

**International Conference on the Role of Science
and Arts in Islamic Civilisational Renewal
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On 4 December 2012, IAIS Malaysia in collaboration with the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture (Turkey) and the Malaysian Turkish Dialogue Society organised the International Conference on the Role of Science and Arts in Islamic Civilisational Renewal, on the theme “Science and Culture as Key Dimensions of Civilisational Renewal: The Thoughts of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi”. Bediuzzaman (“Wonder of the Age”) Said Nursi (1877-1960) was a Turkish scholar during the twilight years of the Ottomans and the founding of the modern Republic of Turkey by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. He is known largely for his intellectual-spiritual jihad in restoring the rational basis of religious truth and eliminating divisive tendencies between the religious and intellectual sciences.

The conference featured nine speakers with opening addresses by Professor Mohammad Hashim Kamali, Founding Chairman and CEO, IAIS Malaysia, and Professor Faris Kaya, President, Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture. It was divided into three sessions: (1) “The Role and Place of Knowledge, Science, Faith and Morality for a Better Future of Humankind: Said Nursi’s Perspective”; (2) “Said Nursi’s Ideas on Science and Development”; and (3) “Said Nursi and Civilisational Renewal (*tajdid hadari*)”.

The conference deliberated, among other topics, on Said Nursi’s project to integrate the religious and intellectual sciences, particularly modern science, at a time when the dominant ethos was one of conflict and confrontation between the two, taking European historical experience as the universal yardstick and barometer to measure scientific development and progress throughout the world. Consequently, religion is perceived to be the stumbling block to science. Nursi, however, disagreed. He distinguished between the accumulation of empirical data and the conceptual/philosophical framework used to organise the acquired data. According to Yunus Çengel (Yildiz Technical University, Turkey/ University of Nevada, Reno, US), it is the latter that Nursi argued is infused with materialism. The pivot here is man as the conscious reader of the cosmic narrative; indeed for many, science faithfully reproduces the phenomena of the cosmos, but Nursi was critical enough to argue that modern science is but an *interpretation* of phenomena. The key to Nursi’s worldview, as explored by Colin Turner (Durham University, UK) in his paper, is the twin concepts of *ma’nā-ye ismī* (self-referential) and *ma’nā-ye harfī* (other-indicative), two modes of

hermeneutics that perceive, respectively, the physical cosmos either as exhausted by itself or as signs/indicators to ontologically higher levels of reality.

Nursi based his philosophical synthesis on solid theological ground. According to Betania Kartika Muflih (University of Malaya), Nursi's philosophy must be understood within the framework of *al-tawhīd* (Divine Oneness), so that all that happens in the universe is seen as the product of universal wisdom and under the direct control of the Wise Lord. On this basis then, Nursi understood the sciences as stemming from the Divine Attributes, i.e., the religious and intellectual sciences stemming from the Divine Attribute of Speech (*kalām*) and Power (*qudra*) respectively. Ismail Latif Hacinelioglu (Suleyman Demirel University, Turkey) pointed out that both revelation and natural phenomena are “Books of God”, i.e. the *Kitab-i Hakim* and *Kitab-i Kebir-i Kainat* respectively. This provides the unity of sources by which the material and spiritual worlds are seen harmoniously, thus contributing towards a holistic approach to knowledge, which is evident in Nursi's approach to the Qur'an.

His *Risale-i Nur* (Epistle of Light), a voluminous commentary (*tafsīr*) on the Qur'an, was written for the general audience despite its depth and intensity, for Nursi recognised that the Qur'an addressed both the mind and man's inner spiritual faculties. The spiritual component of religion carries implications beyond the person to the collective level. According to Mohammed Farid Ali (IAIS Malaysia), Nursi's exposition of self-contentment (*qanā'ah*) contrasts it with greed (*hirs*) and establishes the former as being crucial to the formation of personal character. This personal character connects to the rise and fall of civilisation because spiritual concepts like self-contentment and greed relate to the question of allocation and distribution of resources as well as waste management.

Nursi had taken his ideas beyond theory. By his own account, his life was divided into the “Old Said” and the “New Said” which focuses on study, contemplation and spiritual transformation. Fadhlullah Jamil (University of Science, Malaysia) placed Nursi alongside scholars and thinkers aspiring towards reform and renewal (*tajdīd*) in Islam, who censured blind imitation, superstition and deviant innovation. Nursi had even proposed to the Ottoman ruler Sultan Abdülhamid II the formation of a religious seminary (*madrasah*), called the Medresetü'z-Zehra, which would reflect the integrated curriculum that he envisaged. But the plan did not materialise as it was thwarted by the war, even though foundations had been laid for the project. When secularist dictatorship held sway in Turkey, according to Saim Kayadibi (International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)), Nursi's opposition to it was predicated on the *maqṣid* of *hifẓ al-'ird* (preservation of honor), echoed succinctly in his own words, “I can live without bread, but I cannot live without freedom.”