

Ian S. Markham, *Engaging with Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: a Model of Interfaith Dialogue*
Surrey, England and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 2009. viii+179 pp., hardcover.

The heart warms to hear a Christian ethicist praise a Muslim ethicist as a model for “tradition-located spirituality” and for relying on the “explanatory power and coherence” of his tradition, rather than on coercion, to commend to fellow citizens his own Islamic convictions about ultimate reality.

Ian Markham, the dean of Virginia Theological Seminary in the USA, presents Bediuzzaman Said Nursi -- a Turkish veteran of the First World War and intellectual combatant against both Soviet expansionism and European secularism – along with Nursi’s present-day followers in the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture, as an example to encourage Christians, from their side, to engage with non-Christians and expect to emerge the better for the encounter.

Dr. Markham values Nursi as an example also to Muslims of a commitment to “diversity, conversation, and toleration”, precisely because “the vast majority of Muslims in the world start in the same place” – a tradition-located spirituality. Nursi was unshakably committed to the self-evident truth of the divine guidance given in the Qur’an and the desire of God to see all humanity follow “our master Muhammed! Peace and blessing be upon him thousands and thousands of times. . . .” Nursi, like serious Muslims today, hoped to persuade not only secularists but also Christians and Jews to correct and complete their devotion to God by embracing the way of the Prophet. Yet Nursi advised his followers, in the face of devastating conflicts with Greeks and Armenians in Anatolia, that “the freedom of non-Muslims is a branch of our own freedom” (pp. 56-62).

Nursi’s theologically based tolerance and his embrace of love will be encouraging to westerners. What Dr. Markham does not attempt to assess in this first volume on Nursi is how much assent

Nursi’s arguments command today among Muslim intellectuals beyond the Nur and Fatullah Gulen movements based in Turkey. Nursi’s writings are voluminous rather than systematic. Nursi’s interpretation of the Qur’an and *hadith* (traditions of the Prophet) are selective and creative, rather than citing traditional studies by previous interpreters. And while Nursi acknowledges “the pleasures of the truths of Shari’ah,” one worry that praise from English-speaking Christians, if overheard, might only taint Nursi in the mind of militant and strict interpreters of Islam.

For its intended audience in what the author calls the Western “dialogue industry”, this survey challenges the standard alternative stances of the exclusivist, the inclusivist, and the pluralist. Markham rightly notes how much turns on the conviction about the human condition held by any assessor of others’ traditions. Candidly spelling out his own conviction, Markham concludes: “We are made in the Image of God (and therefore have the capacity for some limited right reasoning about the world and morality); and, simultaneously, we are fallen (and therefore have constant propensities towards egoism and selfishness). Such an anthropology would strongly suggest that all religions contain both insight and error – Christianity included. Given this, we have an obligation to learn of God from the encounter with the other”(p. 169).

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