

Lessons from the Book of the Universe: Nursi and Pope Francis

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In his Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis noted that “God has written a precious book, whose letters are the multitude of created things present in the universe.”² This book of creation is one that God intends us to read, to reflect on it, learn from it, and be transformed by our consideration of what it can teach us. Pope Francis adds: “This contemplation of creation allows us to discover in each thing a teaching that God wishes to hand on to us, since ‘for the believer, to contemplate creation is to hear a message, to listen to a paradoxical and silent voice.’”

For a Christian, the time spent in wonder as one contemplates the roaring of the sea, the silence of a deep forest, the breeze rippling the wheat or (in my case) rice fields, or wildflowers appearing as if by magic in springtime - those are privileged moments in the encounter with God’s eternal message for humanity and with the Holy One who planted that message in the world. Creation speaks to people’s hearts, not in words, but with its silent splendor. Describing the heavens and the silent praise the universe gives to its Creator, the Biblical author sings: “There is no speech, nor are there words, yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world” (Psalm 19: 3-4).

This appreciation of the value of contemplating God’s creation in order to learn the message that God plants in the human heart is a bond that unites Muslims and Christians. As Pope John Paul II noted, “The Muslim believer is also required to hear the word that the Creator has entrusted to the works of his hands.”³ To this end, the Pope cited the Qur’anic verse from Surat al-Baqara: “O men, adore your Lord, who has created you and those who have gone before you. Fear him

¹ Over the years I have been fascinated and inspired by Said Nursi’s “The Supreme Sign,” the Seventh Ray in his *Risale-i Nur*. In various publications, I have tried to share Nursi’s insights and the resonances they have aroused in my own thinking. This present article draws upon reflections on the Supreme Sign that I have published previously, which I have continually revised and reshaped.

² Pope Francis, Encyclical *Laudato Si*, 85

³ Pope John Paul II, “General Audience,” 2 August 2000.

who has made the earth a bed for you and the sky a dome, and has sent down water from the sky to bring forth fruits for your sustenance.”⁴

In the Qur’an, this silent communion with the glories of God’s creation, the act of reflecting prayerfully on the manifold beauties, gifts and blessings of creation is called *tafakkur*, which we may translate simply as “contemplation.” The Qur’an repeatedly calls people to reflect on their lives, on the ways that God has blessed them, on the world around them, and on the myriad signs of God’s power and love. The Qur’an praises and affirms the wisdom of those who take the time to reflect on God’s many gifts. They should reflect on the mercy of God’s sending prophets (Qr 16:44), on God’s power over death (Qr 39:42), on the exalted nature of the Qur’an (Qr 59:21), on the impermanence of worldly wealth (Qr 2:266 and Qr 10:24), on the blessings of married life (Qr 30:12), on the evils of wine and gambling and on the prudent use of worldly goods (Qr 2:219.)

Above all, the Qur’an encourages reflection on the signs of creation that will lead individuals to knowledge of God and God’s qualities. A believer who reflects on the specific blessings of creation should arrive at an awareness of God’s mercy and power and respond by giving glory to God. The Qur’an praises “those who reflect upon the creation of the heavens and the earth (and say): ‘Our Lord, You did not create this in vain. Glory be to You!’” (3: 191).

The Qur’an affirms that creation contains many messages for those who take the time to contemplate them. The Qur’an teaches: “It is He who spread out the earth and placed on it firm mountains and rivers; and of each kind of fruit He created pairs. He causes the night to cover the day. Surely in that are signs for people who reflect” (13: 3). And again, “From the earth he brings forth for you vegetation, olives, plants, vines and all kinds of fruit. In that, surely, there is a sign for people who reflect” (16:11). And in another place: “From [bees’] bellies comes a syrup of different colors, which contains healing for humankind. Surely in that there is a sign for those who reflect” (16:69).

⁴ Qur’an, II: 21-23.

Humans are encouraged to reflect on the serious purpose for which God created the heavens and earth, on the value of rivers and mountains as landmarks, on the wondrous variety of fruits, on the wonderful origins of honey and its astonishing healing powers, and on the alternation of night and day. Since most people take such things for granted and fail to see evidence of the hand of a loving, purposeful Creator, the Qur'an challenges people to look more deeply at the world around them to discover the signs of One who has created a universe filled with blessings for humankind.

2. Contemplation in Said Nursi's writings

One Muslim who has written eloquently about the importance of contemplating the "Book of Creation" is the scholar Said Nursi. I think that I need not spend time introducing this towering figure of 20th Century Muslim thought. Let me just note that the *Risale-i Nur* - "the Message of Light," Nursi's voluminous commentary on the Qur'an - is still studied by millions of Muslims and others around the world and has become a source of inspiration and guidance for those who mine its riches.

In the *Risale-i Nur*, Said Nursi takes up the Qur'an's exhortation to contemplate creation and to reflect thoughtfully on the message contained in the signs of God's names and qualities in the natural world. This is the central focus of "The Seventh Ray" in the *Risale-i Nur* entitled "The Supreme Sign." Nursi introduces the treatise with the Qur'anic verse: "The seven heavens and the earth and all that is in them extol and glorify Him. There is nothing that does not celebrate His praise, but you do not understand their praise" (17:44).⁵ This verse teaches that God is glorified by: 1) the heavens, 2) the earth, and 3) all that is in them and then states the sad reality that we humans do not understand this constant glorification that all creation is giving to its Maker.

If creation is not simply a beautiful work of art or evidence of effortless authority, but is actually a teacher, the bearer of a message to be studied, learned, integrated, and shared, then our

⁵ The Seventh Ray, "The Supreme Sign," First Chapter, p. 130.

contemplative reflection of the universe should not be limited solely to praising God but also to spelling out for ourselves the lessons, the myriad messages, that God wants to teach us in this display of God's creative activity. Referring to creation as a teacher can become nothing more than a pious cliché unless one is prepared to take up the discipline of identifying the lessons taught by the cosmic tutor.

3. The marvels of creation

To establish the narrative of his reflections on creation as the supreme sign of God's names and qualities, Nursi employs the literary device of a traveler who happens upon and wanders through an extremely beautiful kingdom. Nursi directs the readers' attention firstly to the heavens, to God's supporting the hundreds of thousands of heavenly bodies, many of which are larger than the earth. These objects travel in paths on which they do not collide. The light of the stars burns continually without any visible fuel. The huge planets and even greater stars are obedient to the will of the Creator; their movements maintain a balance and continually sweep space clean.

Given the dramatic advances in science and astronomy in the years since Nursi's death in 1960, we know much more about the universe than was known in his day, and the discoveries made by the sciences of astronomy and theoretical cosmology have opened up new avenues for speculation. Low frequency radio telescopes and gamma-ray observations permit scientists to examine distant galaxies, and theorize about spinning pulsars, supernova remnants, nonthermal filaments, black holes, cosmic strings, and other features of the universe that were still unknown in Nursi's day. Quantum physics, and the discovery of the Higgs Boson, has revolutionized the way we understand the movements and interrelationships of sub-atomic particles. Hypotheses like M-theory that are literally mind-boggling, posit an eleven dimensional supergravity, and may eventually provide a framework for developing a **unified theory** of all of the **fundamental forces** of nature.

As the complexity and immensity of our universe become more and more apparent to us, our appreciation of God's creative power and wisdom is not diminished but enhanced. We know now that God's ongoing act of creation reaches far beyond anything that humankind had ever

previously imagined. How great, how powerful, how intelligent must be the God who has done and continues to do all this! Every new advance in astronomy and theoretical physics invites us to engage in deeper reflection about the Creator of this amazing universe.

Moving from the vast expanses of the cosmos, Nursi finds much material in the atmosphere of our planet for his prayerful contemplation. He reflects upon the phenomenon of rain that God in His wisdom has placed in the heavens in order to water the earth and to moderate the temperature of life on the planet. Nursi rises to poetic heights in contemplating the appearance and disappearance of clouds as being similar to an army that, under orders to a commander, alternately makes its presence known and then strategically hides itself again.

Nursi regards the wind, which he sees as a servant of the Creator, bringing heat, light, electricity, and breath to all beings on earth, as well as functioning as a conduit for sound, powering sailing ships, and helping in the pollination of plants. One of the gifts brought by the wind is rain, with its concomitants thunder and lightning, so essential for plant and animal life on earth that it can be called “the very embodiment of Divine mercy.” In fact, throughout his life, Nursi always referred to rain as “*barakat*,” “blessing,” and he taught his students to refer to rain in this way. He taught that complaining about the weather, or anything sent from above, amounts to a kind of insult to the Divine Sender.

Nursi is not personifying or romanticizing natural elements like clouds, wind, and rain. Rather, it is the very unconscious and inanimate nature of these creatures that demands the agency of a wise Creator who has set them on the path of serving humanity. Nursi writes:

The inanimate, lifeless cloud has of course no knowledge of us. When it comes to our aid, it is not because it takes pity on us. It cannot appear and disappear without receiving orders, but acts in accord under orders of a powerful and compassionate commander.⁶

Nursi next turns his attention to thunder and lightning. Instead of being a frightening threat as they are for dumb animals, lightning and thunder are, for the believer, harbingers of good news. They announce the coming of rain, bearing glad tidings not only to farmers and to their fields

⁶ The Supreme Sign, p. 132.

and livestock, but to all who satisfy their hunger by eating the fruits of the earth. Thunder and lightning also challenge self-absorbed individuals consumed by their own problems and shortcomings to look up and discover the world as a beautiful and purposeful act of creation. Thunder and lightning invite the self-centered person, in Nursi's words:

Lift up your head. Look at the miraculous deeds of the most active and powerful being who wishes to make himself known. In the same way that you are not left to your own devices, so too, these phenomena and events have a Master and a purpose. Each is made to fulfill a particular task, and each is employed by a Wise Creator.⁷

4. *The riches of the earth*

When Nursi contemplates the earth, his sense of wonder does not permit him to settle for one metaphor, but his amazement bubbles over to produce a variety of images. In its desirability as a place to reside, the earth is like a luxurious palace or hotel. In the variety of its delights, it is like a lavish banquet filled to abundance with many kinds of food. In its discipline and sense of order it is like the most modern and advanced military instillation. In its wealth of opportunities for relaxation and enjoyment, it is like a recreation area, picnic grounds, or as we might say today, a resort or Theme Park. Moreover, in offering immense possibilities for teaching, the earth is like a classroom or laboratory of an august university.

The movement of the earth around the sun makes Nursi think of the double movement of the Mevlevi dervishes as they whirl about their own center and simultaneously propel themselves forward in motion around the *semahane*. From this sacred imagery, Nursi makes a daring leap to a very different image. As it travels on its circuit, the earth resembles a great ocean liner loaded with food and equipment moving purposefully on its assigned path and carrying its passengers safely through the days, months, seasons, and years.

Nursi looks at the seeds of plants growing on the earth and notes how they are transported from one place to another by the winds. In this way they take root and propagate, producing a wide variety of grains, fruits, and vegetables. The miracle of springtime, when hundreds of thousands

⁷ The Supreme Sign, p. 134.

of tiny seeds, virtually identical to the human eye, burst forth from their winter “death” to a wide variety of abundant new life, is for Nursi one of the strongest arguments in favor of the “Supreme Harvest,” the resurrection and life after death. The same Creator who produces new life annually in the natural world can just as easily resurrect humans when they die. Moreover, the generosity and care of the Creator who provides sustenance for his creatures with the tender mercy of a mother nursing her child is evidence of the “solicitousness, mercy, and wisdom of the Merciful and Compassionate One.”

When Nursi turns his thoughts to the unruly and ferocious movement of the seas, he sees it as a sign of God’s sovereign mercy that the seas are kept within their bounds and not allowed to overrun the earth. As he casts his contemplative gaze into the depths of the ocean, Nursi observes the spectacular underwater world of fish, shells, coral, and marine gardens. He marvels that this world of astonishing variety and beauty, which is virtually inaccessible and almost unknown to man, is maintained in a medium of salt water and microscopic life forms.

When he turns from the seas to reflect on fresh-water bodies like rivers, streams, and lakes, his meditation focuses on the wealth of divine mercy. So great are the blessings for humanity of rivers and fresh-water channels that they seem to flow into our world from Paradise itself. Commenting on the Qur’anic reference to “Four rivers flowing forth from Paradise,” Nursi says that the magnitude and benefits of the earth’s great river systems so far surpass their apparent earthly sources that they seem to be flowing from Paradise itself.

Nursi turns his meditation to the mountains and plains. In an observation that presages our knowledge about tectonic plates, he notes that the mountains arise from seismic forces and movements and form an escape valve for relieving underground pressures. In this he sees the wisdom of an intelligent Creator who maintains the earth in equilibrium by building into its structure a release for internal tensions.

The mountains emerge from the earth by God’s command, thereby alleviating the turmoil, anger, and rancor that arise from disturbances within the earth. As the

mountains surge upward, the earth begins to breathe; it is delivered from harmful tremors and upheavals, and its tranquility as it pursues its duty of rotation is no longer disturbed.⁸

Mountains also serve as storerooms for water, minerals, and other substances useful for human well-being and function as well as landmarks to guide the weary traveler. This the Qur'an itself affirms: "And He set up on the earth firm mountains, lest it shake under you; as well as rivers and pathways, so that you may be guided. And landmarks, and by the stars they are guided" (Qur'an 16: 15-16.) Just as the mountains' grandiose panorama inspires men to reflect on the sovereign majesty of the One who produced them, so also the utility of mountains for human life reminds people of God's tender, compassionate care.

When Nursi turns his attention to the plant kingdom, he sees that from the mightiest tree to the tiniest seed, the vegetative world proclaims the glory of its Creator. This eloquent praise, found both in individual plants and in the totality of plant life, points to an intelligent Creator. The vast range of genus and species, their great variety in appearance, and the wide scope of beneficial usage for humankind all point to a Maker with genuine concern for His creatures. The various uses by which God provides for humans are evidence that the Creator has prepared this world for humankind. Whether it be plants whose existence is essential for human life in the form of food, wood, or medicine, or plants like flowers whose only purpose is to delight the eye and nose, they all proclaim the Creator's glory by their nature.

As is the case with flora, so also with fauna. When Nursi looks at the animal kingdom, he observes that the immense variety of animal life is all giving glory to God, indicating God's mercy, and proclaiming, "There is no god but He." The animal world teaches three great truths. Firstly, it shows that creation cannot be conceived as occurring by chance or random selection; the life of animals must come from One capable of wisdom and purpose. Secondly, symmetry and proportionality of innumerable species demands the existence of one who is all-Powerful who can accomplish this feat. Finally, the production of such an exhaustive variety of animal life from the mingling of virtually identical eggs and sperm shows the infinite capacity of the Producer.

⁸ The Supreme Sign, p. 138.

Advances in biology and DNA mapping have in no way invalidated Nursi's arguments. Rather, science has shown the way that the life of animate beings has developed. The more that humans discover the workings of nature, the more deeply are they able to appreciate the fruits of creation and to understand the song of praise that all creation gives to its Maker.

5. The wonders of humankind

Finally, Nursi's reflection turns to humanity itself. The first sign of God's providential care is His sending of prophets. Nursi considers the line of prophets as essential to guiding the transition of men from the animal to angelic state. As humans learn to think and act less like animals and live more like angels, they need guidance. God did not abandon humankind in their need and in order to bring them to the fullness of their true humanity, God sent the prophets with His message of light. Through the Divine guidance found in the prophetic word, people became able to transcend their lower natures and attain their divinely granted lofty status.

The prophets are the strongest manifestations of God's power, mercy, and blessings for humankind. As the most perfect of representations of humankind, the prophets have been models for human emulation. Through them God was able to warn and correct those who were going astray and lead them on the Straight Path. Belief in all the prophets has become a great source of strength for humans down through the centuries and a sign of God's loving providence. Beyond all else, the unanimity of the prophets' teaching provides humankind with a sure sign of the truth of the message God has communicated.

After the prophets, the next great proof of God's power and mercy are the saints, those remarkable individuals who have been formed by the prophetic message. He is speaking of those whose lives, attitudes, and accomplishments have been shaped by their reflections on "affirmative matters connected with faith." Nursi is referring to the wise teachers and scholars whose faith-based lessons have applied God's prophetic word to generations of believers.

The moral force of this assembly of intelligent, conscientious thinkers down through the centuries gives the ordinary believer a powerful strength that he or she would not otherwise have. Nursi asserts that “the belief and firm conviction concerning the Divine unity that all luminous intellects possessed, despite their varying capacities and differing, even opposing, methods and outlooks, was the same, and that their steadfast and confident certainty and assurance was one.”⁹

Their united voice in affirming and praising the one Creator enables the believer to rely not only on his own abilities and insights, but to be able to draw upon generations of accumulated and transmitted wisdom. Nursi is speaking both of the intellectual heritage handed on by generations of scholars, as well as the spiritual heritage transmitted by “millions of spiritual guides who were striving toward the truth.”¹⁰ Enriched and emboldened by this long history of belief in God and His Prophets and Books, the believer can confidently affirm “the necessary existence, the unity, and the sacred attributes of the Creator of this cosmos.”

Finally, his meditations on the One God manifested in creation lead Nursi to the truths revealed through the prophets. He has learned much on his mental voyage through the realms of creation and is now prepared to listen directly to the words of the Creator. Contemplation focused on creation will always lead back to the Author of that creation. He began his contemplative exercise in response to the Divine command to “reflect,” and his reflections conduct him through the phenomenal world and back to the Unseen Commander. In the process, Nursi has affirmed the purposeful nature of creation and moved to give glory to the Creator. In the words of the Qur’an: “Those who reflect upon the creation of the heavens and the earth (and say): ‘Our Lord, You did not create this in vain. Glory be to You!’” (Qr 3: 191).

For Nursi, there are two great vehicles by which God has communicated His message to humankind; the message of revelation, found in the Qur’an, and the message of creation, found in the universe. Christians find themselves in unison with Nursi’s understanding of how God communicates His word to humans. In medieval times, St. Bonaventure enunciated this approach to God’s Word. “Creation,” Bonaventure wrote, “is like a book from which we can

⁹ The Supreme Sign, p. 145.

¹⁰ The Supreme Sign, p. 143.

gather insights about the creator. The natural world bears the footprints of God, and the human person is created to read this book and know God.”¹¹

In our own day, Pope John Paul II repeatedly refers to the need that modern people have to learn from the Book of Creation. We have to rediscover a sense of wonder and learn to listen with the ears of our heart. This unusual phrase, “the ear of our heart,” is actually used by John Paul II to describe how we can learn the lessons that creation teaches. He says: “The ear of the heart must be free of noise in order to hear this divine voice echoing in the universe. Along with revelation properly so-called, contained in Sacred Scripture, there is a divine manifestation in the blaze of the sun and the fall of night. Nature too, in a certain sense, is “the book of God.”¹²

Elsewhere, John Paul describes the universe as a kind of Gospel that teaches us divine matters. “Nature,” he holds, “becomes a gospel that speaks to us of God. From the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator. Our capacity for contemplation and knowledge, our discovery of a transcendent presence in created things must lead us also to rediscover our kinship with the earth, to which we have been linked since our own creation.”¹³ The Pope cites the Book of Sirach that links the Jewish tradition to those of Christians and Muslims: “Who can have enough of beholding God’s glory? Though we speak much we can never reach the end, and the sum of our words is: ‘He is the all.’ The Pope concludes: “How can we find the strength to praise him? He is greater than all his works...” (*Sir* 43: 27-28). This verse anticipates *Allahu akbar*, the Muslim cry, “God is greater,” which in turn reappears in a yet later age by the desire of Jesuits to work “for the greater glory of God.”

Conclusion

I don’t consider myself an expert on the thought of Said Nursi. I have many friends who have devoted their lives – for 20, 30, 40 years and more – to the study of the *Risale-i Nur*. They read the work alone at home, in student residences, in weekly group study sessions. These are people

¹¹ Ilia Delio, *The Emergent Christ*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011, p. 13.

¹² John Paul II, "General Audience," 2 August 2000.

¹³ John Paul II, “General Audience,” 26 January 2000.

from all walks of life – professionals, laborers, housewives, civil servants, students. Some of these men and women I consider to be true experts in the thought of Said Nursi. At least they have always been able to give convincing and inspiring answers to any questions that I put to them. I find myself a guest who arrives from a different land and culture, formed in and following a different religious path from the Islam shared by Said Nursi and his students. Nevertheless, I have learned a lot from Nursi and am grateful to him for his ideas and his example of constancy and devotion to God. I feel that my life – including my faith life as a Christian – has been greatly enriched by my encounter with the *Risale-i Nur*.