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Rescuing the Muslim collective self: the Nur case in light of the Modern Muslim Subjectivities Project

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Abstract: There is a tendency in the literature to emphasise how contemporary Islamic movements promote ways of living a pious Muslim life alternative to those proposed by secular liberal modernity. For this reason, the domains of religious and civic engagement have often been thought of as opposed to each other. In counterpoint to this tendency, the paper explores the intertwining of national views about mass education and modern citizenship with a renewed Islamic emphasis on the need for moral and ethical reform of society within the Nur movement in modern Turkey. Methodologically, the paper draws upon ethnographic material from research conducted in 2010 on the *Suffa* community in Istanbul, as well as on an account of the life and projects of the leader of the movement, Said Nursi, mainly drawn from secondary sources. This case is explored in light of the theories of successive modernities that inspired the analytical framework for the Modern Muslim Subjectivities Project applied in this special issue. In so doing, it illustrates the complex nexus that Nursi established between long-standing views of Islamic ethics and modern perspectives on education and civic engagement in response to the emergence of the modern nation-state in the first half of the 20th century.

Keywords: collective self; Nur movement; self-formation; successive modernities; Turkish Islam

1 Introduction

A student of the Faculty of Law at Istanbul University, Selim lived in a house managed by the *Suffa* community, one of the contemporary branches of the Nur movement, in the neighbourhood of Fatih, in Istanbul. Despite his young age, he

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had been entrusted with being the head of the house. Here he oversaw a group of ten younger students. One evening, he was explaining to me the meaning and significance of the mission of the *Suffa* community, the mission to which he had decided to dedicate his life a few years before. He said:

Muslims must worship, right? It is a requirement of Islam. But if you told me 100 or 150 years ago, ‘We’ve got to perform the daily prayer because,’ let’s say, ‘if we don’t, hell will be waiting for us,’ this would suffice and people would go on and do their prayers. This is because there was not even the slightest hint of a question in their minds. But today if you tell someone: ‘Go and do the prayer,’ he’s going to ask, ‘What for?’ This is the age of reason. This is the age of science (*fen*). In the olden days, people never questioned anything ... but today, we’ve got to have reasons for why we must worship.¹

Selim’s words well reflect the general conviction held by people variously affiliated with the Nur movement in contemporary Turkey that today the Islamic tradition has to be explained in the light of modern views about science, reason and knowledge. The idea that contemporary Muslims should aspire to an informed way of living Islam is not a novelty or an exclusive element introduced by this movement. Following the encounter with European military power and related systems of knowledge, in the last two centuries Muslim scholars and practitioners have been confronted with the question of faith and of why exactly they should believe at all. Eickelman and Piscatori have notably described this condition as a process of “objectification” of Muslim consciousness.² In their view, from the late nineteenth century it became crucial for Muslim scholars and practitioners to be able to address new questions and doubts that were raised by a growing number of sceptics under the influence of positivist thought. Similar challenges were faced at the time by Muslim reformers such as Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1933) on the Indian continent and Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) in Egypt.³ These scholars have reinterpreted Islamic repertoires of knowledge and practice to offer Muslims new paths to live their faith while at the same time participating in modern society.

In this paper, I show how such accommodation to the socio-political and intellectual transformations brought about by modernisation has been a key trait of the Nur movement since its beginnings in the early 1930s and how such an inclination is still upheld by the *Suffa* community today. The founder of the Nur movement, Said Nursi (1877–1960), lived through the major social, political and intellectual transformations that marked the passage from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic in 1923. Living in such a shifting environment, Nursi believed that the new generations of Muslims should be both knowledgeable of modern

1 Fieldnotes, 2 November 2010.

2 Eickelman and Piscatori 1996: 37–38.

3 Hillier/Koshul 2017; Sedgwick 2009.

science and educated in Islamic ethics. It is true that Nursi, and his followers since, were probably more interested in using scientific notions to reinforce their belief in the existence of God rather than in encouraging engagement in scientific research as such.⁴ No matter how instrumental their enthusiasm for science can in part be, however, Nursi before and his followers at *Suffa* today advocate a kind of Islam that aims to be in pace with the social, political and educational changes brought by modernity. Further, as I will illustrate in this paper, when rethinking Muslim brotherhood, Nursi had also assimilated some of the collectivistic and corporative ideals upheld by new associational forms that emerged in parallel to the affirmation of the nation-state as the dominant form of socio-political organisation on a global scale.

The entwining of Islamic and national ideals in the Nur tradition becomes more evident in some of the contemporary offshoots of the Nur movement. The *Suffa* community has largely invested in supporting the education of young, pious students at modern Turkish universities. It indeed encourages its young followers to mature into good and active citizens who shall one day contribute, as pious Muslims, to the prosperity and well-being of society at large. Although the community rests on a religious worldview and discipline, the participation of its members in society can be seen as a form of civic engagement that intertwines in complex ways with the national project. In their view, by spreading Islamic values anew throughout Turkish society, they will contribute to the latter's well-being and progress. In this sense, they see their proselytism as a legitimate form of civic participation.

Relatedly, in the paper I will explore the case of the *Suffa* community in light of the theories of successive modernities that inspired the analytical framework of the Modern Muslim Subjectivities Project that is applied in this special issue.⁵ Influenced by the multiple modernities approach,⁶ these theories do not see

⁴ For instance, my interlocutors drew examples from the natural world and described them with scientific particulars (e.g. the limited thickness of the atmosphere compared to its role in protecting the earth from the rays of the sun) to point at them as “signs” (*ayat*) that creation could not be the result of chance but must be the work of God. However, as discussed by Riexinger (2020), followers of the movement have problems dealing with some aspects of science such as, notably, the theory of evolution. For analogous reasons, talking about one of the most controversial offshoots of the movement, the Gülen community, Berna Zenging Arslan (2009) argues that this movement promotes a project of conservative modernity aimed at the “Islamization of science” rather than trying to genuinely “modernize” Islam.

⁵ See Wagner 2010, 2012; Jung/Sinclair 2015; Jung 2016, 2017, 2020. I wish to thank Sebastian Elsässer and Kirstine Sinclair for their kind invitation to illustrate my project in light of these theories in Kiel during June 2018, within the framework of the Modern Muslim Subjectivities Project supported by the Universities of Kiel, Southern Denmark, Aarhus and Hamburg.

⁶ Eisenstadt 2000.

modernisation as a linear project emerging in the West and affecting Muslim populations unidirectionally, as the modernisation theories of the 1950s and 1960s strenuously claimed. Rather, modernisation is interpreted as a global process emerging simultaneously in different places across the world and, as such, impacting Muslim life and societies by generating a diversified set of contingent responses in each place. According to Peter Wagner – one of the main exponents of the successive modernities approach – new interrogatives related to modern life emerged synchronically in different parts of the world as populations passed through analogous economic, social, and political stages. Similarly, the Modern Muslim Subjectivities Project intends to present Muslim life not, as it often is, as a self-enclosed response to an exogenous “Western” influence but as the “historically contingent and fragmented results of how social actors have imagined solutions to modern questions.”⁷

Wagner focused on the European experience of modernisation and distinguished between three successive stages: restricted liberal modernity, organised modernity and pluralistic modernity.⁸ By converting these ideal types at the micro-sociological individual level, the Modern Muslim Subjectivities Project individuates three corresponding kinds of modern subjectivities: the classical bourgeois, the peer-group-oriented type of the salaried masses and the post-modern creative worker and entrepreneur.⁹ The first ideal type is the subject of the disciplined, hard-working and self-restrained bourgeois self of the second half of the 19th century – a form very similar to that described by Weber in the Protestant Ethics.¹⁰ The second kind is the peer-group-oriented self that constructs its personality within collective bodies like modern nation-state formations and related labour and spiritual associations. The third kind is the self-reliant, dynamic, creative and individualised self who better fits projects of modernity that followed the 1950s.¹¹ The Modern Muslim Subjectivities Project proposes that although elaborated on the basis of European experience, these models, or ideal types – either in their pure or combined form – can help contextualise and frame some of the main drives of modernisation in Muslim societies.

In the following lines, I suggest that the case of the *Suffa* community, and the Nur movement more generally, can be analysed through the lens of the second type of modernity: the group-oriented ideal type. This becomes apparent when one

⁷ Jung/Sinclair 2015: 28.

⁸ Wagner 2010, 2012.

⁹ Reckwitz 2006, referenced in Jung/Sinclair 2015. See also Jung 2016, 2017, 2020.

¹⁰ Weber 2001 [1930].

¹¹ For a discussion of this, see Jung 2016, 2020. For an application of the third model to the neoliberal dynamics and Islamic charity in contemporary Turkey, see Vicini 2020b.

analyses the collectivistic imprint of the Nur reformist project and how such an inclination is the outcome of the explicit influence that modern socio-political formations exercised on its inspirer, Said Nursi. Relying on ethnographic materials drawn from fieldwork research in Istanbul between 2009 and 2010 and on an account of the life and projects of Nursi mainly based on secondary sources, I will trace such parallels to illustrate the complex link that is established within the Nur movement between long-standing views of Islamic ethics and modern perspectives on education and civic engagement that emerged in the first half of the 20th century in the framework of nation-state formation.

2 The Nur view on Islam and modernity

The Nur movement emerged in the aftermath of the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 from a growing group of followers of Said Nursi (1877–1960), an Islamic scholar of Kurdish ethnicity who is still highly respected and known for writing the *Risale-i Nur* (The Epistles of Light) (c. 1925–1949). The *Risale* is a 14-volume collection of sermons, lectures and letters in which Nursi addresses his students, but also a larger public of ordinary Muslims, who found themselves disoriented by the swift set of secularist reforms that followed 1923. Nursi aimed to address the doubts and concerns of Muslims living in increasingly modernising societies, and for this reason the *Risale* continues to be widely read in Turkey today.

Born in Nurs, a small village in the province of Bitlis in South-Eastern Turkey, as a child Nursi frequented the Sufi circles of the Khalidi branch of the Naqshbandi order – a Sufi tariqa that played a pivotal role in shaping Turkish Islam from the second half of the 19th century.¹² This education left a strong imprint on Nursi, despite his later claims, contained in the *Risale*, that he was not a Sufi.¹³ Such claims most certainly reflect Nursi's strategic need to distance himself from the Sufi brotherhoods, which had been declared illegal in 1925. However, they are also genuine to the extent that, like Muslim modernist intellectuals Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–1897) and Rashid Rida (1865–1935), who stigmatised Sufism as behind the time,¹⁴ Nursi advocated the need to reform Islam in light of modern discoveries and knowledge. This was a response to the intellectual challenges that secular and materialist discourses have posed to Muslim-majority societies in the last one hundred and fifty years. In this vein, Nursi encouraged his followers to

¹² Mardin 1989, 1991; Bruinessen 2009.

¹³ See Vicini 2017, 2020a.

¹⁴ Malik 2018.

engage in “religious service” (*hizmet*),¹⁵ a bottom-up project for societal reform based on the promotion of the message of the *Risale* but that, in line with the teachings contained in the same book, also supported the view that new generations of Turkish Muslims should be educated in modern science.¹⁶

According to Nursi’s own biographical account,¹⁷ his inclination to embrace new epistemologies and worldviews and absorb them within the Islamic tradition first emerged when he was a child. Despite the traditional environment in which he was raised, Nursi reportedly displayed an eccentric attitude toward consolidated forms of Islamic authority and knowledge from a very young age. For instance, Nursi claims that when he was awarded his diploma (*ijāza*) at a local *madrasa* (a conventional Islamic learning institution) in Bayezit (today’s Doğubayazıt, a small town in the Eastern province of Van) at the age of fourteen, he allegedly refused to read all the commentaries and expositions that the other students were asked to study, preferring to focus only on a selection of the most significant passages of each work.¹⁸ Allegedly, Nursi manifested a natural attitude of approaching the religious sources selectively and relying on logic and reason, rather than going through memorisation, as was common in the Muslim world at the time. No matter how truthful this account is, it is a mark of Nursi’s will to embrace the spirit of the new times, when a new epistemology inspired by European scientific methods was spreading through the Ottoman Empire. Not accidentally, Nursi also stresses that when he lived under the patronage of local lords and governors in the region of Van between c. 1895 and 1907, he cultivated an interest in modern scientific methods and discoveries. Reading manuals and compendiums from his hosts’ libraries, he embarked on the study of topics such as astronomy, geography, chemistry, mathematics and physics.¹⁹

15 Since the Islamic revival of the 1980s, the word *hizmet* has also been used by multiple Islamic actors in Turkey to designate their manifold sets of religious activities and initiatives (Vicini 2020a). It is also still used within contemporary Sufi brotherhoods in Turkey (Silverstein 2011), as well as by other Islamic groups and charity organisations.

16 Mardin 1989.

17 Nursi’s biography is reported in *Tarihçe-i Hayat*, one of the 14 volumes of the *Risale*. It was written retrospectively by his students during the 1950s based on Nursi’s own accounts. For this reason, it must be taken with a grain of salt. The book by Vahide (2005) that is quoted below is also based on this publication and accordingly should be taken with some reservation. However, I think that both accounts are significant, as they speak about the self-narrative of both Nursi and the Nur movement.

18 Vahide 2005: 10.

19 Some versions of these compendiums had been circulating in Ottoman intellectual circles since the 18th century but, at least according to Nursi’s rhetoric, previous Islamic scholars had never dealt with them seriously.

This is also a time when Nursi was politically active. Reportedly, he supported the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 by claiming there was a need to introduce a constitution based on principles of citizenship and freedom in the Empire.²⁰ On the other hand, however, Nursi did not embrace the revolution's secularist spirit, as he thought that the forms of legitimacy and the governing principles of the Empire must continue to be grounded in the *shari'a*.²¹ The deep socio-political transformations of which Nursi was a witness had their roots in the set of modernising reforms that had already been initiated during the *Tanzimat* period (1839–1876). However, the Kemalist reform programme that followed the foundation of the Republic in 1923 was unprecedented, and its virulence threw Nursi into a deep personal and spiritual crisis. It was following this moment of discomfort that Nursi decided it was necessary to go back to the core teachings of Islam and reinterpret them in line with the times with the goal of saving faith in these difficult times for Muslims.

In his view, neither the Islam of the Sufi lodges nor that taught in the *madrasas* was a practicable path to cultivate a pious Muslim life in an epoch dominated by the Western worldview. Under the newly established Turkish Republic, the population was now being educated in schools with a strong secular orientation and lived in a society that was dominated by modern rhythms and lifestyles. Even if they wished, they would not be capable of engaging in pedagogical paths like those undertaken by students of the *madrasas* or by members of the Sufi lodges during Ottoman times. Nursi's sermons, which were later collected in the *Risale*, were aimed at offering ordinary Muslims a new path that was compatible with their actual lifestyle.²² As illustrated below, the kind of Muslim self that Nursi upheld in his writings was one whose roots remained in the spiritual path of the Islamic tradition but whose capacity for engagement and action also extended across society – a society that was being reorganised within the framework of the Republican project as severed from religious influence and based on emerging notions of citizenship and loyalty to the nation.

3 The intermingling of Islam, state and modernity

According to Nursi, for the Nur movement to grow into an effective force able to impact society at large, its members had to integrate an Islamic worldview with

²⁰ Vahide 2005: 51–58. These issues were addressed by Nursi in a speech he delivered on the third day of the Revolution titled “Address to Freedom” (*Divan-ı Harb-i Örfî*).

²¹ See, for example, his alleged involvement in the 31st March incident (Vahide 2005: 65–81).

²² For details on the specific set of techniques and Sufi-inspired worldviews that are upheld in the *Risale*, see Vicini 2020a: 97–131.

some elements of modernity. Even before Nursi wrote the *Risale*, he thought that education in scientific and technical knowledge should be integrated in the curricula of schools as part of the modernising reforms the Empire had to undergo. Nursi's sentiment in this regard was shaped by public discussions that were held at the time about the role of modern education in the formation of newly emerging political subjects: the national populations.²³ Similar debates had already emerged during the *Tanzimat* period, when the education sector had been an arena of confrontation between actors both internal and external to the Empire. Governing this sector indeed meant the possibility for those in power of shaping, and hence controlling, the hearts, minds and spirits of the people by instilling in them a sense of belonging and loyalty to the Empire.²⁴ This trend was definitively confirmed with the foundation of the Turkish Republic, when education became a weapon in the hands of the secularist elites to form a new specific kind of modern subject who, no longer faithful to the Sultan, now had to be loyal to the nation.²⁵ The idea of the national youth occupied a central place in the collective imagination of the early Turkish Republic. Within Kemalist ideology, the new generations became the main subject of the scientific and technological revolution that the nation had to undergo to narrow the gap with foreign powers. A veritable "cult of youth" was promoted by the secularist elites in those years.²⁶ Educated into Republican values and modern science, the new generations represented the hope of the nation, those who would lead the country to the expected social and economic progress. In this sense, the youth became associated with the very possibility of realising the Kemalist modernisation and secularising project.²⁷

Nursi's conviction that there was an urgent need for reform of the education sector in the Empire should be read in the light of this new link between the fate of

23 The amount of literature on this topic is vast, but notable is the work of Foucault (1991) on governmentality.

24 In his study of education reform during the reign of Abdülmecid II (1876–1909), Fortna (2002) convincingly demonstrates that in school textbooks of the era, Islam was referred to in terms of "morals" (*ahlak*) and served the Sultan's purpose of restraining the deleterious effects of foreign educational encroachment on the Ottoman youth by making it loyal to the Empire.

25 Kaplan 2006.

26 Neyzi 2001.

27 The identification of the new generations with the Kemalist project was openly formulated by Kemal Atatürk in the famous speech he delivered at the Second Congress of the Republican People's Party on 15–20 October 1927, in which he directly addressed the Turkish youth with the words *Ey Türk gençliği! Birinci vazifen; Türk istiklalini, Türk cumhuriyetini, ilelebet muhafaza ve müdafaa etmektir* (Turkish Youth! Your first duty is forever to preserve and to defend Turkish independence and the Turkish Republic). Some of the salient parts of the speech have been condensed in the oath that Turkish schoolchildren still recite every morning at school. Although the AKP administration has recently attempted to remove the oath, its recitation is still widely supported by the people and seen as a central trait of national identity. See Altınay 2006.

the new generations and that of the state, a link which had already been established in late-Ottoman times. Whereas the class of the *ulema* and the Sufi leaders both generally opposed the modernist turn undertaken by the reformers during the last years of the Empire,²⁸ Said Nursi had been an advocate of reform, especially in the education sector.²⁹ Just as Nursi had supported the introduction of a constitution in the Empire in the two decades before 1923, so too he supported educational reform. Nursi believed that such reform had to be based on the introduction of the modern sciences in the curricula of the *madrasa*. His views can be summarised by looking at his proposal for the establishment of the *Medresetü'z-Zehra*, which he submitted to the higher members of the cabinet in Istanbul in 1908. This was intended to be an Islamic university that would unite three different educational traditions by bringing together “the most superior *mekteb* by the reason, the very best *medrese* [Turkish for *madrasa*] by the heart, and the most sacred *zaviye* by the conscience.”³⁰ Here the modern sciences like chemistry and physics would have been taught side by side with Islamic sciences and the promotion of Islamic conduct. The proposal was never financed by Abdülmahmid II – and any possibility of this waned with the foundation of the Republic. Although it is not possible to establish a direct link between Nursi’s project for reforming *madrasa* education and that of raising a new youth in the country, his proposition well illustrates his will to accept the reform of the education system as a requirement for survival in a speedily modernising world.

Regarding the new socio-political order that was imposed by the Republic, Nursi clearly rejected most of the secularist principles upon which it was established. However, like many other Muslim intellectuals of his time,³¹ he had to accept the impossibility of going back to the Ottoman order and the need for operating within the new order. This was certainly a matter of opportunity and strategy. Opposing the idea of the Republic would have indeed drawn even more suspicion on him than he had already attracted from the secularist institutions – Nursi was repeatedly taken to trial, exiled and sometimes even imprisoned between 1923 and 1950.

However, whereas Nursi rejected the secularist impetus of the Republican project, he was also attracted by some of the organisational forms that accompanied it. Said Nursi looked at European forms of collective organisation based on communities of interest, like the corporations and the nation-states, with mixed

28 Mardin 1989: 110–113.

29 Vahide 2005: 42–49.

30 Vahide 2005: 46.

31 See Jung/El Zafar for an application of the Multiple Modernities, Modern Subjectivities theoretical framework to the analogous case of the Egyptian reformer Hasan al-Banna.

feelings of both aversion and awe. He called these forms of alliance *şahsı manevi*, literally “moral/spiritual (*manevi*) personality (*şahıs*)”. According to Şerif Mardin, the expression *şahsı manevi* is a neologism that might have been introduced in Ottoman lands during the nineteenth century by the Young Ottoman thinker Namık Kemal as an attempt at translating Rousseau’s moral and collective body (*corps moral et collectif*).³² While, on the one hand, Nursi criticised these forms of corporativistly organised units for being shaped by mainly interest-driven and hence amoral ties, on the other, he admired them for their cohesion and unity. He saw these forms of alliance as an interesting source of inspiration for rethinking Muslim unity at a trans-local level. For this reason, he invited his followers to imitate them when striving to achieve a similar kind of unity with their co-religionists under the ideal of religious brotherhood (*uhuvvet*).³³

As will be shown below, brotherhood is a key principle within the Nur movement which is upheld by the community’s key virtue of sincerity (*ihlas*). This principle serves the revivalist mission of the movement. It is only by acting together as a single body that members of the movement can hope to be successful in such a mission. Yet this unity, Nursi suggests, can only be achieved through a firmness and strength of intention that is similar to that generated by corporate kinds of personality that are found in European modern history. These are the basis for the Nur project for the moral reform of society, without which no success is possible. Although in an entirely different context, such ideas continue to be promoted within contemporary branches of the movement like *Suffa*. This point is illustrated by means of two ethnographic excerpts in the following two sections.

4 Religious service to the homeland

Like other communities affiliated with the Nur movement, since the 1980s the *Suffa* community has organised reading circles of the *Risale* in some major Turkish cities. One main correlated activity has been investment in the informal education sector. The community has offered low-price accommodation facilities to university students coming to Istanbul to attend university. In these places, students have been encouraged to embody the ethos of the *Risale-i Nur* and the mission of religious service to society (*hizmet*).³⁴ Once graduated, they continue to frequent the community and support it financially and spiritually, thus contributing to the further

³² Mardin 2000 [1962]: 333–334, 399–400. See also Vahide 2005: 368, note no. 21.

³³ Nursi 1995: 209. For a discussion of this, see Vicini 2020a: 189–190.

³⁴ It is in one of these houses that I spent around three months of my fieldwork in 2010. For details about life in these houses, see Vicini 2020a: 33–62.

growth of the Nur movement and to its success in the goal of revitalising Islam in Turkey. Both educated in secular universities and shaped in their character by Islamic principles, these students represent the highest achievement of the community because they express the success of the Nur project for the education of the new generations of Turkish Muslims.

During the time of my fieldwork in the houses of the *Suffa* community between September and December 2010, the students were constantly monitored by the elder members and regularly asked to join the community's meetings and activities. One day, right after the beginning of the new scholastic year, the head of the Istanbul branch of the community, Muharrem, had gathered all of the around 60 university students who resided in the housing managed by *Suffa* in the city. These included both more experienced students and those who were residing in the Nur houses for the first time. The meeting was informal and relaxed, but the atmosphere was solemn because of the initiatory character that it had for many of them. After illustrating the set of activities promoted by the community in the last few years such as the opening of new internet sites and the reading centres of the *Risale*, Muharrem dedicated the final part of this speech to clarifying the expectations that the community had for them in the following years. He concluded by addressing the students in a solemn voice with the following words:

But you are indeed our greatest service. [...] Without forgetting your own culture, you will be successful in your work and morally upright. This is how you are going to be of service to this country. There is a person that was in these houses and that today is an associate professor [...] Both Islam and culture [...] Only so can *Suffa's* existence be worthwhile. God willing one day you will support this *hizmet* too [...] God willing one day our service will spread to the entire world. [...] Whatever work you do, you'll do it the right way [...] You'll be a Muslim and you'll be someone who is dutifully working. Maybe one day you will be a doctor in a hospital [...] If it is so, then surely you will not explain the contents of the *Risale* to the people. But by showing that you are both a good Muslim and a person doing his job well you will be doing an important service. You will be representing *hizmet* in an appropriate way. [...] Because if some people oppose religion, this is due to our own shortcomings in representing it. This means you'll be doing an important service because you'll be demonstrating the value of Islam. [...] Persons endowed with the right manners, views, and understanding will have come from this very place.³⁵

Muharrem's words illustrate two main points regarding the kind of Muslim modernity that is promoted by the *Suffa* community. First, people at *Suffa* – but this can be said for the Nur movement in general, as pointed out above – have embraced the transformations brought about by modernisation and, rather than rejecting them, they are educated to feel responsible for the duty of illustrating by

³⁵ Fieldnotes, 26 October 2010.

example that there is no contradiction between Islam and such transformations. It is in this sense that the young students are, in Muharrem's words, the community's "greatest service". As both well-educated and faithful Muslims, for the community, they represent the embodied example that modern occupations, science and progress can go hand in hand with belief in God. As exemplified by Muharrem, a pious Muslim becoming a good doctor is one of the best ways to demonstrate this compatibility because such a person embodies both the traits of modern scientific knowledge and Muslim piety. It is by becoming this kind of a person that students at *Suffa* can accomplish the best possible service: to Islam, by illustrating its modern nature to the world; and to society, by spreading a version of modernity that is also grounded in spirituality and ethics. It is because such a mission is delicate that it must be done with the maximum care, according to Muharrem. Widespread views within the Nur movement agree that religion has been rejected by the modernists because Muslims have been unable to represent Islam correctly to the world, namely because they have long been ignorant of the progress of science. Accordingly, it is now their utmost mission as a new and aware kind of Muslim to invert this trend and readdress the destiny of Islam by demonstrating that such views were improper and incompatible with the "true" kind of Islam they profess.

As I have argued elsewhere, these words can also be read as a clear indication that, in the view of people at *Suffa*, the Islamic civilisational project is seen as interlinked with the national one of educating new generations of people into being good citizens (Vicini 2020a: 171–173). Muharrem indeed states clearly that by becoming successful people professionally, they can also better serve their country. This brings us back to the point made above that the Nur movement has in time accepted operating in the framework of the modern Turkish nation by also incorporating the modern values regarding science, progress and education of the new generations.

Second, Muharrem's words are revealing of how this project can only be achieved through a collective and gradual effort. In line with common views in 20th century reformist Islam, the re-infusion of society with Islamic values is an individual-to-individual, bottom-up process. It requires the progressive re-education of single individuals, who will in turn involve themselves in the movement's proselytising project to increase the latter's impact in society. For this reason, such a project requires a collective and capillary effort and, in parallel, that each member of the movement has a sense of being part of this collective endeavour. Only in this way can individual self-sacrifice and dedication to the community's mission acquire sense and confer motivation at the individual level. Even if the desired outcome is not immediately (or ever) reached, the community's mission is projected into an eschatological future in which the goal will be finally

accomplished and Islam will be placed back at the centre of the national project. In other words, while the education project that is upheld by the movement is certainly aimed at the individual level, the kind of Muslim self that is cultivated in the community is one that acquires sense only as part of the spiritual personality of the community. This is not only because the success of the same reformist project depends on the sense of solidarity among its members, but also because the very same virtues that are promoted by the movement have an inter-subjective dimension.

For all of these reasons, the kind of Muslim subjectivity promoted within the *Suffa* community can be compared to the peer-group-oriented kind of self that is described by the Modern Muslim Subjectivities Project that I illustrated in the introduction. In the same way that the salaried masses of the newly emerging modern nation-states of Europe organised themselves into labour and spiritual associations united by a collectivistic orientation, so too the kind of brotherly relationship that is sustained through reiterated discourses and practices within the *Suffa* community, and the Nur movement more generally, is aimed at achieving a high degree of cohesion and unity. This point is substantiated further through other ethnographic materials in the following section.

5 Virtues of brotherhood

In the houses managed by the *Suffa* community, students disciplined themselves to a Muslim life regulated by the five daily prayers and the imitation of the tradition of the exemplary conduct of the Prophet Muhammad (*sunna*). In the view of my interlocutors, the *sunna* was conflated with the other two interrelated notions of *adab* (norms of virtuous behaviour) and *ahlak* (ethics).³⁶ Indeed, it was not restricted to individual pious conduct. It also indicated the set of rules of etiquette and correct manners through which they addressed each other. This etiquette included the embodiment and display of virtues such as self-restraint, politeness, dedication and self-sacrifice for the other brothers. The collectivist orientation of the virtues upheld within the community responds to Nursi's suggestion that the followers of the Nur path should strive for unity into brotherhood as their most urgent and important aspiration. Within the set of virtues that the students were expected to cultivate, sincerity (*ihlas*) occupied a central place. Whereas cultivating this virtue may appear, at a first glance, as related to an individual preoccupation with scrutinising the "real" intentions of one's self, it also underlies the collectivistic view that dominates in the Nur tradition. In the Islamic tradition, the concept of *ihlas* has a complex genealogy, which for reasons of space I am unable to

36 For a discussion see Vicini 2014, 2020a: 74–79.

explore here.³⁷ It suffices to say that in the *Risale*, Nursi describes *ihlas* in strict, indissoluble, connection with the idea of unity in brotherhood. In his view, only by being entirely pure in their hearts can Muslims find full unity with their fellow brothers. Only by cultivating *ihlas* can they not envy other Muslims and thus cooperate with them for the success of the movement's reformist project.³⁸

The indissoluble link that my interlocutors established between brotherhood and the virtue of *ihlas* reflects the imperative Nursi felt to link Muslim processes of ethical cultivation with new forms of Muslim organisation inspired by the European corporatist-like models described above. Within the *Suffa* community, there was a circular relationship between the process of embodiment of the virtue of *ihlas* and the cultivation of a sense of the self that is dissolved into the collectivistic ideal of religious brotherhood. An interesting mark of this circular relationship is, for example, the highly ignominious character that was attributed within the community to the sin of gossiping and talking behind someone's back (*gybet*). The topic was constantly discussed in the houses when students jokingly warned those who complained about small flaws in other students' characters or attitudes not to commit *gybet*. But it was also the subject of specific reading sections, such as the one Yasin, a young doctor and former resident in the houses of the *Suffa* community, conducted in front of a group of university students one evening.³⁹ His lesson was based on the concluding section (*hatime*) of the 22nd chapter of the *Risale* volume titled "The Letters" (*Mektubat*).⁴⁰ This is a writing that Nursi had entirely dedicated to the sin of *gybet* in which he examines the sentence from the Surah Al-Hujurat "Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother?" (Qur'an 49: 12).

Yasin introduced the passage by referring to a *hadith* in which, after admonishing one of his companions for backbiting another, the Prophet Muhammad reportedly ordered her to spit out the piece of meat she had in her mouth, which was indeed immediately expelled.⁴¹ Yasin emphasised how committing such a sin should be hated like perpetrating cannibalistic or inhuman acts. Then he started

³⁷ For more information on this genealogy, see Vicini 2020a: 87–89.

³⁸ These key principles are discussed by Nursi in the 20th and, especially, the 21st Flash, of the *Risale* book titled "The Flashes" (*Lemalar*) (Nursi 1995). The 21st Flash is also known as "The epistle of sincerity" (*ihlas Risalesi*). Although *ihlas* appears in different passages of the *Risale*, this is the section where Nursi explicitly theorises upon the concept and suggests four principles that brothers must follow in order to attain this virtue.

³⁹ Fieldnotes, 11 October 2010.

⁴⁰ Nursi 1997.

⁴¹ According to the sources, the interlocutor and reporter of the *hadith* was Prophet Muhammad's third and youngest wife Aisha, who had just observed how the skirt of a woman who had passed by was too long (es-Suyuti 1994: 200–202).

reading the text at a point where Said Nursi interrogates an imaginary interlocutor about what had happened to his sense of civility that pushed him to commit such a vile and wild act. Of particular interest is the 5th passage of the chapter, in which Nursi compares the sin of *gıybet* to “mercilessly (*insafsızca*) biting the spiritual personality (*şahsı manevi*)”, which the imaginary sinner does not realise he himself is part of so that he is inadvertently “biting his own limbs”. As also mentioned by Yasin, backbiting is a sort of poison (*zehir*) that can spread easily and fast through the community if somebody starts committing it. Luckily, he added, it does not seem to be a concern for their community today. However, he warned the students to always keep their guard up because it is easy to start gossiping about other brothers. Interestingly, Yasin concluded by observing that this would compromise not only the capacity of the single individual to achieve sincerity of faith, but also that of the whole community, which would risk crumbling.

This example is further proof of how the need for unity into brotherhood was constantly recalled during the readings of the *Suffa* community. Speeches like Yasin’s are not just an occasional reminder. Rather, they reflect the general view that through the process of informal education that took place within the houses, the students had to embody these “collectivistic” kinds of virtues. The purity of intention was certainly important at an individual level since it should accompany every single act of religious piety. For instance, daily prayer was considered conducted properly, and hence valuable, only when performed out of a sincere desire to submit oneself to God and praise Him. Beyond this individual dimension, however, sincerity stood at the root of the commitment of the Nur brothers of *Suffa* to the mission of *hizmet*. Only if pure in their intentions could the students one day decide to dedicate their entire life to the reformist project of the community. Moreover, only if sincere in the feeling of brotherhood they had for their fellow Muslims could the students be fully efficient in their endeavours. As highlighted by Yasin, if people within the community stopped being sincere and started backbiting other members, the entire community could crumble in a short time. This is the reason why students were warned not to commit *gıybet* – which otherwise might appear to be a trivial kind of sin.

Any behaviour that might threaten the unity of the Muslim community was seen by Nursi as particularly dangerous for the times and hence to be avoided. Notice that in the text Nursi again refers to the idea of spiritual personality (*şahsı manevi*) to define the kind of unity his followers must strive for. This exemplifies, once more, the group-oriented nature of the kind of Muslim subjectivity that is cultivated in the Nur tradition and, still today, in the *Suffa* community. Members of this community can achieve the status of what they would call “true Muslims” only if able to conform their behaviours to the needs imposed by forms of organised and coordinated action that became dominant at the end of the 19th century. Finally,

this passage also shows that these adaptations do not only reflect the organisational form of the community. They also impact profoundly on my interlocutors' understanding of the Islamic virtues. In his interpretation of the Islamic tradition, Nursi emphasised the collective dimension and import of these virtues. Moved by the needs of looking for a renewed unity among fellow Muslims, he carefully selected those Islamic virtues that could be more comfortably reinterpreted in a collectivistic fashion according to what he thought were the most compelling needs of the time.

6 Conclusions

Claiming that people associated with the *Suffa* community today live a kind of Muslim life that is the result of the particular way in which modernity has taken root in the spirit of a 20th century revivalist movement in Turkey does not mean to say that what they profess is entirely new. The Islamic tradition has been modelled over time through both inner and outer dynamics. It is mostly a matter of proximity that the changes of the last century and a half appear to be more marked and evident to our eyes. Regarding organisational unity and cohesion, for instance, it is possible to speculate that it has always been an important principle of Islam and that, for instance, it might have been as pivotal as it is for the Nur movement today in the early days of Islam when the first Muslim community's existence was threatened by its political and religious opponents. It is indeed no coincidence that a renewed emphasis has been placed on the need for organised Muslim behaviour in the last 150 years, that is, precisely in a period when the existence of Muslim civilisation has been under the threat of secular ideologies and political forces.⁴²

In this paper, I have shown how Nursi accomplished a delicate process of reformulation of the Islamic tradition in light of the main epistemological and – more relevantly for the arguments treated here – socio-political challenges brought about by the global processes of modernisation of the last century and a half. As remarked, among the three main ideal types of modernity that have been individuated by the theory of successive modernities and later refined by the Modern Muslim Subjectivities Project, the second type is the one that can be associated more decisively with Nursi's view. This is true regarding four main points. First, peer-group-oriented modernity is reflected in the Nur project's adaptation to the borders of the newly emerging Turkish nation-state. Although

⁴² Another notable example in this regard is the Muslim brotherhood. See Kandil 2015. Also, Elsässer (2019) illustrates how the Muslim brotherhood's organisational culture is marked by a clear programme of moral education and spiritual exercise.

Nursi was neither a nationalist nor a Republican,⁴³ he had to accept the movement operating, at least for the time being, within the boundaries of the nation-state – whereas today several branches of the movement have expanded beyond Turkey, where, however, they remain self-enclosed and mainly restricted to Turkish emigrants or descendants.

Second, while the education of the character of the person has always been at the centre of every Islamic civilisational project, Nursi aligned this view to national discourses about the relevance and importance of the new generations for the development and progress of the country. The importance he gives to modern scientific education is also the outcome of the influence that some tenets of modernist thought had on him – like those that pushed him to reject any allegiance with the Sufi tradition stressed above. Of course, Nursi rejected the atheistic posture of positivism that was upheld by secularist thought. However, he seems to have incorporated its faith in progress as something to be achieved through scientific advancement. After all, according to Nursi, as well as many other 19th century Islamic reformers, in due time science would but confirm the knowledge that is already enshrined and sealed in the Qur'an. It follows that in his mind faith in science perfectly collimates with faith in the holy message of Islam, and hence there is no contradiction between the two.

Third, the group-oriented self of the second kind of modernity has impacted the movement's organisational forms. Although the idea of brotherhood is a long-standing pattern for Islamic organisation that goes back to the Sufi orders, it gains new meaning and salience in the Nur movement, where it becomes the ideal for a new kind of unity among Muslims. Only if reunited in this way can they wish to challenge the forces of unbelief that threaten their own existence. Yet, to be successful, this renewed sense of brotherhood must incorporate the same sense of unity that the "spiritual personality" of the forces of unbelief have been demonstrated to carry. In this regard, Nursi melds long-standing Islamic patterns of solidarity based on brotherhood with a modern corporatist view of unity in a quite original way.

Fourth, this redefinition of the ideal of brotherhood to fit the organisational needs of the time has caused significant parallel shifts in the hierarchy of the Islamic virtues within the movement. In the Nur view, sincerity acquires a particular prominence and centrality: it becomes the key disposition for the cultivation of other virtues like humility, dedication and self-sacrifice for the other brothers. As such, *ihlas* becomes the seal of the Nur movement's call into

⁴³ However, he could be considered a patriot, since during World War I he led a troop of volunteers against the Russian army and, after his return, in 1918 he joined the resistance against the Western occupation of Anatolia.

brotherhood for a renewed unity of Muslims. While before sincerity was mainly conceived as an individual virtue that was necessary to achieve that level of purity of the heart that is needed to strengthen one's relationship with God and make one's actions religiously meritorious, in the Nur framework, the virtue of sincerity is rethought in a collectivistic fashion. Whereas it remains important for the cultivation of individual faith, the purity of heart that members of the Nur movement aim to attain is seen as functional to unifying and harmonising their will as they struggle against the non-religious forces that dominate society.

In sum, the case of the *Suffa* community well illustrates the interpenetration of modern forms of organisation and modern discourses about education with long-standing Muslim civilisational trajectories. While the second type of modernity was particularly useful to interpret the community's main stance up to the time that I conducted my research, it is possible to wonder whether any significant change toward a third type of modernity has taken place in the last 10 years, during which the Islamic-inspired Justice and Development Party (AKP) has consolidated its power and religious-cum-cultural hegemony over the country. Given the new context, it would be valuable to see whether today's affiliates of the *Suffa* and other Nur groups still have the feeling of being under the threat of secular forces and, for this reason, of needing the strong unity against the forces of disbelief that was professed by Nursi and that I saw was still recounted until 2010. In Turkey, a new generation of growingly impatient religiously conservative youth is emerging which contests the government's grasp on power and its repressive and intolerant behaviour to the point that they have come to question their attachment to a religious culture such as this and, sometimes, even to their faith. While this may not be the case for young people affiliated with the Nur movement, it may be that more "self-reliant" and individual kinds of subjectivity are also appearing within its ranks which might reinterpret the collectivistic nature of the movement and eventually cause it to abate. This, however, is something that only new ethnographic research within the movement can reveal.

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