



## A Critical Comparative analysis of the Said Nursi and Fethullah Gülen's Political Thought

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**Abstract:** Gulen and Nursi present different images of the combination of Islam and modernity. This article seeks to evaluate the similarities and differences of Nursi and Gulen's political thought. According to Gulen's claim that Nursi has been his professor, it seems that there is not much difference in their thoughts, but this article show that despite the influence of Gulen's ideas from Nursi and some similarities in their theoretical approaches, there are obvious difference in their thoughts. This article by applying a historical analysis, attempt to examine a comparative study on the religious and political ideas of Gulen and Nursi. The finding if this article shows that the central point of their theories is reliance on science education, Islam minus politics, combination of tradition and modernity, emphasis on democracy, compromise with other religions and Sufi tendencies, but they have many differences in the fields of ethnicity, methodology, etc.

**Keywords:** Nursi, Gulen, Tradition, Modernity, Turkey, Iran, Political Thought.

## Introduction

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi is regarded as one of the prominent contemporary Islamic revivalists. His thoughts and ideas, especially following the fall of the Ottoman Caliphate, are considered among the most effective in defending Turkey's Islamic identity and countering secularism. Nursi's commitment to Islamic revival and his advocacy for freedom and Islamic awakening kept him in exile and under house arrest for many years. His intellectual legacy lies in bridging the gap between tradition and modernity, successfully integrating religion with democracy, while refraining from direct political engagement alongside his followers. In contrast, Fethullah Gülen is seen as the most powerful religious leader in contemporary Turkey. Today, he is recognized among the top ten living Muslim scholars globally. Gülen advocates for a unique Turkish interpretation of Islam, emphasizing Anatolian Islam, which he characterizes as a tolerant and inclusive version. In this understanding, faith takes precedence over strict adherence to Islamic law (Sharia). Initially, Gülen was merely a preacher, but as his sermons gained traction, he drew significant public attention in Turkey. Identifying himself as a disciple of Nursi's ideas and philosophies, Gülen launched his own educational initiatives using the *dershane* (study circle) approach. Both Nursi and Gülen represent an understanding of Islam that is distinct from political Islam, advocating for a separation between Islam and formal politics. Before them, Egyptian scholar Ali Abd al-Raziq argued that Islam does not prescribe a specific model of governance and that the Prophet Muhammad's mission was primarily spiritual and ethical, not political. In his book *Islam and the Foundations of Political Power*, Abd al-Raziq contends that the laws introduced by Islam, which the Prophet guided Muslims to follow, do not resemble worldly political systems or structures of governmental power (Abd al-Raziq, 2003: 162).

However, there is a scarcity of literature on the political and religious thought of both Gülen and Nursi. Furthermore, after the failed coup attempt in Turkey in 2016, the sale and distribution of Gülen's books were banned, making research on his ideas more challenging. Despite these obstacles, this article draws upon available Persian sources and reputable Turkish-language websites. The aim of this paper is to explore the similarities and differences between these

two influential thinkers. Given the geographical proximity of Iran and Turkey and the significant developments occurring in Turkey, an analysis of the intellectual legacies of Nursi and Gülen holds special importance. The primary concern of the authors is to critically examine and unravel the core ideas of these two thinkers and the intellectual movements they inspired.

### **1. Religion, Politics, and Bediuzzaman Said Nursi**

Bediuzzaman Sheikh Said Nursi was born in 1876 in the Kurdish village of Nurs, located in the Bitlis province of Turkey. He initially studied traditional religious sciences under prominent Kurdish scholars, but later expanded his knowledge by pursuing modern sciences such as philosophy, mathematics, physics, and chemistry to support his intellectual project, which he called the "Union of Reason and Faith." Nursi's early mastery of both religious and modern sciences earned him the title "Bediuzzaman" (the Wonder of the Age). His keen understanding of current events and insight into the state of the Muslim world led him to conclude that European hostility towards Islam was a harsh reality. He foresaw the decline of the Ottoman Empire and was acutely aware of the growing weakness, division, and backwardness of the Islamic world in the face of foreign cultural and political aggression. Nursi's ideas were shaped by these realities (Yavuz, 2013: 221).

In 1907, Nursi met with Sultan Abdulhamid II, seeking his support to establish a university in the Kurdish region of Van, where he aimed to reconcile modern sciences with Islamic teachings. However, the Sultan rejected his proposal. Nursi was a staunch critic of Sultan Abdulhamid II's instrumental use of religion, reducing Islam to merely a state ideology. He openly voiced his opposition to such an approach (Moxie, 2012: 68).

Although primarily a religious thinker, Nursi was not indifferent to political affairs. During World War I, he actively fought against the invaders of his homeland, was wounded, and spent two years in captivity. In 1923, nearing his 50s, Nursi retreated to the slopes of Mount Ararat in Van to engage in ascetic spiritual practices. Despite Nursi's non-political activities, the newly established Republic of Turkey arrested him in 1925, following the suppression of a Kurdish

uprising led by Sheikh Said Piran. Although Nursi had no involvement in the rebellion, he was imprisoned for nearly a year before being exiled to Barla, where he lived for eight and a half years. During this period, he composed most of his works, collectively known as the *Risale-i Nur* (Epistles of Light) (Rad, 2003: 86).

In 1932, following the Turkish government's decision to ban the Islamic call to prayer (Adhan) in Arabic, replacing it with Turkish, Nursi and the congregation of the mosque where he led prayers insisted on maintaining the Arabic call. This defiance led to his arrest and a forced march through snow to the town of Eğirdir, where he was imprisoned. After this incident, and following the arrest of several of his students in 1934, Nursi was relocated to Isparta and later exiled to Kastamonu, where he spent seven years. During this time, he continued to write more of his epistles. After seven years in Kastamonu, Nursi was transferred to Denizli Prison, where he spent nine months, during which he wrote the treatise *The Fruits of Faith* (erfanabad.org). In 1948, at the age of 75, Nursi and several of his students were imprisoned again, this time in Afyon, where they spent 20 months. It is said that secular Turkish governments attempted to assassinate Nursi at least 17 times, but all attempts failed. In 1950, following the victory of the Democratic Party in the elections, the government declared a general amnesty, and Nursi was released. He made his first free trip to Eskişehir and later spent 70 days in Isparta. After one of his students published *The Message to the Youth*, the government used it as a pretext to summon him to Istanbul for trial. However, after three court sessions, Nursi was acquitted. He then returned to Emirdağ and revisited the city where the first *Medrese-i Nur* (School of Light) had been established, where the earliest epistles of light had been written (erfanabad.org). The years between 1923 and 1950 marked the height of the Republican People's Party's rule under Atatürk. During this period, severe restrictions were imposed on Islamists, and it became known as the era of "Islamic purging" (Rouhani, 1986: 104). Islamist activities took on an underground form, continuing covertly under the cover of religious orders (Nur al-Din, 2003: 8). Nursi avoided any political engagement until 1950, but in the final decade of his life, he supported the Democratic Party and Turkey's membership in NATO. His support was driven by his fear of

the materialistic philosophy of Marxism and the threat posed by the Soviet Union (Rose Ebaugh, 2010: 24). After 23 years of non-political life, Nursi found common ground with the newly empowered Democratic Party and publicly declared his support for them, encouraging his followers to do the same. Through this, Nursi sought to raise awareness among politicians about the importance of paying attention to Islam (Eligür, 2015: 94).

In March 1960, Nursi's health deteriorated, and he was diagnosed with pneumonia. After a lifetime of hardship and suffering in the service of faith and Islam, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi passed away. He left behind the *Risale-i Nur*, his monumental contribution to Islamic thought, as a gift to humanity, especially to Muslims ([erfanabad.org](http://erfanabad.org)). Nursi's ideas were influenced by other Turkish thinkers such as Necip Fazıl, Sezai Karakoç, Nur al-Din Topçu, and Ziya Gökalp (Yavuz, 2013: 43). However, the most significant figure to impact his thinking was Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi, a prominent figure of the Naqshbandi Sufi order in India. After studying Sirhindi's ideas, Nursi underwent a profound transformation, referring to himself as the "New Said" (Yavuz, 2003a: 152). In 1892, Nursi also encountered the reformist ideas of Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, through the mediation of Sultan Abdulhamid. This meeting intensified Nursi's reformist zeal and led to his opposition to Ottoman despotism, as he became a strong advocate for constitutionalism (Weld, 2010: 45).

## **2. Religion, Politics, and Fethullah Gülen**

Undoubtedly, if we were to list the ten most influential living Muslim scholars today, Fethullah Gülen would certainly be among them. Moreover, he is one of the most significant figures in the liberalization of Islam. Gülen was born in the village of Korucuk, near Erzurum, Turkey. His father, Ramiz Gülen, was the local imam. Fethullah received his early education in his village, but after his family moved away, he did not pursue formal education further. Instead, he focused on informal Islamic education ([zaman.com.tr](http://zaman.com.tr)). At the age of 16, he delivered his first religious sermon ([tr.fgulen.com](http://tr.fgulen.com)). In 1981, Gülen resigned from his official position as an imam and preacher. Between 1988 and 1991, he gave a series of lectures in prominent mosques across major cities in Turkey. Despite his affiliation with Islamist circles,

Gülen remained silent on key political events, such as the closure of the Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) in 1998 or the Felicity Party (Saadet Partisi) in 2001. Although he had meetings with notable Turkish politicians like Turgut Özal, Tansu Çiller, and Bülent Ecevit, he avoided engaging with leaders of major Islamist parties (eupjournals.com).

Gülen maintained his distance from the Welfare Party led by Necmettin Erbakan, which came to power in 1997. He did not oppose the military coup against Erbakan nor object to the dissolution of the Welfare Party. However, Gülen and his movement supported Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) due to the party's moderation of Erbakan's revolutionary Islamist stance. Yet, this alliance between Gülen and Erdoğan only lasted until 2010, after which their relationship devolved into a serious rivalry (mehrnews.com). In 1999, Gülen left Turkey for the United States, ostensibly for medical treatment. However, it was widely believed that the real reason for his departure was fear of prosecution in Turkey for statements suggesting the necessity of establishing an Islamic government (news.bbc.co.uk). In 2000, Gülen was tried in absentia for allegedly attempting to overthrow the government. In 2008, a Turkish appeals court dismissed the charges against him, and he was acquitted of all accusations. He currently resides in the Pocono Mountains in Pennsylvania, USA, where, according to Bekir Aksoy, his caretaker, his health is reportedly frail (cbsnews.com).

Gülen is not only a prominent religious and political figure in Turkey but also wields considerable influence among Muslims in Europe, America, and Africa. Today, the Gülen movement represents one of the most powerful branches of Turkey's "Jamaat al-Muslimeen" (Community of Muslims), positioning itself in stark contrast to radical Islamist groups. The movement is committed to democracy and pluralism, and as a result, it has played a significant role in the Islamic awakening of the Middle East and North Africa (Ghahremanpour, 2011: 105).

### **3. Nursi and Gülen: Similar Yet Distinct**

Many believe that Fethullah Gülen's ideas are identical to those of Said Nursi. While the Gülen movement initially drew inspiration from

Nursi's works, particularly the *Risale-i Nur*, by the 1970s, it adopted a different methodological approach. This shift in methods has led to notable differences in the nature and focus of both movements.

### **3. Similarities**

#### **3.1.1. Emphasis on Education and Science**

Both Nursi and Gülen place great emphasis on education, particularly modern science. They regard scientific inquiry as a way to gain a deeper, rational understanding of God through the study of His creation. This is why both movements have vast educational networks, with a primary focus on modern natural sciences (mehrnews.com).

#### **3.1.2. Reconciliation with Abrahamic Religions**

Both Gülen and Nursi have sought reconciliation with other Abrahamic faiths. Nursi, for instance, wrote a letter to the Vatican, calling for a Christian-Islamic alliance to combat atheism. During the Korean War, in which Turkey fought alongside the U.S., Nursi encouraged his followers to join the army and combat communism. Similarly, Gülen promotes interfaith dialogue, with an emphasis on peace between religions. (Azimi, 2015:42)

In addition, Gülen, like Nursi, has a strong Sufi inclination. One of the unique characteristics of Gülen's mystical approach is his rejection of traditional Sufi hierarchies. He defends this by citing figures like Al-Ghazali, who belonged to no particular Sufi order. (Azimi, 2015:44)

#### **3.1.3. Non-Political Islam**

Nursi believed there was no distinction between faith and Islam, and his efforts focused on saving faith from atheism and Freemasonry. He held that Islamists should not participate in politics until 60-70% of the population had embraced religion. According to Nursi, gaining political power was unsuitable without a devoted, religious party base. He prioritized nurturing individual Muslims who would live collectively according to Islamic values. Nursi predicted that one day, a generation of believers would take control of the country: "One day, a faithful generation will take control of the country" (Eligür, 2015: 93). Similarly, Gülen views his movement as non-political. He has



openly discouraged his followers from engaging in political activities, fostering a more passive approach compared to political Islamic movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood . Although Gülen is viewed as an Islamic figure, he has never advocated for establishing a government based on Islamic law. He believes that Islam and democracy can coexist, and even supports a secular approach that is not hostile to religion . (Azimi, 2015:46)

Despite Fethullah Gülen's Islamic reputation and the discussions surrounding him from Turkey's secularists, it is inaccurate to describe him as a leader striving to establish an Islamic government. Although Gülen asserts that Islam and democracy are not inherently contradictory and can coexist, he has never publicly advocated for the establishment of a theocratic democracy. He believes that a secular approach, which does not oppose religion and allows for religious freedom, is not inconsistent with Islam (continuumbooks.com). Gülen advocates for the separation of religion from politics and opposes the politicization of religion. During the conflict between Necmettin Erbakan's Welfare Party and Turkey's secular elite, Gülen clearly sided with the secularists, criticizing Erbakan's revolutionary approach and his aspirations for implementing Sharia, which he viewed as excessively ambitious and antagonistic toward the West. Gülen views the politicization of religion as detrimental and argues that reducing religion to social forms is equivalent to its destruction. He maintains that over 95% of religious practice pertains to individual matters, and fulfilling the remaining 5% can be achieved within a secular government that is not anti-religious. Additionally, he contends that religion does not prescribe any specific model of governance but only demands that the ruling authority adhere to certain limited standards. This stance does not indicate Gülen's disregard for governance; rather, he prefers cooperation with the secular Turkish government over confrontation or non-cooperation (Azimi, 2015:54).

#### **3.1.4. Combining Tradition with Modernity**

Nursi aimed to offer a version of Islam compatible with modernity. His efforts were successful to the extent that discussing Turkish modernity today without referencing Islam is almost impossible. (Keyman,



2007:217) Nursi sought to integrate religious teachings with social life, alongside scientific and technological advancements . (Rose ebaugh ,2010:24). Said Nursi is considered one of the prominent figures to be honored with the titles of "Reviver" and "Restorer." He is often referred to as the "Father of Political Islam" and the individual who revitalized Islam in Turkey (Rad, 2003: 86). As a contemporary of reformist thinkers like Rashid Rida and Mawdudi, Nursi aimed to harmonize Islam with modern thought. His followers, known as "Nurcus," see him as a reviver of Islam in Turkey (yavuz ,2003b: 2). In fact, "He was the most distinguished Turkish scholar who dedicated his entire life to Islam and the Qur'an" (Qasim Al-Salhi, 2010: 19-18). His aim was to transform Islam into a dynamic religion in the modern world to prevent its marginalization by secularists (Wold, 2010: 13).

Similarly, Gülen is often associated with Islamic modernism, advocating for the use of Western civilization for material progress while looking to Islamic teachings for spiritual development (Azimi, 2015:42). Many, unaware of this close relationship, have categorized him among religious intellectuals alongside names such as Abu Zaid, Argon, and Fazlur Rahman. Gülen explicitly speaks of the suitability of Western civilization for material advancement and Islamic civilization for spiritual life, asserting that anti-Western sentiment is a factor in our lag behind civilization. Gülen's movement, Hizmet (meaning "service"), combines Islamic ethics with values like hard work, risk-taking, productive investment, and public service—concepts similar to Max Weber's ideas on the rise of Protestant economic success . Gülen's efforts to reconcile Islam and modernity reflect broader trends within Sunni Sufism, such as in Egypt's Al-Azhar or Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama and figures like Tahir-ul-Qadri in the Barelvi movement of the Indian subcontinent. ( mehrnews.com)

### **3.1.5. Commitment to Democracy**

Nursi's synthesis of tradition with modernity included linking Islam with democracy (Tarhan, 2016:65). Likewise, Gülen has repeatedly emphasized his support for democracy, rejecting military interventions as a way to achieve democratic governance. After a failed coup attempt in Turkey, Gülen reiterated his commitment to democracy, stating, "I have always supported democracy. I have never

viewed military interventions favorably, and democracy will never be achieved through such means" . (fgulen.com)

### **3.2. Differences**

While Nursi and Gülen share common roots in their emphasis on science, reconciliation with other religions, and their apolitical stance, they diverge in their methodologies and the scale of their impact. Gülen's movement, which began as a continuation of Nursi's ideas, took a distinct turn in the 1970s, leading to significant differences in both approach and outcome.

#### **3.2.1. Centralization of Ideologies**

The Nur Movement is founded upon the writings of Said Nursi, specifically his seminal work, "Risale-i Nur." Nursi's approach centered on his texts, which addressed political, cultural, and social issues, ensuring his role as the intellectual leader and the movement's continuation through his writings. This textual focus allowed for ongoing critique, analysis, and dissemination. (yavuz, 2003a:151) Conversely, the Gülen Movement, led by Fethullah Gülen, lacks a foundational reference text akin to "Risale-i Nur." Instead, it is predominantly centered around Gülen himself. The movement relies on his speeches and scattered writings, emphasizing a personality-centric approach.

#### **3.2.2. Sanctity and Reverence**

Professor Nevzat Tarhan of Istanbul University notes that Said Nursi resisted being labeled as a great or holy man. He distanced himself from any reverence and insisted on focusing solely on his writings. Nursi even requested that his grave remain undisclosed. In contrast, Gülen has tacitly supported claims from his followers that he has achieved high spiritual status and receives divine messages. Alleged reports among his followers suggest that he meets the Prophet Muhammad weekly, claims Gülen has never formally denied. (risaleajans.com)

#### **3.2.3. Methodology**

The Nur Movement, which began during the Ottoman era, is built on three core principles: a. Fundamental teachings on faith using books.

b. Supplemental books for methodological instruction and social guidance. c. Texts explaining strategies for defending against attacks. While the Gülen Movement initially benefited from Nursi's works, it adopted a different methodology by 1970, disregarding the aforementioned principles (risaleajans.com).

#### **3.2.4. Relationship with Politics**

The Nur Movement has maintained a clear distance from political activism, emphasizing non-participation in political activities and advocating for individual political engagement only under one's own name. Bediüzzaman Said Nursi and his close disciples have offered specific advice for individuals aspiring to engage in political activities. They recommend that such individuals should participate in the political arena solely under their own names rather than as representatives of a religious or ideological group. In contrast, the Gülen Movement operates within a hierarchical structure, seeking governmental positions regardless of individual merit and engaging actively in political lobbying. (risaleajans.com)

#### **3.2.5. Transparency and Openness**

Nursi's approach emphasized transparency, even opening doors to those suspected of being affiliated with intelligence services. The Gülen Movement, however, has established exclusive security zones, transforming into a "closed group" with limited transparency (risaleajans.com).

#### **3.2.6. Nationalism**

The Nur Movement promotes a Quranic interpretation that mitigates ethnic conflicts, emphasizing that linguistic differences should not be used to assert ethnic superiority. Just as the belief in the superiority of one race over another leads to injustice, disregarding the value of other languages and creating divisions among people based on linguistic differences is equally unacceptable. Conversely, the Gülen Movement has shown excessive focus on Turkish nationalism, with an emphasis on teaching Turkish and positioning Turkey as a model for the Islamic world. This nationalist sentiment is also evident in Gülen's negative stance towards Arabs and Iranians. Some believe that one of the

reasons Fethullah Gülen never succeeded in meeting Said Nursi was his pronounced sense of Turkish nationalism. According to risaleajans.com, this nationalism may have been a significant factor. Hakan Yavuz, in comparing Gülen to the leaders of the Nur movement, notes that "Gülen's thoughts resemble those of a Turkish nationalist. He is also a government-oriented individual with a strong affinity for market economies and neoliberal economic policies" (religion.info).

### **3.2.7. Relations with Power Centers**

Said Nursi never engaged in negotiations or dealings with power centers, despite enduring significant persecution and exile. Gülen, however, has lived abroad for 15 years, aligning with Israeli lobbying interests and adopting a discourse parallel to theirs (risaleajans.com).

### **3.2.8. Religion and Political Power**

Professor Tarhan observes that Nursi was often tried for using religion as a political tool but was acquitted in 1973. Nursi's focus was defending legitimate governance rather than political ambitions.

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, famously quoted saying, "I seek refuge in God from Satan and from politics," distanced himself from direct political involvement, prioritizing the defense of a legitimate government. His focus was on internal reform, achievable through the existing system, rather than overthrowing it. Nursi's political views emphasized change within the framework of the current government, advocating for improvements through regular electoral mechanisms. In his final days, before passing away en route to his birthplace, Urfa, his last words poignantly reflected his life's struggle: "They did not understand me." Throughout his life, Nursi endured oppression, imprisonment, and exile at the hands of authoritarian powers. Despite the harsh treatment and suffering inflicted upon him, he never resorted to violent rebellion. Like many great leaders, Nursi protested against injustice but chose not to lead an uprising, believing in non-violent resistance and the pursuit of reform within the system. In contrast, the Gülen Movement operates more like a political movement, aggressively seeking control over governmental structures (risaleajans.com).

### 3.2.9. Strategic Goals

Nursi's strategic goal was to fulfill divine duty and achieve God's satisfaction, as reflected in his writing "Risale-i Ihlas." The Gülen Movement, while professing a similar aim, employs a "results-oriented" strategy, sometimes conflating divine pleasure with leadership in God's name (risaleajans.com).

### 3.2.10. Acceptance of Gifts and Economic Issues

Nursi did not accept gifts and distanced his services from monetary gain, leaving behind minimal personal belongings. Bediuzzaman Said Nursi advised his students who were interested in engaging in business activities to conduct their trade under their own names, emphasizing personal responsibility and integrity in such matters (risaleajans.com). At the time of his death, Nursi left behind very few material possessions: a watch, a cloak, a turban, and twenty Turkish liras, reflecting his simple lifestyle. He passed away without any children, as he chose not to marry throughout his life, fully dedicating himself to his spiritual mission and teachings (erfanabad.org). The Gülen Movement, on the other hand, has created a vast financial network through its educational institutions and is supported by significant contributions from global Jewish communities and American donors. Gülenists operate numerous schools and cultural centers worldwide, with estimates of up to four million supporters involved in various political and cultural roles (Qahramanpour 2011: 105).

The Gülenists have established a vast network of schools, universities, cultural centers, and religious institutions in over 140 countries worldwide. From Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish region in Iraq, to Turkmenistan, Ukraine, throughout Central Asia, the Far East, the Balkans, Australia, Oceania, the United States, and the Horn of Africa, the movement has developed active and dynamic hubs, connecting members through virtual platforms. Estimates suggest that the number of supporters, referred to as "Fethullah's Partisans," could reach as many as four million people, many of whom serve as cultural and political ambassadors of the movement across different spheres of influence (Qahramanpour, 2011: 105). In addition to the support

received from the CIA, Fethullah Gülen and his movement have also garnered substantial financial assistance from the Jewish community in both the United States and globally. His primary liaison with the Jewish community is Ishak Alaton, the founder and CEO of Alarko Holding Company, a major global corporation with investments in energy, real estate, housing development, tourism, and other sectors. Alaton, a Turkish-born Jew, is one of the movement's staunchest supporters and has maintained a close relationship with Gülen, frequently providing help when issues arise. (odatv.com). Gülen's focus on economic activities has led some to liken him to an Islamic version of Calvinism (en.qantara.de). American journalist Andrew Finkel has argued that the Gülen movement is more of a large and successful economic enterprise than a purely religious or ideological movement. Additionally, significant evidence suggests that the network of Gülen schools in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia has been under the control of the CIA since the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the American Jewish community serving as a major financial backer of the movement. WikiLeaks documents estimate Gülen's assets to be valued at around \$26 billion (qudsonline.ir).

### **3.2.11. Worldly and Otherworldly Focus**

Nursi's dedication to spiritual purity led him to reject material wealth, focusing on the afterlife rather than worldly gains. In contrast, the Gülen Movement's emphasis on material success and financial expansion suggests a more worldly orientation (risaleajans.com).

### **3.2.12. Interfaith Relations**

Nursi championed interfaith unity, particularly between different Islamic sects and expressed admiration for the Prophet's family. He viewed divisions among Muslims as a result of external antagonism and sought to reconcile differences.

Bediüzzaman Said Nursi's primary focus during times of repression in his country was to reconnect people, especially the youth, with the Quran in a manner reminiscent of the early Islamic era. He aimed to make the Quran accessible and understandable to them (mehrnews.com). Hadi Khosrowshahi notes: "One of Nursi's educational advantages was his call for unity and solidarity among the

followers of Islamic sects. In his book *Sireh Dhatiyyah*, Nursi identified himself as a follower of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Sheikh Muhammad Abduh, advocating for the unity of Muslims under what he called 'Muhammadian Unity.' In his work *al-Lamaat*, published in Istanbul, he called on Sunni and Shi'a Muslims to avoid sectarian conflict, stating: 'O Sunnis, O lovers of the Ahl al-Bayt, avoid division and strife, as only the enemies benefit from this. You are all people of Tawhid (monotheism), and the sacred bond of brotherhood invites you all to unity'" (Khosrowshahi, 2011: Speech).

Nursi identified moral, psychological, cultural, and political factors as the main reasons for division among Muslims. As one of the influential figures in modern history, he played a pivotal role in reviving religious thought. He is often called the "Father of Islamic Turkey," credited with guiding the country towards religious thinking. Justice and freedom were central tenets of Nursi's thought, which he believed were essential for Islamic unity across the world. He also emphasized that both nations and governments play crucial roles in achieving unity. According to Nursi, Islam itself has not regressed in recent times; rather, the backwardness is on the part of Muslims, and this is not due to adherence to Islam but, on the contrary, because of their distance from it.

Beyond the Quran, Nursi gave significant attention to the ethical teachings of the Quran and to introducing people to the *Asma al-Husna* (the Beautiful Names of God), which he saw as the source of Islamic ethics. He emphasized that he had learned this focus on the *Asma al-Husna* from the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the Ahl al-Bayt. In all of his works, he extensively used the *Dua Jawshan Kabir*, a supplication narrated from Imam Sajjad (AS) through the Prophet. Nursi regarded this prayer as the best supplication for mystics, describing it as a spiritual armor for believers ([mehrnews.com](http://mehrnews.com)).

Regarding Fethullah Gülen, it is worth noting that early in the Iranian Revolution, he was somewhat of a supporter. As a prominent preacher, he initially aligned with the Islamic revolutionary movements. However, about a year after the revolution, the 1980 coup in Turkey occurred, during the height of the Cold War, effectively solidifying NATO's presence and Western influence in Turkey.



Gülen's support for the coup leaders set him on his current trajectory, positioning him as a barrier to the potential shift of religious groups towards revolutionary Islamism. His schools' emphasis on Turkish nationalism and a particular model of Islam attracted the attention of Western governments, who supported him as a means to curb the growing influence of Iran (Azimi, 2015: 55).

In one of his speeches, Gülen harshly criticized Iranians and Shiites, referring to them as "Rafidis" and vehemently opposing their beliefs. He remarked: "If all seven worlds were gathered in one place, I wouldn't even consider going to Iran. If, in the afterlife, the path to Paradise passed through Iran, I would ask, 'Is there another way besides this path?' ... You might think my view is extreme, and yes, one should be moderate in different matters, but that's just my nature. For as long as I can remember, I have viewed these Rafidis as hypocrites, deviants, divisive elements in the Muslim world, and tools of the Jews. No one can justify them to me. Gülen, however, has expressed strong opposition to Iranian Shiism and its adherents, reflecting a more divisive stance compared to Nursi's approach (mehrnews.com; yjc.ir).

### **Conclusion**

Despite popular belief that Fethullah Gulen adheres closely to the ideas and philosophies of Said Nursi, and despite Gulen's efforts to influence Turkey's religious community and his own choice of celibacy akin to Nursi, significant differences emerge between their approaches in practice. Many regard Gulen as a disciple of Nursi, yet Dr. Nevzat Tarhan points out a crucial distinction: "Gulen himself admitted that he did not have the opportunity to meet Said Nursi before his death. Fethullah Gulen was never a student of Said Nursi. Unfortunately, this situation has been convoluted by the public, leading to the mistaken belief that Gulen's statements are quotations from Said Nursi. This confusion aims to harm Said Nursi and his genuine followers. It is worth considering whether Said Nursi's teachings have been accurately represented. Many of Said Nursi's followers now claim that the boundary between the two movements is not clearly defined.

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