedes and overrides the national. That is why the relationship between them is of both an ontological and vertical kind. To exemplify this, the renowned commanders and kings of the Turkish

³¹⁰ Anthony Smith. 2003. *Chosen Peoples*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 16.

states preceding Turks' conversion to Islam around the eighth century can be remembered. However glorious they are, Nurcus do not consider them to be a part of their identity, and they do not even mention those names. Because of this ontological hierarchy, I call Nurcus together with the other religious communities 'nationalist religious Muslims', rather than the widely accepted manner of classifying them as 'religious nationalists' or 'Muslim nationalists' in the scholarly literature on nationalism. This can be seen even in the titles of the books in the field, such as *The New Cold War, Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (1993) by Mark Juergensmeyer and *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks* (2014) written by Jenny White. The significant difference between them depends on the fact that in the former, the primary identity is the religious identity, namely Muslimhood, which defines the limits, space and volume of the national identity, whereas in the latter, religious identity acts as a secondary role which is valuable inasmuch as it contributes to the good of nationalism. Rejecting the conventional monolithic categorization based on the binary opposition between religious nationalism and secular nationalism I propose a different typology which has the capacity to indicate different qualities of different social groups. Regarding the relationship between religion and nationalism I offer the following categorization: (1) religious nationalist, (2) secular nationalist, (3) nationalist religious Muslim and (4) non-nationalist religious Muslim.

The order of the adjectives matters in that whereas the latter stands for the primary component of the identity, the former signifies the type or form of that identity. For instance, the members and supporters of RPP (Republican Peoples' Party) are to be put in the first category, secular nationalists. In addition, even though they are not attached to RPP, Kemalists in the society who both embraces a Western, secular life as an ideal and Turkish nationalism as an integral part of their identity are to be categorized secular nationalist. However, most of the people who lend support to the Nationalist Action Party, or Great Union Party as well as those active in civil society who defends for a nationalism imbued with the colour of Islam are to be called religious nationalists, since their identity is first and foremost nationalist. Because we see religious colours in this identity, they can be categorized as such. On the other hand, neither Nurcus, nor the other religious groups, communities and Sufi orders can be called religious nationalists as opposed to the conventional approach, as their identity is primarily dependent on their religion, Islam. Nonetheless, having a close

look, it is easy to discern the strong nationalist tone in this religiousness, therefore I put them in this category. Especially, *salafi* Islamist movements, whose number is quite insignificant in Turkey, who demand an Islamic state denying the national sovereignty as sovereignty does only belong to God, are to be placed under the rubric of non-nationalist religious people.

The final point that I would like to accentuate is regarding their reconciliation of the universalism of Islam and particularism of Turkish nationalism. First and foremost, both my fieldwork and the online data on the website run by Nurcus show that there is no suggestion that Turks have a specific mission to fulfil regarding the revival of Islam and they are the leading nation in front of the other Muslim nations. Therefore, rather than being a subjective assumption, it is a data corroborated by the empirical data as well. Then another question arises: How do they reconcile? My fieldwork shows that they achieve this reconciliation by four statements: (1) If anachronistic, they assume that Islam envisions that people are split into nations. In other words, nationhood is something natural, a formation of people according to Islam. (2) Again, as a sign of anachronism, they think that caring and loving one's own nation fits with Islamic principle, as caring for one's own family and relatives is recommended both in the Qur'an and in the practices of the Prophet. (3) Turkish nation is the leading one among the other nations in the Muslim world. (4) This exceptional status of Turks is not something granted by God, rather they earned this status by working hard. For me, especially the last statement is of quite great significance, on the grounds that by just changing reason and effect, they achieve a fusion of religious universalism and national particularism. In other words, to make it clearer, they do not argue that Turks are directly mentioned in the verses of the scripture or in the prophetic traditions. Rather, in these foundational texts, the criteria of good deeds, for instance, bravery, charity or altruism are detailed, and the Turks almost exclusively met those criteria by their practices, both in history and now. Therefore, they are not chosen by name, but they are the ones who fit into that category, chosenness, by working hard. Thus, Nurcus manage to be both religious and nationalist without sacrificing one to the other. Nevertheless, it should be reiterated that they do not cover up ontological spaces of the same size and level. Instead, national identity and nationalistic fervour are always overridden by their religious faith.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I attempted to shed a light on the debates regarding the tension between universalism of religions and particularism of nationalisms. First and foremost, I maintained that in my approach I do not regard nationalism as a religion and secondly, agreeing with modernists, I also accept that nations are modern formations. Thus, the tension embedded in the research question of this thesis keeps its validity. By the term of religion, I refer to the universalist religions, as no tension can be observed between a nation and a religion which is peculiar to that specific nation.

Then I moved on to the debates regarding the coexistence of these two differing understandings in Christianity and Islam, concluding that even though Christianity is conducive to nationalism, this does not suffice to resolve the problem of reconciliations. With regard to Islam, despite the fact that I do not agree with those suggesting that because of the clear political model envisioned by the fundamentals of the religion, there is no room for particularism and therefore nationalism in Islam, I hold that there are many impediments to be coped with for nationalist Muslims in the basics of Islam, namely both the scripture and the prophetic traditions.

Because I think that there is a gap in the theoretical literature as well, I came up with my own framework. Although I use some of Anthony Smith's analytical tools, namely, national heroes, sacred homeland, golden age and chosenness, I employ them in a different way to him. What he does is basically stretch a line from pre-modern ages to the modern period and argue that there is a continuity, allegedly proving that nations as modern social formations are actually a continuation of the pre-modern peoples. He makes this point by depending on the similarities and resemblances between different social formations and time periods, which is a methodological pitfall in my understanding. What I do is apply those categories to a nationalist religious community in modern Turkey and try to understand how they accommodate differing worldviews. I conclude that according to the case that I examine, rather than two separate categories, namely, a modern nationalist society/understanding and a pre-modern religious people/understanding, religion and nationalism are merged in the minds of Nurcus. However, they do not stand at the same ontological level. Rather, the national is subordinated and employed by the religious. Then it does not become complicated to juxtapose religion and a nation in the service of that religion.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter will cover the methodology of the research on the engagement of Nurcus with nationalism. Firstly, different epistemological stances will be discussed. Secondly, because qualitative methodology will constitute the backbone of this research, its main features, possibilities and restrictions will be deeply examined. Thirdly, the issue of sampling will be problematised. This section will also touch upon how to achieve optimum representativeness through sampling strategies. Finally, going through the existing approaches, I will discuss the specific methodology of this research.

Epistemology

It is crucial to lay a stress upon the epistemological stance prior to undertaking social scientific research, simply because it is nearly impossible for human beings to avoid assumptions. Whether we are aware of them or not, these pre-judgments are innate and so strong as to have a huge effect on the results of any study.³¹¹ In this section, I will discuss, positivism, interpretivism and hermeneutics as different epistemological stances. Then I will elaborate my own position which is marked by self-reflexivity and understanding the subjective meaning of an action without sacrificing objectivity of knowledge.

Positivism

Positivism is at the centre of these kinds of pre-judgments in assuming that there is an ‘over there’ reality and the researcher's task is to find and uncover this objective

³¹¹ Susan White. 1997. "Beyond Retroduction?—Hermeneutics, Reflexivity and Social Work Practice". *The British Journal of Social Work*. 27 (5) p. 740.

reality.³¹² In the positivist approach, in addition, there is not much room for criticism or different views on the same object of study. In a sense, this kind of scientific endeavour is a closed circuit. It is also believed that the scientist is able to possess rationality and so the truth. Therefore, it is more authoritarian methodological stance compared to critical approaches. According to Goodings, one cannot mention an ontological ambiguity regarding a positivist social scientist's engagement with the object of study. There is not much awareness of the subjectivity of the researcher and her/his relation to, say, informants or the text.³¹³ Another point to be emphasised is that positivism has a lot to do with routinisation and standardisation in methodology. Although it is more common in the natural sciences, there is a positivist tendency in the social sciences as well. This tendency is correlated with the extent to which the methodology can be routinised. Statistical techniques and surveys can be given as examples of this type of methodology.

The task of going back in the past and capturing the one truth is not possible due to the fact that all historians are embedded in today and within the particular context of the present time. Thereby, the only result coming out of historical studies will be the interpretations of the historians which are highly affected by the time they live in and the future they imagine.³¹⁴ The differing versions of Turkish history in different sections of society constitute a perfect example for this argument. The same historical figures, even though not much time has passed, are presented in completely different images. For example, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk is a national hero for secular nationalists³¹⁵, while he is the epitome of treason in the eyes of many nationalist

³¹² Ibid., p. 741.

³¹³ David Gooding. 1992. "Putting Agency Back into Experiment." in *Science as Practice and Culture*, edited by Andrew Pickering. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. p. 72.

³¹⁴ Ibid., p. 46

³¹⁵ The book, titled, *Mustafa Kemal*, written by a quite popular Kemalist writer, Yılmaz Özdil, was sold at 2500 TL, around 430 USD, which is quite a high price. People paid this amount of money not

religious people. This holds true for the mighty sultan of the late Ottoman Empire, Abdulhamid II, who was exalted as the last great ruler of the Empire in their eyes.³¹⁶ The same monarch is the maintainer of despotism for more than thirty years according to the republican narrative. In a nutshell, contemporary ideological conflicts have a determining role of the different fractions' engagement with the history. This is the reason why this research does not adopt positivism which might make one think that this work claims universal truths not open to be challenged. Rather, it aims to reach a subtle truth taking the views of the respondents seriously into account.

It is obvious that positivism is not the ideal approach for this thesis as well, as it does not allow room for various conclusions, whereas, my research is limited with its context, time and my subjectivity. In other words, if the same research has been done by another inquirer in a different context and period, it is possible that s/he would reach different conclusions.

Interpretivism

In contrast with positivism, the interpretivist position holds that reality is by default relative, varying in accordance with human consciousness. Thus, it is not possible to grasp reality to the fullest extent.³¹⁷ Because there is no meta-narratives and epistemological certainty in interpretivism, it is not possible to claim possession of the truth. Furthermore, the methods used can vary from one researcher to another simply because there is no determined, standard and single way of carrying out research.³¹⁸

According to interpretivists the primary aim of social sciences is understanding the

for the author but for the respect and deep love that they have for the personality of Atatürk. Here are the citation details of the book: Yılmaz Özdil. 2019. *Mustafa Kemal*. İstanbul: Kırmızı Kedi Yayınevi.

³¹⁶ For a great example of this exaltation, see Necip Fazıl Kısakürek. 2015. *Ulu Hakan Abdülhamit Han*. İstanbul: Kamer Yayınları.

³¹⁷ White, "Beyond Retrodution?—Hermeneutics, Reflexivity and Social Work Practice," p. 741.

³¹⁸ Fuchs, "Three Sociological Epistemologies," p. 32)

meaning of human actions. Within their framework, the actions of human beings differ from the movements of non-human beings, e.g. physical objects is that the former always inheres a meaning behind the visible action. “To say that human action is meaningful”, according to Thomas Schwandt, “is to claim either that it has a certain intentional content that indicates the kind of action it is and/or that what an action means can be grasped only in terms of the system of meanings to which it belongs.”³¹⁹ In order to find out the intention behind the human action, Dilthey contends, one should have a full understanding of the consciousness of the actor which requires an emphatic identification between the inquirer and the actor.³²⁰ In other words, “[i]t is an act of psychological reenactment—inside the head of an actor to understand what he or she is up to in terms of motives, beliefs, desires, thoughts, and so on.”³²¹ Regarding the interpretive understanding of meaning during research, the famous cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz argues that human beings are suspended in the webs of significance, called culture, created by themselves. Therefore, analysis should be through an effort based on interpretive inquiry of meaning, rather than experimental methods of natural science targeted at finding the underlying law.³²² Borrowing from Ryle, Geertz elaborates the concepts of thin and thick descriptions and argues that

"between what Ryle calls the thin description of what the rehearser (parodist, winker, twitcher ...) is doing ("rapidly contracting his right eyelids") and the "thick description" of what he is doing ... lies the object of ethnography: a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures

³¹⁹ T. A. Schwandt. 2000. “Three Epistemological Stances for Qualitative Inquiry: Interpretivism, Hermeneutics, And Social Constructionism.” In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. p. 191.

³²⁰ Ibid., p. 192.

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Clifford Geertz. 2000. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books. p. 5.

in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not ... in fact exist, no matter what anyone did or didn't do with his eyelids."³²³

To grasp this meaning, according to Geertz, the researcher should look over the shoulders of actors, which will help understand her/his intention. In short, according to interpretivism, human actions are beyond their manifestation. Therefore, it is an impediment for the inquirer to search for the meaning behind the particular action.

Although this sounds idealistic as reaching inside the head of the actor will enable to reach the real meaning behind the actor's actions, it does not consider the limitations of the inquirer whose mind is also limited with various bias and prejudices. In addition, to my mind, this does not seem to be a practical and feasible methodology in pursuit of making sense of human actions. Therefore, during my research, I did not attempt to be in the shoes of my respondents and to read their minds whatsoever, simply because this might lead to many inaccurate conclusions as this reading attempt is not subject to any external assessment.

In the next section, I will discuss the main claims of hermeneutics approach which takes interpretivism one step forward towards a more relativist stance vis-à-vis reality.

Hermeneutics

The main idea of hermeneutics is the suspicion about absolute realism and methodological rationality as well as firm grounds for any social scientific endeavour. Therefore, one can only talk about contingent approaches among many, rather than

³²³ Ibid., p. 7.

one standard way.³²⁴ Furthermore, hermeneutics sustain that interpretations, which are all about working with systems of meaning, are at the centre of human life.³²⁵ However, in contrast with interpretivism, hermeneutics sustains that it is impossible to set any rule or procedure for understanding as it is an innate quality of human beings by which everybody takes something as 'something'.³²⁶ In addition, hermeneutics rejects any idea of inquirer's effort of understanding the meaning beneath the human actions.³²⁷ Schwandt emphasises that according to hermeneutics, "in the act of interpreting ... socio-historically inherited bias or prejudice is not regarded as a characteristic or attribute that an interpreter must strive to get rid of or manage in order to come to a "clear" understanding."³²⁸ This is mainly because, in this approach it is held that the prejudices and the traditions that produces them are not something on which human beings have full control. Rather they are like the skin of the body, so it is impossible for the interpreter to distance and abstract herself/himself from these prejudices.³²⁹ The argument follows that due to the fact that they are part and parcel of the interpreter, it is both futile and wrong for one to try to get rid of them.³³⁰ The natural result of this point is that in contrast with objectivism or naïve realism holding that over there reality is attainable following a rational methodology, according to hermeneutics, there is no correct interpretation. Rather, there are different interpretations of different interpreters.

Despite the fact that this looks like a tempting approach, I do not think that it holds true regarding the relationship between the inquirer and the object of the research. It

³²⁴ Fuchs, "Three Sociological Epistemologies," p. 37.

³²⁵ T. A. Schwandt, "Three Epistemological Stances for Qualitative Inquiry: Interpretivism, Hermeneutics, And Social Constructionism," p. 194.

³²⁶ Ibid.

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Ibid., p. 195.

should be accepted that positivism represents an excessive point on the attainability of reality, hermeneutics pinpoint to another excessiveness by completely relativising attempts to reach some real conclusions as the result of the research. For instance, though human beings have many prejudices and biases which are frequently part of their circumstances in which they were grown up, I still argue that it is possible to take a self-critical position in the attempt to grasp the meaning of the human actions. As a result of this stance, from time to time I reached some conclusions, regarding the relationship between nationalism and religion in the case of Nur movement, though I do not claim that they are representing the bleak truth.

Having discussed positivism, interpretivism and hermeneutics, I will move on my epistemological stance which basically takes a middle path among the aforementioned approaches which either takes an absolutist or relativist positions regarding attainability of truth.

My Epistemological Stance

After discussing three approaches in the previous section, I would like to argue that neither an absolutist epistemological stance, nor a completely relativist approach does not seem to work well as the basis of knowledge in the case that I work on throughout this thesis. Then a middle path between them will be the best one, even though one cannot avoid removing all the barriers between the researcher and knowledge which are actually the personal biases.

As interpretivism pointedly argues, I also contend that the main objective of social sciences is to discover the meanings behind them. That is why, in the interview questions, I frequently use interrogative pronouns such as *how* and *why*. However, to my understanding, to look over the shoulders of the actor seems to be a utopic goal which is quite difficult to achieve. Moreover, there is no guarantee ever to achieve,

even when the inquirer thinks that s/he has succeeded.

Another point emphasised by interpretivism constitutes backbone of my epistemological stance, which is the attempt to understand the subjective meaning of an action without sacrificing objectivity of knowledge.³³¹ Although this is challenged by hermeneutics, I still find it quite a critical position to be taken in pursuit of the meanings of actions. To this end, even if it is not a solution to this huge problem of attaining reality, informing the reader of the assumptions as well as the pre-judgments of the researcher will help to alleviate the possible negative implications.³³² The prominent sociologist Pierre Bourdieu makes a distinction between textual and epistemic reflexivity. By the former he means the researchers' attempt to disclose their value positions via presenting an autobiography of the research experience to their reader. However, he argues that this is not sufficient to achieve reflexivity. Epistemic reflexivity appears to be a necessity which implies that a researcher is also responsible for objectifying her/his way of interpretation as well as the specific discipline or professional grouping within which the research is carried out. In other words, the relation of the researcher with the object should be objectified as well. He holds that

[w]hat distresses me when I read some works by sociologists is that people whose profession it is to objectivise the social world prove so rarely able to objectivise themselves, and fail so often to realise that what their apparently scientific discourse talks about is not the object, but their relation to the object.³³³

In order not to make this mistake, later in this chapter, in the section, 'Research

³³¹ Ibid., p. 193.

³³² White, "Beyond Retrodution?—Hermeneutics, Reflexivity and Social Work Practice", p. 742.

³³³ Pierre Bourdieu and L. Waquant. 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press. pp. 68-69.

Design', I give an account of my subjectivity, in which I show the possible mistakes in my conclusion due to my own worldview and biases and prejudices vis-à-vis the way my respondents make sense of the world.

In conclusion, my epistemological stance is in between with the approaches based on axiomatical generalisations and the relativist ones denying the possibility of attaining reality. Despite the fact that I also think that human beings are limited with many factors ranging from subjective tendencies, traditions, biases and prejudices, it is still possible, I argue, to minimise the adverse effects of them. Otherwise, if all the opinions are equalised on the basis of absence of any methodology, it will be pointless to level a criticism to the findings of any researchers. This is because, criticism can only be possible, if there are some rules and procedures binding all parties.

Qualities of Qualitative Studies

Qualitative methods are quite crucial in social sciences, because with them a researcher can overcome the problem of the lack of depth frequently observed in quantitative studies. For instance, in a sample composed of, say, five thousand subjects, it becomes impossible to ask open-ended questions. In this kind of research, subjects are given a set of questions with certain multiple answers out of which they are asked to choose one. Having adopted this kind of strategy, by reaching statistically significant number of people, many numerical results can be generated. However, there remains a considerable gap with respect to the possible answers or explanations that individuals can come up with rather than choosing one among existing ones.

On the other hand, qualitative methods receive many criticisms, especially from scholars who are prone to think that researchers are supposed to come up with

replicable results at the end of their research.³³⁴ However, this criticism is groundless, since researchers adopting qualitative methodology does not make such a claim that their findings are to be reached by any and every inquirer doing the same research. All the epistemological debates are revolving around problems of this kind. Secondly, it is regarded as ‘unscientific’, which is a severe criticism where and when the highest form of knowledge is considered to be the scientifically obtained one, an assumption based on primarily positivistic understanding. Connected to their allegedly ‘unscientific’ character, it is widely claimed that qualitative studies are primarily based on anecdotes, and personal impressions are dependent upon researcher bias.³³⁵ This point is also bereft of any firm ground, since this kind of positivistic stance has been receiving severe criticisms within the field by scholars who discuss the possibility of attainability, even existence of truth.

Qualitative studies actually have the ability to provide significant results as far as they can give reliable descriptions of behaviours and beliefs of individuals across different cultures. They can also give deeper insights regarding human behaviours as well as social processes due to the very nature of the methods harnessed during the research, such as in-depth and long interviews with informants. It is also possible to merge qualitative and quantitative methodologies in a complementary manner. For instance, some quantitative techniques can be applied to interview transcripts, such as measuring the frequency of one key term. Thus, the results extracted from this method might play an important role in corroborating the results obtained through qualitative methodology.

Another point regarding the merit and necessity of qualitative methodologies is that

³³⁴ Nicholas Mays and Catherine Pope. “Rigour and Qualitative Research,” *BMJ: British Medical Journal*. 311 (6997) p. 109.

³³⁵ Ibid.

due to the pluralisation of life-worlds in contemporary era and to “the dissolution of "old" social inequalities into the new diversity of milieus, subcultures, lifestyles, and ways of living”³³⁶ the classical deductive methods face with problems in understanding meaning behind the human actions. This led to the rise of empirical methods which provides an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the actions of the people and the way they think.³³⁷ It should also be noted that because developing deeper understanding requires spending longer times with the data acquired from the field, qualitative researchers are interested in working on a small sample composed of a few individuals. During the research, rather than limiting “a phenomenon—make it neat, tidy, and comfortable—but to break it open, unfasten, or interrupt it so that a description of the phenomenon, in all of its contradictions, messiness, and depth, is (re)presented.”³³⁸ This enables the researcher to come up with new categories, ideas and arguments which are not envisioned prior to the actual fieldwork and data analysis. This is one of the important comparative advantage of the qualitative methodology over quantitative approach. Because, this thesis is not interested in the numbers or the proportions, rather it aims at understanding Nurcu’s engagement with nationalism and how they reconcile it with the religion of Islam, I adopted qualitative methodology. As Mayan rightfully argued, many important points came out of these interviews, an example of which is ‘the case of this is the case’ elaborated in detail in Chapter 6.

Taking all these above-mentioned points into account, one can reach the conclusion that through qualitative methodology *moderatum* generalisations can be achieved, which stands between axiomatic generalisations and completely personal, so,

³³⁶ Uwe Flick. 2009. *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications. p. 12.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Maria J. Mayan. 2009. *Essentials of Qualitative Inquiry*. California: Left Coast Press. p. 11.

subjective accounts. However, although the claim on generalisations of the qualitative methodology is modest, as the name implies, “it cannot be taken to occur naturally and automatically in the process of doing research, or be left to the readers' discretion...”³³⁹ Therefore, research should be carried out consciously and following a rigorous plan in order to reach meaningful results regarding the object of study. This is also crucial for being able to draw a thick line dividing the consequences of the designed research and the everyday generalisations which need not be stuck to any methodology and criterion.

Sampling

Sampling is quite a crucial element in the research in the field of social sciences irrespective of its type, qualitative or quantitative. Its main purpose is to achieve a representative insight with regard to the behaviours and habitats of individuals in the society.³⁴⁰ It emanates from an apparent impediment that conducting research among all the members of any human society or its subsets is practically not possible. Although everybody in a community cannot be interviewed, the sample drawn from that group of people which is the object of study, should provide minimum requirements of representativeness so that one can come up with some ideas about the larger community.³⁴¹

The decision about sampling is critical, the psychological and demographic profiles of the informants play quite a crucial role in the data collected by the interviewer.³⁴²

³³⁹ Geoff Payne, and Malcolm Williams. 2005. "Generalisation in Qualitative Research". *Sociology*. 39 (2) p. 297.

³⁴⁰ Evelyn Jacob. 1987. "Qualitative Research Traditions: A Review". *Review of Educational Research*. 57 (1) p. 6.

³⁴¹ Roger Sanjek. 1993. *Fieldnotes The Makings of Anthropology*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. p. 197

³⁴² Ellen Perceman and Sara R. Curran. 2006. *A Handbook for Social Science Field Research: Essays & Bibliographic Sources on Research Design and Methods*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications. p. 125.

Since these factors are out of control of both researchers and informants, it will not be plausible to consider that the results of any research represents the truth. In quantitative research, randomness is considered to be the essential condition of the whole process, which is carried out by drawing subjects from every segment of the community that is the object of the study. In order to achieve external reliability those conducting surveys based on quantitative analysis have recourse to probability sampling “whereby within each stratum every case has the same known probability of selection”.³⁴³ Adopting an inductive approach makes it possible to make generalisations from sample to universe. Because probability sampling is not possible in qualitative studies, other ways are adopted that try to emulate this method.³⁴⁴ Furthermore, on the grounds that the main purpose of this research is to understand and explain social processes, an impeccable statistical representativeness is not considered to be an indispensable condition.³⁴⁵ Another point that should be kept in mind is that in case the sample is not drawn based on random selection, i.e. opportunity sampling, from a methodological perspective the statistical tests of significance become no more applicable to this type of research.³⁴⁶ As aforementioned, this thesis is interested in how Nurcus reconcile nationalism and Islam being mainly religious people. Because it is a *how* question, it was important to adopt qualitative methodology. Furthermore, due to the fact than I aimed to understand the mentalities of my respondents and the context in which they form their way of thinking, rather than measuring any quantity or proportion, I did not draw a sample based on random selection.

³⁴³ Payne and Williams, "Generalisation in Qualitative Research," p. 296.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 297.

³⁴⁵ Mays and Pope, “Rigour and Qualitative Research,” p. 110.

³⁴⁶ Sanjek, *Fieldnotes The Makings of Anthropology*, p. 175.

In order to get around this sampling problem, another strategy, which is called systematic non-probability sampling is harnessed in qualitative research whose purpose is not to “establish a random or representative sample drawn from a population but rather to identify specific groups of people who either possess characteristics or live in circumstances relevant to the social phenomenon being studied”³⁴⁷. Having finished the research design, especially holistic ethnographers continue to carry out interviews to the point that no new data can be collected from the informants. In other words, where repetition of the arguments and information starts, interviews turn out to be far from being beneficial in data collection.³⁴⁸ In this research, I adopted non-probability sampling and followed this strategy, since my objective is going deeper regarding the reconciliation of ideas which does not seem compatible at least on the surface. My sample included twenty-one respondents of different ages, gender, occupation and social status. I did not stop conducting interviews to the point that same arguments are repeated by different people. I also observed that there is an explicit overlap with the online data as well which led me deciding to suffice with the existing sample.

Another issue regarding sampling is the representativeness of the interviews recorded during research. This is also crucial since any counting of any theme in the transcription of the audio files can only be meaningful if the sampling is arranged properly. Otherwise, the mistake on the methodology will have an adverse effect on the result accordingly. This problem can be fixed by making sure the variety among informants by selecting them from different categories, such as, age, gender, social status and so on.³⁴⁹ Mays and Rigour come up with an example of the study of primary

³⁴⁷ Mays and Pope, “Rigour and Qualitative Research,” p. 110.

³⁴⁸ Jacob, “Qualitative Research Traditions: A Review,” p. 15.

³⁴⁹ Sanjek, *Fieldnotes The Makings of Anthropology*, p. 203.

care team and argue that

some of the theoretically relevant characteristics of general practices affecting variations in team working might be the range of professions represented in the team, the frequency of opportunities for communication among team members, the local organisation of services, and whether the practice is in an urban, city, or rural area. These factors could be identified from other similar research and within existing social science theories of effective and ineffective team working and would then be used explicitly as sampling categories. Though not statistically representative of general practices, such a sample is theoretically informed and relevant to the research questions. It also minimises the possible bias arising from selecting a sample on the basis of convenience.³⁵⁰

This approach throws a light upon my research as well. Because of both the impossibility of reaching and interviewing hundreds of thousands of people who are members of Nurcu community, and the specific design of the research, essentially based on written material, the number of interviewees was limited. I carried out interviews with 21 respondents. The data collected from these conversations and observations during these meetings played an auxiliary role to support the data drawn from the written material. As aforementioned, it is definitely not a probability sampling which is by no means feasible. Although it did not ensure hundred percent representativeness of the sample, I included people (1) having different viewpoints, (2) coming from different sub-groups in Nur community and (3) belonging to different

³⁵⁰ Mays and Pope, "Rigour and Qualitative Research," p. 110.

social statuses.³⁵¹ One should take into consideration the gender issue, if the object of interest is a religious community whose female members might refrain from having a conversation with a male stranger. However, I made all due effort to speak to female members of Nurcu community in order to expand the range as much as possible, I achieved to talk to six women in the movement corresponding to approximately thirty percent of the sample. To be specific, although most of them are the supporters of Turkish nationalism—because they are the primary target of this study, I carried out interviews with those who oppose this dominant approach, as well. Although in development processes of nationalism, elites play the most important roles, it will be misleading to argue that lay people are only exposed to the instructed ideas. If, especially, a modern society is in question, where access to information and education is comparatively easier than the premodern times, focusing solely on elites might have adversely affected the results of the research. Finally, in order to achieve representativeness, I thought it was important to conduct interviews with different branches within Nur community. Prior to my research, I assumed that regarding the relationship between nationalism and Islam there is no significant difference among them. This variety allowed me to test my assumption and it has been verified by the research. With respect to exceptional status and even superiority of Turkish nation over the other Muslim nations, I did not observe any difference based on difference of branches. For instance, a member of *Yazıcı* group does not think different from an *Okuyucu*, with respect to the ‘unprecedented performance’ of Turkish nation in serving refugees while Muslims in other countries were only watching the tragedy.

Research Design

As aforementioned, I did not adopt the positivistic approach on the grounds that I am

³⁵¹ Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*. p.183.

quite sure that I have some biases though I will make every effort to minimise them. This automatically means that the research to be conducted for this thesis does not uncover the ‘truth’ about Nursi’s engagement with Turkish nationalism. Rather, both my subjectivity and the extent to which I can collect data from the interviewees and the texts play a critical role in how and what kind of knowledge is produced at the end of the research.

My Subjectivity

At this point, touching upon my subjectivity is fruitful for the reader especially during the assessment of the results of this research. First of all, I am a Muslim, Turkish and male individual who reads the works of Said Nursi, the leader of the Nur movement. However, I am not part of any community defined by hierarchy, therefore, I believe I do not have any bias regarding the possible results that this research will produce. In addition, because I am not a nationalist, I can safely argue that I did not manipulate the results so as to favour Turkish nationalism. On the other hand, although I have been critical of nationalism as an ideology, I do not define my intellectual position through standing against nationalism, for instance as an anarchist or some fractions of Marxism. Regarding the relationship between religion and nationalism, despite the fact that I do not claim that they are categorically opposing each other, I am convinced that reconciling nationalism as a particularist ideology with Islam as a universalist religion is not an easy task to achieve. Moreover, based on my own readings, in the line of Şerif Mardin and Camilla Nereid, I am convinced that Said Nursi was a supporter of neither Turkish nor Kurdish nationalism.³⁵² These possible biases should be taken into consideration while exploring the consequences I draw as a result of this

³⁵² Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey*, Camilla T. Nereid. 1997. *In the Light of Said Nursi Turkish Nationalism and the Religious Alternative*. Bergen: Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies.

research.

Time Period

I cover the period beginning with the Justice and Development Party until today. The reason behind this choice is that for the first time in the history of Turkey a party with clear Islamic tendency came to power without any coalition partner. The same period witnessed a rapid rise in the activities of Islamic communities as well in every sphere of the society. This new political situation brought about the association of ideas of state and nation with Islam in the minds of religious people. Although it cannot be argued that this took place for the first time, it can be safely argued that AK Party (Justice and Development Party) Period represented the peak point of this new orientation.

Written Primary Sources

At the beginning of my research I intended to explore one website and one daily newspaper as written primary sources. The daily newspaper is *Yeni Asya*,³⁵³ which has been published since 1970 and has become the public voice of the community. Although it was closed down temporarily during the coups that took place in 1971 and 1980 respectively, the publication of the newspaper did not stop. It is known for the tendency to promote central right parties, due to the fact that Nursi, the leader of the group, lent his support to the Democrat Party between 1946 – 1960. Today, especially following the conflict between Justice and Development Party and Gülen movement, the newspaper adopted an opposing stance against the government.

Though, initially I planned to include the newspaper into the analyses, then I decided not to analyse this source within the framework of the research. This is because they

³⁵³ The title of the newspaper literally means New Asia, referring to one of the sayings of Nursi.

are not adopted by the majority of the Nurcu community, which will adversely affect the representativeness of the primary sources with which I attempt to analyse the whole community. Especially, since around 2012 when the first serious disagreements between Gülen movement and Ak Party emerged, this newspaper sided with Gülenists, leading to an outrage on the side of Ak Parti. For instance, the pro-government newspaper *Akit* claims that after dismemberment of (Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation), Yeni Asya started to act like the official media outlet of this organisation.³⁵⁴ On the other hand, during the same period, all the other major branches of Nur movement lent support to the government with the official declarations prior to the elections.³⁵⁵ On the basis of this ideological differentiation, I thought that it will be more plausible not to include them in the analysis.

The website is www.sorularlaislamiyet.com whose domain name means ‘Islam with questions’. It started to be published in 2002 and still draws the attention of many Muslims, not only the Nurcus, but also from the other communities as well. Keeping in mind that among around 50 million websites operating in Turkey³⁵⁶, Sorularla İslamiyet is ranked 252³⁵⁷, it can safely be argued that it appeals to a quite wide range of people. Those who are in charge of the website are Nurcus who are members of Istanbul Suffa Foundation. This institution is also the headquarters of one of the Nurcu

³⁵⁴ “Yeni Asya FETÖ Medyasını Aratmıyor,” [Yeni Asya replaces FETÖ media] Yeni Asya, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://www.yeniakit.com.tr/haber/yayinlariyla-feto-medyasini-aratmiyor-yeni-asyadan-imamoglu-propagandasi-809712.html>.

³⁵⁵ In the list of foundations announced in this news are some institutions belonging to Nurcus, such as, Suffa Foundation, Hizmet Foundation and Istanbul Foundation for Sciences and Culture. “Yüzlerce STK’dan Ak Parti’ye Destek Kararı,” [The Decision of Lending Support by Hundreds of NGOs] Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://www.aksam.com.tr/siyaset/yuzlerce-stkdan-ak-partiye-destek-karari/haber-747697>

³⁵⁶ “Hiç Düşündünüz mü? Dünyada ve Türkiye’de Kaç Web Sitesi Var?,” [Have You Ever Thought How Many Websites are in the World and Turkey?] On5yirmi5, Accessed June 26 2019, <https://www.on5yirmi5.com/haber/bilim-teknoloji/internet/223737/hic-dusundunuz-mu-dunyada-ve-turkiyede-kac-web-sitesi-var.html>.

³⁵⁷ SimilarWeb, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://www.similarweb.com/website/sorularlaislamiyet.com>.

groups. It provides various services to students such as scholarships, training courses and dormitories. In the 'about' section of their website, their purpose is declared to 'enlighten people regarding the questions about Islam from the perspective of Sunni understanding'. Though it has not been explicitly stated that *Risale-i Nur* collection, the magnum opus of Said Nursi, is taken to be the on top of the major references while answering the questions, it will not be difficult to discern this important detail even after looking at a couple of questions and answers on the website. Due to the great interest it has received, other languages are also added to its interface, namely, English, German, Russian and Azerbaijani³⁵⁸, which implies internationalisation of the project.

Interviews

During the research, I analysed the discourse both in the interview and the written material. In this sense, the simultaneity of observation of the informants and interviews gains importance. This kind of meticulous approach made it possible to detect any contradiction or corroboration of the statement with the body language of the respondent in the course of conversations.³⁵⁹ In my research, rather than finding something unknown about how people are doing something, I was interested in understanding how people reconcile Islam and nationalism in their minds.

I carried out the interviews based on the principle that they are instruments for collecting data rather than interrogation positioning the interviewer into a higher level than the addressees.³⁶⁰ As a natural reflection of this kind of approach, the interviews were semi-structured, to make sure that the research is conducted based on a plan,

³⁵⁸ "Hakkımızda," [About] Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/sayfa/hakkimizda>.

³⁵⁹ Julian M. Murchison. 2010. *Ethnography Essentials: Designing, Conducting, and Presenting Your Research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

without, however, blocking the different paths it might take in the process. My interview questions posed to the respondents are extrapolated from Anthony Smith's theory of sacred foundations of nationalism. According to this theory, even though nations are not primordial communities which can be dated to time immemorial, they have strong roots in history as well as traditional great religions.³⁶¹ He draws some parallels between the pillars of religions and nationalisms and comes up with interesting similarities, namely golden ages, national heroes & messiahs, chosenness and sacred homelands. For instance, in order to understand if they think that Turks are chosen by God, I asked whether they think that Turks are assigned a specific mission in the Muslim World. Then I received very interesting answers confirming that to a great extent Nurcus think that Turks have an exceptional place among other Muslim nations. Likewise, I asked whether they thought that there were golden ages in the history and whether they can provide some examples. This question also demonstrated the inextricably intermeshed nature of religion and nationalism in the minds of Nurcus. The question regarding the sacred territory, asking what they thought about Anatolia and Istanbul led to invaluable insights about Nurcus' conception of land as a sacred place, if not they are comparable to Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. Although, I designed my research in accordance with this theoretical framework, it only became a guide for me. I did not confine myself within the borders of this approach. That is why I came up with my own conclusions different from Smith, discussed in detail in Chapter 7 and 8.

Fieldwork Experience

Before entering this field, I submitted my application and I have received approval from the Ethics and Risk Committee in November 2016. On 6 December, I landed in

³⁶¹ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p.5.

Ataturk airport, Istanbul. However, prior to my departure, I was strongly warned of security problems in Istanbul. On 10 December, a mere four days after I set foot in the city, a suicide car bombing took place in Beşiktaş, leading to the death of 48 people and the injury of 166 others in the city centre. This terror attack by TAK, the PKK's urban extension, demonstrated just how right this warning was. In addition, the country was under a state of emergency following the failed coup attempt that had occurred only six months prior, which created a tense atmosphere in which people felt uncomfortable to express their thoughts and feelings. However, I was lucky in that I was going to carry out interviews with people who supported the Turkish nation and state. I assumed, therefore, that although the climate was not conducive to freedom of expression, those who considered themselves opponents to the state and government would be less likely to express their true feelings.

Having completed all the interviews myself, I can safely argue that by and large, my initial plan worked. I succeeded in reaching critical voices within the community. I also found the opportunity to talk to people from different branches of the community. Unfortunately, however, the same environment of fear did impede my attempts to talk with Kurdish Nurcus. I called the Med-Zehra group's association located in Ümraniye, a large district of Istanbul mostly inhabited by conservative individuals of Kurdish descent whose families have immigrated from south-eastern cities of Anatolia. During our phone call, I asked to conduct interviews with people affiliated with their institution after sharing my thesis topic. They immediately rejected me stating that they did not want to give interviews to anybody. Considering the political climate, this reaction is not unexpected. As such, I was able to speak with only one Kurdish respondent, Samet Elbaş.

Snowball sampling is extensively used when the size of a specific population cannot

be precisely determined. In the case of Nurcus, this is one of the chief concerns, as there is no legal entity, like a social society, where members sign up following formal procedures. Rather, since membership is voluntary and unceremonial, it is impossible to count or standardise. Moreover, only this methodology would enable me to reach critical individuals whom I normally would not have been able to reach. As a result, snowballing sampling worked very well in my research. Some of my interviews took place in İlim ve Kültür Vakfı (The Foundation for Science and Art) located in Fatih, the very heart of Istanbul. My informants in this foundation referred me to others, which allowed me to carry out interviews with people I would normally have overlooked. This way, I was able to talk with a very famous academic who was still held immense influence in the movement. Thanks to these referrals, an MP from the ruling AK Party accepted to talk with me, which allowed me to access invaluable information. Perhaps the most significant benefit of this chain-referral method was in my being able to speak with female members of the community, as they otherwise might not have talked with me. This was not a baseless concern of mine, as one of the women with whom I was able to schedule an interview cancelled our meeting at the last minute.

I faced a number of other challenges during the research. Sometimes my respondents were shy and simply did not want to talk at length. In these cases, I would ask further questions to obtain more information, though I was not always successful in my efforts. The tight schedules of high-profile individuals posed time problems that restricted them from going into detail on certain issues they brought up. For instance, I once needed to wait for at least one hour at the door of a university rector. Before starting the interview, I was told that we had only thirty minutes, which was definitely not enough time to respond to my all questions. As such, I was unable to ask a few

questions during that interview. As I continued to conduct interviews, I noticed that people usually were inclined to talk about the issues they considered important. Whereas this was interesting at times, most of the time it led to digressions. In such cases, I strove to keep them focused on my questions without offending them. Last but not least, the fact that I was writing my thesis at a university in a Western country would often cause my interviewees to adopt a more defensive position. For example, knowing that his answers would be shared with Westerners, one interviewee expressed that Westerners should understand Turks' pride in their past.

Combined Methodology

Combination of different methods, called triangulation, becomes necessary, in order to reach a conclusion greater than sum of the parts.³⁶² To be concrete, data extracted from semi-structured in-depth interviews, the primary written sources and their content analysis are combined and compared with each other to observe where they agree (convergence), where they contradict each other (discrepancy), or where they complement one another (complementarity).³⁶³ Semi-structured interviews constituted one leg of this research. Through them I had the opportunity to collect data directly and verbally from the individuals. These conversations made asking questions possible contributed a lot to the whole research, which is not possible in the written material.

The second leg was to explore an important website, www.sorularlailamiyet.com, which was founded by Suffa Foundation in 2002, the same year that AK Party came to power. The founders' main aim in creating the website is "delivering the light of

³⁶² Alicia O'Cathain, Elizabeth Murphy, and John Nicholl. 2010. "Three techniques for integrating data in mixed methods studies". *BMJ (Clinical Research Ed.)*. 341 (7783) p. 1147.

³⁶³ Ibid.

faith and Qur'an to the whole world and producing solutions to the spiritual problems of humanity"³⁶⁴. The foundation established a research centre in a separate building in Büyükçekmece, a district in the western part of Istanbul in which academics and various experts work. On this website are hundreds of thousands of pages classified under dozens of categories in fifteen languages, including English, French, German, Russian and Arabic. This content is produced based on the questions sent by visitors to the website that have been replied to by experts working in the centre. In case of need, questions are directed to other experts. Responses to questions are published on the website after editors' correction. The scientific committee draws on Ahl al-Sunnah sources in preparing answers. In addition, Said Nursi's Risale-i Nur collection is used as the primary source while answering questions.³⁶⁵

More than 350 thousand people from roughly two hundred countries visit the website and read various answers to the questions daily in addition to sharing and commenting on content.³⁶⁶ In other words, the website's content is not produced solely by the people working in the research centre. Rather content is produced through interaction with the site's visitors. The popularity of the website is quite noteworthy. In Ramadan, the holy month for Muslims, www.sorularlailamiyet.com ranks among the top 100 websites most frequently visited in Turkey. In fact, there are at times more than 10 thousand simultaneous visitors using the website during Ramadan.³⁶⁷

The content analysis of both interview transcripts and the other materials might have played an auxiliary role in corroborating the qualitative data collected from them.

Initially I planned to employ coding as a quantitative technique, with the idea that the

³⁶⁴ <https://feyyaz.org/icerik/hakkimizda>

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Yusuf Yalçın, one of the board members of the foundation, shared this information with me during a phone call on 5 May 2020.

frequency of some certain concepts, such as nationalism, Islam or the ones that will come forward during the research, will enrich the whole research endeavour. According to my blueprint, that would have been possible, via the software called NVivo, which allows the users to create matrices showing the frequency of one or multiple concepts by different informants. However, although this program is working quite well and producing pretty reliable results in English texts, I figured out that it does not work for texts in Turkish at all. Due to the lack of the studies on natural language learning regarding the Turkish language, unfortunately, the program did not help me. I attempted at searching for some keywords such as *millet* (nation), *din* (religion), however, then, I noticed that it is highly possible that my calculations might have missed some synonyms or near-synonyms, leading to a risk that the conclusions at which I would have arrived would be unreliable and inaccurate. Based on these considerations I decided not to use quantitative techniques in the analysis of my research.

However, I used this source as a part of qualitative methodology. Because it comprises huge data comprising thousands of online pieces, first, I excluded the irrelevant ones by filtering through searching for the following key concepts: *millet* (nation), *ümme* (umma), *milliyet* (nationality), *milliyetçilik* (nationalism), *ırk* (race), *ırkçılık* (racism), *kavmiyetçilik* (tribalism), *asabiyye* (tribal solidarity), *Türkler* (Turks), *Osmanlılar* (Ottomans), *Kürtler* (Kurds), *Araplar* (Arabs). As a result of this search, I was able to determine 55 articles related to the subject of this thesis. Examples of their titles include *Milliyetçilik ırkçılık değildir* (Nationalism is not Racism), *İslamın milliyetçiliğe bakışı hakkında bilgi verir misiniz?* (Can you give information about the view of Islam to nationalism?), *Kur'an'da Türkler övülüyor mu?* (Are Turks praised in the Quran?), *Yavuz Sultan Selim'in Kürtleri katliama tabi tuttuğu doğru mudur?* (Is

it true that Selim II subjected the Kurds to massacre?). As seen from the titles, these articles contain ample data that corroborated my findings from the interviews. Keeping in mind the research questions, I read them very carefully and created a separate cell in Microsoft Excel for each part that I found relevant. After doing this, I merged the data that I extracted from the website with the data I had obtained from the interviews and grouped them based on common themes. Finally, I interpreted them in the empirical chapters of my thesis in the light of the theories that I drew on throughout the entire process.

Conclusion

In this chapter I made an effort to lay out the methodological elements that is critical to any research in the field of social science. First and foremost, I discussed various epistemological approaches, highlighting positivism, interpretivism and hermeneutics posing them against each other. At the end of this discussion I came up with my epistemological stance basically taking a middle path between absolutist and axiomatic generalisation and relativism. I stated that rather than promising to reveal truth I only tried to come up with my own interpretations and conclusions which hopefully contribute to the broader academic endeavour. Later, I went into details of qualitative research which will be primary element of this research. I strove to demonstrate both strengths and weaknesses of this methodology. For the purposes of this research, and as a requirement of the adopted specific epistemological approach, I opted for qualitative techniques. Otherwise, statistical data, for instance surveys would not give much light about the inner worlds of people and the meanings that they attach to the phenomena around them. Quantitative methodology is preferred if especially deductive approach is adopted where there are some sharply defined categories prior to the research. However, the research for this thesis explores the

questions of *how* and *why*, rather than *what* and *how many*.³⁶⁸ Thirdly, I discussed the various sampling methods and argued that non-probability sampling will be the most suitable one for this research. Using this methodology, I conducted interviews with people coming from diverse social backgrounds (both lower and higher status in economic and social terms), having conflicting opinions, and attaching to different branches within the same overarching religious community. Lastly, I laid out my research design, in which the written materials and the online data are introduced and the specific methodology pertaining to the interviews is discussed.

³⁶⁸ Svend Brinkmann. 2013. *Qualitative Interviewing Understanding Qualitative Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 49.

CHAPTER 5: CONSTRUCTING THE SELF AS A NATIONALIST MUSLIM

Introduction

Nurcus have been among the most widespread and influential religious social movements, along with the Nakshi sufi order, throughout the history of Republican Turkey. The Nurcu movement started as a form of resistance based on the protection of the faith in the face of the secularizing policies of the new political elites using revolutionary instruments. Although Nurcus, as other religious movements, are in deep disagreement with the new secularist state, I claim that within the field of nationalism there are many elements that overlap as well, such as Turkish exceptionalism and marginalization of the Kurds. Therefore, as aforementioned in the previous chapter, what is at issue is the fusion of religious and nationalist identities. This, first and foremost, constitutes a challenge to modernization theory, according to which nationalism and religiousness are opposed to each other, thereby not allowing any room for their coexistence. The following quote from Van der Veer is quite eye-opening in this debate:

[w]hen dealing with religion and nationalism, it is necessary to offer an analysis of their social force that cuts across conventional dichotomies. Social theory as well as Western common sense have often been content to assume an ideological a priori distinction between the nationalist and the religious imagination. As the argument goes, nationalism belongs to the realm of legitimate modern politics. Nationalism is assumed to be "secular," since it is thought to develop in a process of secularization and modernization. Religion, in this view, assumes political significance only in the underdeveloped parts of the world-much as it did in the past of the West. When religion manifests itself politically in the contemporary world, it is conceptualized as fundamentalism.³⁶⁹

However, the rise of religions after 1980s severely weakened the value of this approach. In the Turkish case too, religion and nationalism are inextricably intermeshed; it is not even easy to determine where one of them ends and the other one starts. That is why the modernist approach is not the best fit for the Nurcu case. However, it should be kept in mind that this approach is twofold. Firstly, according to

³⁶⁹ Van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann. 1999, *Nations and Religion Perspectives on Europe and Asia*, p. 3.

them, religion and nationalism are different in quality; while the former is non-secular and belongs to the space of the sacred, the latter is a secular ideology. Secondly, for Nurcus, in essence the two cannot co-exist due to this structural differentiation. To my mind, Nurcus are, to a great extent, right in the first argument. However, my position diverges from them in the second one, as the reality does not prove this point. In other words, it is the case that religion and nationalism frequently coexist in the minds of people, representing different aspects of the same person's identity.

Although Anthony Smith uses his categories, which he called the sacred foundations of nationalism, namely, chosenness, a golden age, secular and spiritual heroes and sacred territory, and homeland³⁷⁰ in other contexts, especially, Jewish and Christian people, I argue that they can also be applied to Muslim Turkish case. In this chapter, I will attempt to discuss the nationalist elements in the minds of Nurcus using Smith's categories. However, although I will use them, I will share neither the way he employs these tools, nor the conclusion at which he arrives. Had I identically applied Smith's framework to the secular Turkish nationalists and found that their nationalism had included those elements, then that study would have been a true match with Smith's theoretical approach. However, I adapted his approach and abstracted his elements and used them for another purpose, taking me to another conclusion.

To make it clearer, Smith searches for these categories in pre-modern societies, whereas I look for them in a contemporary/modern religious nationalist community. Furthermore, by employing them, Smith reaches the conclusion that there is a similarity between pre-modern religious peoples and national societies, implying that nationalism is actually a kind of religion based on a sacred homeland and the other sacred elements. However, in this chapter, I will show how these elements are found in a primarily religious community, which places religion before and above nationalism. To put it a different way, in this thesis and contrary to Smith's position, there are no two separate categories, namely, premodern peoples (sacred/religious) and modern nations (apparently secular). Rather, there is a community which is both religious and nationalist at the same time.

Drawing upon both online and fieldwork data, firstly I will discuss how Nurcus perceive the place of Turks in the Muslim world. Secondly, I will elaborate on what they think of the alleged sacred mission entrusted to the Turkish nation by God to revive the ummah. Thirdly, their conception of golden age(s)

³⁷⁰ Smith, *Chosen People*, pp. 5, 42-43.

will be scrutinised as an intersection of religion and nationalism. Fourthly, I will be looking at the role that national heroes play in the formation of Nurcus' national identity. Finally, I will be focused on Anatolia and Istanbul, both as sacred spaces and national homeland. Then, I will conclude that although Nurcus are not ethnic nationalists considering blood tie as the condition of belonging to the Turkish nation, their nationalism is not that much inclusive, as they are prone to Turkify many historical prominent Muslim figures, although obviously they are not Turkish. Furthermore, I will also argue that Nurcus manage to accommodate both Islamic and Turkish identity, by legitimating the latter through the useful precepts of the former, in case they are in contradiction with each other.

The Place of Turks in the Muslim World

Nurcus, as an observant religious group in Turkey, are mostly composed of individuals who are quite proud of their nation and its place in the Muslim world. In the narratives of my interviewees during fieldwork, a glorious past was almost always at the centre of the conversation, associated with a deep nostalgia, coupled with admitting the relatively weak power of their country, Turkey, in today's international arena. At the same time, however, one could quickly detect a revival in nationalistic as well as imperial pride as Turkey takes over a more pro-active role in both neighbouring countries and faraway territories which were once ruled by the Ottoman Empire. This was frequently observed during interviews. İsmail Akay, one of the most prominent historical novelists, not only from within the Nur movement, but also all across the religious society, for instance, claims that the Ottoman Empire had a civilization lasting 700 years - actually 624 years – characterised by protecting the Muslim world. Therefore, according to him, the Turkish nation is the cream of all Muslim societies.³⁷¹ In line with this thought, in one of the posts published on sorularlaislamiyet.com, it is proudly maintained that the Ottoman army conquered continents thanks to the Muslim brotherhood.³⁷² These sentences are clear indications of a nationalistic pride and nostalgia for a quite recent, glorious past. In addition, the extraordinary attention paid to the TV shows exalting Ottoman, Islamic and Turkish past cannot be considered a coincidence. These are broadcast on the official state channel, TRT (The Turkish Radio and Television Corporation) and are completely in line with the government's ideological attitude.

One of my interview questions was about the place of the Turkish nation among the *ummah*, meaning

³⁷¹ İsmail Akay, interview with author, January 1, 2017.

³⁷² "Birlik ve Beraberlik," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/kaynak/birlik-ve-beraberlik>

Muslim community all over the world, including each and every Muslim individual irrespective of their ethnic identities and national attachments. Therefore, it is a concept standing for a transnational human society. During the fieldwork, most of the people with whom I carried out interviews, except a Kurdish and a British interviewee, were prone to think that Turks have an important, even comparatively superior position among the other Muslim nations in terms of practising the religion, their past services to Islam and the capacity to revive Islam again in the future. However, while claiming superiority over the others, they did not seem that comfortable in doing so. For instance, Miraç Demiroğlu³⁷³, who is a renowned Ottoman historian with conservative-traditionalist tendencies, started replying to my question by claiming that he was not a racist.³⁷⁴ Actually, this can be considered to be a pre-emptive strike in preparation for a statement, which might sound racist. Indeed, during the conversation, he talked about the innate attributes of Turks which make them superior to others. Likewise, Eyüp Göksoy³⁷⁵, in the very first sentence of his answer, reminded me that what he told had nothing to do with racism, since the Turkish nation indeed comprises many ethnic groups, ranging from Kurds to Armenians who used to be called the ‘loyal nation’ (*millet-i sâdıka*).³⁷⁶ This same pattern holds true for Abdüllatif Kurtan, one of the students of Nursi who served him until Nursi’s death and Necati İshakoğlu, who is a bureaucrat and a previous senior manager among Copyists as well. While the former stated that they all refrained from being racist³⁷⁷, the latter argued that what he said in favour of the Turkish nation cannot be placed under the rubric of racism.³⁷⁸ On the website, the same issue was taken up in a piece titled, *Nationalism is not Racism*. Here is the careful differentiation introduced by an anonymous writer: “Islam refuses to show hostility to other nations, not to love and watch for one’s own nation. This is because, it is completely apart from racism that human beings love their own nation, extend their hands to help them, try to correct if there are mistakes, explain the services that their ancestors make in Islam and try to resemble them.”³⁷⁹ It is quite obvious to see the ambivalent and

³⁷³ He composed many books on the glory of the Ottoman Empire, so he has still been a popular academic figure not only amongst Nursis but also general religious public in Turkey.

³⁷⁴ Miraç Demiroğlu, interview with author, December 19, 2016.

³⁷⁵ Since he is a member of the Foundation for Sciences and Culture (*İlim ve Kültür Vakfı*), it should be added that the first word in the name of the foundation is *ilim*, meaning science. However, there is a conscious selection regarding this word, because another Turkish word, *bilim*, is not used. This is quite understandable, since *bilim* is a word devised by the Institution for Turkish language during the 1930s, in order to stand for, or even, replace, *ilim* (علم as spelled in Arabic) which has quite strong Islamic and traditional connotations.

³⁷⁶ Eyüp Göksoy, interview with author, December 24, 2016.

³⁷⁷ Abdüllatif Kurtan, interview with author, December 20, 2016.

³⁷⁸ Necati İshakoğlu, interview with author, December 25, 2016.

³⁷⁹ Here is the original sentence in Turkish: “...İslam, ırkı yok saymaz, ırkçılığı dava etmeyi yasaklar.

pretty cautious stances of some of the Nurcus in both desiring to uphold the Turkish nation and trying to avoid any criticism of racism at the same time. However, even if this might not be called racism, as they do not base their argument on racial elements, it is obvious that a nationalism of this kind is an exclusive and illiberal one.

Secondly, there is a predominant belief that after converting to Islam, Turks contributed to the glory of the Muslims, and they even became the standard-bearers of Islam. By this word, standard-bearer, they tacitly refer to Nursi's encomium of the Turks, describing them to have been the standard-bearers of the religion for many centuries, meaning that they were the leading Muslim nation in history since the thirteenth century.³⁸⁰ In other words, Nurcus' contention regarding the pioneering role of their own nation is also verified by Nursi, who himself is a Kurdish scholar. That is why they keep emphasizing this word. As a reflection of this inclination, Alaaddin Başar³⁸¹, one of the writers in the website, also holds that they love their ancestors not due to racism but because they were the standard-bearers of Islam as Nursi depicted them.³⁸²

I noticed that most of the respondents believed that Turks helped the revival of Islam, especially in the military sphere with the successful campaigns against both Mongols and crusaders. Although making a mistake in the dates, Ömer Faruk Kamışlı, who is a businessman and a board member of a Nurcu foundation and who did not go through the regular schooling system, states that Turks converted to Islam during the reign of Ghaznavids and that they have been working to spread their religion as of that time. In the same context, Muammer Öztunç, a lawyer and a prominent figure of the movement, mentions a concept, *i'la-i kelimetullah* (إعلاء كلمة الله) whose literal meaning is exalting the name of God. But, by that, he means making the faith of *tawheed* (oneness of God) predominant all over the world. Mehmet Paksu, who is a renowned scholar of Islamic jurisprudence and a prominent figure of the movement, also seconds this contention on the website, arguing that Turks served Islam with their bravery combined with a passion of *jihād*, as being a crucial part of the Muslim army during the Abbasid

Milletini sevip gözetmeyi değil, başka milletlere düşmanca tavır sergilemeyi reddeder. Çünkü, insanın kendi milletini sevmesi, onlara yardım elini uzatması, hataları varsa düzeltmeye çalışması, atalarının İslama yaptıkları hizmetleri anlatması ve onlara benzemek için gayret göstermesi ırkçılıktan tamamen ayırdır.” “Milliyetçilik, İrkçılık,” Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/kaynak/milliyetcilik-irkcilik>.

³⁸⁰ Said Nursi. 2012. *Sözler*. İstanbul: Söz Yayınları. p. 965.

³⁸¹ Normally he is a professor of management. However after retirement he started working for sorularlaislamiyet.com in the research center.

³⁸² “Bediüzzaman'ın ırkçılığa bakışı nasıldır?” Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/bediuzzamanin-irkcilig-bakisi-nasildir>

Period in the tenth and eleventh centuries.³⁸³

Thirdly, some of my interviewees believe that there is a strong relationship between Turkishness and Islam. To a great extent, the Turkish nation is not considered to be just one of the nations which converted to Islam. For instance, İbrahim Gezin holds that the existence of Turkishness is dependent upon Islam. This is an idea championed since the beginning of 1990s, especially by İsmet Özel in Turkey, who is a renowned ex-leftist, Islamist poet. According to him, all the Muslims who venture to make *jihad* against the infidels should be considered Turkish. As a natural extension of this approach, he claims that the companions of the Prophet Muhammad are to be seen as Turkish, although most of them were ethnically Arab.³⁸⁴ However, there is a slight but important difference between the positions of Özel and Gezin. According to the former, Turkishness is quite a totalitarian category although it seems inclusive, as it does not allow the existence and expression of the other ethnic identities. Kurds are the first and foremost example of this. According to Özel, they are also to be considered Turks even though this is against their will. In his line of thought, those who are not Turks are categorized as infidels. It will not be true to argue that Gezin's position entirely overlaps with Özel's stance, since are agreed on the contention that Turkishness is only meaningful within the religion of Islam. However, Gezin does not share Özel's exclusionist and totalitarian view.

Şadi Eren stresses the merging of the Turkish and Muslim identities, stating that although there is an ethnic element in Turkishness, it is not enough. For him, the Turkish national identity can only be perfected and achieved by integrating the Islamic soul. Most probably borrowing from Nursi, he gives Hungarians and Bulgarians as an example of Turkic peoples who lost their Turkishness because they left Islam.³⁸⁵ Nursi also makes the same point, suggesting that although Turks form the majority among the Muslim nations, all the Turks around the world are Muslim except those who lost both their religion and national belonging, such as Hungarians.³⁸⁶

Some of my respondents hold that Turks are superior to the other Muslim nations even today, despite

³⁸³ "Peygamber efendimizin Türklerle ilgili hadisi şerifi var mıdır?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/peygamber-efendimizin-turklerle-iligili-hadisi-serifi-var-midir>

³⁸⁴ "Tartışmalı Konferanslar: 2. Tartışmalı Konferans: Modernlik ve Türklük," İstiklal Marşı Derneği, Accessed June 26, 2019, <http://www.istiklalmarsidernegi.org.tr/Yazi.aspx?YID=59&KID=3&PGID=0>.

³⁸⁵ Şadi Eren. 2008. *Ademin Torunları, İslami İslâmî Açından Irkçılık ve Milliyetçilik Konularına Genel Bir Bakış*. İstanbul: Mega Basım A.Ş. p. 85.

³⁸⁶ Said Nursi. 2012. *Mektubat*. İstanbul: Söz Yayınları. p. 454.

many drawbacks. According to Muammer Öztunç, Turkey is unrivalled in the contemporary world in both material accumulation and intellectual capital.³⁸⁷ İncekara, another prominent figure of the movement, who used to be the manager of the radio station belonging to the Yeni Nesil circle, highlights the democratic advancement of Turkey in the face of many challenges.³⁸⁸ While stressing Turkey's democratic regime, he does not forget to mention the authoritarian regimes of the other Muslim countries. Remembering that the Nur movement is one of the closest ones to the West and Western ideas, especially freedom and democracy, it is quite natural that the members of the community are proud of democratic values. Despite the fact that it might sound contradictory, remembering their opposition to the secularization policies of the state, actually it is not. While Nurcus were opponent of the top-down policies of the state aiming at a social transformation until the Ak Party seized power, most of them are quite open and supportive of the ideas of democracy and individual freedoms, though there are some exceptions such as Copyists and Med-Zehra group. In a way, the majority of the movement can be compared with and likened to the liberal secular segment of Turkey with regard to modern values and their inculcation to the masses, as they also embrace modern values, but oppose top-down secularization policies. On the other hand, it should also be noted that there is a discrepancy between the positions they take regarding party politics at ideological level, and their nationalist stance based on the superiority and exclusiveness of their own nation vis-à-vis the others.

The Sacred Mission to Revive the Ummah

According to Smith, one of the sacred foundations of nationalism is the belief in chosenness. Some ethnic groups believe that they are exclusively elected by God in order to fulfil some missions entrusted to them. The myth of election in this analysis is more than a simple tale, rather it functions to meet the contemporary needs of the people, and legitimates their deeds and actions.³⁸⁹ Although there are many traces of the concept of chosenness in Nurcus, it will be far-fetched to claim that they are a good fit for Smith's theory. Firstly, while Smith develops his theory, he mostly links his approach to the Jewish experience which leads to incompatibilities in many cases. For instance, in the Nurcu case, there is nothing comparable to the idea of a covenant into which entered between people and the deity.³⁹⁰ Secondly, in understanding the Nurcu case I am not inclined to argue that a functionalist approach will

³⁸⁷ Muammer Öztunç, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

³⁸⁸ Mehmet Ali İncekara, interview with author, December 12, 2016.

³⁸⁹ Anthony Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, 2003, p. 49.

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

be explanatory. In other words, to claim that Nurcus believe that Turks are chosen by God in order to meet certain needs they have today, would be both excessive and an ungrounded. However, it is obvious that Nurcus, to a great extent, think that Turks are not an ordinary nation from God's perspective.

My fieldwork demonstrates that they believe that the ummah has been in a dire situation at least for two centuries and it will be revived by the Turkish nation as it carries out this mission granted by God. Although their reasons may vary, they are quite convinced of this. For instance, İsmail Akay contends that Turks have a particular mission which was assigned by God. He explicitly uses the word mission (*misyon* in Turkish). Then he states that this is part of the customs of God who assigns missions to certain nations, so that the religion continues to be great. He justifies his point by an evolutionary approach to history, pointing out that "there is an obvious evolution in the history"³⁹¹. He claims that since Mawlana (Jalaladdin Rumi) and the rise of Seljuks, there is a pattern in the history.

When Seljuks leave the scene of history, Ottomans step in. When they leave, this time Republican Turkey comes into the picture. This cycle has been repeated ever since the Huns. The obvious conclusion to be drawn is that God does not deprive this nation of a state. Taking this line back to the Huns, it looks like [God] prepares this nation for something. At least I see it in this way.³⁹²

Therefore, according to him, God takes this nation to a specific point in history, when the religion will also be revived. There are a couple of points to be raised here. Firstly, contrary to the Smith's understanding of chosenness, there is no direct assignment by God, rather it is a tacit one which can only be felt and observed, as there is no mention of the Turks as the chosen nation in the fundamental texts of Islam. So, Akay does a specific reading of history in a way that indicates Turks to be 'the nation'. Secondly, as Smith rightfully suggests "that the doctrine of divine election harnesses universalism to particularism, and makes the salvation of all hinge on the conduct of a special few"³⁹³, in this account, the good of the whole (religion and humanity) is attributed to the good of the part (the nation).

Another point is that Akay's words truly reflect the ambivalent nature of the relationship between the religious people of Turkey with the republican state as imbued with a deep secularism, especially prior

³⁹¹ İsmail Akay, interview with author, January 1, 2017.

³⁹² İsmail Akay, interview with author, January 1, 2017.

³⁹³ Anthony Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 51.

to Erdoğan's grip on power since September 2010, when the power of Kemalists in high judiciary and bureaucracy was broken and replaced with those supported by the ruling party. As of that year, the secularization policies have been waning, although they did not entirely disappear, remembering that the official curriculum and the official history did not go through a significant change in this period.

Secondly, Akay is resentful against Kurds, which is, to a great extent, a trademark of Turkish nationalism. This has been proved by the latest developments in Northern Iraq and Northern Syria. Both Bashar Asad, the leader of the Syrian Government and Hashd-i Shaabi, the Shiite militia backed by the Iraqi government, were preferred over Kurds by both the Turkish state and society.³⁹⁴ Thirdly, even though Akay does not adopt the republican ideology, he openly sides with the seculars in the face of disintegration. The most important thing for a nationalist religious person is the existence and well-being of the state as the protector of religion. Akay claims that during the foundation of the Republic, whereas even many Kurdish Muslim scholars wanted to have an independent state, Said Nursi declined these demands and held that the unity of the *ummah* is fundamental, because the caliphate needs to remain standing. He added that even if Nursi was not able to affect the masses, he convinced his students together with the people around him. Furthermore, Nursi supported the Ankara government composed of the nationalists who were against both the invaders and the sultanate based in Istanbul, though later he criticized and even became an opponent of it. Then Akay makes this critical remark: "Thanks to scholars like Said Nursi, the state avoided annihilation, rather it evolved at least to a republic."³⁹⁵ This "at least" is a clear sign of longing for the sultanate, especially keeping the mindset of the interviewee in mind. In his books, Akay keeps elaborating on the power and glory of the Ottoman sultans, even though he does not criticize, but rather writes in favour of the fratricide envisioning the murder of the brothers of the ruling sultan, the potential candidates for the throne, for the sake of the state's well-being.

In the same way as Akay, Demiroğlu, the famous historian of the Ottoman Empire, also thinks that the place of Turks among the *ummah* is a special one and it was determined by the Prophet Muhammad himself. He comes up with this argument by having recourse to a hadith and a verse. In the hadith to which he refers, it is said that "[w]hen my community keeps on the right (path), it is going to enjoy an

³⁹⁴ (Daily Sabah, 2017a) "Turkey supports Iraq's moves to restore peace, order in Kirkuk, MFA says," Daily Sabah, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2017/10/16/turkey-supports-iraqs-moves-to-restore-peace-order-in-kirkuk-mfa-says>

³⁹⁵ İsmail Akay, interview with author, January 1, 2017.

age of one day, and when it does not keep on the right (path), it will have an age of half a day”³⁹⁶. Demiroğlu sets forth that Said Nursi interprets this hadith in a way that the periods of Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties equal half a day, which is 500 years, since an age of one day stands for 1000 years. It did not take one full day (1000 years), because they did not keep on the right path. However, the Turkish nation completed half a day (around 500 years) only during the Ottoman period. For Demiroğlu, this is an evidence of the exceptional place of the Turkish nation among the other Muslim communities. However, looking at the source to which Demiroğlu refers, it appears that he, on purpose, dismisses some parts of Nursi’s interpretation. Firstly, Nursi does not use the word “only” that Demiroğlu uses, which changes the meaning to a great extent. Secondly, Nursi also claims that the Ottoman Empire did not keep on the right path. Thirdly, in Nursi’s interpretation, past Arab dynasties and the Ottoman Empire are brothers. Contrary to the approach of Demiroğlu, Nursi does not contrast these periods.

Both Said Nursi and Elmalili Hamdi Yazır, another famous interpreter of the Qur’an, interpret a Qur’anic verse referred to by Demiroğlu;

“O you who have believed, whoever of you should revert from his religion - Allah will bring forth [in place of them] a people He will love and who will love Him [who are] humble toward the believers, powerful against the disbelievers; they strive in the cause of Allah and do not fear the blame of a critic. That is the favour of Allah; He bestows it upon whom He wills. And Allah is all-Encompassing and Knowing.”³⁹⁷

This implies that if you (Arabs) turn your face from my religion, I will assign the mission to another nation with six qualities. According to both of the scholars, the implied nation in the verse might be the Turks after the decline of the Umayyad and Abbasid Empires.³⁹⁸ On the website, in the answer to the question as to whether Turks are praised in Qur’an, it is maintained that Turks are one of the few nations who uphold the religion of God, so they are one of the nations to which the above verse implicitly refers.³⁹⁹ In addition to the prophetic determination of the Turkish nation, Muammer Öztunç notes the

³⁹⁶ Al-Bayan, Tafsir of Surat al-‘Asr, İbni Kesir, 1:13; Mu’cemü’t-Taberânî, el-Kebîr, 22:573, 576

³⁹⁷ Qur’an, 5-54.

³⁹⁸ Miraç Demiroğlu, interview with author, December 19, 2016.

³⁹⁹ "Kur'an'da Türkler övülüyor mu?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://sorularlailslamiyet.com/kuranda-turkler-ovuluyor-mu-bu-dogru-mu-aciklar-misiniz-0>.

similarity between the attributes of Turks before their conversion to Islam and the precepts of Islam.⁴⁰⁰ Therefore, for both him and Mehmet Ali İncekara Turks' conversion did not take place by force of arms, rather they were convinced by the Muslims.⁴⁰¹ According to Abdüllatif Kurtan, Turks were like Muslims, even when they were not Muslim.⁴⁰² Likewise, in one of the pieces on the website, it is argued that Turks' belief system, based on monotheism along with their faith in hereafter, predestination and common practices such as punishing adultery and homosexuality, were among the chief reasons which paved the way for their conversion to Islam.⁴⁰³ What is interesting here is that they do not problematize conversion by force of arms in itself. Instead, they prefer to single out the way the Turkish nation changed their faith.

Another point is that the Turkish state's humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees in particular comes forth as an important element of Turkish exceptionalism which constitutes the bedrock of the claim that Turks have the mission to revive *ummah*. This way of thinking is an appropriate example to illustrate Smith's point regarding the balance between universalism and particularism in that the leadership of the Turks will also bring about the well-being of other people as well. For example, according to Halime Coşan, who is a programmer at Moral FM, a radio station whose audience is mostly Nurcus and religious people, Turks definitely have certain missions, one of the indicators of which is taking care of Syrian refugees. She perplexedly asks:

Is it only the responsibility of Turkey to take care of the Syrian refugees? Is that only the burden of Turkish Muslims? It is not actually. Nevertheless, Muslims in Turkey take care of them more than the other Muslims.⁴⁰⁴

Emine Başeğmez, who is an accountant, also makes a very similar comparison between Turkey and the rest of the Muslim world. The reason behind this argument is as follows: In the face of atrocities all over the world, while other Muslim states remained silent, Turks spoke out loud due to charitable attitudes. The context should also be kept in mind, since back in 2016-17, when the interviews were

⁴⁰⁰ Muammer Öztunç, interview with author, December 30, 2016. *Zekeriya Kitapçı. Saadet Asrında Türkler İlk Türk Sahabe Tabii ve Tebea Tabiileri*, Yedi Kubbe Publications, İstanbul. 2014. p.3

⁴⁰¹ Mehmet Ali İncekara, interview with author, December 12, 2016.

⁴⁰² Abdüllatif Kurtan, interview with author, December 20, 2016.

⁴⁰³ "Türkler ne zaman Müslüman olmuştur?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/turkler-size-saldirmadan-siz-sakin-turklere-saldirmayin-cunku-onlar-gelecekte-islamiyete-cok>.

⁴⁰⁴ Halime Coşan, interview with author, January 4, 2017.

conducted, charities and financial assistance towards Syrian refugees were quite popular in the national agenda.⁴⁰⁵ Even if this issue is still in circulation, at that time it was high on the agenda, because the political decisions and acts of the government were severely criticised by the opposition led by the Nationalist Movement Party and its prominent member of parliament, Ümit Özdağ.⁴⁰⁶

Regarding the mission assigned by God, some of the interviewees are doubtful, contrary to the majority. Sevinç Ak, who is an undergraduate student in the department of Arabic Language and Literature, does not think that there is a specific duty given to the Turks. Rather, all Muslims have the same duty.⁴⁰⁷ Mehmet Ali İncekara goes further, arguing that to say that in future Turks will fulfil the specific duty falls under the rubric of racism, as it might mean attaching privilege to one specific human society.⁴⁰⁸ According to Elif Dereli, who is a young lawyer and a graduate Sociology student, we cannot talk about a mission peculiar to Turks. But, departing from the concept of nationality, Turks certainly have a role within ‘Islamic nationhood’ to realize this type of nationhood.⁴⁰⁹ Dereli means the greater ummah by this concept. Indeed, ‘Islamic nationhood’ is a translation of the phrase *İslamiyet milliyeti* as used by Nursi. He uses this concept in order to alleviate the danger of rising nationalism based on ethnicities and the idea of separation. With the objective of encompassing the Muslim ummah as a whole, he comes up with this concept. Furthermore, although Nursi is not a nationalist, he considers nationalism as a level of development, as opposed to tribal attachments.

Nevertheless, shortly after making these points on their reservations about the peculiarity of Turks, most of the interviewees started talking about the good deeds of Turks which can make them the leader of the ummah. During the interviews, what I noticed is that even if only at a theoretical level, people are willing to be fair in their position. In other words, some of them experience a tension between the universal equality taught by their faith and the strong attachment and love towards their nation. Although, obviously they love and privilege their own nation, they have an inclination to introduce this position as a requirement of an objective and fair assessment.

⁴⁰⁵ Emine Başeğmez, interview with author, December 31, 2016.

⁴⁰⁶ Shortly after I carried out the interviews, he left his party and joined a newly-founded nationalist party, Good Party, led by Meral Aksener, who is a center-rightist politician known for nationalist policies especially against Kurds in the South-eastern part of Anatolia. Akşener has long been accused of being involved in unidentified murders in the south-eastern part of Anatolia mostly populated by Kurdish people, especially by the leftists and the members of the Kurdistan Party, People’s Democracy Party.

⁴⁰⁷ Sevinç Ak, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

⁴⁰⁸ Mehmet Ali İncekara, interview with author, December 12, 2016.

⁴⁰⁹ Elif Dereli, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

Another point which is made by a majority of the respondents is the objective superiority of the Turkish nation over other Muslim nations. This can be called ‘the case of this is the case’ in that they suggest that Turkey is unique among the others, independent of their subjective opinions. As if it is a common argument shared by everybody, Elif Dereli, the young lawyer and a master’s student in one of the distinguished state universities located in Istanbul, holds that the most powerful country is Turkey, which is also accepted and perceived by the other countries as well. She relates an anecdote that she experienced in Mecca during *umra*⁴¹⁰ where she met a person saying she loved Turkey’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, because Turkey is the last fortress in this region, upholding the Muslim world. According to the interviewee, that is why Turkey takes over more important roles than the others, as the one and only country standing strong within a fragmented geography.⁴¹¹ Galip Kul, who is a Board member of the Foundation for Science and Culture, also draws attention to the peculiarity of the Turkish nation and absence of any other nation, including Saudi Arabia that he considers closest to Turkey in terms of the spirit of leadership required to uphold the umma, which can take the lead. He especially mentions the Kurdish nation and contends that they do not have the necessary leadership attributes. For him, the Kurdish nation survived so far by submitting to Turkish rule for centuries.⁴¹²

The uniqueness of Turkey is emphasized by İbrahim Gezin as well. He argues that unfortunately the other Muslim nations do not have the capacity to represent Islam. According to him, Arabs do not have the capacity to protect even those states that are from their own Arab nation. “Regrettably,” he holds, “when we look at Syria or the other countries, they cannot demonstrate the potential that Muslims need. But Turkey protects the Muslim countries, even though they are of other nations.”⁴¹³ When I asked what he thought about the position of Iran, he responded with a laugh and stated that he had never taken Iran into consideration, and was of the opinion that they do not have such an objective. According to Gezin, Iran does not include Sunni Muslims in the Muslim world, so they do not feel the need to protect Muslim countries with a Sunni population.⁴¹⁴ He also stresses the way Islam is being experienced in Turkey and contends that Turkey’s place is different from Iran’s. Implicitly he is highlighting the more moderate form of Islam adopted by the majority in Turkey.⁴¹⁵ Halime Coşan makes the same point with

⁴¹⁰ *Umra* means lesser pilgrimage which is not obligatory as opposed to pilgrimage (*haji*) which is one of the pillars of Islam.

⁴¹¹ Elif Dereli, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

⁴¹² Galip Kul, interview with author, December 18, 2016.

⁴¹³ İbrahim Gezin, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

an emphasis upon the past practices of the Ottoman Empire. She, as many Nurcus, felt obliged to make a reference to Nursi in any statement she makes. Regarding the deeds of her ancestors, she argues, they followed a latitudinarian approach to the non-Muslims, considering their rights, and accordingly they did not attempt to uproot them from their religious beliefs.⁴¹⁶ What should be noted at this point is that although the mission of the Turks is deemed to be sacred by some of the Nurcus with which I carried out interviews, they also come up with some rational and secular explanations to support their opinion. In other words, they embrace the idea that the revival of the religion and ummah is entrusted to the Turkish nation, however this is so not only because some prophetic traditions tacitly refer to the Turks, but also because the existing realities of the world make this option possible.

Nurcus' Perception of Golden Ages

In this section, I will elaborate upon Nurcus' perception of the concept of golden age as both a sacred foundation of nationalism in Smith's sense, and an important element of the ideology of nationalism in general. Firstly, I will suggest that as religious nationalist people most of the Nurcus make some amendments to the golden ages identified by both secular nationalists (republican elites) and non-nationalist religious people (e.g. their master, Nursi). Secondly, I will argue that although they mostly combine two identities, being religious and national, the former overrides the latter regarding golden ages as well as the other foundations. Thirdly, for Nurcus, there is not one agreed-upon golden age excluding all the other periods in the history. Rather, there are multiple ages deemed to be golden. Fourthly, even though my sample is not large enough, it might be argued that there are differing perceptions based on generation and ethnicity. Fifthly, I explore Smith's idea that golden ages act as an exemplar for the members of a nation, prior to the beginning of the decline. Therefore, I contend that my findings acquired both from the interviews and online data show a complex and detailed picture with regard to the conception of the golden age.

The imagination of a golden age sits at the intersection of more than one parameter. These people are both members of the Nur community following the teachings of Said Nursi, and they are citizens of a modern nation-state who place great importance on the glory of the Turks in history. This diversity is well elaborated in Smith's approach. He argues that

...the quest for a golden age does not of itself create a sense of unity and cohesion

⁴¹⁶ Halime Coşan, interview with author, January 4, 2017.

in the members of an ethnic. On the contrary, the evidence we have cited reveals a frequent split in ethnic consciousness, which in turn produces alternative conceptions of national identity and dignity. ... Hence, national unity, that mirage of nationalists, can be found only in the ceaseless debates between rival ideals of the golden age and their bearer classes debates that take place within the narrow circle of the historic culture of the community, and that sharpen the national consciousness of the contending parties⁴¹⁷

In this analysis, Smith successfully draws attention to the rival conception of golden ages which is also the case in modern Turkey as well. However, due to Nursi's multiple identities, being both practising Muslims and members of a modern nation, the conceptions of their golden age differ from both imaginations. They fit neither into Nursi's historical narrative nor the one depicted by the secular republic. In Nursi's account, there is no specific reference to the place and deeds of Turks in history. He starts the history with the Prophet Muhammad and a decline starts beginning with twelfth century. In his eyes, even the Ottoman period coincides with this decline during which there were many problems regarding natural and Islamic sciences.⁴¹⁸ In the republican narrative, in contrast, there is very little reference to Islamic history; instead, the pre-Islamic Turkish history until the eighth century, is presented as the golden and glorious past age of the Turkish nation. However, the new historical narrative which has for some time been promoted by the Ak Party, especially through the media, boosts the Ottoman period as a response to Kemalist policies. The point, which is shared by Nursi's and Kemalist narratives, is the little attention which is paid to Ottoman history. Modern Turkish *Nurcu* individuals fill this "gap" by merging both narratives into one, which modifies both of them. As an example of this argument, here is the renowned professor Miraç Demiroğlu's answer to my question regarding his perception of golden age:

The answer to this was given by Bediüzzaman in his book *Muhakemat*. Bediüzzaman says that the golden age is from the first to the fifth century. Quite obvious. Nobody can deny it. The second golden age, in my personal opinion, is a very beautiful golden age from Mehmed II until the beginning of reign of Selim II. There are some other golden ages as well. There are Baburids, there are Seljuks,

⁴¹⁷ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 214.

⁴¹⁸ Said Nursi. 2012. *Muhakemat*. İstanbul: Söz Yayınları. p. 46.

but they lasted a very short time, a corruption started either in practice or in faith.⁴¹⁹

Here I intervened and asked: “It seems like there was a decline in the Ottoman centuries according to Nursi.”

He responded as follows: “Yes, I know but I said I would add to it if you notice. I do not object to it.”⁴²⁰

Although he says that he is adding to what is stated by Nursi, actually his point is at odds with the approach of Nursi who evidently considers the Ottoman period as a decline in his book, *Muhakemat*.⁴²¹

There, Nursi argues that “since the fifth century after *hijrah* onwards, [the idea of] power defeated the right [as a value]”⁴²². Although he writes somewhat in favour of the Ottomans in later years⁴²³, his critical position is self-evident, implying that there are some problems regarding the principle of justice in the Ottoman period.

Coming back to Demiroğlu’s approach, it might be argued that because he does not want to risk going against his master openly, he opts for going around, rather than confronting the position adopted by Nursi. This looks like a way of coping with the tension and trauma experienced by a disciple, when his and his master’s opinions diverge from each other.

During the interviews, when asking whether there is any golden age in history, I omitted the subject on purpose in order to observe the reactions of the interviewees. Therefore, in the question they were asked, whose golden age was meant was not clearly stated. The way I framed the question helped to bring out some interesting points. Without clarifying whether the golden age of Islam or Turkish nation was meant, many of them replied that it was the *asr-ı saadet*⁴²⁴, which was the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, when Turks had not yet converted to Islam. In other words, they filled in the blank part within the question and assumed that the golden age of Islam is in question. This is in accordance with

⁴¹⁹ Miraç Demiroğlu, interview with author, December 19, 2016.

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Nursi, *Muhakemat*, p. 49.

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ As is mentioned before, the following verse is frequently mentioned by Nursi as an evidence to the chosenness of Turks: *يَأْتِ اللَّهُ بِقَوْمٍ يُحِبُّهُمْ وَيُحِبُّونَهُ* (Surah Maidah, 54). It means, “Allah will bring forth [in place of them] a people He will love and who will love Him”. According to Nursi *the just* sultans of the Ottoman Empire are the ones implied by this verse, because they restored the power and glory of Islam after a comparatively long period of chaos lasting around three to four years. It is important to note that Nursi wrote this part of the book in 1934, when the state-sponsored nationalism was at its peak. It was being disseminated among the people as well. Therefore, this interpretation becomes more conceivable taking the historical circumstances into consideration.

⁴²⁴ Although generally, only the lifetime of the Prophet was meant, at times the era of the rightly-guided Caliphs and the time during which the companions of the Prophet Muhammad lived was included in this golden age. Literally it means “the age of happiness”.

Smith's emphasis on sacredness of the pasts of the communities as they are remembered.⁴²⁵ However, the significance of the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad for Nurcus goes beyond the analysis of Smith, as it is not a part of the national history as a golden age, but it is still important, even the most important. İbrahim Gezin, for instance, held that the only golden age in the history is the *asr-ı saadet* and there were no golden ages other than that. He was quite strict on the uniqueness of the golden age, whereas many other interviewees mentioned some other golden ages as well.⁴²⁶ On the website, in response to the question as to whether nationalism and racism are not permissible in Islam, the author made a clear differentiation between the periods before and after Islam. While s/he describes the previous period as the age of ignorance and interregnum, s/he depicts the lifetime of the Prophet as the time of felicity together with the other Muslims.⁴²⁷ Abdullah Halit Göç, who has been a professor of Physics at a public university and Miraç Demiroğlu are also among the ones who directly mention the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, however they allude to some other ages as well.

On the other hand, some informants such as Mehmet Ali İncekara, Eyüp Göksoy, a board member of a Nurcu foundation and Ömer Faruk Kamışlı, separate the history of Turks and Islam and asked me back whose golden age is meant.⁴²⁸ According to Coşan, whereas the golden age of Islam is the *asr-ı saadet*, it is the time of Great Seljuk Empire for the Turkish nation.⁴²⁹ In a piece published online, the same period is described to be the one during which Turks dominated the world⁴³⁰, which is definitely not the case. However, this is important for demonstrating to what extent golden ages are the products of nationalist and religious imaginations.

At this point, it is crucial to accentuate that although different times in history can be conceived to be golden, the uniqueness of the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad is common for everybody. Even if the interviewees mention some other great states or empires, they all privilege the seventh century in which Islam emerged in the Arabian Peninsula. This demonstrates that even though all these people

⁴²⁵ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 171.

⁴²⁶ İbrahim Gezin, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

⁴²⁷ "Milliyetçilik, ırkçılık hakkında bilgi verir misiniz? Kendi milletimi diğer milletlerden daha fazla sevmem caiz midir?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/milliyetcilik-irkcilik-hakkinda-bilgi-verir-misiniz-kendi-milletimi-diger-milletlerden-daha-fazla>.

⁴²⁸ Mehmet Ali İncekara, interview with author, December 12, 2016. Ömer Faruk Kamışlı, interview with author, December 31, 2016.

⁴²⁹ Halime Coşan, interview with author, January 4, 2017.

⁴³⁰ "İslamiyet, Arapların işine mi yaramıştır?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/islamiyet-araplarin-isine-mi-yaramistir>.

define themselves as Turkish in national terms, they are staunchly attached to Islam and its historical roots. According to Göç, it is quite clear that it is impossible to make a comparison between *asr-ı saadet* and any other ages in history.⁴³¹ The primary reason behind this firm belief should be found in the way Muslims look at that period. According to the Islamic creed, Prophet Muhammad received revelations from God from the age of forty, the beginning of his prophecy, until his death. Because the Muslim community was led by him and because he was under constant surveillance and supervision of God himself, either good deeds were done, or wrongdoings were corrected on the spot. In other words, in this world where there is no direct connection between God and his creatures, the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad was an exception. Based on this approach, both sayings and the deeds of the Prophet Muhammad constitute an example for all Muslims, on the grounds that his sayings and actions were under direct control of God. In modern times, reformists in the Muslim world opposed the idea of exceptionalism of that period and emphasized the historicity of some of the Prophet's acts and policies. However, they constitute only a small minority in the Muslim world, in which for many Muslims the Prophet Muhammad is the pinnacle of humanity, and for Muslims it is a must to follow the way he lived. Many times, the following verse is cited as evidence: "Nor does he speak from [his own] inclination."⁴³²

Elaborating on the qualities of golden ages, Smith argues that for some nations there might be more than one golden age in different categories. He mentions the political/military ages during which specific nations defeated others in many battles. Or, religious creativity and the successful activities of some clerics qualify a historical period as a glorious one.⁴³³ The examples can be multiplied. In accordance with Anthony Smith's analysis, most of the respondents have more than one golden age, as opposed to the idea of one single golden age. Usually, it starts from the lifetime of Prophet Mohammad and reaches to contemporary Turkey. Placing them on a timeline, it is observed that there are many ages regarded as "golden" with a couple of exceptions marked by clear defeat of either Muslims or Ottomans. Conceivably, the thirteenth century during which Mongols invaded the territories inhabited extensively by Muslims, or the period after especially sixteenth century are considered the times of decline rather than glory. One of the rare students of Nursi, who is still alive, Abdüllatif Kurtan, also refers to the *asr-ı saadet* and the period of rightly guided caliphs with a specific emphasis upon the first

⁴³¹ Abdullah Halit Göç, interview with author, January 1, 2017.

⁴³² Surah Najm, verse 3.

⁴³³ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p.174.

two caliphs, namely, Abu Bakar and ‘Umar, excluding the later period.⁴³⁴ This emphasis is also significant, because historically speaking, a chaos started during the reign of the third caliph ‘Uthman. Although in this discussion I draw attention to the multiplicity and diversity of golden ages in the imaginations of people, nevertheless, there might be a conflict within this diversity. Therefore, I think at this point it would be meaningful to refer to the following argument of Smith: “[W]e repeatedly find examples of rival mythologies and competing ethnic memories, which appear to reveal a deep split in the cultural and political fabric of national identity, and which give rise to different types of ideology and policy....”⁴³⁵ The Ummayyad period is one of the spaces of contention within the circle of religious nationalist people as well. It is a controversial period as Muslims experienced a very advanced level regarding natural sciences and intellectual vividness, but this same period also witnessed politically authoritarian regimes under the control of patriarchal monarchs. Another point to be made regarding this period is that Arabs were openly favoured and protected at the expense of offending other peoples. Hence, it is a period around which many debates revolve, and different positions are taken. It is important to note that most of my elder respondents remember this period in negative terms, especially due to the discrimination against non-Arabs, including Turks. The online data also shows a negative stance towards that period. In one piece, it is suggested that “[a]s the Umayyad ... gave importance to the Arab people and viewed the others as slaves or second class, the Umayyads offended the other nations in the Islamic world and they themselves experienced many disasters, and they caused the development and spread of the Islamic world in the earlier periods to stop”⁴³⁶. In another one, it is suggested that Umayyads were Arabists and they fabricated some prophetic traditions that would legitimate and whitewash their Arabism.⁴³⁷ Among my respondents, however, three of them remembered Umayyads in positive terms. They are all young and two of them are females. One of them is Samet Elbaşı, an ethnically Kurdish young man, a Sociology graduate, working for a company. Sevinç Ak, a female university student holds that during the Umayyad period many Muslim scientists carried out scientific research and Westerners learned from them. It looks like she is referring to the

⁴³⁴ Abdüllatif Kurtan, interview with author, December 20, 2016.

⁴³⁵ Anthony Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 170.

⁴³⁶ "Milliyetçilik, Irkçılık Değildir," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/blog/milliyetcilik-irkcilik-degildir>.

⁴³⁷ Hz. Peygamber (asv)'in "Ben, bütün seçkinlerin seçkini oldum" sözünün, Emevilerin uydurması olduğunu ve Arapçılıkla ilgili olduğunu söyleyenler var. Sizce bu hadisi nasıl anlamalıyız? Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/hz-peygamber-asvin-ben-butun-seckinlerin-seckini-oldum-sozunun-emevilerin-uydurmasi-oldugunu-ve>.

translations of the works of ancient Greek philosophers from Arabic into Western languages during the Renaissance in Europe. Then she talks about the pro-Arab attitude of Umayyads as something problematic and concludes that despite their Arab nationalism they served Islam a lot.⁴³⁸

Here, I want to draw attention to another point regarding the difference between racism and nationalism. According to Anderson, "...from the start the nation was conceived in language, not in blood, and that one could be 'invited into' the imagined community. Thus today, even the most insular nations accept the principle of naturalization..., no matter how difficult in practice they may make it."⁴³⁹ Based on this difference in their definitions, there appears a difference between the terminologies of İncekara and Ak. While the former considers that attitude to be racism, the latter calls it nationalism. Because İncekara's nationalist consciousness is more entrenched than Ak, he feels the need to specify that Umayyads had a blood-based idea of Arabness and discriminated against people of other ethnic origins. Nevertheless, Ak, on the other hand, as a young female student does not feel the need to protect the ideology of nationalism itself and calls the policy of the Umayyads nationalistic. In contrast, İncekara, needs to call the same attachment racism, which is critical to differentiate it from nationalism as an ideology which is to be protected in his eyes.⁴⁴⁰ As far as I observed, nationalistic inclinations and sensitivities were looser in the younger generations.

In line with Ak, another young woman, Sena Çekmeci who is an editor and TV programmer, mentions only the period of Umayyads in Andalusia, emphasizing the high times of art, science and architecture. It is important to note that she is one of the two people referring Umayyads in Andalusia, showing that this period in the history almost does not matter at all in identity formations of Nurcu individuals. In her answer, she also adds that the artistic revival and scientific developments during the Renaissance had already been carried out by Muslim scholars in Muslim Spain.⁴⁴¹ Accordingly, she claims that all these artistic and architectural advancements which are thought to be the works of Europeans are actually rooted in the Andalusian period. It should also be noted that this line of thought is quite common, not only among Nurchus but also across Turkey. Most of the time people think that the West either stole or usurped some civilizational values and scientific inventions from Muslims, or they pretended that they invented or discovered those things in history, whereas they all belonged to Muslim

⁴³⁸ Sevinç Ak, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

⁴³⁹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 145.

⁴⁴⁰ Sevinç Ak, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

⁴⁴¹ Sena Çekmeci, interview with author, December 31, 2016.

civilization. This kind of perception of that period also fits well with Smith's analysis, arguing that golden ages serve for the realization of dignity at the same time, especially when one's nation falls behind the others in different spheres, such as arts and sciences. In his parlance, "the quest for an ideal age or ages establishes a standard of evaluation and comparison both with the past and with outsiders. Appeals to golden ages enable the community to realize its true and pure self, before the age of decline and humiliation."⁴⁴² In especially Çekmecı's approach, it is obvious that there is a longing for the glorious past as well as a discontent with the current status of Turkey and Turkish people.

However, the most interesting reaction belongs to a young, ethnically Kurdish man, Samet Elbaşı. He staunchly repudiates the fact that Muslim Turks today are taking credit for the good deeds of their ancestors. He gives the example of the conquest of Constantinople by Mehmed II, and emphasizes that the army was not wholly and solely composed of Turks, rather there were Janissaries⁴⁴³ including Serbians and the other ethnic communities in the Balkans. He asks, full of anger: "Which one of them was Turkish?"⁴⁴⁴ Then he refers to Andalusia conquered by Umayyads with these words: "Whether you like it or not, it was the Umayyads who conquered Andalusia. What are you going to do? They were all responsible for the spread and flourishing of Islam in there. Umayyads in Andalusia built and granted the values making Europe 'Europe'."⁴⁴⁵ He keeps asking rhetorical questions: "What are you going to do?"⁴⁴⁶ Obviously, he implies that one cannot get away from the fact that there were some non-Turkish Muslims in history, and they contributed to Islam more than Turks. The reason behind the differentiation between his perception of Umayyads and the approach of most of the other interviewees most probably lies in his ethnic identity. He is politically quite conscious and although he lives in Turkey and spends most of his time with Turks in the metropolitan cities, he is pretty unhappy with the attitudes of his Turkish friends within the same Islamic community. He also talks about the bad treatment of those speaking Kurdish in *dershanes*, which are places where Nurcus mostly gather and read Risale-i Nur in a collective manner. Drawing attention to a contradiction, he says that while those coming from European countries speaking French or Dutch are welcomed, in case somebody speaks

⁴⁴² Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 214.

⁴⁴³ Janissaries were the backbone of the Ottoman army, who were all the young boys taken from Christian families in the Balkan regions and raised as soldiers. They were directly connected to the Sultan, and their loyalty belonged to him only.

⁴⁴⁴ Samet Elbaşı, interview with author, December 12, 2016.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

Kurdish, he is either openly reprimanded or condemned with a stern look.⁴⁴⁷ Therefore, in his reaction to the general perception of Umayyads in the minds of Turkish Muslims, one can see the traces of his perception of his own ethnic identity and its unfavourable treatment by not just the state but the civil society, namely Islamic community. In Elbaşı's case, we can remember Smith's analysis regarding rivalling religious and secular golden ages.⁴⁴⁸ However, in this example, we observe an intra-community disagreement regarding the golden ages. Whereas, except for a few examples, Turkish Nurcus prefer not to mention the 'glories' and 'successes' of the Umayyads, Elbaşı as a Kurdish Nurcu both places a strong emphasis on this period and refers to that age to refute the claims of all-encompassing Turkish glory in history.

All in all, it can be concluded that Nurcus neither belong to the sphere of secular nationalism nor can they be considered only religious. Their identity is a combination of nationalist and religious elements, predominantly determined by the latter. This specific amalgam is reflected in their perception of golden ages in history, as it appears to be a unique one. Another point that should be noted is that they are not homogenous, since there are differences in approaches based on generation and ethnicity. Although my sample is a limited one, it does not constitute an impediment for observing apparent differences in the ideas of both my respondents and the online data.

This-Worldly and Spiritual Heroes

According to Smith, one of the sacred foundations of nationalism is the national heroes who act like pure and pristine examples representing the highest levels of goodness for a nation. He also observes a parallel between the prophets/messiahs for religions and heroes for nationalism. In his parlance, "[t]hese heroes and messiahs are also seen as 'authentic' -pure, true, pristine, originary-and as such rooted in the soil of the homeland. Their message is still relevant, they provide models of conduct, and their exploits are true exempla virtutis, worthy of emulation in each generation"⁴⁴⁹. His framework can, to a great extent, be applied to the Nurcu case, as they also see the heroes in history as pure personalities about whom nothing negative is mentioned. They are treated like angels, creatures not committing any sin. However, contrary to the Smithian approach, Nurcus merge religious and national historical personalities. In other words, they are neither only religious people stripped of their national identity

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁸ Smith *Chosen Peoples*, p. 214.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 41.

and nationalist feelings and upholding only the prophets of their religion, nor are they secular nationalists who are only concentrated upon this-worldly heroes of their own nation. Needless to say, they place the Prophet Muhammad on top of all the historical personalities, and they mention figures as heroes inasmuch as they are in service of the religion.

For Nurus, the number of heroes in history is not limited to a few. Rather, they mention many heroes from different historical periods, ranging from the tenth century up until today. It should also be noted that religion and nationalism are intermeshed regarding heroes as they are in other spheres. They do not make any reference to any hero belonging to the pre-Islamic history, although there are many great commanders like Attila and Mete who are definitely on the list of Turkish nationalists, such as the Nationalist Action Party. In addition, they make a differentiation among the heroes along the lines of spirituality and materiality. Whereas, for the former, they refer to people of letter and heart, such as Muslim scholars, Sufi saints and scientists; regarding the latter, they refer to men of the sword, such as commanders, sultans and soldiers. For most of my respondents, the past, especially the Ottoman past, is almost an idealized period full of rumours and metaphysical incidents lacking historical evidence. Lastly, although they converge with secular nationalists in that both of them exalted the period of the war of independence which took place between 1919-1923, differentiation can be observed in the selection of heroes from the same period.

Necati İshakoğlu, Ömer Faruk Kamışlı, Ahmet Cihan Kurşun who was the MP and a board member at one of the foundations of Nurus, and Muammer Öztunç, are among the ones who emphasized the difference between the spiritual and this-worldly great men.⁴⁵⁰ It appears that they give this answer as a response and reaction to any assumption that heroes are only the commanders or soldiers who fought battles against enemies. Öztunç and İshakoğlu place a specific emphasis on this point. Öztunç states that one does not become a hero only by holding a sword or using any weapon. Then, he poses this rhetorical question: “If you can help a needy person in a dire situation, is not that heroism as well?”⁴⁵¹ İshakoğlu adds the point that one should not pride oneself on the bloodshed done by the ancestors. Rather, for him, it should be the civilization in which one should take pride, then he refers to the

⁴⁵⁰ It would be proper to use the word “men”, since only one interviewee, Eyüp Göksoy, mentioned only one female historical person as a hero, who is a woman soldier, fighting both in the WWI and the independence war. (Eyüp Göksoy, interview with author, December 24, 2016.

⁴⁵¹ Muammer Öztunç, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

madrasas, educational institutions established during the Seljuk period as signs of civilization.⁴⁵² İncekara and Akay, on the other hand, draw attention to the juxtaposition of these two types of heroes in history. İncekara holds that Osman Gazi, the founder of the Ottoman Empire, was a man of the sword but he was with Sheikh Edebali who was a renowned Sufi saint. Likewise, Akşemseddin was another great Sufi and scientist who accompanied Mehmed II who conquered Istanbul. While Selim II was a great sultan of the Ottoman Empire, the *sheikhul-Islam* of the time was Zenbilli Ali Efendi, a distinguished Muslim jurist.⁴⁵³ In one of the online pieces, it is also argued that the scientist who discovered that the main reason for diseases is germs was Akşemseddin, who lived in the fifteenth century; rather than Louis Pasteur, a French microbiologist, who is thought of and represented as the first scientist who made this discovery in the nineteenth century.⁴⁵⁴ In short, they think that it is widely believed that heroes are only men fighting against their enemies. Therefore, in their answers, they would like to give the impression that the history of Muslim Turks is not filled with military heroes as it might be an indication of backwardness.

Before moving on to the 'heroes' mentioned by Nurus, it is important to stress that the most important criterion for them is the fact that the hero should first and foremost be a Muslim. That is why they do not mention even one name from the pre-Islamic periods. Demiroğlu clearly states that what he understands from the heroes of Turkish nation are the ones who are Muslim only. He definitely refuses to call either Atilla or Genghis Khan heroes, on the grounds that his criterion is only Islam. So, he counts only those who struggled for the sake of upholding the word of Allah, which is *i'la-yı kelimetullah* in Islamic nomenclature.⁴⁵⁵ Hızlı, in his piece on the website, makes a further description of the concept and suggests that this also means jihad which is struggling for the sake of God. He also adds that that is not waging wars against non-Muslims, rather its aim is to remove any barrier in front of the Islamic faith.⁴⁵⁶ It appears that he tries to avoid any criticism based on conversion by coercion. Abdullah Halit Göç, on the other hand, refers to the sultans of the Ottoman Empire in the formative period on the grounds that especially the father of the first sultan, Ertugrul Ghazi, purposely decided to

⁴⁵² Necati İshakoğlu, interview with author, December 25, 2016.

⁴⁵³ Mehmet Ali İncekara, interview with author, December 12, 2016.

⁴⁵⁴ "İslam Toplumu ve Medeniyet : Mikrop ilk olarak 15. yüzyılda keşfedilmişti," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/blog/islam-toplumu-ve-medeniyet-mikrop-ilk-olarak-15-yuzyilda-kesfedilmisti>.

⁴⁵⁵ Miraç Demiroğlu, interview with author, December 19, 2016.

⁴⁵⁶ "İ'lâ-yı Kelimetullah," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/kaynak/ilay-i-kelimetullah>.

head West to fight the Eastern Roman Empire. According to Göç, this decision is fully in accordance with the path of Prophet Muhammad in that Ottomans preferred spreading out rather than being involved in inner disagreements. Their primary objective was to revive and save the hereafter of the non-Muslim people by contributing to their conversion. At the centre of the whole idea of moving towards the territories of Byzantines was the ideal of conquering Constantinople, modern-day Istanbul. Even if he did not state it clearly, it can be inferred that Göç thinks their major motivation was fulfilling the prophecy of the Prophet Muhammad, which is about the conquest of Istanbul. This might be additional supporting evidence in that he mentions Mehmed II, “not to mention Sultan Fatih who was honoured by the commendation of the Prophet”⁴⁵⁷ Selim I was also a hero in his eyes because of his contributions to Muslim unity in the fifteenth century.

Emre Batur, who was a Ph.D student when the interviews were carried out, also considers Mehmed II and Selim I as heroes based on the same reasons. However, according to him, the struggle of the latter against Shiite during wars with Safavids is quite crucial in that he successfully stopped the Shiite expansion into lands inhabited by Sunnis. This specific emphasis demonstrates the sectarian dimension of the issue, as being Sunni is an important part of the Nurcu identity.⁴⁵⁸ The same anxiety is mentioned in one of the online pieces as well. As a response to a question, Mehmed Kırkıncı, one of the students of Nursi who died in 2016, argues that before the military campaign by Selim II to Iran, the Shiite activities had been so intensified that Anatolia faced the risk of dismemberment from inside during a possible war.⁴⁵⁹ As a critical voice, and as a Kurdish Nurcu, Samet Elbaşı objects to taking pride in the deeds of Mehmed II, owing to the fact that what he did only belongs to him. He fulfilled his own duty and acquired an honour based on his own act, according to Elbaşı. He adds that because that honour is not something material, it cannot be inherited by the people living today.⁴⁶⁰

Although Elbaşı adopts a critical attitude, for most of the Nurcus, the Ottoman past stands as something from which pride can be taken. Most of the time, this imagination is accompanied with some meta-

⁴⁵⁷ Abdullah Halit Göç, interview with author, January 1, 2017.

⁴⁵⁸ Although, Nursi and his followers are unitedly Sunnis, it must also be kept in mind that he took some steps which can be deemed to be favourable by Shiite. For instance, unlike the other Sunni communities, he included *Jawshan al-Kabir*, which is a prayer book mostly recited by Shiite and inauthentic in the eyes of Sunni scholars, among his daily remembrance prayers. Furthermore, he privileges the path of Ali bin Ebu Talib and especially his son Hasan, and attributes his line of thought to their way. However, this does not change the fact the Nur movement stays among the Sunni orders.

⁴⁵⁹ "Yavuz Sultan Selim, Hemdem Paşa'yı niye öldürdü?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, <https://sorularlailamiyet.com/yavuz-sultan-selim-hemdem-pasayi-niye-oldurdu>.

⁴⁶⁰ Samet Elbaşı, interview with author, December 12, 2016.

physical stories attributed to these 'heroes'. According to Kamışlı, for instance, ninety nine percent of the Ottoman sultans are saints, which is a clear indication of how sacred and secular is blended in his mind. He justifies his point by relating a story about the Selim II which took place in the campaign against the Mamluk Empire located in Egypt in 1517. On the way to Egypt, according to the story, in the middle of the desert, Selim II, leading his army, dismounts from his horse and starts walking. Then all the army follows suit and dismounts from their horses. One of his viziers asks the reason why he stopped riding his horse. The sultan replies: "Do not you see? The Prophet Muhammad is walking in front of us. How can I be on top of the horse, while he is walking?" Departing from this anecdote, Kamışlı concludes that Ottoman sultans indeed followed in the footsteps of the Prophet. He says that we perceive our sultans in this way, statesmen whose each and every act was in accordance with the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad.⁴⁶¹ As an answer to a question regarding Selim II, it is held that in the dream of one of the viziers of the sultan, four of the rightly-guided caliphs, who were also the companions of the Prophet, came and said that the right to serve for Mecca and Medina, two holy cities for Islam, were granted to Selim II by the Prophet himself. Therefore, he was invited to march southwards and capture the cities from Mamluks. It is also added that the sultan started preparations for the war upon listening to this dream.⁴⁶²

The same approach can precisely be seen in a story related by Kurtan, which took place during WWI in the Dardanelles Front. In 1915 the British navy was trying to cross the strait and Turkish troops resisted this attempt. In a critical moment of the war, one of the Ottoman commanders, Cevat Pasha⁴⁶³ sees Prophet Muhammad in his dream, and the Prophet teaches him where the mines should be placed. In the morning, he immediately informs the commander of the mining ship, and the mines are placed in accordance with the guidance of the Prophet. A day after, the two greatest battleships of the British Royal Navy, namely Irresistible and Ocean were drowned after crashing on the mines. Kurtan ends the story with such exclamations: "What a great heroism it was! *Masallah, subhanallah!*"⁴⁶⁴ These two stories show us that Nurcus strongly believe that religion and nationalism go hand in hand. However,

⁴⁶¹ Ömer Faruk Kamışlı, interview with author, December 31, 2016.

⁴⁶² "Yavuz Sultan Selim'e, rüyasında Dört Halife gelerek Mekke ve Medine'nin hizmetlerinin kendisine verildiğini söylemişler midir? Bunun kaynağı var mıdır?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/yavuz-sultan-selime-ruyasinda-dort-halife-gelerek-mekke-ve-medinenin-hizmetlerinin-kendisine-0>.

⁴⁶³ He misremembers and supposes that he is Rauf Orbay, another Ottoman general.

⁴⁶⁴ These are phrases to praise God, but they are mostly used when people are astonished with a pleasing news.

what is more important is that being religious and following the path of the Prophet Muhammad is mandatory to be considered as a hero.

In summary, the heroes mentioned by the Nurcus can be split into four categories: (1) politicians and military people, (2) sufis, (3) islamic scholars (4) scientists. In the first category, primarily Ottoman sultans and viziers are mentioned, such as, Alparslan, Osman Gazi, Mehmed II, Selim II and Suleiman the Magnificent.⁴⁶⁵ Regarding Sufi saints, Sheikh Edebali, Ahmet Yesevi, Yunus Emre, Mawlana Jalaladdin Rumi, Shakh-i Nakshband, Abdulkadir Geylani and Akşemseddin. As Islamic scholars, Imam Ghazali, Imam Bukhari, Imam Ebu Hanifa, and Zenbilli Ali Efendi were mentioned. In the last category, Piri Reis, al-Jazari and Kharizmi were considered to be the heroes of the Turkish nation. The point which should be emphasized is that many figures that are included among the Turkish heroes of the past are not Turkish at all, whereas the origins of some of them are a matter of debate among historians. For instance, Abdulkadir Geylani was a Persian. Rumi's origin is doubtful as he wrote all his poems in Persian rather than Turkish. There is even no claim that al-Jazari or Kharizmi are of Turkish origin. What is important is that although they are not Turkish or there is a doubt, the interviewees still think that they can be considered as heroes of the Turkish nation. İncekara, for example, holds that the founders of the Sufi orders, say, Shakh-i Nakshband, are all heroes even though he is not sure if they are Turkish or not.⁴⁶⁶ Batur, on the other hand, states that Mawlana can also be taken as a hero, *if we accept him as Turkish*.⁴⁶⁷ In some cases, we observe the attempt to Turkify these prominent figures in history. İshakoğlu, accepting Imam Ghazali to be a Turk, talks about his contribution to purify the Islamic creed, purging ideas based on philosophical debates. I interrupted him and asked: "Is he Turkish?" He replied without any hesitation: "Of course, Turkish." The same tendency can be observed in the line of thought of many Nurcus. They rapidly mention these names one after another, without even thinking that there might be a room for debate with regard to their origin.

What we can infer from these points is, firstly, that they employ the category of Turkishness in a quite wide sense of the word, which is definitely not an ethnic or racist one. However, they also think that

⁴⁶⁵ Abdullah Halit Göç, interview with author, January 1, 2017; İsmail Akay, interview with author, January 1, 2017; Necati İshakoğlu, interview with author, December 25, 2016; Mehmet Ali İncekara, interview with author, December 12, 2016; Galip Kul, interview with author, December 18, 2016.

⁴⁶⁶ Mehmet Ali İncekara, interview with author, December 12, 2016.

⁴⁶⁷ Emre Batur, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

this nation, which is quite inclusive has still some limits, for instance Arabs, Persians or other Muslim nationalities are not included. Only the ones who are renowned for their success, in short, heroes who lived in or around the lands populated by Turks, are considered Turkish. Then, even though this nation is defined quite flexibly, it is regarded as ahead of the other nations. In other words, what we observe is not just one's love or sympathy for his/her nation. Lastly, it would also be true to mention that their nationalism mostly does not depend on any enmity or hostility towards other nations. Their emotion is concentrated upon the pride in the superiority of their own nation which does not necessarily mean and require the denigration of others.

In short, as a natural consequence of being a nationalist, Nurcus have some national heroes who lived in the past. However, these heroes are not limited with the mighty military figures, but also myriad names from different walks of life are mentioned. In addition, they are not few, rather, it can safely be argued that plenty of names are mentioned, which is showing the diversity among the members of the community, although there are some common names. Last but not least, what I have observed is that either most of them tend to include non-Turkish distinguished people among their own national heroes, or they prefer Turkifying these people.

Sacred Spaces: Istanbul and Anatolia

The notions of national land, as the territory peculiar to specific nations, has been central to the ideology of nationalism since it was born in around the eighteenth century. Although collective attachment to a land is not something entirely modern, in modern times it provided maintenance and entrenchment of national identities.⁴⁶⁸ According to Smith, there are two types of sacred spaces, the first of which is the promised land towards which the members of the nation travelled. The second one is the ancestral land where people think that their ancestors lived in history. However, that land is not necessarily where the nation was born, rather it might be somewhere which was conquered or migrated to at some point in history. Smith calls the ancestral land, the land of history, and the promised land, the land of destiny.⁴⁶⁹ As far as I observed, considering both the online data and the interviews, I can argue that Smith's approach is quite helpful in understanding the nationalism of Nurcus as far as my sample allowed. One can see the reflections of both types of land, namely history and destiny in the Nurcus' imagination of

⁴⁶⁸ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 131.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

national homeland.

Although, geographically speaking, the modern Turkish Republic was founded on Anatolia and Istanbul,⁴⁷⁰ it was the remaining part of the Ottoman Empire, which ruled over larger territories stretching from the South of Arabian Peninsula to West Africa and the Balkans. Because it would be interesting to go deeper about how a small part, which is just a remainder of that vast territory, has been made exclusive and special, I focused my perspective and questions on that matter. What I have found is, firstly, that a place is sanctified in the eyes of most of my Nurcu respondents, only if either some important religious figures, prophet or saints lived there, or it has been mentioned or implied in the canonical texts, such as Qur'an or Prophetic traditions. Secondly, even though they are both religious and nationalist, religion almost always precedes nation. When it comes to the comparison of universally sacred places in Islamic creed, such as Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem, they demonstrate a strong reaction and even reject making such a comparison between these places and their homeland, because it is self-evidently clear that they are superior. Thirdly, occasionally some material factors are also mentioned, such as the qualities of their homelands. Nevertheless, most of the time they are linked to religious considerations in one way or another.

With regard to the sacredness of Istanbul, except a few of them, they refer to the prophetic tradition praising the commander and the army who would have conquered the city. At this point the concept of promised land comes into the picture⁴⁷¹, as the conquest of Istanbul was prefigured by the Prophet in one of his traditions. However, contrary to the Jewish case, it is not promised to one specific nation, however, those who would conquer the city were praised by the Prophet. The second point to be made is that although it is comparable to the promised land, actually it is prefigured land. Nonetheless, some respondents think that it is a particular blessing to the Turks that they were the nation that conquered the city. Demiroğlu, for instance, states that there is no need to say anything further, after it has already been said by the prophet himself and many Muslim leaders laid siege to the city in order to take that honour.⁴⁷² Along with some others, such as Kamışlı and Kul, he talks about one of the companions of the Prophet who died at the age of 82, during a military campaign against the Byzantines to capture

⁴⁷⁰ Actually, There is a small land called Eastern Thrace as an extension of Eastern Europe on the North-Eastern part of the country. However, because it does take up a very tiny space, almost inexistent, in the imagination regarding the territory, it has not been included into the analysis. This holds true in meta-narratives of both the official ideology and its religious opponents.

⁴⁷¹ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 136.

⁴⁷² Ömer Faruk Kamışlı, interview with author, December 31, 2016.

Istanbul in 674, and was buried in the city, namely Abu Ayyub al-Ansari. Kul, on the other hand, refers to the number of companions buried in Istanbul, which is 29, and to the fact that Prophet Joshua was also buried in the same city.⁴⁷³ Although these are not historically verified facts which are unitedly accepted to be true by everybody, it is important to see that they are in circulation and play an important role in sanctification of the space. However, regarding the authenticity of the hadith, Batur has no doubt: “First and foremost, that hadith [about Istanbul] is a sound one, as it is found in *Kutub-i Sitte* and *Bukhari* and *Muslim*”⁴⁷⁴.⁴⁷⁵ On the other hand, some others complain about the current situation of Istanbul due to its secularization. Göç does not accept that the city has been conquered yet. He says: “Istanbul still is not ours. We have not been entirely attached to our roots and we have not yet won our freedom. When we gain it again, I believe that a revival will take place again. Even if this sounds ridiculous now, it will happen.”⁴⁷⁶ He implicitly refers to the weak position of Muslims in both Turkey and the world. However, his confidence comes from the prophetic traditions foretelling the success of Muslims in future. One of the most important symbols of the secularization of the city is the conversion of Hagia Sophia, which used to be a church till 1453, from mosque to museum in 1935. Elif Dereli raised this issue and regrets that Hagia Sophia is no longer a mosque, making reference to a curse of Mehmed II who would use the building for purposes other than the ones stated in the foundation charter. These remarks not only demonstrate that the city is deemed to be sacred, but also that there is a general discontent with the secularization process peaking in the Republican era.

These commendations hold true for Anatolia as well, which can be placed under the rubric of ancestral land, so the land of history in Smith’s parlance. Nevertheless, his following note should be considered:

“The term 'ancestral land' immediately suggests a place of origin. But that is misleading. A land may become an ancestral homeland after some generations, even though it was originally occupied through migration and/or conquest. Over the generations, it has become a homeland, 'our place', and the resting places of our immediate progenitors, if not our (usually mythical) distant ancestors.”⁴⁷⁷

Anatolia is not the region to which the Turks can and do trace their oldest descendants. It is a historically

⁴⁷³ Galip Kul, interview with author, December 18, 2016.

⁴⁷⁴ These are the most credible hadith collections in the Sunni tradition.

⁴⁷⁵ Emre Batur, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

⁴⁷⁶ Abdullah Halit Göç, interview with author, January 1, 2017.

⁴⁷⁷ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, pp. 147-48.

known that some of the nomad Turkic tribes migrated from central Asia to Anatolia in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. However, during the subsequent centuries, it turned out to be a homeland. The modern times also witnessed a sacralization of this land as well. Therefore, in a sense, the land of history was gradually transformed into a sacred homeland. Kul for instance talks about past prophets and saints who lived in this territory, who were in the service of the belief (*iman*) and Qur'an. According to him, because Turkey is founded on this territory, it is also a blessed country, including its nation and the state.⁴⁷⁸ Many others also refer to especially Sufi saints such as Ahmed Yesevi and Yunus Emre and also Muslim scholars. However, none of them mentioned any name of these scholars, which is a sign of a lower level of consciousness about scholars vis-à-vis Sufi saints.

In an answer to a question asking where and among which nation *Mahdi* (messiah, saviour) will fulfil his mission, it is suggested that although there are some prophetic traditions saying that Mahdi is a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, this does not necessarily mean that he will be of Arab descent. After severing the relation of the Mahdi with Arabness, another tradition is cited, according to which some people in the East will pave the way for *Mahdi*, and he will be dominant among them. The author interprets this tradition in the way that the people in the East are the Turks who then migrated and settled in Anatolia.⁴⁷⁹ Thus, an ancestral land turns out to be a sacred homeland on which the Turkish nation, among which Mahdi will prevail, has been settled. Furthermore, via these interpretations of the sacred sources, singling out their own nation becomes possible. In a way, they make what is particular universal, by attempting to legitimate the exceptional place of the Turks among the other Muslim nations, referring to the common divine sources of Muslims. Irrespective of the fact that the non-Turkish Muslims are convinced, it is crucial to observe how a nation and land is sacralised with strained and foggy interpretations.

Despite the fact that Istanbul and Anatolia are considered to be sacred places because of various reasons mentioned above, the hierarchy of sacredness is quite clear for most of my informants. During the interviews once I asked for a comparison of Istanbul and Anatolia with Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. İshakoğlu did not welcome this question at all. Although he referred to the fact that many prophets, including Adam, emerged in the Middle East and Anatolia as well as the Prophet Khidr who worked in

⁴⁷⁸ Galip Kul, interview with author, December 18, 2016.

⁴⁷⁹ "Hz. Mehdi nerede, hangi millet içinde vazife yapacaktır?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, <https://sorularlailamiyet.com/hz-mehdi-nerede-hangi-millet-icinde-vazife-yapacaktır>.

the building of Hagia Sophia, he stated that it would be an exaggeration and a logical fallacy to compare these places with Kaba, the holiest place in the religion of Islam, towards which all the practicing Muslims face at least five times a day.⁴⁸⁰ Likewise, according to Kul, it is important to differentiate the spheres of homelands of Turks and the universally sacred spaces of religion. He emphasizes that his perception of Istanbul and Anatolia is restricted to the spheres of service to the religion of Islam and upholding the word of Allah.

Another point that should be emphasized is that some respondents consider Istanbul and Anatolia to be the crossroads of different civilizations, which, as a result, singles out this region compared to others. Kul states that Istanbul brought East and West, North and South together and hosted people of different confessions, namely Muslims, Christians and Jews within a peaceful atmosphere. This is something which cannot be achieved in the other regions of the Muslim world. Making a reference to a statement of Said Nursi, İncekara and Kurtan state that there are two continents in the world where rational and spiritual developments took place. Whereas historically speaking, Europe has been the bedrock of rationality, prophets and most of the ancient religions flourished in Asia.⁴⁸¹ According to İncekara, neither of these two elements are sufficient for the overall good of humanity. Therefore, they need to be combined, which can only be possible where they intersect with each other, which is definitely Istanbul and Anatolia. Kurtan, on the other hand, mentions the existence of plenty of churches, especially in Western Anatolia, to draw attention to Christianity and Islam coexisting peacefully in the same region.

The existence of other civilizations in Anatolia and Istanbul in history is also mentioned by many people as a distinguishing feature of this place.⁴⁸² On the other hand, Eyüp Göksoy holds that this territory has been a space of tolerance and interaction, where people prefer engaging with the other by talking and establishing dialogue, rather than being involved in bloody conflicts. He both refers to the ancient civilizations such as Hittites ruling in Anatolia⁴⁸³ around the seventeenth century BC and the Sufi saints,

⁴⁸⁰ Necati İshakoğlu, interview with author, December 25, 2016.

⁴⁸¹ Mehmet Ali İncekara, interview with author, December 12, 2016; Abdüllatif Kuran, interview with author, December 20, 2016. Nursi, 2012n, p. 300.

⁴⁸² Sena Çekmeci, interview with author, December 31, 2016; Ahmet Cihan Kurşun, interview with author, December 19, 2016.

⁴⁸³ It should be noted that this is the one and only exception referring to the pre-Islamic civilizations of Anatolia. No other respondent mentioned those civilizations. This selective forgetting lies at the very heart of the discrepancy between the secular nationalists and nationalist religious people in modern Turkey.

namely Yunus Emre and Ahmed Yesevi, who contributed a lot to the rapid spread of Islam around the twelfth century AD. Here it should be noted that Göksoy prefers not to remember many bloody wars which took place in exactly the same historical period between different Muslim Turkish tribes and even states. Obviously, this helps to ‘clean’ both the time (history) and space (homeland).⁴⁸⁴ In short, the national territories are adopted by Turkish Nursis as religious citizens. Nevertheless, they diverge from the official ideology in that their justification is almost solely based on religious arguments ranging from Sufi saints to the tombs of prophets or the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad regarding the conquest of Istanbul and the service of the residents of the region, Turks, to Islam.

The geographical location of Turkey is one of the important reasons that is mentioned in interviews regarding why Turkey has the mission. Sevinç Ak, for instance, argues that the actions of Turks influence the Muslim world more than the other nations, which is basically because of the spirit Turks have and the territory on which they are located. On the other hand, Mehmet Ali İncekara pays attention to the insistence of Nursi to stay in Anatolia. He tells an anecdote of Nursi that he was arrested by the police and intended to be exiled. Although many people wanted to help him, he insisted on staying in Anatolia. According to İncekara, Nursi observes a potential which can be realized in future, based on the good deeds and glorious past of this nation.⁴⁸⁵ Here it should be noted that the usage, ‘this nation’ (*bu millet*) in Turkish is a loaded concept. Especially conservative people in Turkey prefer this usage in order to avoid offending Kurds and to stay away from the debates on ethnic groups. Therefore, even if they mean the Turkish nation, using an ambivalent concept, they prevent possible criticisms based on discrimination. Ömer Faruk Kamışlı, Abdullah Halit Göç and İzzet Saraçgil who is the rector of a private university argue that if the last Muslim Empire collapsed in Anatolia, then it will be revived there again.⁴⁸⁶ Saraçgil draws attention to the fact that Nursi comes up with the idea of a United Nations of Islam and according to him the centre of this league should be Turkey in general, and intra-mural Istanbul in particular. He said that Said Nursi also talked about Muslim unity, but without the Sultanate. In Saraçgil’s words, “however, Nursi never left Anatolia, believing that Islam will be upheld here because the last Muslim state declined here. There is a saying: A hero stands up from where he falls down.” The proverb, which was also mentioned by Kamışlı, is used to support Saraçgil’s main

⁴⁸⁴ Eyüp Göksoy, interview with author, December 24, 2016.

⁴⁸⁵ Mehmet Ali İncekara, interview with author, December 12, 2016.

⁴⁸⁶ Ömer Faruk Kamışlı, interview with author, December 31, 2016; Abdullah Halit Göç, interview with author, January 1, 2017; İzzet Saraçgil, interview with author, December 20, 2016.

argument. The last sentence he added is also interesting, which is: “His intention was not to re-establish Ottoman Empire (while emphasizing Anatolia).”⁴⁸⁷ This additional explanation effort indicates Saraçgil’s concern not to disturb the power-holders in the state, as reactionary movements (*irtica* in Turkish) have been a traditional enemy of the Kemalist state. Although today the Ak Party is in power, the nature of the state with all the anxieties, red lines and perceptions of threat remain the same. As aforementioned, although the Ak Party captured power in Turkey, and despite its will to revive the Ottoman heritage, the republican foundations of the state still remain almost intact. Keeping in mind that the Ak Party under the leadership of Erdoğan has formed an alliance, called *Cumhur İttifakı* (People’s Alliance) with the Nationalist Action Party since the presidential elections on 24th June 2017, it is to be expected that the red lines of the state such as the cult of Atatürk, the unfavourable treatment of the political demands of the Kurds and so on are well protected. Even if they are not *sine qua non* for Ak Party and some of its supporters, they are part and parcel of the foundation of the Nationalist Action Party.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I tried to give an analysis of the elements of the nationalist religious identity of Nurcu people in modern Turkey as far as the limited size of my sample is concerned. After discussing their perception of the place of the Turks in the Muslim world, I scrutinized the fusion of religious and nationalist identities using Smith’s approach, drawing upon the categories of sacred mission or chosenness, golden ages, national heroes and sacred spaces. Although, many times I found a remarkable fit with Smith’s framework, I did not fully embrace his model as an analytical tool, mainly because he envisions two different categories, namely modern national societies, and pre-modern religious peoples. Then he draws a line between them, ensuring a continuity across time. What I do is different in that I have been looking at a modern community embracing both nationalism and religion.

One of my findings is that both the online data and interviews demonstrate that Nurcus are not ethnic nationalists depending mainly upon blood ties with regard to inclusion or exclusion. On the other hand, mostly they do not have a fully open understanding of nation into which everybody can be included. As far as I observe and deduce from both the online and fieldwork data, there are two crucial criteria for inclusion: geography, which is homeland, and religion, which is Islam. They are inclined to regard

⁴⁸⁷ İzzet Saraçgil, interview with author, December 20, 2016.

the other ethnic groups living in Anatolia to be Turkish, in case they are Muslim. This is also quite visible regarding their perception of heroes in history. Majority of them consider Rumi, who was a Sufi and lived in Anatolia in the eleventh century, as Turkish, although he composed all of his poems in Persian. Needless to say, modern Iranians regard him an Iranian poet. Likewise, the other Muslim scholars and significant people in history who lived in or around historical homelands of the Turkic people are all accepted as members of the Turkish nation.

In conclusion, it might be argued that Nurcus manage to accommodate two different identities – sacred vs. secular, universalist vs. particularist – without sacrificing one of them to the other. However, irrespective of their accuracy, most of them legitimated their nationalism by drawing upon some selected principles for the fundamental sources of Islam.

CHAPTER 6: RECONCILING RELIGION AND NATIONALISM

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I tried to give a picture of how Nurcus in modern Turkey construct their identities between Islam and Turkish nationalism. In this chapter, however, I am going to discuss how they reconcile these two different understandings of the world, the former being universalist and the latter being particularist. Although to a great extent I explain this phenomenon using the theoretical tools of Anthony Smith, who refers to the so-called sacred foundations of nationalism, in this chapter I will also draw upon some other explanations. This is because Smith's explanatory tools fall short on the detailed arguments of Nurcus regarding the reconciliation of religion and nationalism.

Smith's basic argument is that the roots of modern nations can be found in historical communities especially regarding the idea of sacredness. For him, modern nationalisms derive their constructive elements in particular from past civilizations, like authenticity, the idea of golden ages, the concept of national heroes, as well as the sacred homeland.⁴⁸⁸ Each of these foundations has a long history and none of them were invented by nationalists.⁴⁸⁹ This explanation model helps us a lot in understanding the Nurcu case, as they share many of the above-mentioned elements. However, it is important to point out that Nurcus' nationalism is not the core of their identity, rather it is an additional element of their religious identity. This does not mean that they are not nationalists, as they accommodate many elements of nationalism, however it is not the defining part of their identity. Therefore, they are not secular nationalists in essence who draw upon the existing qualities of the sacred foundations of past communities. Rather, these foundations pave the way for them to embrace nationalism without going through a fierce confrontation.

As mentioned above, in order to be able to understand the way Nurcus juxtapose Islam and nationalism, I will draw upon the analytical tools of some other scholars, namely, Ira M. Lapidus, Elisabeth Özdalga, Birol Akgün, Şaban Çalış, Gökhan Çetinsaya and Ernest Gellner. Lapidus and Özdalga draw attention to some common elements between the caliphate and nation-states. According to them, both of these polities elevate their citizens who were previously attached to their parochial-tribal identities, to an upper level of community not based on blood ties, ummah for the Caliphate, nation for the nation-states. Akgün and Çalış and Çetinsaya, on the other hand, emphasize the importance of Turkey's

⁴⁸⁸ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, p. 255.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

particular historical experience, elaborating on the debates between Turkists and Islamists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For them, back then, Islam was the predominant discourse and it was really hard for anybody to step out of it.⁴⁹⁰ Indeed, the prominent figures of the Turkists, who were quite active towards the end of nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth century in promoting the idea that the Ottoman Empire could only be saved from dismemberment through the policies promoting Turkish history, culture and nation, were the defenders of quite a fundamentalist version of Islam. So, in the history of Turkey and the Ottoman Empire, these identities were inextricably interlinked. This helps us understand the current complicated identities of Nurus. Regarding the equality of every citizen in a nation regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, which is quite similar to the egalitarian understanding of world religions, I will make use of Gellner's argument on the parallel developments during the rise of Protestantism in Europe. Within the chapter, I will show how these approaches become meaningful frameworks in explaining Nurus' arguments regarding the relationship between Islam and nationalism. On this matter, it should also be noted that the data both from the fieldwork and the website analysis make me come up with some new points that are not covered by the existing theoretical frameworks.

In this chapter I will analyse the interviews with my respondents and the posts published on the website sorularlailamiyet.com. The first section entitled "Declining Superiority" will elaborate on how they decline any claim of superiority over other nations. This section will be followed by another one on their view of different ethnic groups living in Anatolia. Thirdly, I will discuss the arguments that Nurus come up with revolving around the idea of the naturalness of loving one's own nation. Fourthly, I will touch upon the religious evidence based on the precepts of Islam, namely the Qur'an and the prophetic traditions. Fifthly, I will discuss the different types of arguments Nurus use to place the Turkish nation on a higher plane than other Muslim nations. I will conclude that even though we can call Nurus nationalist, their primary identity is religion, namely, Islam. Therefore, they first deny any claim of superiority. Nonetheless, they explain the current "superior" status of the Turkish nation using both religious and natural arguments.

⁴⁹⁰ Birol Akgün and Şaban Çalı, "Tanrı Dağı Kadar Türk, Hıra Dağı Kadar Müslüman Türk Milliyetçiliğinin Terkibinde İslamcı Doz," in *Modern Türkiye'de Siyasi Düşünce IV, Milliyetçilik [Political Thought in Modern Turkey IV, Nationalism]* ed. Tanıl Bora and Murat Gültekingil. 2008. İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları.p. 589; Gökhan Çetinsaya. 1999. "Rethinking Nationalism and Islam: Some Preliminary Notes on the Roots of "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis" in Modern Turkish Political Thought". *The Muslim World*. 89 (3-4) p. 356.

DECLINING SUPERIORITY

During the fieldwork, I directly asked my respondents if they attributed any superiority to their own nation. In addition, I looked for the same topic on the website, sorularlaislamiyet.com. The reason behind this is not any assumption that all nationalisms include an idea of superiority. However, it is to be expected that a nationalist attached to a powerful nationalism, e.g. Turkish nationalism, feels superior to the other ones. The power of Turkish nationalism is mainly rooted in the fact that the predecessor of the Turkish Republic, the Ottoman Empire, was among the leading world powers from around the fifteenth to mid-eighteenth century. Moreover, as will be seen in the coming sections, most of the Nurus think that the Turkish nation has a special and even an advanced position among the other Muslim nations. That is why it was important to inquire about the idea of superiority.

The short answer to the aforementioned question is that they definitely rejected any claim of superiority. "According to Islam as defined in the Qur'an, there is no superiority" says Ahmet Cihan Kurşun. He also refers to the existence of prophetic traditions prohibiting any claim of superiority among people.⁴⁹¹ The same point is raised on the website as well in a response to the question of how the Prophet Muhammad approached racism. In the post by an anonymous writer, some sentences from the Prophet's last sermon are quoted, such as: "All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action."⁴⁹² In another response regarding the meaning of the verse stating that we divided you into peoples and tribes so that you know each other, it is pointed out that the superiority of one human society to the other one is first and foremost dependent upon faith in the right religion – which is Islam in this case – and universal values. The reason behind this emphasis is to show the insignificance of any racial or ethnic attributes. Abdullah Halit Göç, on the other hand, draws attention to the fact that even if the Muslim world rises thanks to Anatolia, it will be unnecessary and inappropriate to emphasize this fact, on the grounds that the rise of *umma* has the ultimate importance.⁴⁹³ Muammer Öztunç also stresses how inappropriate it is to exalt a specific ethnic group among the nations constituting the Muslim worlds using the precepts of Islam. He especially refers to the abovementioned verse, Hujurat, 13, and states that this kind of an

⁴⁹¹ Ahmet Cihan Kurşun, interview with author, December 19, 2016.

⁴⁹² "Allah Resulü (asm.)'ın ırkçılığa bakışı nasıldır?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/allah-resulu-asmin-irkilig-bakisi-nasildir>.

⁴⁹³ Abdullah Halit Göç, interview with author, January 1, 2017.

exceptionalist approach would be in contradiction with this verse. He adds that this kind of understanding is not common today in Turkey.⁴⁹⁴ Saraçgil also makes the same point and contends that the Turkish nation does not have a claim to leadership, only a claim to contribute to world peace. He calls this kind of claim ethnic narcissism and puts forward that Turks do not have that kind of narcissism. Rather, according to him, this is a Western sin and it was a result of social Darwinism which was quite popular in Europe in the late nineteenth century.⁴⁹⁵ While Saraçgil attributes this superiority complex to Westerners, Kamışlı puts the blame on Arabs. Without making a reference to a specific historical period, he argues that Arabs used to be quite nationalistic and they used to see themselves as superior over others. He takes this one step further and holds that in Islam there is no nationalism. Neither the Arab nation nor the Turkish nation, nor any other nations can be superior to the others. Implying the verse Hujurat 13, he concludes that superiority is only dependent upon piety and *taqwa*, meaning fearing from God.⁴⁹⁶

All in all, based on the statements by many interviewees and the posts shared on the website, it is plausible to argue that for the most part Nurcus do not openly accept any superiority of the Turkish nation over others.

CONSIDERING EVERYBODY TURKISH IN ANATOLIA

When Islam emerged in the Arabian Peninsula in the sixth century, it brought many novelties into the lives of people, ranging from believing in only one God, to fasting during a month in every year and banning alcohol. In addition to these novelties, the political commitments of the people were envisioned to change. Whereas they were first and foremost attached to their tribes, after the establishment of the first Islamic city-state in Medina, all the Muslims were considered to be members of *umma* and citizens of that state. When a disagreement appeared based on their tribal identities, Prophet Muhammad reminded them to leave solidarities based on blood ties and belonging to the period of “ignorance” (*jahiliyya*). This approach was preserved during the caliphate period as well. Regarding this quality of that period, Elisabeth Özdalga makes the following point:

A similar process [to nationalism] was also underway during the development of Islam – the caliphate and the *ummah* – even though in much less pronounced form.

⁴⁹⁴ Muammer Öztunç, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

⁴⁹⁵ İzzet Saraçgil, interview with author, December 20, 2016.

⁴⁹⁶ Ömer Faruk Kamışlı, interview with author, December 31, 2016.

Still, the logic of the social transformation was the same: away from tribal and landed-estate dominance (agrarian and hierarchical) towards greater influence of urban, thus relatively more individualistic and egalitarian structures.⁴⁹⁷

According to her, there is a palpable similarity between the early Islamic caliphate and modern nationalisms. Just as it is crucial for caliphates, for nationalisms to emerge it is a must to break down the local attachments based on blood, estate or another element of parochial identities. To constitute a relatively egalitarian society whose members are at equal distance to the state, the dissolution of those traditional local structures is a *sine qua non*. Ernest Gellner also makes a parallel point regarding egalitarianism. He draws attention to the egalitarian understanding of Protestantism after the Reformation in the fifteenth century. With the translation of the Bible into vernacular languages, all the Christians gained equal access to the holy book. In addition, Protestantism rejected any intermediary between human beings and God. He argues that this transformation in the religious sphere paved the way for nationalism on the grounds that nationalism also envisions a society with equal individuals stripped of any superiority claim due to their class status, being a member of higher caste or a superior tribe over the others.⁴⁹⁸

I would argue that the two approaches that I have detailed above shed light on Nurcus' perspective on different ethnic groups living in Anatolia. During the interviews, especially at the beginning of the conversations, in order to prove that their approach is based on justice, very emphatically a significant majority of them argued that they conceived everybody in Anatolia to be Turkish regardless of their ethnic background, referring especially to the Kurdish people. This point is reiterated in many answers to the questions posted on the website as well.

During the conversations, some of them started with the point that it is the greatest betrayal (*ihane*) that might lead to provocations by addressing such issues as whether there is any superiority claim of one Muslim nation over the others. They added that these topics are not worth paying attention to.⁴⁹⁹

These points were stated with displeasure, which may be considered meaningful, especially keeping in mind the quietist approach of Sunnism to these kinds of areas of political disagreement which might trigger a chaos within the society. Therefore, their first reaction was to prefer to be silent and to call for

⁴⁹⁷ Elisabeth Özdalga. 2009. "Islamism and Nationalism as Sister Ideologies: Reflections on the Politicization of Islam in a Longue Durée Perspective". *Middle Eastern Studies*. 45 (3) p. 416.

⁴⁹⁸ Ernest Gellner. 1994. *Encounters with Nationalism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. pp. 48-49.

⁴⁹⁹ Ahmet Cihan Kurşun, interview with author, December 19, 2016; Eyüp Göksoy, interview with author, December 24, 2016.

silence.

Secondly, with regard to the question of any possible Turkish superiority, a large number of the respondents and the authors of the answers to the questions on the website make the point that it would be implausible to make any claim based on Turkishness or Kurdishness, referring to the mixture of different races in Anatolia. Although they do not name them, it is known that Anatolia sits at the intersection of different continents, so it has been a passage for different peoples, some of whom preferred staying there. Circassians, Albanians, Kurds, Armenians, Greeks and Jews are some of them. However, from the data at hand, I cannot tell if they refer only to the Muslim ethnic group or all of them. Based on their general inclination, it might be inferred that they mean basically different Muslim ethnic groups. In one of the online pieces, it is argued that it would be wasting time to go after the claims based on race with the following warning:

Both in our country and in other parts of the world from time to time, "pure blood racism" can be made. Although it is possible to make this argument in some parts of the world, the geography of Turkey does not allow for this kind of an argument. Because after the conquest of this blessed homeland by Muslims, migrants from all sides came and settled here.⁵⁰⁰

Dereli also asks the same question in a rhetorical fashion: "Which one of us proved to be descendent of a purely Turkish origin based on some blood tests?" She concludes that there is nobody who is purely Turkish.⁵⁰¹ Göç makes the same point. However, he includes Armenians into the argument and asks what happens if you are of Armenian descent.⁵⁰² In this question, it is implied that the issue of descendance is so unimportant that even though somebody is descended from a non-Muslim lineage, that will not constitute an inconvenience. Eyüp Göksoy also makes a similar argument by including the other non-Muslim element living in Turkey, namely Jews. Mentioning Jews and Armenians is quite important because especially in the late Ottoman period, the continuous armed conflicts drove a wedge between Armenians and other Muslim elements. Although Jews were seen as the loyal subjects of the Empire back then, increasingly they turned out to be an object of hate in the eyes of Muslims during the twentieth and twenty first century. The reason behind their cautiousness and using words like

⁵⁰⁰ "*Âdemin Torunları İslâmî Açıdan İrkçılık ve Milliyetçilik Konularına Genel Bir Bakış*, (Grandchildren of Adam: An Overview of Racism and Nationalism from an Islamic Perspective)" Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, 2016. <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/blog/ademin-torunlari-islami-acidan-irkcilik-ve-milliyetcilik-konularina-genel-bir-bakis>.

⁵⁰¹ Elif Dereli, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

⁵⁰² Abdullah Halit Göç, interview with author, January 1, 2017.

“even” is that respondents know they are entering a “dangerous” area, keeping in mind the general understanding of their larger community on these issues.

Thirdly, based on the repudiations of any claim on race, they argue that Turkishness is a supra-identity including everybody living in Anatolia. Demiroğlu, for instance, refers to Said Nursi, holding that he also considers all the people to be Turkish in Anatolia. According to him, Nursi states that if only the *lawh al mahfuz*⁵⁰³ is opened, the ethnic origins of the people will be disclosed, implying that nobody’s ethnic identity claims are undebatable facts, they are indeed unknown to us. Here is the original quotation from Nursi to which Demiroğlu refers:

The face of the world and especially this country of ours has since ancient times seen numerous migrations and changes of population. In addition, when the centre of Islamic rule was established here other peoples were drawn to it and they settled here. Consequently, only when the Preserved Tablet is revealed will the races truly be distinguished from each other. To construct movements and patriotism on the idea of true race is both meaningless and extremely harmful. It is for this reason that one of the nationalist leaders and racialists, who was very neglectful in religion, was compelled to say: “If language and religion are the same, the nation is the same.” Since that is so, relations of language, religion, and country should be considered, not true race. If the three are the same, the nation will certainly be strong. And if one is absent, there will still be nationhood (Nursi, 1934/2012b p. 377).

Therefore, there cannot be any differentiation between Turks and Kurds based on their ethnic identities which do not represent truth. Göç also holds that what is important is to live in and to be a part of Anatolia.⁵⁰⁴ Risale-i Nur, Nursi’s famous work, was composed in this region, and it is a hundred percent local. Here Göç might refer to the fact that it was not imported from another Muslim country, as there has been an ongoing disagreement between the Muslims who extensively make use of some non-Turkish, especially Egyptian and Pakistani Islamist scholars such as Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, and Mawdudi.⁵⁰⁵ Regarding elevation to an upper political identity and as a rejection of ethnic

⁵⁰³ This literally means the preserved tablet or slate. In Islamic belief, it is believed that everything that will be experienced by human beings were pre-recorded in a book belonging to Allah. This concept is mentioned in surah Al-Buruj, twenty second verse: “[Inscribed] in a Preserved Slate”.

⁵⁰⁴ Abdullah Halit Göç, interview with author, January 1, 2017.

⁵⁰⁵ Abdullah Halit Göç, interview with author, January 1, 2017.

particularisms, Muammer Öztunç relates an anecdote about Nursi. In 1909, in a court-martial, Nursi was interrogated and asked by a military judge to which Kurdish tribe he was attached. Nursi showed his reaction in a quite fervent manner and asked as a counter-question to which Tatar tribe the judge belonged, as he was of Tatar descent. Öztunç concludes that Nursi thus demonstrated his uneasiness with ethnic definitions and declared that he was an Ottoman in quest of a broader political identity. During those times, political identity was an object of heated debates among both intellectuals and state elites. Whereas some proposed the ideology of Ottomanism, others were proponents of Turkism. In the year 1909, the Unionists were in power and they were following relentless Turkist policies, especially towards Arabs in Syria, leading to deep offence among the Arabs of that region towards the state centre. Nursi was a defendant of the idea of Islamic unity and thought that emphasis on local solidarities would be a barrier to achieving that ideal.⁵⁰⁶ So, the background information sheds light on Öztunç's point in that he shows the reaction of his 'master' towards a question asking for his ethnic origin.

Although it will not be easy to make a strong argument that Nursi's adoption of more egalitarian and inclusive nationalism is a function of their belief in the breakdown of local traditional solidarities, it may be put forward that this elective affinity paves the way for such a positioning in the face of a modern challenge. In other words, Özdalga's analysis helps us understand this case. Gellner discusses a specific form of religion, Protestantism, in the history of Christianity as a factor facilitating the transition to a nationalist period in Europe. In his words,

The stress on literacy and scripturalism, the priestless unitarianism which abolished the monopoly of the sacred, and the individualism which makes each man his own priest and conscience and not dependent on the ritual services of others: all foreshadowed an anonymous, individualistic, fairly unstructured mass society, in which relatively equal access to a shared culture prevails, and the culture has its norms publicly accessible in writing, rather than in the keeping of a privileged specialist. Equal access to a scripturalist God paved the way to equal access to high culture.⁵⁰⁷

It would be misleading to suggest that the point made by Gellner fully overlaps with the Nursi case. However, I would argue that it would be quite reasonable to draw a parallel between the comparatively

⁵⁰⁶ Said Nursi. 2012. *Münazarat*, İstanbul: Söz Yayınları. p. 456.

⁵⁰⁷ Ernest Gellner. 1983. *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford: Blackwell Publisher. p. 142.

egalitarian perspective of Islam as a world religion, and the inclusive way that Nurcus look at ethnic groups.

On the other hand, it would not be accurate to think that the approach of Nurcus with whom I conducted interviews and who writes on the website represents a fully egalitarian position, due to the fact that they are prone to include diverse ethnic identities, such as Kurdish, Laz or Circassian, under the supra-identity of Turkishness. In other words, they are far from accepting them as they define themselves. If close attention is paid to their sentences, it can be observed that they are inclined to include ethnically non-Turkish Muslims only if they accept Turkishness as a sort of umbrella identity. Therefore, we can talk about a partially egalitarianist attitude. Thus, their stance, to a great extent, converges with that of the Kemalists who are staunchly secular nationalists. They contend that all the people in Turkey are Turkish. The workaround that they recently came up with is that Turkishness is an umbrella term as well as a supra-identity under which there might be sub-identities. This demonstrates that nationalist religious people, at least Nurcus in this case, have many things in common with secular nationalists in Turkey.

“PEOPLE JUST LOVE THEIR NATION”

Some of my respondents and the writers of some of the pieces posted on the website are united on the argument that loving one’s nation is just a natural feeling that can be considered innate. According to them, it is so natural that there is no need to dig in to find any reason behind that. In addition, it is also implied that if something is completely natural, it should not be at odds with the religion of Islam, as it will not prohibit anything which is in concordance with human nature.

In one of the pieces on the website, it is held that human beings innately feel closer to their relatives. Loving one’s own nation more than the others is just a reflection of this natural inclination. Therefore, there is no problem whatsoever in this type of love.⁵⁰⁸ Gezin does not think that Said Nursi proposes that Muslims should leave aside their national identities like their Turkishness or Arabness, based on the fact that they are all Muslims. For him, this level of nationalism, namely sticking with one’s own nation, is quite a natural behaviour.⁵⁰⁹ Batur also seconds this point, arguing that according to Nursi, it is a given for human beings to love the culture, nationality or ethnic group in which they have grown

⁵⁰⁸ "İslamiyete göre ırkı inkar etmek gerekir mi?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/islamiyete-gore-irki-inkar-etmek-gerekir-mi>

⁵⁰⁹ İbrahim Gezin, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

up. He draws a parallel with the relationship with relatives as in the aforementioned piece, which suggested and contends that just as prioritizing one's own family and relatives over others is not at odds with divine justice, it will not be unjust to prioritize one's own nation over others.⁵¹⁰ Ak also holds that Nursi does not talk about nationalism as something to be avoided. She adds that according to him, nationalism can enhance brotherhood among Muslims. The reason that she comes up with this argument is that the more common attributes people have, the more intermingled they become, as those attributes increase the affinity among members of society.⁵¹¹

Nursi comes up with two kinds of nationalism, namely positive and negative. Regarding the positive type, he says: "Positive nationalism arises from an inner need of social life and is the cause of mutual assistance and solidarity. It gives rise to a beneficial strength, and is a way of reinforcing Islamic brotherhood."⁵¹² It is interesting that although he mentions the results of the positive nationalism, he does not define and provide the fundamentals of it. However, after uttering only two sentences, he warns as follows:

The idea of positive nationalism should serve Islam and be its citadel and armour; it should not take its place. For within the brotherhood of Islam is a hundredfold brotherhood that persists in the Intermediate Realm and World of Eternity. So whatever its extent, national brotherhood may be an element of it. But to plant it in place of Islamic brotherhood is a foolish crime like replacing the treasure of diamonds within the citadel with the citadel's stones, and throwing the diamonds away (Nursi, *The Letters*, p. 374.).

Moreover, he mentions nationalism (*fikr-i milliye*) without any adjective. For instance, he complains that "[t]he peoples awakening in Asia are embracing the idea of nationalism and imitating Europe precisely in every respect, and on the way are sacrificing many of the things they hold sacred." (Nursi, *The Letters*, p. 375.) It is apparent that he does not have so much sympathy with this new ideology as it constitutes a drawback and a challenge for Islam.

However, Nursi with whom I was in contact during the fieldwork fill this blank part in the account of their master and they enlarge the space devoted to the positive type of nationalism. One of them holds that being proud of one's own social class or hometown is an example of positive nationalism.

⁵¹⁰ Emre Batur, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

⁵¹¹ Sevinç Ak, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

⁵¹² Said Nursi. 2012. *The Letters*. Translated by Şükran Vahide. İstanbul: Söz Yayınları. p. 374.

Likewise, trade guilds or a body of lawyers are legitimate types of solidarity.⁵¹³ Although he attributes this approach to Nursi, in *Risale-i Nur*, I am not able to find any sentence justifying this idea. Gezin also thinks that Nursi approves in pride at one's own nation or race and the merits of that nation or race. However, what is not recommended by Nursi is to look down on other nations.⁵¹⁴ Kaya gives some examples of these merits and argues that within the idea of positive nationalism it is recommended to be proud of the altruism or mercifulness of one's own nation. In one of the pieces posted on the website, in line with the arguments of my respondents, it is claimed that positive nationalism is to feel responsibility for the fellow members of one's own nation, and to make efforts to solve their problems. The example of the naturalness of feeling closer to relatives is repeated in this piece, and it is demonstrated as proof of the wisdom of spending more time with members of the same nation.⁵¹⁵ Regarding negative nationalism, almost all of the interviewees put forward that being a racist and belittling others are not allowed.⁵¹⁶ In other words, only if attachment to a nation amounts to the level of racism by excluding and looking down on other people based on blood relationships, that would be counted as negative nationalism which is almost equal to racism. In a piece on the website, it is clearly put forth that the religion of Islam repudiates racism and considers it to be a grave sin and a societal danger. Furthermore, referring to Imam Shafi'i, founder of one of the four legal schools in Islam, it is held that the testimony of those committing racism by either word or action is not accepted in the court.⁵¹⁷ In another piece, racism is criticized directly, quoting Nursi:

But to translate them and discard the Arabic original due to weakness of belief, negative nationalism, and hatred for the Arabic language, driven by a destructive urge, will cause people to renounce religion. (Nursi, 2012b, p. 497 cited in Sorularla İslamiyet, 2012a)

Based on this argument, it is deduced that it will be stepping out of the circle of religion to recite the Qur'an in Turkish rather than Arabic due to hating Arabic with racist feelings.⁵¹⁸ It is also argued that

⁵¹³ Ahmet Cihan Kurşun, interview with author, December 19, 2016.

⁵¹⁴ İbrahim Gezin, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

⁵¹⁵ "İslamiyete göre ırkı inkar etmek gerekir mi?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/islamiyete-gore-irki-inkar-etmek-gerekir-mi>

⁵¹⁶ İbrahim Gezin, interview with author, December 30, 2016; Ahmet Cihan Kurşun, interview with author, December 19, 2016; Eyüp Göksoy, interview with author, December 24, 2016; Sevinç Ak, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

⁵¹⁷ "İslâm'da birlik," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/kaynak/islamda-birlik>.

⁵¹⁸ "Arabi sevmek iman alameti, buğz ise münafıklık alametidir. gibi hadisler sahih midir?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/arabi-sevmek-iman-alameti-bugz-ise-munafiklik-alametidir-gibi-hadisler-sahih-midir>.

Arabic is the richest language by which the words of God are revealed to people. Therefore, going against reciting the Qur'an in Arabic is equal to objecting to the preferences, knowledge and wisdom of God.⁵¹⁹

Another argument based on the naturalness of nationalism is the one stating that leadership of one nation over others is something natural. Moreover, it is even preferable. Saraçgil, for instance, refers to a prophetic tradition commanding that if three people are travelling together, one of them should be elected as the leader of this small group. He draws a parallel between the group of travelling people and nations. Therefore, as an extension of this reasoning, it is quite normal that Muslim nations are led by one nation, which is not necessarily Turks.⁵²⁰ Gezin does not even need to come up with any evidence and he just says that Muslims should act together, but Turks will take the lead. He does not think that this is at odds with the essence of Islam. Akay shows a furious reaction to my question and asks counter-questions:

Why? Why did the God Almighty send the Prophet from the Arabs? That means that such a mission was entrusted to the Arabs. When he gave up hope from them, the mission was passed down to the Ottomans. This is a matter of blessing from God. ... So what harm does it make for a nation to become a leading nation? Isn't it required that someone take the lead in front of the ummah? Do we not need a nation which is more self-sacrificing, as in the case of the Ottomans, to draft projects and determine the destination to head? Is this not necessary?⁵²¹

In the same way as Akay, Başımeçmez finds my question weird and she thinks that to manage something there should necessarily be a leader. In a very straightforward manner, she says that "there is a leader, and you will just follow that leader". Despite my emphasis on the question of inequality among different nations she insists on her argument that this discussion is totally irrelevant as far as equality is concerned.⁵²²

In sum, it might safely be argued that the Nurcus with whom I had interviews and whose pieces I read most of the time do not see any contradiction between Islam and nationalism, because they think that

⁵¹⁹ "İslamiyet, Arapların işine mi yaramıştır?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://sorularlaislamiet.com/islamiyet-araplarin-isine-mi-yaramistir>.

⁵²⁰ İzzet Saraçgil, interview with author, December 20, 2016.

⁵²¹ İsmail Akay, interview with author, January 1, 2017.

⁵²² Emine Başımeçmez, interview with author, December 31, 2016.

loving one's own nation or leadership of one nation over the others are part and parcel of human nature and they are so natural that there is no need even to come up with a specific reason.

IS NATIONALISM COMPATIBLE WITH ISLAMIC PRINCIPLES: RELIGIOUS REASONS?

Contradicting Views

In this section, I will elaborate on the points raised and discussed by the Nurcus to justify nations and nationalism from the perspective of Islam. However, before going into detail on the arguments of both my respondents and the pieces posted on the website, I will discuss the opposing approaches in the literature in order to prepare a solid platform for understanding. To start with the one which does not envision a sympathetic relationship between Islam and nationalism, Adrian Hastings claims that nationalism is quite unfavourable for Islam. This general argument is followed by the statement that from the very beginning, in Islam the political society was envisioned to be in the form of umma, which is essentially at odds with the idea of nations.⁵²³ Furthermore, a sacred language was at the basis of the Islamic world empire, which is Arabic. Therefore, it was opposed both to the multitude of nations and vernacular languages. However, this was not the case for Christianity:

The Muslim attitude to the Qur'an made translation almost impossible. For the religious person it has to be read, recited out loud five times a day, or listened to in Arabic. In consequence the whole cultural impact of Islam is necessarily to Arabise, to draw peoples into a single world community of language and government. And this is what it did. Even the language of Egypt disappeared before it, except as a Christian liturgical language. Nations are not constructed by Islam but deconstructed. That is a fact of history but it is a fact dependent upon theology. Recognition of it should make it all the clearer that the construction of nations within the Christian world was not something independent of Christianity but, rather, something stimulated by the Christian attitude both to language and to the state.⁵²⁴

As a concluding argument, he holds that although the breakthrough of nations in Muslim societies is

⁵²³ Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood*, p. 200.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 200-201

not impossible, the religion of Islam does not help them in this endeavour.⁵²⁵ While Hastings is quite sure that Islam is opposed to the existence of nations, Lapidus thinks in a different way. According to him, after the emergence of Islam, the umma as a political society gathered different tribes together, however it was not like an absorption, rather there was a fusion of identities, being religious and parochial. He argues that “[t]he umma, moreover, did not obliterate the smaller units, such as clans, and even religious factions within the Muslim camp. The smaller units maintained their identity and their capacity for separate action.”⁵²⁶ In his approach, the caliphate was representing the first model of a polity providing a multi-ethnic, multi-tribal and multi-cultural society, especially keeping in mind the inclusion of the hundreds of thousands of non-Arab converts. This was a novelty within the geography of the Middle East, where patrimonial empires with one ethnic group and a single authority were dominant. In addition to different ethnic and cultural groups, the caliphate provided a comparatively free platform for the emergence of myriad non-state religious organizations and schools (Lapidus, 2001, p. 40).

I would argue that the approach of Lapidus is more helpful to understand the Nurcu case, as they also think that nations are quite acceptable entities for the religion of Islam. As opposed to Hastings’ point, they do not have any hardship in reconciling Islam and their fervent attachment to their nation.

“The existence of nations is Islamic”

Even if the question regarding the existence of nations is not equal to any discussion of nationalism, I will discuss this issue on the grounds that a majority of the Nurcu respondents of mine, themselves, touch upon this topic to show that nationalism is part and parcel of Islam. During the conversations with my respondents I figured out that they do not even question if the existence of nations as human societies is in accordance with their religion or not. This argument is backed by the answers to the questions of visitors to the website as well. They either make a reference to a verse or a prophetic tradition or argue that nations and nationalism are helpful for the good of Islam in general.⁵²⁷

Dereli holds that nations exist so that different peoples and races know each other, referring to the well-

⁵²⁵ Ibid., p. 201.

⁵²⁶ Ira M. Lapidus. 2001. “Between Universalism and Particularism: The Historical Bases of Muslim Communal, National, And Global Identities,” *Global Networks*. 1 (1) p. 41.

⁵²⁷ Elif Dereli, interview with author, December 30, 2016. "Peygamber Efendimiz hangi millettendir?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, <https://sorularlaislamiet.com/peygamber-efendimiz-asm-hangi-millettendir>. "İslamiyete göre ırkı inkar etmek gerekir mi?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://sorularlaislamiet.com/islamiyete-gore-irki-inkar-etmek-gerekir-mi>.

known verse, Hujurat, 13.⁵²⁸ In a question on the website regarding the ethnic origin of the Prophet Muhammad, it is suggested that Islam does not repudiate the notion of nation by referring to the same verse.⁵²⁹ In another piece published on the website, we see a more detailed interpretation of the same verse. Holding on to a quite essentialist understanding of the concept of nation, the anonymous writer holds that indeed there are some idiosyncratic qualities of each nation. Starting from those qualities of an individual, we can tell his or her nation. Then the author moves on to the army as another example and contends that just as different regiments within an army can be differentiated by their specific uniforms, nations are also differentiated from each other based on their attributes. In an army these different units are not in conflict with one another due to their differences, so different attributes of different nations should not serve to create any disagreement between them.⁵³⁰ In another answer to a question related to interpretation of a verse, it is suggested that the personal interaction between different human societies is possible thanks to the existence of different nations. Had there not been any differences and had all the people been created in a uniform manner, there would not have been any interaction between people; rather there would have been chaos in the world. Then an example of identical twins is given, and it is put forward that it would be so hard to differentiate two twin brothers or sisters putting on the same dress. Accordingly, different clothes for twins will be quite helpful for everybody.⁵³¹ In another piece, another dimension of the interpretation of the verse is raised and argued 'that knowing each other' is not an ordinary knowing, rather it refers to the interaction between different cultures, civilizations and scientific traditions.⁵³²

⁵²⁸ Elif Dereli, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

⁵²⁹ "Peygamber Efendimiz hangi millettendir?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/peygamber-efendimiz-asm-hangi-millettendir>.

⁵³⁰ The example of army is originally raised by Nursi in his *Risale-i Nur*. Because the editors of this website are members of the Nur community, even if they do not make a specific reference, we can tell that that this example is borrowed from Nursi: "In explanation of the principle of mutual acquaintance and assistance alluded to by the above verse, we say this: an army is divided into divisions, the divisions into regiments, the regiments into battalions, and companies, and squads, so that all the soldiers may know their many different connections and related duties. In this way, they all will perform properly a general duty in accordance with the principle of mutual assistance, and the collectivity they form will be safe from the attacks of the enemy. The army is not arranged thus to be divided and split up, with one company competing with another, one battalion being hostile to another, and one division acting in opposition to another. Similarly, Islamic society as a whole is a huge army that is divided into tribes and groups. Nevertheless, it has unity in numerous respects: its groups' Creator is one and the same, their Provider is one and the same, their Prophet is one and the same, their qibla is one and the same, their Book is one and the same, their country is one and the same; a thousand things are one and the same." Nursi, *The Letters*, p. 372.

⁵³¹ "Rum suresi 22. ayette, dillerin ve renklerin farklı olmasının güzelliğini anlatır. Halbuki, savaşların çoğu bunlardan çıkmaz mı?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/rum-suresi-22-ayette-dillerin-ve-renklerin-farkli-olmasinin-guzelligini-anlatir-halbuki-savaslarin-0>.

⁵³² "Ve birbirinizle tanışmanız için sizi kavimlere ve kabilelere ayırdık ayetinden maksat nedir?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/ve-birbirinizle-tanismaniz-icin-sizi-kavimlere-ve-kabilelere-ayirdik-ayetinden-maksat-nedir>.

Some prophetic traditions are also referred to for justification of the compatibility of Islam and nationalism. In one of the pieces on the website, it is asserted that the Prophet Muhammad did not oppose the science focusing on the descendants of people (*ensab ilmi*) with the objective of protecting the genealogical trees of the tribes. He even praised Abu-Bakr, his closest companion, for mastering this science.⁵³³ Another tradition was directly about loving one's own race. As an answer to a question on the website, this hadith is referred to and it is emphasized that one of the companions of the Prophet asked him if loving one's own *qawm*⁵³⁴ is called racism and he responded that it is not. Only if helping one's *qawm* to increase the wrong-doings and atrocities against others is it called racism.⁵³⁵ Both the interviewees and the authors of the website frequently conclude that within the framework of Islam, it is recommended to love one's relatives and race, rather than this being prohibited.⁵³⁶

In sum, it might be concluded that according to most of the Nurcus who took part in this project, the fact that human beings are brought together in the form of nations is not at all at odds with Islam. Rather, it is something recommended by Islamic principles, both by the prophetic traditions and the verses in the Qur'an.

TURKISH EXCEPTIONALISM

On the above section, I elaborated on the arguments to justify the idea of nation and nationalism in Islam, regardless of the identity of the nation. So, in a nutshell, they think that nationalism is quite an Islamic phenomenon. However, they do not stop the argument at this level, but also hold that the place of the Turkish nation in the Muslim world is somehow different from and ahead of the others.

In this section, I will discuss these points in three sub-sections, namely, "Islam and Turkishness: Two intermingled identities", "Innate attributes" and "Didn't ask, we are granted". In the first one, I will go into details of how national and religious identities of Turkish religious people are fused and raise some ideas regarding the roots of this in the recent history of modern Turkey. Secondly, I will give an account of how they legitimate the comparative superiority of Turks based on the innate attributes of the nation. Finally, I will be discussing quite an interesting point made by the informants and those who provides

⁵³³ "Peygamber Efendimiz hangi millettendir?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/peygamber-efendimiz-asm-hangi-millettendir>.

⁵³⁴ This word is within the contested area regarding nationalism debates. At times it is translated as nations, whereas it might also mean the whole Muslim community in the world, like *umma*.

⁵³⁵ "Peygamber efendimizin Türklerle ilgili hadisi şerifi var mıdır?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/peygamber-efendimizin-turklerle-ilgili-hadisi-serifi-var-midir>

⁵³⁶ "Milliyetçilik, Irkçılık Değildir," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/blog/milliyetcilik-irkcilik-degildir>.

answers to the questions of the visitors of the website suggesting that the superior position of their nation is not something discriminatorily attached to themselves. Rather, they deserve the descriptions of good people and societies by working hard.

Islam and Turkishness: Two intermingled identities

It should be noted that the fact that Turkishness and Islam are intermeshed cannot solely be a basis for claims of Turkish superiority, nevertheless before emphasizing the distinctive position of their nation, my respondents themselves raise this issue. Therefore, I thought it would be meaningful to further elaborate on it. On the other hand, it is by itself important to dig thorough the roots of the phenomenon in order to have a better understanding of the coexistence of these identities in contemporary Turkey. Here are the logical steps: (1) Nation is a permissible category of human societies for Islam. (2) the Turkish nation is inseparable from Islam due to its unrivalled contribution to the religion of Islam. (3) Therefore, the place of Turks is a bit above the other Muslim nations.

Both Turkism and Islamism are modern ideologies emerging in the late nineteenth century. Turkism as the nationalist ideology of the constituent element of the empire, namely Turks, is the latest nationalism arising among the other ethnic elements within the Ottoman land. Although the proponents of these ideologies had heated debates back then, there are many common points shared by both parties.⁵³⁷ Before moving forward, it is important to remember that to my understanding Nurcus can be considered to be neither Islamist nor Turkist. However, they are in between these two ideologies. That is why, elaborating on the convergences of these parties which were politically active more than a century ago will shed a considerable light on today's complex phenomena. According to Akgün and Çalış, back then the word "Islam" used to have more positive connotations than "Turkish", which was used pejoratively to designate non-urban Turkoman peasants ignorant of any decorum. This fact can help us understand initially why Turkism was quite weak in the capital of the Empire, rather it mustered up support mostly in Russia among the Turkic Muslims. On the other hand, prior to the long secularization process during the Kemalist period, Turkists frequently felt obliged to make references to Islam and Islamic concepts as it was the predominant discourse of the time. During the Tsarist period in Russia, Turkists were accused of being involved in Islamist activities by the state. Actually, it was not just the perception of the authorities, because the founding fathers of Turkism organized their congresses under

⁵³⁷ Akgün and Çalış, "Tanrı Dağı Kadar Türk, Hira Dağı Kadar Müslüman Türk Milliyetçiliğinin Terkibinde İslamcı Doz," p. 589.

the name of ‘Russian Muslims’, which is quite telling about the dilemma that they went through.⁵³⁸ The most famous of these founding fathers, Yusuf Akçura (1876-1935), for instance, defended an ethno-religious nationalism, in which Islam and Turkishness operate in a harmonious manner.⁵³⁹ This inclination of Akçura can be explained by the fact that he was influenced by Turk-Tatar modernism, which was a combination of Turkish nationalism and Islamic modernism.⁵⁴⁰ According to Akçura, “religion and nationalism can enhance one another. Religion is not always replaced by nationalism. On the contrary, Islam could be an important factor in the construction of Turkish nationality”.⁵⁴¹ In line with Akçura, İsmail Gasprinski (1851-1914), who was a prominent figure of Turkism, had long aspired to hold a well-attended Congress of World Muslims and he made many attempts to fulfil this objective. There are only a few Islamists who made as many efforts for the good of the Muslim world as Gasprinski, which is an obvious indicator of how hard it is to draw a line between Islam and nationalism.⁵⁴² On the other hand, another ideologue of Turkism, Ahmet Ağayev, during the debates with Islamists, similar to the contemporary Nurcus, strove to come up with Islamic evidence to legitimate nationalism. According to him, Islam was opposed to *asabiyah* (group solidarity) not *milliyet* (nationality). By *asabiyah*, he thought what is meant is tribalism. Furthermore, for him, the primary initial objective of the Prophet Muhammad was to create a Muslim society based on nationality, by uniting all the Arabs as members of the Arab nation.⁵⁴³ At the end of long elaborations, he came to the conclusion that serving one’s nation is serving Islam. Besides, Islam is the inseparable element of the identity of the Turks, which becomes more understandable remembering the substantial contribution of the Turks to Islam in history. He takes his argument one step further, suggesting that at the end of this history, Turkish nationalism also cannot be separated from Islam.⁵⁴⁴

These examples can be multiplied. However, the existing one demonstrates that in the intellectual history of Turkey, Islam and nationalism are intertwined. Whereas sometimes Turkish nationalists draw upon the elements of Islam, at some other times Islamists favourably approach the idea of nation. In

⁵³⁸ Ibid.;

⁵³⁹ Hakan Yavuz. 1993. "Nationalism and Islam: Yusuf Akçura and Üç Tarz-ı Siyaset". *Journal of Islamic Studies*. 4 (2) p. 202.

⁵⁴⁰ Çetinsaya, "Rethinking Nationalism and Islam: Some Preliminary Notes on the Roots of “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis,” p. 355.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid., p. 356)

⁵⁴² Akgün and Çalış, “Tanrı Dağı Kadar Türk, Hıra Dağı Kadar Müslüman Türk Milliyetçiliğinin Terkibinde İslamcı Doz,” p. 591.

⁵⁴³ Ibid., pp. 591-92)

⁵⁴⁴ Çetinsaya, "Rethinking Nationalism and Islam: Some Preliminary Notes on the Roots of “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis,” p. 359.

modern Turkish history, both the staunch secular nationalists and Islamists fully rejecting nationalism constitute a minority, both at the societal and intellectual levels. The majority preferred to juxtapose both of these approaches.⁵⁴⁵ According to Lapidus, this can be generalized to other Muslim nations as well. For him, what makes a person an Arab or a Turk Turkish is first and foremost Islam. "Much of the emotional power of nationalism in the Muslim world comes from the capacity of national movements to parochialize Islam and channel the force of Muslim faith into national commitments. Nationalism becomes the bearer of Islam." (Lapidus, 2001, p. 48) This point is crucial because we can find the traces of this understanding in Nurcus as well. Because, as far as fieldwork and online data demonstrate, most of them are convinced that the Turkish nation is at the service of Islam, they promote loving their nation. In other words, their contribution to Islam turns out to be the legitimating tool for their nationalism.

Islam is embedded in the nation

As an extension of the foregoing discussion, it might be argued that for my Nurcu respondents Islam is embedded in the concept of nation. This interrelation, first, transpires at the linguistic level, then it is taken to the practical level. For instance, in the answer to a question as to whether there is any concept of Islamic nationhood (*İslamiyet milliyeti*) in the Islamic literature, it is argued that in the nomenclature of the Qur'an, the word *millet* (nation) means religion or *shariah*. Metaphorically speaking it might refer to a specific society. Nevertheless, in this case this society should be based on religious bonds rather than ethnic attachments.⁵⁴⁶ Moreover, the derivative of the word, *milliyet*, which can be translated as nationality, corresponds to the religion to which people are attached. Departing from this reasoning, the anonymous writer of this piece argues that *milliyetçilik* (nationalism) is the name for attaching to the same religion or *shariah*.⁵⁴⁷ At this point, it should be noted that this interpretation cannot be generalized to all Nurcus, on the grounds that conceptually speaking they make a differentiation between nationalism and Islam. After recognition of the difference they attempt to reconcile them. However, it would not be an excessive claim that the word *millet* has a lot of religious connotations and it was used to mean religion or religious groups around a century ago. It is not a coincidence that the ideology of the Welfare Party, the successor of the Ak Party, was named Milli Görüş (National View).

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 376.

⁵⁴⁶ "İslam literatüründe İslamiyet milliyeti gibi bir kavram mevcut mudur?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/islam-literaturunde-islamiyet-milliyeti-gibi-bir-kavram-mevcut-mudur>.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid.

The word itself, in a sense, is the reflection of the intermingled nature of religion and nation in Turkey.

Göç strongly emphasizes the close relationship with the following words:

I'm not a nationalist. I'm not a nationalist in terms of any -ism. When there is an event with national emotions independent of Islam, I do not burst with pride. Know what I mean? I don't feel anything. ... I say it again, as a Turk, for example, listening to the Tenth Year Anthem⁵⁴⁸ doesn't make me feel anything in my heart, okay! For example, when I go to the Anıtkabir [Atatürk's monumental tomb] - I didn't go there by the way - when I see those visiting the monument, my heart does not excitedly beat. So, as the master [Said Nursi] said, I think that Islam and Turkishness are intertwined and cannot be separated, which is already the case. Those who have no Islamic sensibility are no different than the Europeans. I am not saying it to humiliate, but there's no difference.⁵⁴⁹

Therefore, this comparatively long quote from our conversation with Göç clearly shows that nationality is the function of religion, not vice versa. Therefore, one can see the divergence of Nursi along with the other religious groups from the secular nationalists. That is why I prefer to call them nationalist religious people rather religious nationalists. In one of the pieces published in the website, an argument is made in support of this point. It is suggested that some time ago - around 1930s - some people helped to sever this nation (Turks) from the Muslim world in the name of Turkism and facilitated and simplified British spies' work who strove to separate Muslim nations from each other. Then the call of Nursi to the Turkish Muslims is quoted:

O my Turkish brother! You watch out in particular! Your nationhood has fused with Islam and may not be separated from it. If you do separate them, you will be finished! All your glorious deeds of the past are recorded in the book of Islam's deeds, and cannot be effaced from the face of the earth by any power. So don't you efface them from your heart at the evil suggestions and devices of Satan!⁵⁵⁰

⁵⁴⁸ This anthem was composed and performed in the tenth year of the Republic in 1923. It was in a sense an alternative to the national anthem for pure secular nationalists on the grounds that in the national anthem there are plenty of Islamic elements, enough to bother a secularist. However, the new anthem is full of references to the achievements of the Republic and the greatness of the Turkish nation.

⁵⁴⁹ Abdullah Halit Göç, interview with author, January 1, 2017.

⁵⁵⁰ "İrkçilik ve Milliyetçilik İslam'da yasak mı? Ruhun ırkı var mıdır?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, <https://sorularlaislamiet.com/kaynak/irkcilik-ve-milliyetcilik-islamda-yasak-mi-ruhun-irki-var-midir>. Said Nursi, *Mektubat*, p. 375.

These emotionally strong words, in a sense, provides the reason behind the Nurcus' insistence on the fusion of Islam and nationalism. With this emphasis they diverge from both republican nationalists and the followers of the Nationalist Action Party, which is known to have strong nationalist and statist tendencies with due respect to Islam, but not more. Last but not least, I would refer to another piece from the website, in which there are important insights regarding whether Islam precedes the nation or vice versa. It is suggested that just as Islam led Arabs to the right path, it led Turks, Kurds and the other Muslim nations to the straight path. Then some successive rhetorical questions are posed to emphasize the importance of Islam: "It is Islam that makes Osman Gazi, Ertuğrul Gazi, Fatih Sultan Mehmed, Seljukids and Ottomans dominate the world. Is it not Islam that made Salahaddin-i Eyyubi the greatest hero commander of the Orient? Is it not Islam that brings Ayyubids and other Kurdish principalities to important positions?"⁵⁵¹

In sum, in the mind of most of the Nurcus, Islam and Turkishness are intermeshed. More importantly, in the construction of identity, religious attachment precedes national identity. It might even be claimed that without religion, the national attachment turns out to be an empty signifier. It is also crucial to remember the intellectual relationship and interaction between the Turkists and Islamists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It appears that the Nurcu perception regarding nation and religion carries many traces from those debates which took place in the recent history of Turkey.

Innate Attributes

In pursuit of emphasizing the differences, but especially the superior attributes of the Turkish nation, some of the Nurcus refer to some so-called innate attributes of their nation. According to them, in addition to many other factors, these unchangeable and exclusive features characterize the Turkish nation as well. It should also be added that the emphasis on these innate attributes gives the impression that they make these points irrespective of their subjective positions, simply because they represent some reality "out there".

On the website, in response to a question regarding the reason behind the diverse characteristics of nations, Jews are given as an example. They are defined to be people placing a great importance on science, acting superior over the people of other nations. They are also represented to be fond of wealth

⁵⁵¹ "Osmanlı devletinde savaş esas mıydı, cihad anlayışı nasıldı?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/osmanli-devletinde-savas-esas-miydi-ctihad-anlayisi-nasildi-osmanli-imparatorlugu-anadolu>.

and leadership. These points are followed with the one that Jews are quite cowardly people thanks to their fondness for carnal and worldly desires. Turks are counterposed to Jews and it is held that the mobility due to nomadic life, the desire to find somewhere to settle down, and the necessity to survive made them brave, dynamic and venturesome.⁵⁵² At this point, it might be argued that although my respondents and the experts working for the website openly critique racism as it is not an easily defensible ideology, from time to time they make race-based arguments. Their perception of Jews on the website reflects this approach as it is applied to the “other”. To see how this operates regarding their perception of themselves, the Turkish nation, we should look at another online piece in which the contribution of these attributes to Muslim world is raised: “When the feature of bravery, which was present in the creation of the Turkish nation, combined with the spirit of *jihād* in Islam and the sacred aim of the Islamic *mujahedeen*, who reached Turks’ homeland from Mecca and Medina, the Turks had the rightful place and position in history”.⁵⁵³ In another answer, the contribution of Turkish soldiers to the Muslim army during the Abbasid period is mentioned and it is held that they combined their bravery with love of *jihād* and became the standard-bearer of Islam throughout the centuries.⁵⁵⁴

On the other hand, Demiroğlu also finds the features quite important, however he notes that to lay excessive emphasis on these features can drag one to the verge of racism, even implying that although his stance is quite close to a racist position, it is not to be considered racism. Then making a reference to some racist policies, like measuring skulls, of the early decades of the Turkish Republic, he contends that he does not embrace any racist approach. However, he goes on to elaborate the argument with a “but”:

However, Ahmet Cevdet Pasha⁵⁵⁵ in his magnum opus suggests - I hundred percent agree with him - that besides of some virtues that they acquire from Islam, they are granted some innate attributes by Allah, such as, courage, resistance against the perpetrators, siding with the victims. These are not something that we own, rather they are given to us by Allah.

⁵⁵² "Ülkesini koruyan asker ve polis şehit olur mu?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/ulkesini-koruyan-asker-ve-polis-sehit-olur-mu>.

⁵⁵³ “Peygamber efendimizin Türklerle ilgili hadisi şerifi var mıdır?,” Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, 2019, <https://sorularlaislamiyet.com/peygamber-efendimizin-turklerle-ilgili-hadisi-serifi-var-midir>

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁵ He is one of the brightest figures of the late Ottoman Empire, being a military person, bureaucrat and a historian. He is especially famous with the work called *Majallah*, published in 1876, which is the end-product of the work of a few scholars to codify the Islamic law, basically depending on Hanafi school.

According to him, God granted those inborn attributes to the Turkish nation for some other purposes. He makes a comparison with the Prophet Muhammad and suggests that because God decided to make Muhammad the Prophet, he created his innate attributes accordingly. Therefore, as an extension of this analogy, the reason why Turks are created with these superior attributes is that they were pre-destined by God to be the gallant standard-bearers of Islam for a thousand years.⁵⁵⁶ After he comes to the end of his argument, he reiterates his initial point that what he says is not racism, but it is only reporting the case. In answer to a question on the website, the argument on the differences in the characteristics of the nations is further detailed and the religious dimension within nations is added. It is contended that today it is not possible to talk about the attributes of races but there are some differences between the characteristics of the societies. Then referring to differences between Muslim and non-Muslim Turks as well as Muslim and non-Muslim Arabs, it is demonstrated that although there are innate attributes of nations, their religious attachment has the capacity to change them.⁵⁵⁷

In conclusion, it might be argued that to justify the exceptional status of the Turkish nation among the other Muslim nations, some of the Nurcus refer to the ‘innate’ outstanding attributes of their nation. However, it is quite palpable that they cannot avoid referring to the religion, Islam, even if they do talk about basically non-religious issues. In one way or another, they need to link these attributes to Islam.

“Did not ask, we are granted”

As aforementioned, most of the Nurcus involved in this project do not look like they have any doubt regarding the outstanding features of their nation along with its comparative superiority over the others. One of the points that they make is quite original and contrary to common-sense. Basically, they argue that neither Turks are privileged by God nor do they possess some superior attributes just because they are members of that nation. Rather, according to them, Turks earned the position of leadership with good deeds and hard work.

İshakoğlu holds that there is no exclusive designation regarding Turks. Furthermore, Turks do not have claim over leadership of the umma. However, there is a common rule that a mission is granted but it will be wrong to request it. In accordance with that rule, Turks did not ask for any mission or position, however it was given to them during the reign of Selim II, when he conquered Egypt in 1517. Up until

⁵⁵⁶ Miraç Demiroğlu, interview with author, December 19, 2016.

⁵⁵⁷ "Milletlerin birbirinden farklı özelliklerinin ve milli karakterlerinin olması, neden kaynaklanıyor?," Sorularla İslamiyet, Accessed June 26, <https://sorularlailamiyet.com/milletlerin-birbirinden-farkli-ozelliklerinin-ve-milli-karakterlerinin-olmasi-neden-kaynaklaniyor-0>.

that year, the caliphate, the spiritual successor of the Prophet Muhammad, was in the hands of Mamluks in Egypt; nonetheless, it passed to the Ottomans after the conquest. İshakoğlu argues that they, Ottomans, did not ask for this, rather the Mamluk Sultan himself admitted that they were not able to maintain that mission and voluntarily abdicated from it. This is actually not proven by the historical facts, because this transition took place after a decisive defeat of Mamluks by the Ottomans. Therefore, it is not easy to mention any voluntariness of the defeated side regarding handing down of the caliphate to another Muslim state.⁵⁵⁸ Eyüp Göksoy, on the other hand, suggests that there are some verses in the Qur'an and some prophetic traditions giving details of good people, at both the individual and societal levels. Looking at those, we can infer that Turks are fitting into those descriptions. He emphasizes that there is no direct reference to any specific race or nation in these verses and traditions. Therefore, the other Muslim nations should not envy Turks. Instead, they had better work harder and try to be like the people described in the Qur'an.⁵⁵⁹ Demiroğlu further elaborates the argument of deserving rather than being privileged. He comes up with an example according to which a man announces that he will pay one million Turkish Liras to anybody who brings a gold Reshad⁵⁶⁰ to him. He will pay that amount of money if the one who brings it is of Armenian, Turkish or Kurdish origin. Therefore, for instance the thirteenth verse of the surah Hujurat was not revealed to mean Turks. Nevertheless, Turks fit into the description of the verse.⁵⁶¹ Saraçgil and Başeğmez also stress merit and qualification of Turks and they suggest that technically it is possible for the other Muslim nations to take the lead.⁵⁶²

To accentuate the outstanding and exclusive position of the Turks, Kamışlı asks some strong rhetorical questions: "Who is the patron of all the Muslim nations around the world ranging from Syria, Egypt, Iraq to Indonesia, Malaysia and Myanmar?" He himself replies: "Today it is Turkey". He goes on to ask further questions: "Is there any nation other than Turkey who strives for the protection of Muslims? It does not look like it now. Even if we hear some sounds, they are quite weak".⁵⁶³ Eyüp Göksoy also draws attention to this point and asks very similar questions: "Is there any other country than Turkey which receives the refugees fleeing Iraq and Syria with open arms? Can it be shown?" To support his argument, he also gives an example from the Ottoman history holding that Turks welcomed Jews

⁵⁵⁸ Necati İshakoğlu, interview with author, December 25, 2016.

⁵⁵⁹ Eyüp Göksoy, interview with author, December 24, 2016.

⁵⁶⁰ This is an Ottoman golden coin which was in circulation during Sultan Mehmed Reshad whose reign was 1909-1918.

⁵⁶¹ Miraç Demiroğlu, interview with author, December 19, 2016.

⁵⁶² İzzet Saraçgil, interview with author, December 20, 2016; Emine Başeğmez, interview with author, December 31, 2016.

⁵⁶³ Ömer Faruk Kamışlı, interview with author, December 31, 2016.

fleeing from the persecution of the Christians in Spain at the end of the fifteenth century.⁵⁶⁴ İshakoğlu, also referring to the weaknesses of the other Muslim states, asks rhetorical questions in line with the other Nurcus: “Are they able to have an impact [in the face of the persecutions that Muslims experience]? Only we show our presence in the [Middle Eastern] region?”.⁵⁶⁵

After making arguments on the merit of the Turks, Demiroğlu self-confidently argues that again Turks will raise the flag and the Muslim Turkish nation will play the primary role in the promulgation of the caliphate and achieving the Islamic unity which are among the duties of the Mahdi.⁵⁶⁶ In line with the self-confidence of Demiroğlu, İshakoğlu contends that Turkey is the centre of the Muslim world, as it is spiritually the seat of the caliphate. According to him, it is impossible to abolish this sacred institution, because it was not established by law, rather it is divinely ordained mission. In addition, all the sacred relics⁵⁶⁷ which are symbolic indicators of the caliphate are still preserved in Istanbul, in the hands of the Turks. Following all these pieces of evidence, he positively puts forth that all the indicators point to Turkey, no matter from what angle we look.⁵⁶⁸

As the above points show, in contrast to a ‘proper’ nationalist who might straightforwardly argue that her or his nation is superior to others, most of my respondents and experts on the website prefer to take another way to get a similar conclusion. To a great extent, they are quite discontent with any idea of innate superiority and they think that there are some criteria to be good individuals and communities which are set by the Qur’an and prophetic traditions. By working hard and by being braver and more hospitable than others, the Turkish nation met those criteria. In short, they succeed both in not avoiding the principle of equality and in proving that Turks are better than the other Muslim nations, so they become the leader of the *umma*.

CONCLUSION

In applying Anthony Smith’s theoretical framework, one can find many similarities between nationalism and the religion of Islam which pave the way for Nurcus to adopt nationalism. Therefore, at the very core of the argument, I should note that Smith is right, and his framework is helpful in

⁵⁶⁴ Eyüp Göksoy, interview with author, December 24, 2016.

⁵⁶⁵ Necati İshakoğlu, interview with author, December 25, 2016.

⁵⁶⁶ *Mahdi* literally means ‘guided one’. In the religion of Islam, it is believed that towards the end of the world, a person will appear and redeem the religion. He also will ensure the political superiority of the Muslim world as well. Miraç Demiroğlu, interview with author, December 19, 2016.

⁵⁶⁷ These are some personal belongings of the Prophet Muhammad, including his sword, stamp, arrow and bow etc. After the battle of Ridaniyah, they were brought from Egypt, the then seat of the caliphate to Istanbul, the capital city of the Ottoman Empire.

⁵⁶⁸ Necati İshakoğlu, interview with author, December 25, 2016.

understanding the Nurcu case in the broadest sense. However, it should also be admitted that his broad approach falls short in more than one way when it comes to different arguments used by Nurcus to justify, firstly, nationalism within Islam, then the distinctiveness of the Turkish nation.

First and foremost, my point is that it would be quite misleading to consider Nurcus primarily nationalists considering the data during my research. In other words, Nurcus cannot be likened to some modern nationalists drawing upon some sacred elements to entrench their ideological position or convince the masses to adopt this new understanding of the world. Rather, they are pious Muslims in the first place, then nationalist. The most important evidence for this is that almost all the time they try to come up with an Islamic reason derived either from a verse or a Prophetic tradition to legitimize their position vis-à-vis nationalism. Even when they make some non-religious arguments, such as the naturalness of loving one's own nation, they feel compelled to make a reference to Islam in one way or another.

Secondly, the approaches of Özdalga and Lapidus highlighting the parallel between the caliphate and nation-states regarding the transition from smaller units to broader political attachments has explanatory power regarding the nationalism of Nurcus. This is because they are prone to considering everybody living in Anatolia as Turkish, independently of their ethnic background. If not, this can be seen as a pluralist approach, and even if it has some totalitarian implications, it should be admitted that this has some traces of a political egalitarian approach envisioning the breakdown of smaller types of attachments, such as tribal or ethnic ones. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that the approach of the Nurcus contacted during my research does not represent a liberal approach in that their inclusion stipulates that non-Turkish Muslim peoples accept Turkishness as the supra-identity. In other words, they do not include the other ethnic groups into the Turkish nation unless they submit to Turkish identity. That is why, when it comes to the existence of other ethnic groups, they prefer to emphasize the unimportance of ethnic or racial differences. However, they fervently emphasize the differences, peculiarities and superior qualities of Turks.

Finally, the historical roots of the intertwined nature of Islamism and Turkism broadly discussed by Akgün and Çalış and Çetinsaya is quite a useful approach to understand their coexistence within the mindset of my Nurcu respondents. These scholars pretty convincingly argue that during the emergence of Islamism and Turkism as modern ideologies, they were in an interesting relationship in that they had opposed each other but at the same time they borrowed conceptual elements from each other. To put it

differently, both a convergence and a divergence was underway. Nurcus are heirs of such a legacy, as their master, Said Nursi, was part and parcel of these heated debates during the second constitutional period (1908-1918) on the side of the Islamists. Nursi himself went through a spiritual transition during the 1920s and changed his worldview. He stopped being involved in politics and political matters. Following in the footsteps of their master, the members of Nur community did not head towards the way of Islamism. However, unlike Nursi, they did not completely quit nationalist orientations.

CHAPTER 7: NATIONALISM OF THE NURCUS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE MUSLIM WORLD

Introduction

After discussing the empirical findings in the previous two chapters, I will now attempt to situate the Nur movement in its greater historical context because treating this community as something isolated from the developments occurring throughout the wider Muslim world would be misleading. Therefore, in order to have a better understanding of the duality between religion and nationalism, and to be able to compare the Turkish case with others, I will discuss the same phenomenon in other Muslim countries, with a specific emphasis upon the Middle East. Firstly, I will give an account of the introduction of the idea of nationalism into Muslim lands and how it was received and perceived. Within this section, I will also be discussing pan-Islamist Muslim reformers as champions of nationalism, who were accommodating this ideal with the religion of Islam as opposed to staunch secularists. In the second section, I will compare and contrast the Nur movement with three other Islamist movements in the Middle East, namely, *Ikhwan al-Muslimin* (Muslim Brotherhood) in Egypt, *Hamas* (Islamic Resistance Movement) in Palestine, and Islamic Revolution in Iran. There are a few reasons behind selection of these three movements. Firstly, they are all contemporaries of the Nur movement, which is an important dimension for comparison. Secondly, all three movements are the major ones of the Muslim world, so they have considerable impact on the other communities and movements around the Muslim world, especially regarding resistance to the secular states. Keeping in mind the resistance of the Nur movement to the Kemalist Republic, this comparison makes sense. Thirdly, connected with the previous point, the methods these movements adopt both in organisation and in opposition as well as the positions

that they take in the face of the challenges has been a significant part of the heated debates among Islamic circles. For these reasons, shedding a light on them enables a better understanding of the nationalism of Nurcus. I will argue that although the Nur movement cannot be considered an Islamic movement, there are striking parallels regarding their approach to nationalism and the ways they reconcile nationalism with Islam. I do not see any inconvenience and methodological pitfall to compare an Islamic movement with Islamist ones regarding nationalism, on the grounds that although they differ related to the view on the necessity of an Islamic state, their points of reference remain the same, namely the Qur'an and the prophetic traditions. In addition, both Nurcus and other movements in the surrounding countries have been striving for the Islamisation of society, though their methods might differ. In other words, they are movements which share the same language and nomenclature enabling a communication between them.

The Introduction of Nationalism to Muslim Lands

Since its emergence in the seventh century up until today, Islam has been confronted with many major challenges, the first two of which were the Mongolian invasion of the Muslim lands and the crusades, during which various sizable Christian armies attacked Anatolia and the Levant. These challenges took place in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and Muslims survived both of them, although many harms were inflicted. Besides all the devastation they brought about, both led to some unexpected consequences, such as an exchange of information between civilisations. In modern times, especially starting from the mid-eighteenth century, a new challenge rose from Europe, namely modernity, especially in the sense of secularisation spreading across the world. The modern period witnessed the dissolution of long-lasting traditional structures rooted in the old world. The Muslim world was not an exception in this

world-historical transformation. Even though Islam as a religion maintained its life, the European powers captured most of the lands extensively inhabited by Muslims from the shores of Morocco in the West to Malaysia and Indonesia in the far East.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards, the Ottoman Empire was faced with the challenge of separatist nationalist movements, especially in the Balkans. The idea of nationalism gradually spread among the Christian peoples of Eastern Europe. Moreover, the European powers' intention was to ensure the separation of those minorities from the Ottoman Empire, the power of which would decrease accordingly. Firstly, in 1804 Serbians rebelled against the central authority in the name of national independence.⁵⁶⁹ Greeks were the first nation that succeeded in establishing their own state. Bulgaria, Albania and others followed suit. Armenian and Kurdish national struggles failed during the process, on the grounds that they were not able to enjoy the support of the Great Powers during and after the First World War.⁵⁷⁰ The last nationalist movement was, interestingly enough, Turkish nationalism, as Turks constituted the backbone of the Ottoman Empire and the official language was Turkish although it included many ethnic groups, as did the other multi-ethnic empires. Turks resisted the Allies after the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and established a modern nation-state based on Western blueprints.⁵⁷¹

In the Muslim world, the basic question was how to respond to the assaults of the

⁵⁶⁹ François Georgeon. 2006. *Osmanlı-Türk Modernleşmesi – 1900-1930*. İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları. pp. 1-2.

⁵⁷⁰ Feroz Ahmad. 1993. *The Making of Modern Turkey*. London and New York: Routledge. p. 4.

⁵⁷¹ Whereas, during the Ottoman Empire, the adjective “Turk” was used as a pejorative word describing nomadic Turks who were ignorant of the urban etiquette, the meaning of the word was exposed to a transformation in due course. According to Bernard Lewis, “The [Turkish] people had once called themselves Turks, and the language they spoke was still called Turkish, but in the Imperial society of the Ottomans the ethnic term Turk was little used, and then chiefly in a rather derogatory sense, to designate the Turcoman nomads or, later, the ignorant and uncouth Turkish-speaking peasants of the Anatolian villages. To apply it to an Ottoman gentleman of Constantinople would have been an insult.” Bernard Lewis. 1968. *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*. London: Oxford University Press. pp. 1-2.

imperialist powers and different trends of thoughts were developed, namely Westernism, Islamism and nationalism. The Westernists held that there was only one way out of that dire situation: to wholly adopt the Western way of life, from the way of dressing to education, science and art. They “saw Oriental civilisation sinking, sinking not because of the predatory, or immoral, or hostile nature of European civilisation, but because Oriental civilisation itself was inherently bad and backward; and they saw Western civilisation as inherently good and superior, not a civilisation taken over from the Arabs, but one based upon entirely new foundations, which were neither Christian nor Muslim”⁵⁷². According to them, and contrary to the Islamist approach, a selective approach accepting technological and scientific advancements and rejecting the modern lifestyle could not be an ultimate solution to on-going underdevelopment and the state of unceasing defeat. They believed that the morality and lifestyle of the West was responsible for all the modern advancements and military and technological superiorities of European powers. These sentences penned in 1898 well exemplify the approach of a Westernist of the time, Hüseyin Cahit:

We are bound, whether we like it or not, to Europeanise. Just as the pantaloons we wear came from Europe, our literature too ... ought to come from there... We are bound to turn to Europe even if all the history books of the Arabs were translated; still we have to learn antiquity and pre-history from European science. Ibn Khaldun's philosophy of history belongs to the infantile age of the science of history. Since then, the child has grown; he became a boy in Germany; he even grew to old age; nay, the poor fellow is dead! The

⁵⁷² Niyazi Berkes. 1961. *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*. Montreal: McGill University Press. p. 297.

modern science of history is to come from Europe, not from the Arabs.⁵⁷³

As opposed to Westernism, the supporters of Islamism advocated uniting the whole Muslim world around the flag of the religion of Islam.⁵⁷⁴ For them, the political unity of Muslims around the world was the one and only solution to the underdevelopment of Muslims. It would also help to stop imperialist encroachment into Muslim lands. Abdulhamid II, sultan of the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century, adopted this approach as a state ideology. Consolidating the status of caliphate, which was going to ensure the help of other Muslims, he aimed at resisting Western powers.

The most prominent figure among the Islamists was Jamaluddin al-Afghani (1839-1897), who was a Muslim scholar born in Afghanistan and educated in Iran. He was a reformist and staunch defender of reform of the education system in Muslim countries in the light of reason and science. Both he and his students raised harsh criticisms against traditional Islamic sciences which did not give due importance to reason, rather they were solely dependent upon revelation. He was the most vocal figure of the idea of Islamic unity against especially the British imperialist expansion.⁵⁷⁵ According to him, Islamic unity was based on three principles, namely religious attachment, *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina) and the caliphate. His

⁵⁷³ Hüseyin Cahit, 1898, cited in Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*, pp. 298-299.

⁵⁷⁴ Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*, p. 267. Although flags are the symbols of the nations, as the other sacred foundations of nationalism, this symbol has also a history. For instance, based on a prophetic tradition, Muslims frequently pray to come together under the flag of the Prophet Mohammad. Here is the original text of the hadith: At-Tirmidhi narrated: "The Prophet said: I heard your words, and everything you said is indeed true, and I myself am the Beloved of Allah (habibullah) and I say this without pride, and I carry the flag of glory (liwa ul-hamd) on the Day of Judgment, and am the first intercessor and the first whose intercession is accepted, and the first to stir the circles of Paradise so that Allah will open it for me and I shall enter it together with the poor among my Community, and I say this without pride. I am the most honored of the First and the Last, and I say this without pride." Hajjah Amina Adil. 2012. *Muhammad the Messenger of Islam: His Life & Prophecy*. Fenton: Islamic Supreme Council of America (ISCA). p. 5.

⁵⁷⁵ Hayrettin Karaman. 1994. *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*, s.v. "Cemaleddin Efgani." [Jamaluddin al-Afghani] İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayınları.

approach to nationalism was not categorically negative. Unexpectedly, he found the ideology of nationalism useful, on the condition that it would not overshadow religious attachment and not increase ethnic fanaticism.⁵⁷⁶ At the same time, he inspired many nationalists from different regions with the following argument: In order to attain the goal of Islamic unity, each and every Muslim nation should first secure its independence.⁵⁷⁷ In a piece that he wrote in 1883, he came up with the idea that there are two main attachments among human beings, namely linguistic and religious unities. According to al-Afghani, the former was much firmer and more permanent than the latter. Arab as well as Turkish nationalists were profoundly affected by this idea and promoted it within their own circles.⁵⁷⁸ After the establishment of the Turkish Republic, it can be argued that reformist Islamists' views on nationalism continued to be influential. In the next section, within the light of this information, I will discuss nationalism of three Islamist movements in comparison with Nursi.

How Nursi Diverge from and Converge with Islamic Movements in the Muslim World

Regarding reformism, it would not be accurate to brand the Nur movement fully reformist in the sense of repudiating the whole Islamic tradition of knowledge. However, it is also a fact that Nursi himself claimed that he aimed to renew the tradition, called *tajdid* in the Islamic nomenclature.⁵⁷⁹ In addition, he mentions al-Afghani and his student Abduh as his predecessors in the issue of Islamic unity

⁵⁷⁶ Mehmet Ali Büyükkara. 2015. *Çağdaş İslami Akımlar*. [Contemporary Islamic Movements] İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları. p. 25.

⁵⁷⁷ Hilmi Ziya Ülken. 1979. *Türkiye'de Çağdaş Düşünce Tarihi*. [Contemporary Intellectual History in Turkey] İstanbul: Ülken Yayınları. p. 206.

⁵⁷⁸ A famous pan-Turkist poet Mehmet Emin Yurdakul was one of those who were affected by the ideas of al-Afghani. Ülken, *Türkiye'de Çağdaş Düşünce Tarihi*, p. 206.

⁵⁷⁹ Said Nursi. 2012. [ca. 1928] *Sikke-i Tasdik-i Gaybi*. İstanbul: Söz Yayınları. p. 29.

(Tarihçe-i Hayat, p. 89). So, I believe that this relationship and continuity will help explain the nationalism of the Nur movement and the ideas of reformist pan-Islamists of the nineteenth century.

The Nur movement is one of the Islamic movements that emerged and flourished in the twentieth century in Turkey. Although it cannot be considered Islamist⁵⁸⁰, because it has no agenda for establishing an Islamic state, it can safely be argued that it is an Islamic movement on the grounds that its members' main objective is to spread the Islamic faith and belief in the hereafter.

Therefore, it is meaningful to compare this Islamic movement with Islamist movements in other Muslim countries. I undertake this comparison because despite the difference in agenda, which is the objective of establishing an Islamic state, there are many parallels in the intellectual challenges they face and the tensions they go through, as will be more clearly seen in the coming pages. To give a better picture of the movement, this section will elaborate on the tension between nationalism as a particularistic ideology and Islam as a universalist religion in the following cases: (a) Ikhwan al-Muslimin, Egypt, (b) Hamas, Palestine and (c) Islamic revolution, Iran.

Ikhwan al-Muslimin (Muslim Brotherhood)

The movement emerged in 1928 in Egypt under the leadership of Hasan al-Banna, who was a young missionary Muslim scholar. It was developed as a resistance movement to the authoritarian and corrupt regime of the monarchy, led by King Fuad. While it started as a community-based grassroots movement in the 1930s, its members

⁵⁸⁰ Although the majority of the movement is not Islamist, because they support a democratic state which is respectful of religious freedoms, there are some marginal branches which have been waiting for an Islamic state based on shari'a law, though it is a state of passive waiting. Contrary to many Islamist movements, Nurcus are not directly involved in politics and they have never adopted armed resistance against the state to whose secularist policies they are opposed.

started to be active in national politics. In the aftermath of World War II, its influence increased across Egypt and it reached other Muslim countries inhabited by Arab populations. After the Second World War the number of branches amounted to 2000 and the socio-religious activities of Muslim brothers started taking place everywhere in the country. Their charismatic leadership and organisational competence played an important role in this comparatively rapid growth).⁵⁸¹

As with many other Islamic movements emerging in the last century, the Muslim Brotherhood defended Islamic unity. According to Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the movement, Islam was not just a faith, but it was also the nationality and the fatherland of Muslims. Even the name of the movement implies an identity transcending national attachments.⁵⁸² However, al-Banna did not develop any idea favouring the integration of all the Muslim countries into one greater polity, as he was aware of how utopian this ideal was. Abu Zahrah, another prominent figure of the movement, took the argument one step further and pointed out that a political Islamic unity under one central administration was only possible before the spread of Islam reached outside of the Arab lands. For him, such a state would not be sustainable either. The structure that al-Banna suggested was the establishment of an Islamic bloc in which Muslim states worked together.⁵⁸³ Like al-Banna, Abu Zahrah envisaged an Islamic league formed by various Muslim states. In the case of Nursi, there is a remarkably similar idea expressed by Saraçgil during my interview with him. Referring to Nursi, Saraçgil, similar to members of the MB, proposed that United Nations of Islam should be established. Unlike the MB, however, he stated that its headquarters should be located

⁵⁸¹ Noman Sattar. 1995. "Al Ikhwan Al Muslimin" (Society of Muslim Brotherhood) Aims and Ideology, Role and Impact". *Pakistan Horizon*. 48 (2) p. 9.

⁵⁸² Zafar Ishaq Ansari. 1961. "Contemporary Islam and Nationalism: A Case Study of Egypt", *Die Welt des Islams*, 7 (1-4) p. 12.

⁵⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

in Istanbul. Although both the MB and Saraçgil both considered it necessary to establish an international political Islamic assembly, they are not on the same page as to its centre. Regarding Islamic unity, the main point al-Banna stressed was the fact that Muslims scattered around the world should not restrict their concerns to personal or national issues. Instead, Muslims should share in the grief of their Muslims brothers around the world because they were first and foremost members of the same religious community.⁵⁸⁴ There are also striking parallels with Nurcus on this issue as well. The research for this thesis demonstrates that most Nurcus consider the ummah to hold a special place as opposed to secular nationalists. Like the MB, Nurcus empathise with their Muslim brothers and sisters outside of Turkey. For instance, they did not remain indifferent to the ongoing bloodshed occurring in Syria simply because of their religious ties. This position can well be contrasted with the indifference of secular nationalists in Turkey who eschewed Syrians simply for not being members of the Turkish nation.

In congruence with an ideal of Islamic unity, if not a multi-national unitarian Islamic state, the movement does not support the ideology of nationalism. For instance, in 1955, Said Ramadan, one of the leaders of the brothers, suggested brotherhood based on Islam should replace nationalistic feelings:

Perhaps after the world has experienced ... (different forms of) chauvinism and nationalism ... it is in need of a new tie which transcends all these factors (i.e. nationalism, etc.) and supports truth, wheresoever and with whomsoever it might be. Muslims are duty-bound to play their role in this respect, to free themselves of the chauvinisms of interests and desires and

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

gather themselves around the call towards Truth.⁵⁸⁵

In the eyes of the members of the movement, nationalism is seen as something imported from the West, which is by itself a problem for them.⁵⁸⁶ Because nationalism promotes the good of particular nations, according to the Muslim brothers, it was a cultural weapon used by the Western countries in order to weaken and even to dismember the unity of the Muslim world. Muhammad al-Ghazzali criticised nationalism using religious terminology and considered it to be “modern *jahiliyya*”.⁵⁸⁷ This refers to the well-known concept of *jahilliya*, meaning ignorance, which is used to qualify the state of mind in the Arab peninsula prior to Islam, with specific reference to their belief in idols and bad treatment of women, children and weak members of society. By using this term, al-Ghazzali aims at invigorating some negative images in the minds of modern Muslims against nationalism. While the position of al-Ghazzali cannot be compared with that of individual Nursi, it is safe to argue that Nursi and al-Ghazzali had very similar ideas about nationalism. In the *Risale-i Nur*, Nursi argues that “[f]urthermore, in the idea of nationalism is a thrill of the soul, a heedless pleasure, an inauspicious power.”⁵⁸⁸ In parallel with al-Ghazzali’s emphasis upon the dismemberment of the Muslim world due to nationalism, Nursi holds that:

As for the present, when the peoples and tribes of Islam are most in need of one another, and each is more oppressed and more poverty-stricken than the other, and they are crushed beneath European domination, to regard one another as strangers due to the idea of nationalism and look on each other as enemies, is such a calamity it is

⁵⁸⁵ Sa'id Ramadan. 1955. *Tariq*. op. cit., pp. 72f. Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

⁵⁸⁸ Nursi, *The Letters*, p. 373.

indescribable. It is quite simply a lunacy like turning one's back on dreadful serpents so as to avoid being bitten by a mosquito and struggling against the mosquito due to the idea of nationalism. To attach no importance to the European nations, which are like huge dragons, at a time when their insatiable greed their grasping hands are outstretched, indeed, to in effect help them and to nurture enmity against fellow-citizens in the eastern provinces or brother Muslims to the south, and to take up positions opposed to them, is extremely detrimental and dangerous.⁵⁸⁹

On the other hand, it was not the case that Ikhwan was entirely against every objective or tenet espoused by Egyptian or Arab nationalists. Regarding the evacuation of British troops from the Suez area and similar national issues, the Muslim Brotherhood were united with nationalist parties like *Wafd*. In a nutshell, they were on the same side regarding the immediate political aims of the nationalists, with specific reference to national independence.⁵⁹⁰ The importance of Egypt's national independence as well as that of other Muslim countries comes from the fact that the Islamic resurgence and the permeation of an Islamic lifestyle into the capillaries of societies were all dependent on liberation from the yoke of foreign powers. In addition to regarding these national struggles as crucial for Islamic revival, the Muslim Brotherhood went one step further and considered fighting against foreign powers to save even a tiny part of the national territory as a religious obligation (*fard*). Accordingly, refraining from this obligation turned out to be a grave sin, which is an unpardonable one, in their re-interpretation of religious concepts. As a natural consequence of this

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 374.

⁵⁹⁰ Sa'id Ramadan. 1955. *Tariq*. op. cit., pp. 72f. Cited in Ibid., p. 19.

approach, both during the national independence of Egypt and in defending the Arab cause in Palestine against Israel, orthodox Muslims and nationalists cooperated.⁵⁹¹

There is a striking parallel here between the attitude of Ikhwan toward nationalists and the attitude of Said Nursi, the leader of the Nur movement, and his followers. Especially during the independence war between 1919-1923, both Said Nursi and the other leaders of the religious communities and Sufi orders fought side by side against the occupying forces for independence of the Muslim peoples of Anatolia. Mustafa Kemal, the founding father of the Turkish Republic, who led the nationalist resistance, announced the reasons for his call as emancipating the sultanate and caliphate from the oppression of invaders. Therefore, he succeeded in consolidating forces of both nationalist secular elites and the religious people who were both the majority in number and influential in society.

Turning back to the Egyptian case, although it appears at first glance that there is a self-evident contradiction between Islamic universalism and nationalist particularism, in the eyes of the members of Ikhwan, they were reconcilable. Al-Banna, for instance, contends that each and every Muslim should harmonise these two attachments by separating responsibilities for each one. Therefore, a Muslim can maintain his or her attachment to the cause of Islamic unity while maintaining his or her national attachment. In order to solve this problem, al-Banna coined the following concept: *qawmiyyah al-khassah*, particular nationalism.⁵⁹² This might be likened to the two concepts developed by Nursi, which are a 'positive idea of nationality' (*müsbet fikr-i milliye*) and a 'negative idea of nationality' (*menfi fikr-i milliye*). By the former, Nursi means a nationalism which clings to the precepts of Islam and teaches the love of the

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., p. 21.

⁵⁹² Ibid., p. 22.

nation. However, the negative one contains a destructive enthusiasm with regard to the members of other nations. It can be inferred that both Hasan al-Banna and Said Nursi made an effort to change the direction of a very fast-flowing nationalist stream towards the cause of Islam, as much as possible. Al-Banna legitimised his attitude towards nationalism as loving and caring for the nation based on Islamic principles. He held that, just as a Muslim is responsible to give donations first to his or her closest relatives, to care and love one's own nation is in accordance with the teachings of Islam. According to Islam, when it comes to donations, the level of responsibility decreases from the inner-most circle towards the outer circles.⁵⁹³ Al-Banna successfully constituted a resemblance between this religious principle and nationalism as a modern ideology. Therefore, with this interpretation a this-worldly deed is sanctified. This sanctification, in turn, contributed to persuading Muslim individuals to support nationalism. This approach is also shared by Nurcus. For instance, Emre Batur argues that family in Islam is, at least in certain regards, prioritised over other circles of an individual. He then applies this logic to the idea of nationalism and concludes that it is a religious duty for a Muslim to prioritise his or her nation over the other ones.⁵⁹⁴

Al-Banna espoused many aspects of nationalism, such as love of a nation, its glory, the idea of conquest, social welfare, freedom and independence. He explained love for a nation using both Islamic precedents and secular arguments. According to him, loving one's own nation and country is part and parcel of human nature. He added that after migrating to Medina, where the first Muslim city-state was established, Prophet Muhammad and one of his companions missed Mecca, the city where they used to

⁵⁹³ *Mu'tamar*, p. 46. cited in *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁵⁹⁴ Emre Batur, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

live.⁵⁹⁵ Here he juxtaposes a medieval city as a homeland and the territory of the modern nation-state, which is an often instrumentalised anachronism. Like al-Banna, in 1938, another Islamic writer, al-Amin, also wrote in favour of love for one's own nation using arguments based on human nature. He argued that this is not peculiar to human beings, as even animals love and protect their homes. In addition, he held that the contributions of individuals to their narrow circles, their nations in this context, are more tangible than their contribution to the greater or global communities. He gave the example of sugar in a glass of tea, arguing that although a very small amount of sugar is able to sweeten an entire glass of water, its taste goes unnoticed in a tank of water.⁵⁹⁶ As a result, he prioritised the nation over the greater Islamic community with regard to individual responsibility. Among my respondents, İbrahim Gezin also thinks in very much the same manner as the Ikhwan. According to him, Islam does not require that Muslim's to strip themselves of their ethnic or national identities. Instead, he asserts that the only thing that Muslims should avoid is considering one nation or ethnic group to be superior over others.⁵⁹⁷ Likewise, Sevinç Ak holds that nationalism only turns into racism implying when it is exaggerated, that only then is it religiously forbidden. She also puts forward that nationalism is not an ideology from which Muslims are supposed to refrain.⁵⁹⁸ These show that there are significant parallels between Nurus and Ikhwan with regard to the prioritisation of one's own nation.

Although opposed to nationalism as an ideology, Ikhwan exalted Egypt in a pamphlet published in 1942:

We are Egyptians born and grown up in this noble part of the world, Egypt,

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 22.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 23.

⁵⁹⁷ İbrahim Gezin, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

⁵⁹⁸ Sevinç Ak, interview with author, December 30, 2016.

an Islamic country. It welcomed Islam in a noble manner; it protected and repulsed aggression against Islam at various periods of history. It sincerely and unreservedly embraced Islam and has showered upon it its intense emotions (of love) and its noblest feelings . . . Because of various reasons it has come to be the nursery of the Islamic ideology... So, how can we (afford) not to work for Egypt and for the good of Egypt? And how can it be said that Egyptianism is inconsistent with the obligations of a person who upholds the cause of Islam?⁵⁹⁹

The Muslim Brotherhood's self-confident attitude towards nationalism is of interest as they are generally known as Pan-Islamists. In addition, although they did not support the idea of turning back to the Pharaonic times, they approved of taking pride in the glorious past of Egypt as their ancestors surpassed their contemporaries in science, art and technology.⁶⁰⁰ At this point it is important to note that there is a difference between the attitudes of Ikhwan and Nurcus towards the "heathen" or non-Muslim ancient people who lived in their homeland. In Turkey, not only Nurcus but also members of the other religious communities, irrespective of their tendency towards Islamism or Sufism, are generally indifferent towards the non-Muslim heritage of the ancient civilisations. Especially in the Western parts of the Anatolia and in Istanbul, there are many historical sites left from Byzantine and ancient Greek civilisations. However, because they do not reflect the glorious past of the Islamic civilisation, religious people are rarely interested in those historical sites. They are mostly visited and celebrated by the secular segments of the society, Kemalists, liberals or leftists. Indeed, this is not something unfamiliar for modern nation-states,

⁵⁹⁹ *Da'watuna fi Tawr Jadid*, 1942. p. 12. cited in *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

as they are fervently inclined to rediscover the ancient cultures and civilisations in service of creating a new nation. The ruins left from ancient Greek states, for example, did not draw the attention of the Ottoman Empire until the late nineteenth century, the period which coincides with the efforts of some political figures to transform the Empire to a nation-state. However, especially after the foundation of the new republic, they were rediscovered as an alternative past to the Islamic one. “Ruined columns and statuary ... could now be claimed as the remnants of an exemplary ancient past, a past that was shared by the middle classes in London, Berlin, Paris, Rome, or Athens, as well as by the peasantry in Anatolia. Atatürk's Turkey was entering the modern age by appropriating Europe's classical heritage.”⁶⁰¹ In the early years of the republic, even the tombs were literally shut down and visiting was officially banned. This can be explained by the fact that Turkish secularism historically developed against Islam, especially Sunni-Orthodox version of Islam. In a nutshell, whereas in Turkey one can observe a comparatively clearer distinction between secular and religious positions vis-à-vis the non-Islamic heritage, it appears that there is a convergence in the Egyptian case on the same matter, although it does not mean that Ikhwan and secular Egyptian elites are completely on the same page.

The Arab exceptionalism in the discourse of Ikhwan was also quite striking. Hasan al-Banna accentuates the specific position of Arabs among the other Muslim nations.⁶⁰² According to Arabs, Islam was revealed and introduced first to the Arabs through whom it was spread to the world. It was not a coincidence that the language of the holy book, the Qur'an, is Arabic and there are prophetic traditions mentioning a correlation between the abasement of Arabs and the downfall of Islam. According to

⁶⁰¹ Kader Konuk. 2010. *East West Mimesis: Auerbach in Turkey*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. pp. 11-12.

⁶⁰² Ansari, “Contemporary Islam and Nationalism: A Case Study of Egypt,” p. 25.

al-Banna, the decline of Islam started after the transfer of political leadership of the Muslim world from Arabs to other nations.⁶⁰³ This argument is also quite popular among Orientalists, according to whom the starting point of this decline is Gazzali and his ‘destructive’ blows to the development of a secular philosophy in the Muslim world. Here, Nurcus and the Ikhwan both converge and diverge. With regard to the nation itself, there is definitely a discrepancy, as Arabs are considered exceptional for the Ikhwan whereas Nurcus consider Turks to be the saviours of the Muslim world. However, they are united in drawing upon different parts of the Qur’an and Sunnah to offer evidence that their respective nations are above and ahead the other Muslim nations. Referring to the fifty fourth verse of Surah al-Ma’idah, Demiroğlu argues that God promised to send the Turkish nation to uphold the ummah after its decline in the hands of the Arabs.⁶⁰⁴

Regarding the exceptional status of the Arabs, al-Banna suggested that the unity of the Arabs is not only within the responsibility of Arabs, but also an imperative for other Muslims as well. This is mainly because, for him, the restoration of the glory of Islam is first and foremost dependent upon the unity of Arabs.⁶⁰⁵ At this point also, the Nurcu case differs from Ikhwan in that even if Nurcus support Islamic unity under the leadership of Turkey, firstly they do not promote a trans-national Turkish unity and secondly, they do not hold that it is also the responsibility of the other Muslim nations to ensure Turkish leadership in the Muslim world. Today, a trans-national Turkish unity is only defended by the Nationalist Action Party and the Good Party in the political arena, whose members can be called Turkish nationalist with conservative

⁶⁰³ Al Banna definitely means Turks by other non-Arab nations, because it is a historical fact that in the aftermath of the Abbasid Empire, first Seljukids and then the Ottoman Empire rose as Muslim political entities in the Middle East.

⁶⁰⁴ Miraç Demiroğlu, interview with author, December 19, 2016. Qur’an, 5-54.

⁶⁰⁵ *Tawr Jadid*. 1942. p. 12. cited in *Ibid.*, p. 25.

tendencies. The nationalism of Kemalism, as championed by the Republican People's Party, is also peculiar to the territory of the Turkish nation-state, which at times becomes the sphere of disagreement between different types of nationalists.

Even though Ikhwan shared many points of agreement with Egyptian nationalists, there was a significant difference between their reference points. Whereas, for nationalists, the good of the nation was in itself a value, Ikhwan referred to Islamic principles or the good of the Islamic cause as a reason behind their love for the nation.⁶⁰⁶ They raised the point that they were struggling for the independence of Egypt, because Egypt was the leading country in the Muslim world. They loved Egypt, because the Prophet Muhammad and his companions loved their homeland as well. They made an effort to unite all the Arabs, because the glory of Islam was dependent upon the glory and worldly success of the Arabs. The examples can be multiplied. However, in short, the Muslim Brotherhood's love for their country was a function of their loyalty to their religion. However, for nationalists this was not the case. Although they could cooperate with Islamists, their anchor point was the nation itself. In other words, in their system of values nation preceded religion.⁶⁰⁷

Here one can draw another parallel between Ikhwan and the Nur community, which is the fact that the nationalism of Nurcus is also dependent upon and emanates from the fundamentals of Islam. Each time they mention the glory of the Turkish nation, they refer to their centuries-old service to Islam. In addition, while trying to single out Turks amongst the other Muslim nations, they refer to the following prophetic tradition: "Verily you shall conquer Constantinople. What a wonderful leader will her leader be, and what a wonderful army will that army be!"⁶⁰⁸ For them, humanitarian

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 25.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁸ (Musnad Ahmad, Al Hakim, al Jami' al Saghir)

aid provided by the Turkish state for needy Muslim people is also a sign of Turkish superiority over other Muslim states. In a nutshell, Ikhwan and the Nur community employ similar strategies to legitimate their respective nationalisms. At this point, I will move on to another Islamist movement in Palestine, which can be considered to be an offspring of the Muslim Brotherhood and discuss their engagement with nationalism and any parallel or discrepancy with Nurcus' nationalism.

HAMAS, Islamic Resistance Movement in Palestine

As with many Islamist movements in the Middle East, the origins of Hamas can be found in the Muslim Brotherhood based in Egypt. In 1973, Sheikh Ahmad Yasin, the famously charismatic leader of Hamas, who was an ex-member of Ikhwan, founded an Islamic Centre (*al-Mujamma' al-Islami*) in Gaza together with some of his friends. The centre provided many community services around a mosque, from training women to giving donations to needy people. By collecting *zakat* (almsgiving), the Islamic centre were supported in financial terms as well. During the 1970s and 80s the centre increased its appeal and power and started controlling a huge number of mosques across the Gaza strip.⁶⁰⁹ In 1987, following an accident in which many Palestinian workers died, the first *intifada* (widespread uprising) started against Israel. During the uprising, after some disagreements with other movements like the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organisation,) the Islamic Centre decided to establish a new organisation called HAMAS (*Harakat al Muqawama al-Islamiyya*, Islamic Resistance Movement). The silent acceptance of Israel which aimed at undermining the challenges posed by the secular nationalist Palestinian groups organised around the PLO, paved the way of the establishment of HAMAS.⁶¹⁰ The movement turned

⁶⁰⁹ Are Knudsen. 2004. *Crescent and Sword: the Hamas enigma*. Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute, Development Studies and Human Rights. p. 1376.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid.

out to be the representative of many religious Palestinians living both inside and outside of the country.⁶¹¹

Up until the establishment of Hamas, the members of the movement within the Islamic centre used to think that the social and civil efforts towards Islamisation of society preceded the political struggle to liberate Palestine from Israeli occupation. In other words, defeating Israel was dependent upon conscious Muslim Palestinians who reached a certain level of self-cultivation within the sphere of Islam.⁶¹² However, in the aftermath of the establishment of Hamas, things changed. The policies towards the education of individuals and families as well as efforts aiming at Pan-Islamic ideals were replaced with the exaltation of a sacred independence war against Israelis who occupied Palestinian lands.⁶¹³ In a sense, Palestinians followed suit and, just like the other Islamist movements in the region, moved from a non-nationalist religious identity to a nationalist one.

The Nur movement in Turkey is also renowned for its distance from daily party politics, even harshly criticised by the members of many Islamist movements, such as the Nationalist View movement and many Sufi orders who have supported being involved in active politics. However, Said Nursi was quite clear that the main aim of members of the movement is to serve the faith and spread it across the country, even all over the world. At the beginning of the 1950s, in a book composed of letters between Nursi and his students, he says that:

For now, there are four parties: People's Party, Democrat Party, Nation's Party and Islamic Union Party.

⁶¹¹ Ibid., p. 1373.

⁶¹² Khalid Hroub. 2010. *Hamas: A Beginner's Guide*. London: Pluto Press. p. 28.

⁶¹³ Shaul Mishal and Avraham Sela. 2006. *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence, and Coexistence*. New York: Columbia University Press. p. 17.

Islamic Union Party can come to power within today's politics only if sixty to seventy percent of the society are devoutly religious. Then it can strive for not instrumentalising religion for politics, but rather instrumentalising politics for religion. But because it will have to instrumentalise religion for politics, due to undermining of Islamic way of cultivation and against the incursions of the current politics, it would be better for that party not to come to power.⁶¹⁴ [my translation from Turkish]

It is interesting that, back then, even if there was a party called Islamic Unity, it had almost no impact in the national politics, as it did not run for election. Nevertheless, Nursi did not support politicising the idea of Islamic unity. Around twenty years later in 1970, the first Islamist party of Turkey, the National Order Party, was founded by the leader of the Nationalist View movement, Prof. Necmettin Erbakan. However, following the teachings of their leader, at the expense of getting involved in many arguments with other Islamists, Nurcus never became active in actual party politics as a movement. Although some members were elected as members of parliament, their actions were individual rather than collective. It should also be noted that parallel to the rise of the Ak Party and the access of religious segments of society to political power, Nurcus have increasingly been engaged with the ruling party in different ways, although they are not involved in crucial activities of the party. Therefore, regarding both departure points -staying civil- and the destination -going national- of HAMAS, a similar transition may be detected.

⁶¹⁴ Here is the original: "İttihad-ı İslâm Partisi, yüzde altmış, yetmiş tam mütediyyin olmak şartıyla, şimdiki siyaset başına geçebilir. Dini siyasete âlet etmemeye, belki siyaseti dine âlet etmeye çalışabilir. Fakat çok zamandan beri terbiye-i İslâmiye zedelenmesiyle ve şimdiki siyasetin cinayetine karşı dini siyasete âlet etmeye mecbur olacağından, şimdilik o parti başa geçmemek lâzımdır." Said Nursi. 2012. [ca. 1949-60] *Emirdağ Lahikası II*. [Emirdağ Appendix II] İstanbul: Söz Yayınları p. 547.

From 1987 on, when the first *intifada* took place, HAMAS gradually adopted the national myths, symbols and narratives which were already in circulation, promoted by the other secular-nationalist Palestinian organisations, such as the PLO.⁶¹⁵ Nonetheless, what Hamas did was not just borrowing some concepts from the other nationalist movements. Rather, they integrated some traditional Islamic concepts into their struggle, by first emptying then infusing them with some novel, contemporary secular meanings. The concept of *waqf* (religious endowment) can be mentioned as an example. Normally, these endowments (*awqaf* [plural of *waqf*]) are donated by individuals, and they are not subject to tax. Furthermore, because they are deemed to be sacred, they cannot be bought and sold in the market as a commodity. In their charter, published in 1987, Hamas considered the whole Palestinian land to be *waqf*⁶¹⁶, thereby giving up even a tiny part of it was not religiously permissible.⁶¹⁷ Although, in the history of Islam no country was considered to be a *waqf*, Hamas adopted quite a broad interpretation of the concept.⁶¹⁸ It was an example of both invention of tradition⁶¹⁹ and anachronism. This kind of over-interpretation is also observed in the case of Nurcus in legitimising Turkish nationalism, or nationalism itself based on Islamic sources. For instance, they interpret the prophetic tradition recommending taking care of close relatives as evidence legitimising one's prioritising his/her own nation over others as if they were comparable categories. In other words, both HAMAS and Nurcus suffer from anachronism. Additionally, just as Hamas has sacralised Palestinian lands, Nurcus have done the same thing throughout Anatolia and Istanbul. Both referring to a prophetic tradition prefiguring the conquest of

⁶¹⁵ Mishal and Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence, and Coexistence*, p. 15.

⁶¹⁶ Knudsen, *Crescent and Sword: the Hamas Enigma*, p. 1377.

⁶¹⁷ Issam Aburaiya. 2009. "Islamism, Nationalism, and Western Modernity: The Case of Iran and Palestine". *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*. 22 (1) p. 64.

⁶¹⁸ Mishal and Sela, *The Palestinian Hamas: Vision, Violence, and Coexistence*, p. 130.

⁶¹⁹ Knudsen, *Crescent and Sword: the Hamas Enigma*, p. 1378.

Istanbul and emphasising that many Sufi saints travelled to Anatolia, they attached sacredness to a piece of land corresponding to the territory of a modern nation-state.

According to Aburaiya, Hamas not only sanctified the Palestinian land, but also sacralised the means to struggle for and liberate the country from Israeli occupation.

This was due to the fact that although all the other resistance movements attempted to emancipate the same country, their justification was solely based upon the objectives of a nationalist movement.⁶²⁰ Hamas, by turning the same struggle into a religious one, namely *jihad*, highly increased its capacity to mobilise more people within Palestine, and to draw more assistance from different Muslim countries. It is also important to note that, once a struggle is branded as *jihad*, it is not something seen as good to join. Rather, it becomes an obligation for each and every Muslim, because *jihad* is a Qur'anic term that is binding for Muslim individuals.⁶²¹ Here, the Palestinian case differs from the Turkish one, as Nurcus do not believe that other Muslim nations have any responsibility in struggling to maintain Turkey and her borders. However, they argue that other Muslims should both appreciate the good deeds of the Turks and accept their leadership. They lay this out as if it were an objective, over-there reality.

After starting from quite a pan-Islamic position, Hamas ended up with strong nationalist discourse in the guise of and supported by religious terminology. According to Hroub, it would be wrong to call the movement either an Islamist or nationalist movement. Rather, both adjectives were to be used, because they were like two sides of a coin.⁶²² Although it is possible to draw a parallel between Hamas and the Nur movement in the sense that both movements employed religious

⁶²⁰ Aburaiya, "Islamism, Nationalism, and Western Modernity: The Case of Iran and Palestine," p. 65.

⁶²¹ Ghada Talhami. 2000. review of *Islamic Politics in Palestine*, by Beverly Milton-Edwards, *Middle East Policy*. 7 (3) p. 191.

⁶²² Hroub, *Hamas: A Beginner's Guide*, p. 26.

argumentation in legitimising nationalist views, it might not be true that there is an overlap in their ideologies. This has to do with the clear distance between Nurcus and politics, as opposed to the undisputable Islamist stance of Hamas longing for a state based on Islamic *shari'ah*. On the other hand, employing the categorisation laid out in the third chapter, both of the movements can be placed under the rubric of nationalist religious. This is because, for both of the movements, Islam constitutes a major part of the identity of their members and they integrate nationalism to their identity inasmuch as it is compatible with Islam. Nonetheless, the difference between them occurs in this main part of the identity which is Muslimhood. Whereas Nurcus can be called more pious Muslims who are even promoting democratic values within nation-states, Hamas demands a structural change in the state structure and wants to base it on Islamic fundamentals, which makes it Islamist rather than Islamic.

Islamic Revolution, Iran

Before 1979, Iran was under the administration of the Shah's regime, which was highly controlled by the USA in the circumstances of Cold War with the USSR. The monarch in the country used to have many dissidents ranging from far leftists, to liberals and Islamists. The economic troubles which the country went through exacerbated the situation for the ruling administration in the face of the harsh popular opposition. 1978 witnessed the first popular uprisings. Although the regime resisted to some extent, at the beginning of 1979 the Shah had to flee the country and the exiled charismatic religious leader, Khomeini, returned from Paris. The Islamic revolution marked the beginning of a new age in the history of Iran during which Islamic law was applied and only the colour and the targets of oppression changed.⁶²³

⁶²³ Marta Schaff. 2009. *Islamic Revolution in Iran*. Ohio: Great Neck Publishing. p.1.

In its first stages, before and after the revolution, the Islamic movement under the leadership of Khomeini was quite internationalist and universalist. The members of the movement were quite enthusiastic to export the revolution as an expression of solidarity and liberation. Whereas the revolution created unrest among authoritarian Arab regimes, the Islamists welcomed it as a success of the masses as opposed to the revolutions taking place via a coup d'état. Along with the Islamists, many leftists in both the Arab world and Turkey were also impressed by the success of the revolution.⁶²⁴ In the same period, *Nurcus*, and specifically *Yeni Asya*, did not lend support to the Islamic revolution, even going so far as to publish critical articles in their journal *Köprü* (Bridge) claiming that what was going on in Iran did not represent Islam. Because they are traditionally pro-democracy, their criticism against the revolution is quite understandable. On the other hand, the Islamists in Turkey opposed the *Nurcus*, welcoming and offering moral support to the Iranian Islamic revolution. Sometime after the revolution, the Islamist policies started becoming more nationalistic in their essence. "While at one level it proclaimed Islamic universalism, there was never any doubt about the Shi'i identity of Iran. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic specified that Iranian nationality be a condition for citizenship of the Republic."⁶²⁵ According to the new laws, it was a must to be Muslim and Shi'i, and ethnically Iranian to be eligible to run for presidential elections. Needless to say, the non-Muslim people in Iran, such as Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians were not allowed to assume political leadership. The war lasting eight years (1980-88) between Iraq and Iran strengthened nationalism in Iran and sharpened the enmity between Shi'i Iranian and Sunni Arab identities. In the parlance of Khomeini, the Iranian nation was

⁶²⁴ Sami Zubaida. 2011. *Beyond Islam: A New Understanding of the Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris. p. 188.

⁶²⁵ *Ibid.*

the pioneer of the Islamic revolution in the world. As mentioned above in the case of the Ikhwan, Nurcus also consider Turkey to be the leader of the Muslim world. In short, although the nation varies, the underlying idea remains constant; each movement singles out its respective nation.

The combination of religious and nationalist elements was also reflected in the new regime's curriculum. Even though there was an overt Islamisation of official history in textbooks after the revolution, it was not the case that Iranian ethnic identity was entirely effaced from historical accounts. One of the first actions the revolutionary government took was to remove the glories of the pre-Islamic Persian Empires, as they are all considered to belong to the period of *jahiliyya* (ignorance). However, this did not indicate a completely universalist understanding of Islam treating all nations equally. "[E]ven though history in the IRI [Islamic Republic of Iran] begins with the rise of the Prophet, the Iranian nation, as it emerges in the textbooks, remains a distinct community of people whose destiny is at once inexorably linked to Islamic history and at the same time predates it, and even persists in separation from it."⁶²⁶ For example, history textbooks on the Ancient Greeks and the inauguration of the Olympic games also emphasised that ancient Iranians taught sport to children, such as horse-riding and playing polo. Furthermore, while explaining the emergence of Islam, the official history textbooks suggested that Iranians were already acquainted with the idea of justice and so without any armed resistance they welcomed Islam, a religion upholding the value of justice.⁶²⁷

The same line of thought holds true for Nurcus. Similar to Iranians, they place a clear distance between themselves as Muslim Turks and the pre-Islamic Turkish states, and

⁶²⁶ Haggay Ram. 2000. "The Immemorial Iranian Nation? School Textbooks and Historical Memory in Post-Revolutionary Iran". *Nations and Nationalism*. 6 (1) p. 78.

⁶²⁷ Ibid.

they argue that Turks converted to Islam without any armed struggle. This was, according to them, because they already possessed the many virtues and values of Islam, like bravery, justice and protecting the weak in the society.⁶²⁸

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I aimed to analyse the relationship between the universalism of Islam and the particularism of nationalism in the case of one of the most widespread religious movements of modern Turkey, the Nur movement. As explained in the first chapter, this movement dominated the realm of religious opposition at the societal level from the inception of the Turkish Republic until the 1960s. In fact, being religious was intertwined with being a Nurcu, as it was highly unlikely that a person who prayed five times a day did not follow Nursi. In the following decades, the movement acquired an international character, spreading to Germany, the USA, the UK, France, several African countries, Russia, the Indian sub-continent and Far-east Asia. In short, when both its size and impact are considered, this social movement is certainly worth investigation. In addition, I have closely observed the rising tension between Islamic and national identities within this movement for some time now.

Theoretically speaking, if we were to imagine an alien landing on Earth that was informed about the main tenets of the great world religions and of nationalism, this alien would most likely think that religious and nationalist people belonged to different camps and that they are, at least on the philosophic level, in conflict with each other. However, in most cases, this is not the case. On the contrary, two worldviews are inextricably intermeshed with each other for individual Muslims and the greater Muslim world. This peculiar reality attracted my attention and propelled

⁶²⁸ Sorularla İslamiyet, 2007b.

me to conduct this study.

I have asked two research questions:

- a) *How do Nurcus reconcile the universalism of Islam and particularism of nationalism?*
- b) *How do they alleviate the tension between the sacredness of Islam and secularity of nationalism?*

In order to provide answers to these questions, I have, at least partially, employed Anthony Smith's approach of the sacred foundations of nationalism. I decided to make only partial usage for a couple of reasons. Firstly, I disagree with Smith's assertion that nationalism is a belief system or a political religion because I do not perceive nationalism as a religion. Instead, I envision there to be a real tension between these concepts, as proven by this study. Secondly, as opposed to modernists, Smith maintains that both nations as human societies and nationalism as an ideology have existed since pre-modern times, even if in different forms. I do not agree with him on this point either. Rather, in line with modernists, I argue that nationalism is a modern and secular ideology, after which my research questions make sense. Nevertheless, the categories that Smith calls sacred foundations or cultural resources are still useful as analytical units, since they are among the qualities of the modern nations and do have significant connotations regarding sacredness. This then led me to search for them in the case of Nurcus while seeking to analyse the fusion of religious and national identities in a modern setting.

Before going over the chapters, I would like to elaborate on this question: If the larger Nur movement is divided into at least a dozen branches, what criteria were used to identify each group as Nurcu? Although this question sounds intriguing, its answer is

actually quite simple. The movement's division into so many branches has nothing to do with the religiousness or their stance towards nationalism. This holds true even for Kurdish Nurcus, who might be considered the most distinct one among all groups. Their position vis-à-vis nationalism is virtually no different than that of Turkish Nurcus; only the Turkish nation is replaced with the Kurdish one. This is why I hypothesised that the existing differences between different Nurcu groups was inconsequential as far as the specific purpose of this thesis was concerned. The findings of my empirical research confirmed this initial hypothesis.

In the introduction, I laid out the foundation for this study and elaborated my research questions and theoretical framework in addition to presenting a discussion on the significance of both the research topic and my argument. In the first and second chapters, I discussed different theoretical frameworks in relation to the tension between universalism and particularism together with the emergence of nations and nationalism. At the end of the second chapter, I solidified my theoretical position through which I analysed the Nur movement in Turkey. I devoted the third chapter to the methodology of the thesis, where I elaborated different epistemological approaches, namely, positivism, interpretivism and hermeneutics. In addition, I compared and contrasted qualitative and quantitative methods, concluding that the former is a better fit for this study as my thesis aims at exploring self-perceptions of the group in question rather than quantitative figures about them. Then, I provided information about the significance of the primary online data and the selection criteria used to select specific content available on the website www.sorularlailamiyet.com. I also provided information about the people I interviewed in this chapter. In the fourth chapter, I strove to situate Nurculuk in a wider context by comparing it with three major Islamist social movements in the region, namely the Muslim Brotherhood

in Egypt, HAMAS in Palestine and the Iranian Islamic Revolution, concluding that there are considerable parallels between them and Nurcus as far as fusing religious and national identities is concerned. The fifth chapter served to explain the greater historical context. In this chapter, I detailed the life of Said Nursi, how he understood nationalism and the Nur movement. Moreover, I attempted to illustrate the transformations that the Nur movement underwent and where they converged with and diverged from their master Nursi. The sixth and seventh chapters are empirical in nature. In these two chapters, I analysed the primary sources directly, namely the online and interview data. In the sixth chapter, I drew upon Anthony Smith's approach to the sacred foundations of nationalism in my effort to understand how and to what extent Islamic and Turkish identities merge in the minds of Nurcus. In the second empirical chapter, I endeavoured to search for answers to my research questions, basically asking how the tension between Islamic universalism and nationalist particularism are alleviated by Nurcus.

With regard to the nationalism of Nurcus, my findings demonstrate that they represent a refutation of the secular replacement theory as they have a zealous attachment to both identities. Although consciousness for the ummah is quite pervasive, this does not lead to a weakening of nationalism. It can further be argued that contrary to what is expected, this consciousness for the *ummah* strengthens nationalism instead of abating it. This can be explained through the widespread belief that the ummah, or greater Muslim world, is not composed of independent and sovereign states that have equal or divergent standings vis-à-vis the others. Rather, the ummah is imagined to be a community in chaos that will be saved by a leading nation, which is understood by the Nurcus to be the Turkish nation. However, it should be noted that although they

merge different identities in their minds, their importance, comparative weight and hierarchy are not equal. That is to say, Nurcus are first religious and then nationalist. Although their views converge with secular nationalists, they always feel the need to legitimate the particularism of nationalism using religious arguments.

Nursi is not wholly welcomed by every group in Turkey. Indeed, being a counter-revolutionist in the eyes of Kemalists, they completely reject Nursi's ideas and actions. Although Nurcus consider him to be their master, they differ in their stances toward politics and social issues while still claiming to follow him. Nursi's university project, *Medresetü'z-Zehra*, constitutes a poignant example in this regard despite never having materialised. Nursi envisioned that its languages of education would be Turkish, Kurdish and Arabic. As is demonstrated in this thesis, Turkish Nurcus are not over jubilant with the public visibility of Kurdishness. In fact, they only tolerate people of other ethnic communities that accept Turkishness as an umbrella political identity.

At this point, I would like to propose my categorisation regarding the relationship between Islam and nationalism in modern Turkey. For me, there are four categories in Turkey, namely, (1) religious nationalist, (2) secular nationalist, (3) nationalist religious Muslim and (4) non-nationalist religious Muslim. Because of the major defining quality of Islamic identity, Nurcus might be placed under the rubric of nationalist religious Muslims in this four-point typology, as opposed to the existing literature that does not make this differentiation and adopts the same approach toward all groups without considering the differing weights of different identities. Looking at the other major religious groups in Turkey, it appears that for the most part, the same category mostly holds true for them as well. For instance, famous Naqshi Sufi orders, such as, İskenderpaşa, Hüdayi, Menzil and the Süleymancılar all share the same

position with regard to Turkish nationalism and the allegedly exceptional and superior status of the Turkish nation among other Muslim nations. Some Islamist groups and foundations, such as Furkan Vakfı (Furkan Foundation), İHH (The Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief) and İnsan ve Medeniyet Hareketi (Human and Civilization Movement) can be counted as examples of non-nationalist religious communities, though it might be possible to find varying levels of nationalism in them. Nevertheless, these groups are far from being widespread and represent the general religious-conservative public in Turkey.

Another finding of the empirical work carried out for this thesis is that although the nationalism of Nursi cannot be labelled as ethnic, it should also be noted that its inclusivity is limited. This blended identity includes only (1) Muslims (2) those living in Turkey who either (3) melts his/her own ethnic identity within Turkishness or (4) makes it insignificant and secondary. Therefore, it might be said that at this point, they diverge from their master Nursi and converge with secular and religious nationalists, even if their criteria for inclusion slightly differ from the others. Although they follow Nursi's footprints regarding the weight and significance of Islamic identity, Nursi does not single out the Turkish nation nor teach that it should be upheld. Quite the opposite, he is in favour of *ittihad-ı İslam* (Muslim unity).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that although charismatic leaders have tremendous impact on human societies, they do not have the power to entirely uproot sociological forces. Due to the multitude of reasons discussed throughout this thesis, nationalism remains entrenched in various segments of the society. Although Nursi attempted to change this political inclination and to erode the power of nationalism, he mostly failed in this endeavour. A very similar transformation, a journey from non-nationalist to nationalist religiousness is being witnessed in other Islamic communities. For

instance, the Welfare party of Necmettin Erbakan, whose emphasis on Islam was quite explicit, gave birth to the nationalist-religious AK Party, especially considering its most recent positions. In other words, leaders, no matter how charismatic, do not have the necessary resources to change the very marrow of society.

APPLICABILITY OF MY FRAMEWORK AND FURTHER STUDIES

I believe the framework that I have developed to explain the multiple identities of Nurcus has the capacity to be applied to other societies as well. For instance, the new categorisation I have proposed including four different identities taking into account the relative weights of religiousness and nationalism might also be helpful in gaining a theoretical understanding of Islamic movements in Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Syria, the Indian sub-continent and the Muslim countries located in Southeast Asia. Some adjustments and amendments to this approach may make it useful for categorising religious/Christian movements and communities in Europe and the US. I think that one of the most original parts of my theoretical framework is the legitimisation of national superiority, not by using direct religious principles but by indirect implications, which allows for both religious and national identities to be accommodated without sacrificing particularism to universalism or vice versa. As should be remembered, one of the strategies adopted by Nurcus for maintaining the particularism of nationalism and the universalism of Islam is attributing agency to God and not to the nation itself. Since of the many strategies, this particular one has come to fore, it should be stimulating to look into the other cases so see whether they follow similar methods in reconciling nationalism and religion. I assume that if Islamic movements in the Muslim world are viewed through this lens, a number of interesting conclusions can be reached.

Regarding the limitations of my study, with the exception of one interviewee who

agreed to be interviewed, I was unfortunately unable to include voices of the Kurdish Nurcus in my study for two reasons: (1) It might have overextended the limits of the study and cause me to neglect the existing focus. (2) Those I did try to reach rejected being interviewed because of the state of emergency in place when I contacted them. However, a study comparing the nationalism of Kurdish and Turkish Nurcus might open up new horizons. On the other hand, I detected a number of differences in how different generations viewed nationalism, with older generations being more enthusiastic in their nationalism than younger ones. However, due to the limits of my study, I was unable to come up with solid and reliable conclusions based on this parameter. A new study considering age as a factor in understanding nationalism and religion among Nurcus would definitely be thought-provoking.

When I started working on this project in 2014, Turkey was engaged in an on-going peace process during which the political and civil rights of Kurdish citizens were at the centre of heated debates. The government made great efforts to convince the Turkish public to adopt different stances, even inviting artists, journalists and public intellectuals to support the process. Prominent figures and institutions of the greater Nurcu movement openly supported the government in this endeavour and even organised workshops in which Nursi's tolerant stance towards all ethnic groups, even if, like Armenians, they are not Muslims. The predominant climate was far from a nationalist one, and Islamic circles were no exception. That is why some people around me told me that my efforts to understand the dynamics underpinning the marriage of nationalism and religion were futile, as there simply was no such phenomenon. However, both my readings and observations since at least the mid-90s have shown that the then-prevailing atmosphere was only temporarily and covered up

something else below the surface. It soon turned out that I was right. In the elections held on 7 June 2015, the AK Party lost a considerable amount of power, and the pro-Kurdist HDP (People's Democratic Party) increased its votes across the country. After a short time, the PKK, the armed wing of the Kurdish political movement, resumed its violent attacks. Things changed very quickly and Turkish citizens promptly returned to their regular political position. After one year, on 15 July 2016, a coup within the military was organised by the members of Gülen community⁶²⁹ seeking to topple AK Party government, only to fail the same night. In the aftermath of this military intervention, nationalism peaked in Turkey. I conducted interviews with my respondents roughly six months after the attempted coup, which were very productive as they demonstrated the level and intensity of nationalist feelings held by Nurcus.

As mentioned above, nationalism is not something peculiar to a single political party or social group in Turkey. Rather it is a phenomenon that cuts across all parties, religious groups and social segments. Almost every Islamic community, including Sufi orders, are, to a great extent, nationalist in their very nature. Though the intensity may fluctuate over different historical periods, it remains a constant. There is no sign that this will change in the short term, especially considering the unending political tension in the region surrounding Turkey. These tensions have fed a social memory marked by a collective sense of insecurity. For instance, the Gezi Protests sparked in 2013 were to a large extent responsible, if only indirectly, for the recent increasing

⁶²⁹ Currently, the organisation of Fethullah Gülen is officially called FTO (Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation). However, I do believe that the greater Gülen community is composed of multiple layers that may not necessarily be aware of what is going on in the other layers. It appears that this community has an armed wing working clandestinely within the state that organised coup d'état in 2016. Gülenists allegedly infiltrated the civil bureaucracy prior to the attempted coup, and that cadre worked in co-operation with their counterparts in the military. The actions, including the attempted coup, committed over the years by the community should be considered crimes rather than terrorism. For this reason, I believe that it would be better to call them the Gülenist Criminal Organisation and to restrict this label only to those who have actively participated in such criminal acts.

authoritarianism in Turkey, as the demonstrations against the government triggered the entrenched fears in Turkey's religious/conservative masses. Since then, these people have given stronger support to the AK Party and have preferred to suspend their criticism towards it.

All of these fear-triggering incidents have likewise served to bolster nationalist sentiments.. In fact, Kemalists and religious people in general are united when it comes to nationalism; their disagreement is in completely different spheres. The dimensions of how nationalism manifested in these people became more visible after the AK Party gained the upper hand to increasingly dominate the entire social and political field beginning in 2015. It should also be noted that the AK Party's social base is composed mostly of religious/conservative individuals who are more passionate when it comes to expressing nationalism. When they perceive the state to be in an insecure position or under threat, they are prone to dismiss the basic civil rights of citizens. It is therefore unsurprising that each time the party claims that Turkey is under the fierce attack of so-called external forces, or mostly Western powers, this discourse finds a response in its social base. This attitude is associated with an imperial pride rooted in the 'glorious' Ottoman past. Though Nursi strove diligently to change these political orientations, he failed. In fact, his followers have even attempted to create a Said Nursi who champions Turkish nationalism.

With regard to the present and future of Turkey, I predict that the heavy nationalist tone will continue, as will the perception of internal and external threats in the minds of religious people. Older generations in particular are staunchly nationalist and more religious compared to the younger generations. This might be explained by the fact that their intellectual foundation occurred during the Cold War era in a bipolar world order. Moreover, both internal and regional instabilities underpin this conservatism.

I do not think that either nationalism or religion will lose its social significances in the near future. Therefore, the strategies used to merge them elaborated in this thesis will continue to remain useful. However, Turkish society has undergone and continues to undergo a slide towards secularisation as society's welfare level has increased, though this too has been severely affected by the economic crisis over the last two years. Both rapid urbanisation and integration with the world combined with technological advancements have brought about a loosening of nationalist feelings as well. It is quite eye-opening that a recent survey demonstrates that the majority of the Turkish youth would like to live outside of Turkey.⁶³⁰ Based on these indicators, it would be safe to predict that unless some unexpected event happens, both religious and nationalist feelings will continue to wane in Turkey, which might lead to the gradual disappearance of the strategies used to combine them. On the other hand, it should be kept in mind that both nationalism and religion are quite powerful, as they have survived the fiercest of challenges levelled against them during the modern period. Remembering that there were many people who announced the end of nationalism at the end of the First World War, it would be wise to exhibit caution when making predictions about the future.

⁶³⁰ <http://sodev.org.tr/sodev-turkiyenin-gencligi-arastirmasi-raporu-aciklandi/> (Reports for the research on the youth of Turkey have been announced)

APPENDIX I – LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

1. **Abdullah Halit Göç**, Professor at a university
2. **Abdüllatif Kurtan**, Student of Nursi
3. **Ahmet Cihan Kurşun**, Board member at a foundation
4. **Elif Dereli**, Master's student
5. **Emine Başeğmez**, Accountant
6. **Emre Batur**, Graduate student
7. **Eyüp Göksoy**, Board member at a foundation
8. **Galip Kul**, Board member at a foundation
9. **Halime Coşan**, Radio programmer
10. **İbrahim Gezin**, Graduate student
11. **İzzet Saraçgil**, Professor at a university
12. **Mehmet Ali İncekara**, Writer, Radio Station Manager
13. **Miraç Demiroğlu**, Professor at a university
14. **Muammer Öztunç**, Writer, lawyer
15. **Necati İshakoğlu**, A bureaucrat and a previous senior manager in a Nurcu community
16. **Ömer Faruk Kamışlı**, Businessman
17. **Samet Elbaşı**, Undergraduate student
18. **Sena Çekmeci**, Editor – TV Programmer
19. **Sevinç Ak**, Undergraduate student
20. **Zehra Maydagil**, Independent academic
21. **İsmail Akay**, Writer

APPENDIX II – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What do you think about the place of Turkish nation among other Muslim nations with respect to its history, merits and so on?
2. Do you think that Turks have a specific task to fulfil in reviving the ummah (worldwide Muslim community), or are they equal to the others?
3. If you assume a peculiarity, why do you think that this task is specifically assigned to Turks?
4. How do you reconcile the specific position of Turks and the universal teaching of Islam?
5. If you think that Turks have specific position among other Muslims, is the Arabness of the Prophet at odds with the peculiarity of Turkish nation? Or are they compatible with each other?
6. To my knowledge, Said Nursi always identifies himself to be Kurd. How do you reconcile the Kurdishness of Said Nursi and the distinctiveness of Turkish nation, if there is any? Is he also a part of this mission, or not because of his ethnic origin?
7. If Turks, specifically, have this duty, why does Nursi mention the virtues of other Muslim nations as well, namely, Kurds and Arabs?
8. Do you think that Istanbul and Anatolia are sacred places? If so, are they sacred from the point of view of nationalism or Islam, or both?
9. Do you have an idea of the golden age in history?
10. What do you think of the history of Turkish nation? Has it been existing from time immemorial, or did it emerge at one point in history?
11. If so, when did it emerge?
12. Who are the great heroes of Turkish nation in history? Why do you think they are heroes? What qualities of them make them heroes?

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