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# The Role of Values Education in Countering Violence

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## Abstract

The problem of violence and its prevention is a central issue in the modern age. Acts of violence are often associated with the religious identities of the perpetrators. The misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims by the media and politicians has unfortunately become a common scenario. On the other hand, research into extremism, violence and terrorism proves that there are other factors than religion that prepare the fertile ground for such acts. Moreover, understanding the causes of violence and developing effective strategies to counter it as well as strengthening resilience in the community has become a significant need of governments, communities and individuals. This study adopted narrative literature review as its research method. The paper is organised in three main parts. The first part analyses theoretical and research based literature about the underlying factors that lead to violence. The second section focuses on values education as the means to develop resilience as well as resistance to violence with reference to relevant research studies. Intervention studies discussed in this section especially demonstrate practical applications of values education. The third section goes on to analyse a specific case in Turkish history in which values education was used to build resilience against persecution and violence. The principles of compassion towards others and wisdom in various areas of life are two main values found to be effectively used to counter violence. The authors suggest that the teaching and practice of these values can reduce violent acts towards others as well as build resilience against such acts when committed by others.

**Keywords:** values education, compassion, wisdom, violence, Islam, Islamophobia

## Introduction

In the modern era, religions and their followers are experiencing many challenges both in ideological and practical terms. With the rise of secularisation at a government level and among their own communities at a social level, practising a religion has become a struggle for many mainstream followers of religions. These changes have led to many different reactions as some chose to adapt and some chose to reject. Moreover, mass media and social media have also started associating religions and religious communities with certain negative constructs. Paedophilia, sexual misconduct, and violence are some common examples of these constructs that are frequently reported in the media which in turn cause

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negative perceptions in the minds of the public against these religions and religious communities. In recent years, the constructs of violence, extremism and terrorism have been used side by side the words Islam and the Muslim by the media and politicians alike. Today, this issue has also become a serious controversial topic of discussions around the world and particularly in the Middle East. Although media depictions may be exaggerated and politicians may feed Islamophobia for their own agendas, there are instances which involve violence both in the Muslim majority countries and in non-Muslim countries. It is important to explore the causes of such violent acts for developing effective mechanisms to counter them.

This article discusses values education as an effective strategy against violence, both to prevent its occurrence and to build resilience. Moreover, a case from Turkey will be used as a case to demonstrate how Islamic values education can be a successful method in countering acts of violence and persecution in a society.

In this study, the underlying causes of violence and values education as a strategy against violence are discussed through analysis of theoretical and research literature. Moreover, for the Turkish case Said Nursi's (1873-1960) biography, and his collection of writings, the *Risale-i Nūr*, were analysed to see how he used moral values of compassion and wisdom against violence. Thus, the proposed strategy of countering violence and being resilient against it is based on Nursi's notions of compassion and wisdom.

## 2. Understanding Factors Causing Violent Acts

From the first human being until today humanity witnessed different forms of violence. Violence, with high social, economic and psychological costs, is considered to be one of the most critical problems in human history. Because of violence, the lives of millions of people are lost each year and a huge economic cost is borne.<sup>1</sup> Owing to violence, many individuals suffer from mental health issues. With the evolution of the rule of law and democracy, to some degree, violence has declined. However, across all countries, it remains a current global issue.<sup>2</sup> Understanding the factors and the reasons causing violent acts will be helpful to discuss the solutions offered in this paper.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) believed that as the primary reason for all actions, humanity is motivated by the “will to power.”<sup>3</sup> Power increases the likelihood of survival of man, and violence is one of the most significant means. Violence, as an instrument of

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<sup>1</sup>David W. Brown, “Economic Value of Disability-Adjusted Life Years Lost to Violence: Estimates for WHO Member States,” *Revista Panamericana de Salud Pública* 24 (September 2008): 203-9.

<sup>2</sup>Susanne Karstedt, “Democracy, Values, and Violence: Paradoxes, Tensions, and Comparative Advantages of Liberal Inclusion,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 605 (2006): 50-81.

<sup>3</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power: In Science, Nature, Society and Art*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Vintage, 2011).

power, intimidates enemies and provides access to wealth. Power has several forms where violence is a form of it. One can say that violence is power in action. Violence also has several forms such as killing a human being to physical injury. Killing is considered the most extreme type of violence.

According to Tore Bjorgo, in certain cases for example, in self-defense circumstances, whether it involves an attack on a person, a foreign aggression or an invading power, most people agree that the use of violent force might be legitimate. The state has been provided a monopoly on the lawful use of force through the police and military armed forces within defined limits. These restrictions can differ greatly from country to country, but there are some international principles and conventions relating to the use of force. However in some contexts, the use of violent force may not be legitimate in any way. That is generally called terror. Moral obstacles to causing death and misery on others are likely to discourage most individuals from participating in terrorism, even though they might have severe grievances.<sup>4</sup>

Basic awareness, socialization and education are the main factors in which these expectations are internalized by children and young adults. Parents, teachers and other moral leaders are the primary preventive players, but peers and other role models may increasingly play leading roles in influencing attitudes. While standards and moral values are perhaps the most powerful deterrents against involvement in terrorism and violence, some people have little scruples over causing misery to others. Even within “normal people” morals, there is a delicate shield that may crumble down in such conditions. However, building and upholding those expectations is one of the most successful methods for the prevention of terrorism.<sup>5</sup> Therefore violence has many different kinds of sources. According to a study conducted on Values and Violence Endorsement among College Students in Turkey, the data significantly contribute to the understanding of the relationship between values, gender, and violence.<sup>6</sup>

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) suggests the following are eight motivating factors that may cause extreme action and potentially motivate the person to turn to violent extremism as “a). The role and impact of global politics; b) Economic exclusion and limited opportunities for upward mobility; c) Political exclusion and shrinking civic space; d) Inequality, injustice, corruption and the violation of human rights; e) Disenchantment with socio-economic and political systems; f) Rejection of growing diversity in society; g) Weak state capacity and failing security; and h) A changing global

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<sup>4</sup>Tore Bjorgo, *Strategies for Preventing Terrorism* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013), 32.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>6</sup>Veysel Bozkurt and Hakan Gülerce, “Values and Violence Endorsement among College Students in Turkey,” *The Journal of Humanity and Society* (2019): 16.

culture and banalisation of violence in media and entertainment.”<sup>7</sup> The pull factors of violent extremism include a quest for identity, socialisation through media experiences, especially social media channels, and schools, religious and cultural organisations.<sup>8</sup> As seen in the push and pull factors, violence does not directly relate to the religious understanding of a person or society directly. But religious teachings can definitely affect the worldview of a person on these push and pull factors. With values of compassion and wisdom a person can practice a balanced and meaningful life without violent actions.

Many people think that the source of violence comes from religious matters, while some think that violence emerges from political issues and excessive desire for power. Some violent groups have apparent supporters from Muslim communities especially in areas of conflict. Moreover, such views can be supported by an interpretation of the message of Islam radically different from the mainstream tradition. The evidence is the scholars who condemn those particular views both in their communities and in the media. Therefore, there is a pressing question in the minds of many people whether Islam really encourages violence.

Public representations of Islam in the media are frequently associated with the problem of violence. As a result, many people with limited experience of Islam and Muslims assume that Islam allows acts of terrorism, extremism, and war because of such media reports every day. It is notable that if the attacker is a Muslim, terror attacks generate five times more media attention.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, with the rise of new technology and social media networks that are easily accessible through smartphones and other gadgets, the issues on killings, kidnappings, persecutions, and shootings are always on top of the news and such actions tend to shape peoples’ perceptions of the religion. However, the very fundamental message of the religion is “Islam means peace.” Islam is a religion of peace that teaches compassion, peace, fellowship, dignity, morality, justice, and tolerance to its believers. Most notably, Islam is against bigotry and forbids society’s racism. If someone in the name of Islam, commits violence, then it must be understood that he is deviant and contradicts the teachings of Islam.<sup>10</sup> In this paper we suggest that societies can counter violence through values education in an effective way.

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<sup>7</sup>“Preventing Violent Extremism through Promoting Inclusive Development, Tolerance and Respect for Diversity” (United Nations Development Programme, 2016), 17, <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/>.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>John Esposito, and Derya Iner, eds., *Islamophobia and Radicalization: Breeding Intolerance and Violence* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 94, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-95237-6>.

<sup>10</sup>Muhammad Zaman Nazi, Abdur Rashid Qadri, and Farman Ali, “The Role of Religion in Establishing Peaceful Coexistence in Society,” *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 8, no. 2 (October 2, 2018): 163.

### 3. Values Education as a Strategy to Counter Violence

In response to violent attacks by individuals or terrorist groups, there is usually a demand from the society to deliver justice. This “justice” is frequently delivered through security-focussed approaches to counter violence by police and military interventions. However, Lawale concludes that these measures failed to successfully counter violence.<sup>11</sup> As an alternative, she suggests a multiagency approach utilising education with the participation of government, non-government organisations, communities and the academicians using education as a strategy to counter violence: “...there is consensus amongst the various stakeholders that education at all levels and contexts, as discussed in the previous section, is crucial to prevent and counter violent extremism. Multi-disciplinary approaches are the recommended way forward for understanding the complex nature of the domain.”<sup>12</sup>

So what is the main reason why people refrain from committing crimes in general and violent ones in specific? Although the fear of punishment plays a role in psychology, there are other and maybe stronger deterrents against crime. Bjorgo explains the importance of self-control and compassion that can prevent a person from committing an act of violence. Other contributing factors such as interacting positively with other members of the society and internalising moral values can prove to be useful to deter individuals from violence. These factors are called “normative barriers.”<sup>13</sup> These normative barriers are very powerful deterrents in the face of crime or other morally and socially unacceptable behaviour. Therefore, an individual with a strong sense of self-control or conscience will not even consider morally unacceptable behaviour as an option. On the other hand, some legal offences are not seen in the same category and the same level of deterrence does not apply to them (e.g. some traffic offences or littering). Moreover, cultural norms play a role in these perceptions and development of self-control in the individuals and may minimise the severity of use of violence or even permit it in some situations.

Bjorgo suggests values education both in formal and informal institutions as a strategy to develop self-control and reduce violent crimes. This education can occur through cooperation among different agencies including family, schools and role models in the community. The representation of morals in action by these people and institutions can prevent violence by constructing strong moral values against it. The other agencies that can contribute to developing an understanding of right and wrong include the media, clergy and criminal justice system.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Shivali Lawale, “Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism Through Education: A Vital Element for the Peace Process in the Gulf,” *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 14, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2020.1730597>.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>13</sup>Bjorgo, *Strategies for Preventing Terrorism*, 12.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 13.

Grayling argues that human actions are motivated more by emotions than ration and they can reduce negative emotions when they encounter who they perceive to be different or “other”. This can be achieved through engaging in social dialogue in formal and informal situations where people can overcome their fear, anxiety and anger towards others. He adds that education is a key strategy in reducing violence among people: “Violence is a primitive means of expression, an immature one, blind to the world of the victim: what education hopes and strives to achieve is a surpassing of that primitivity of emotion, so that violence ceases to be even a last resort in human interaction, but no resort at all.”<sup>15</sup>

Although there is an emphasis on developing emotional aspects in Grayling’s work, the authors suggest here that a combination of both heart and the mind, emotions and reason, compassion and wisdom can prove to be a much stronger way to develop our human capacity in education as well as a strategy to tackle violence in different areas of life.

In a research study from Australia, Aly, et al. also underline the importance of values education as an important tool to counter violence, extremism and terror. Aly, et al. were actually part of a programme developed in Australia in response to the Bali bombings in 2002 and 2005 where an extremist group killed hundreds of people among whom were many Australian citizens. The educational intervention aimed to educate young people in schools in order to prevent any future occurrences of similar incidents as well as to build resilience against such attacks. The “Beyond Bali” programme was: “... designed to activate students’ self-regulatory mechanisms of moral agency and psychologically immunize them against the social influences that promote violent extremism.”<sup>16</sup>

In their research and intervention, Aly, et al. adopted social cognitive theory of moral disengagement. This theory is based on the suggestion that people when they engage in violence and aggression violate their own moral code. Socialization is how this code of morality is developed. The violation of such a code causes the individual to feel uncomfortable and therefore is generally avoided by most members of a society. Abiding by this moral code, on the other hand, adds to the feeling of “self-worth” and is therefore encouraged.<sup>17</sup>

In the face of a challenging situation, people choose to act in a violent or non-violent way based on the strength of the moral systems they have internalised. It is interesting to see parallels between moral disengagement theory and the teachings of most mainstream religions where refraining from sin and committing good deeds are encouraged and supported by an internalised belief system. The main difference though is that in religion

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<sup>15</sup>Anthony C. Grayling, “Educating against Violence,” *Prospects* 48, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 9.

<sup>16</sup>Anne Aly, Elisabeth Taylor, and Saul Karnovsky, “Moral Disengagement and Building Resilience to Violent Extremism: An Education Intervention,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37, no. 4 (April 3, 2014): 383, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2014.879379>.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 374.

individuals are also held to account by God on the Day of Judgement which bears reward or punishment in eternal life as well as consequences in the worldly life.

Owing to the difficulty of quantitative analysis of effectiveness in such programmes Aly, et al. did not report their programme's success in those terms. However, there was still an observable level of positive impact of the intervention reported by the participants in their interviews. In their evaluation of this intervention Aly, et al. concluded that it was successful in "building resilience by engaging participants in constructing violent extremism as unjust and inhumane; creating empathy with victims of violent extremism; developing self-efficacy in resisting violent extremism influences and responding to influences in positive, productive ways and considering the devastating impacts of violent extremism."<sup>18</sup>

In another study from Australia Halafoff, et al. examined national data and international research and concluded that "a critical approach to education about religions can assist young people to identify religions' ambivalent role in contributing to both cultures of violence – direct and structural – and cultures of peace."<sup>19</sup>

#### 4. Muslim Values Education against Violence

Alam reports the results of a case study from Sungai Penuh, Indonesia where different stakeholders worked in collaboration to counter violence. The roles of the political leader (mayor), government institutions, educational establishments, community leaders and social society initiatives to counter radicalism at an ideological and practical level are described in general terms. Although details of the intervention and the method of measuring effectiveness are not clear, a multidimensional approach with adopting cooperation among stakeholders is probably the only way to reach sustainable success against perceived legitimacy of violence in the community.<sup>20</sup>

In another study among the Muslim participants, Weine and Ahmed worked with the Somali Muslim community in Minneapolis USA. The aim of the project was to identify risk factors for violent extremism and develop some counter-measures. The study included interviews with youth and community leaders. The results of the study revealed that stronger Islamic education with focus on essential teachings of "peace and harmonious coexistence" could be useful in countering perceptions of violence as a licit means.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 383.

<sup>19</sup>Anna Halafoff, Kim Lam, and Gary Bouma, "Worldviews Education: Cosmopolitan Peace building and Preventing Violent Extremism," *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 40, no. 3 (July 3, 2019): 381, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2019.1600113>.

<sup>20</sup>Masnur Alam, "A Collaborative Action in the Implementation of Moderate Islamic Education to Counter Radicalism," *International Journal of Innovation, Creativity and Change* 11, no. 7 (2020): 497.

<sup>21</sup>Stevan Weine, and Osman Ahmed, "Building Resilience to Violent Extremism among Somali-Americans in Minneapolis-St. Paul," *Final Report to Human Factors/Behavioral Sciences*



## 5. Building Resilience against Violence through Values Education: A Case from Turkey

There are various interpretations of the term *jihād* among the classical and modern era Muslim scholars. The discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is important to describe Said Nursi's approach to the use of physical force and violence from his own works as well as his biography. The aim here is to understand his teachings on moral values education related to the use of physical force for defense and other forms of *jihād* in the case of Turkey during a period of religious persecution. This analysis can also provide a resilience strategy for religious communities under persecution and an alternative to violence as a reaction against such pressures.

Said Nursi differentiated between two forms of *jihād* as a struggle within the rules of religion: one internal and the other one external. The external *jihād* involves the use of force particularly for the purpose of self-defence. This was considered mainly a temporary application and use of force. For example, in his early life, Said Nursi fought against the invasion of the Russians and the Armenians during WWI and received medals due to his bravery and service to save the civilians from massacres by these invading forces. Moreover, his merciful behaviour against the women and children captured by his forces and returning them to their community set an example of compassion even during traumas of war. This also resulted in a halt to the execution of Muslim women and children by the enemy side.<sup>22</sup>

The second type of *jihād* Said Nursi identified was an internal one which was not restricted to a time and place. This second category did not involve use of physical force which he practised and taught for the most part of his life. The difference between the two are explained as follows: "... the essential matter at this time is the jihad of the word or moral *jihād* (*jihād manawī*). It is to form a barrier against the moral and spiritual destruction, and to assist internal order and security with all our strength. Yes, there is a power in our way, but this force is for preserving public order."<sup>23</sup> There are important principles to underline here. First, he did not negate the use of power altogether but restricted it to external aggression such as defending one's country against invasion. This is consistent with his personal practice. Second, preserving public order despite unjust persecutions and other violations by some people in power is internal jihad. Moreover, the teaching of the Qur'ān on individual liability in the case of sin and crime are important.<sup>24</sup> Nursi also quotes this verse as an important reason why physical force or violence cannot be used internally: "the brother, family, or children of a criminal cannot be held responsible

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*Division, Science and Technology Directorate* (U.S. Department of Homeland Security College Park, MD: START, 2012).

<sup>22</sup>Sukran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

<sup>23</sup>Said Nursi, *Emirdağ Letters* (İstanbul: Sözlür Publications, 2020), 506.

<sup>24</sup>Al-Qur'ān: al-An'ām 6:164.

for him. It is because of this that throughout my life we have endeavoured with all our strength to maintain public order. This force may not be employed internally, but only against external aggression.”<sup>25</sup> Compassion towards the majority of the society and even the innocent relations of those oppressors prevented the use of any physical force. Wisdom also required such acts of patience and perseverance as they resulted in continuous moral teachings to the society and a long-term but successful change in the minds and hearts of the people.

## 6. The Analogy of Concentric Circles

In order to understand the principles of internal *jihād* (*jihād manawi*) it would be useful to analyse the reasons why Said Nursi did not engage in politics or encourage his students to achieve his goals through powers of the government. During his unlawful exile in Kastamonu, WWII was causing destruction internationally. Although Turkey was not involved in the war, people lived in fear of war and followed it closely. Moreover, the war affected many Muslims around the world which would be of concern to a scholar of religion. In spite of all these reasons, Said Nursi did not ask of the war nor paid any attention to it and in response to the questions he explained man’s duties using a metaphor of concentric circles. There are smaller circles in the centre of one’s life starting from the most basic, immediate and continuous needs and duties. As the circles grow in size (to home, family, society, nation, humanity etc.) these needs and duties become less important and temporary.<sup>26</sup>

It can be understood that paying continuous attention to inner circles of relation such as matters of spirituality and religion (e.g. heart and the mind) as well as close social relations (e.g. family and community) are more significant and more worthy to spend time on. Through reflection and internalisation of this analogy having a continuous purpose in life can help individuals and communities refrain from using violence. Moreover, he adds that such clashes as wars can legitimize violence and oppression for the viewers and warns about the spiritual harm caused by ideologically supporting such tyranny.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, he mentioned sincerity as one of the main reasons why he did not engage in politics although in his early life he was very capable of it. Nursi states that owing to the strong feelings of partisanship prevalent in politics and religion can be exploited by some to achieve political gain. Therefore, utmost sincerity requires reliance on God’s grace rather than sacrifice piety.<sup>28</sup> It may be necessary to note here that these instructions were for his close students who were actively engaged in the Islamic education of the society. If the context is not well understood, it can lead to false assumptions about political engagement altogether.

<sup>25</sup>Said Nursi, *Emirdağ Letters*, 506

<sup>26</sup>Said Nursi, *The Rays*, trans. Sukran Vahide (İstanbul: Sözlere Publications, 2020), 223.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 223.

<sup>28</sup>Nursi, *Emirdağ Letters*, 53.

Another reason to avoid political movements against the persecution of the state was the principle of compassion against the widespread abuse of force by governments and individuals: ‘No bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another,’<sup>29</sup> that is, no one, not even a relative, is guilty because of another’s fault and does not deserve punishment. But in the face of this principle of divine will, at this time, in accordance with the meaning of “Man is indeed given up to injustice and ingratitude,”<sup>30</sup> some people retaliate with extreme ferocity.

Nursi continues with examples of the widespread violence that he has observed during the wars. It is unfortunate to see that modern military and police interventions do not restrict their attacks on the combatants and criminals and many civilians are also victims of these. The Qur’ānic verse he refers to about individual responsibility in the face of Islamic law is an important lesson to humanity especially enforcers of law.

On the other hand, his emphasis on compassion and regular contemplation were apparent in the treatises he wrote which were compiled into the *Risale-i Nūr* Collection. There, he frequently expanded on the merged use of mind and heart as they were centres of contemplation and compassion.

### 7. Jihād of Sword and Jihād of Word

*Jihād* is an Islamic term which is derived from the root word “*jahada*,” meaning to toil or to exert (oneself) strenuously. It is not merely defined as a struggle that appropriates physical force against an invader (self-defense), but it also reflects a greater personal and spiritual struggle against the evils of one’s soul and an intellectual struggle against the forces of ignorance. Muhammed Yaseen Gada comments that “*Jihād* in Islam has much broader connotations; the ultimate aim of which is to extirpate oppression, aggression, *fitnah/fasād* (disorder; persecution; corruption on the earth).”<sup>31</sup> There are many ways to strive or to toil on the path of God as a means to seek God’s pleasure and receive God’s guidance. We see this meaning of *Jihād* in Nursi’s life experiences. Even in very difficult times, he urged his students to use the power of pen and good spoken word in response. Thus, he reveals the implied wisdom behind the challenging situations which are being courageous and hopeful in the mercy of God who generously grants success to those who make genuine efforts by earnestly seeking God’s guidance.

According to Nursi, the real enemies of humanity are ignorance, poverty and conflict. He states that “we shall therefore fight against these three enemies with the ‘weapons’ of

<sup>29</sup>Al-An’ām 6:164.

<sup>30</sup>Ibrāhīm 14:34.

<sup>31</sup>Muhammad Yaseen Gada, “Beyond Violence: Deconstructing the Contemporary Western Discourse of Jihād,” *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 06, no. 02 (October 2016): 48, <https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.62.03>.

education, industry and brotherhood.”<sup>32</sup> This is the real meaning of *jihād* for Nursi as these ‘weapons’ highlight Nursi’s implied message which is the essence of wisdom and compassion as humanity is appreciated and respected and not degraded and discriminated against. Rather than blaming others, Nursi’s teachings emphasize that the inner evil self is the first and foremost enemy.

Nursi understands that the wars of current times cause casualties of innocent civilians. He repeatedly states that those cannot be punished on account of the faults of their political leaders or fellow countrymen. He often quotes from the Qur’ān a fundamental principle of Islam: “No bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another.”<sup>33</sup> Even a sibling is not accountable or punishable for the mistakes of his/her sibling. This prohibition of unlawful killing in all major religions is unfortunately one of the most violated in Middle East as well as the rest of the world. It is remarkable that Nursi frequently mentions this verse in his letters (*Emirdağ* Letters) to his students.

Another point to note is, Nursi’s moral values reveal his compassion to the weak and oppressed from diverse religions which is very apparent in his writings during the horrors of World War I and II. These also make a distinction between the aggressors and the civilians where the former met with divine justice and the latter with divine mercy.<sup>34</sup> In essence, Nursi stresses internal *jihad* as the struggle of each person against the menaces of the evil commanding soul and try to reform it through exemplary characteristics of the prophets, to love others in the name of the Creator and to mend social ills through offering reasonable advice. The tools for this *jihad* are clear proofs, “for the civilized are to be conquered through persuasion, not compulsion. Investigation of the truth should be prompted by love, while enmity should be reserved for savagery and bigotry.”<sup>35</sup> Eventually this reveals Nursi’s compassionate thoughts and meaningful actions filled with wisdom which are solutions to heal the sickness of the soul.

### 8. Compassion Guided by Wisdom

Compassion is a word used frequently in everyday life, but it is rarely used with anything close to philosophical precision. This study will not concentrate on the ontological or epistemological meaning of compassion; rather, Nursi’s understanding and experience of compassion (compassion in action) together with wisdom will be examined in order to be applied as a remedy in today’s social sicknesses. Such an understanding and experience of compassion and wisdom may help us to respond to violence which results in the kind of catastrophic phenomena that can be seen in today’s world.

<sup>32</sup>Said Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon: From the Risale-i Nūr Collection*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Sözler Neşriyat, 1996), 78.

<sup>33</sup>Al-An’ām 6:164.

<sup>34</sup>Sukran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. by Ibrahim Abu Rabi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 90.

<sup>35</sup>Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, 78.

All chapters of the Qur'ān except one begin with the same sentence: “In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.” This verse has guided Nursi’s compassion not only in his daily life, but also became a key concept in his theological perspective. According to Ian Kaplow, Nursi’s compassion is a basic category of moral significance, not just a fundamental norm of Islam.<sup>36</sup> This point of view makes his understanding of compassion universal for the whole humanity. In her work on Said Nursi’s biography Şükran Vahide states: “Nursi’s sense of humanity and compassion reveals his profound concern for all human; it was this that drove him to conduct his intelligent, farsighted struggle that repaired and built rather than destroyed.”<sup>37</sup> Vahide explains how Nursi “draws moral lessons” from the points he’s making about compassion which display his wisdom through meaningful actions. Many of these points can be observed in his writings about harm done to innocents. Nursi writes, “Compassion, truth and right, and conscience, the fundamental way of the *Risale-i Nūr*, severely prohibit us from politics and from interfering in government.”<sup>38</sup> Through engaging in politics, innocent people may be harmed, and this will have an enormous effect on compassion, which assures us that innocent citizens will not be harmed. Nursi says: “It is because of this compassion that I absolutely never interfere with government or disturb public order.”<sup>39</sup>

Nursi’s concern for innocent people has a very significant place in his understanding of compassion. In his writings, he states public order is something which must be taken care of in favour of protecting and well-being of innocent people. This is why, he often emphasises the values respect, compassion and keeping the security in order.<sup>40</sup>

Another example shows the degree of compassion he has for his enemies. We can see again his concern for innocent people who may be affected as he wrote in one of his letters: “In the Afyon prison there were some petty officers who were jealous and mean-spirited; they harassed me terribly. Sometimes in this prison, I felt I suffered more in one day than I had in one month in the Denizli prison. In these circumstances, it came to my mind to invoke curses on them - the weapon of the oppressed. Suddenly I saw a girl of four or five looking pityingly into my window. I asked who it was and learned she was the prosecutor's daughter. And for the sake of innocents like her, I did not curse anyone.”<sup>41</sup>

Nursi’s compassion was thus a very powerful ‘weapon’ for his understanding of *jihād*. This powerful ‘weapon’ changes lives. Asım Allavi, in his work on Nursi, argues that Nursi’s heart possessed compassion towards people. He gives an example from Nursi’s life

<sup>36</sup>Ian Kaplow, *Nursi’s Compassion and Kant’s Categorical Imperative: Justice and Ethics in Building a Better World, Theodicy and Justice in Modern Islamic Thought* (Routledge, 2016), 243.

<sup>37</sup>Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 351.

<sup>38</sup>Nursi, *The Rays*, 372.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 395.

<sup>40</sup>Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 372.

<sup>41</sup>Abdulkadir Badıllı, *Bedüzzaman Said-i Nursi: Tarihçe-i Hayatı* (Timaş Yayınları, 1990), 1715.

when he was sent to Afyon prison with the usual fabricated charges. He was put in a ward which was exclusively for hard core criminals, including murderers. There he met with Tahir, nicknamed Kasap (Butcher) Tahir, for the heinous crime he had committed by killing his own wife and several other men. He was such a wicked person so he had to remain shackled in solitary confinement for long periods of time. As time passed with Nursi settling in with these criminals, the rays of belief gradually began to glitter in the ward; hearts like hard rock began splitting and sending forth water; tears gushed from eyes during the time Nursi delivered his lessons. The criminal ward was transformed into a spiritual habitat. It so happened one day Kasap Tahir, who was condemned as the merciless slaughterer of his own wife, came to Nursi asking if it was allowed to kill the bed bugs that haunt them day and night.<sup>42</sup> It reveals how Nursi's enduring compassion through wisdom has transformed the life of a criminal who has committed a very serious crime. Nursi was very thoughtful as he teaches with passion and patience and this reveals his wisdom in managing a very challenging situation in a wise way.

Nursi also reveals the notion of compassion by appreciating the important role of women in the society. In Nursi's biography, he says "From my mother I learnt compassion, and from my father orderliness and regularity."<sup>43</sup> Therefore, he implies the values of compassion and wisdom can be learnt at the early young ages of a person from the very first educator in life, from one's mother.

Nursi's understanding of compassion is balanced, in accordance with the 'middle way' - neither excess, nor deficiency. In the teachings of Nursi, compassion should always be practiced together with wisdom. If a child is crying for chocolate, is it compassionate to give in to his demands or to refuse? Outsiders who do not know what is happening when they see a child crying while the parents remain silent and do not respond may think that those parents lack compassion. But their compassion is actually at the highest level, because they know that to give in to the child would be injustice and not compassion. In other words, Nursi's compassion is not something which just flows out without any check or balance. As in Nursi's view, compassion is gentle and pure, wide and embracing and sincere.<sup>44</sup> Thus, he practices compassion with the cover of wisdom as he evaluates the situation and considers the consequences and implications.

Nursi always advised his students to act positively through consultation with the other members of the community and strengthening their belief through patience and perseverance in the face of difficulties. The source of this action is again his understanding of compassion. He states that because of the compassion that has been his principle for over thirty years and in order to prevent the innocent from harm, he chose not to even think and act negatively against the persecutions he suffered. The reason he accounts is the

<sup>42</sup>Asim Alavi, *Seeds of Change*, ed. Hakan Gülerce (İstanbul: Vakıf Yayınları, 2013), 4-5.

<sup>43</sup>Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 4.

<sup>44</sup>Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', ed., *Spiritual Dimensions of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Risale-i-Nür*, First Edition (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 16.

innocent relatives of those tyrants who will also be affected from Divine wrath. Therefore, he sometimes even forgave them.

Nursi also states that “It is because of this compassion that I absolutely never interfere with government or disturb public order. Moreover, I have recommended this so strongly to all my friends that some of the fair-minded police of three provinces have admitted that these *Risale-i Nūr* students are police of a sort; they preserve order and maintain public security.”<sup>45</sup> In today’s world, issues on violence are mostly not motivated by religions. The conflict mostly starts with political issues, excessive desire for power, egoistic desire to dominate, control, and retaliate. Nursi, by his understanding of compassion, takes refuge from politics. He says “Compassion, truth and right, and conscience, which are fundamental to the *Risale-i Nūr*’s way, prohibit us sternly from engaging in politics and interfering in government.”<sup>46</sup> He rightly states that “Don’t let the satanic principle of ‘love for the sake of politics, enmity for the sake of politics’ take the place of the divine principle, ‘love for God’s sake; enmity for God’s sake.’ Don’t agree to the tyranny of displaying hatred for your brother and love and support for a satanic political colleague, and so in effect share in his crime.”<sup>47</sup> These strong feelings of division and partisanship have become the source of violence in the Middle East in these recent years.

Love is also a form of compassion in Nursi’s teachings and life experience as for him, love should be in the center of one’s heart. Love is a verb and needs action. He states, “Love is the very heaven of the universe. It is through love that all beings are in motion.”<sup>48</sup> He did not merely talk about love but he also practiced it and taught his students how to practice it. He was always against enmity. He stated in his writings that “Our way is love toward love and enmity toward enmity; that is, to assist love among the Muslims and defeat the forces of enmity.”<sup>49</sup> The most important problem for him in the social and political life is “love of enmity.” The solution for this problem is “love of love”. He says again “the thing most worthy of love is love, and the quality most deserving of enmity is enmity.” It is love that guarantees the life of society and ensures happiness, while enmity and hatred destroy them.<sup>50</sup> Nursi’s argument on “love of love” is very unique as when one loves for the sake of God, the degree of his love increases and eventually leads to compassion. Nursi’s compassion was not only directed towards humanity but also other creatures in the universe. Thus, Nursi reveals his compassionate attribute with wisdom as he contemplates on each situation that teaches him humanistic values.

<sup>45</sup>Nursi, *The Rays*, 395.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 321.

<sup>47</sup>Nursi, *Kastamonu Lahikası*, 84.

<sup>48</sup>Said Nursi, *The Words*, Translated by Sukran Vahide. (Istanbul: Sozler, 2004), 652.

<sup>49</sup>Nursi, *Damascus Sermon*, 76.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 76.

## 9. Conclusion

In this study, the authors have tried to demonstrate through the review of research studies that a direct association between religious beliefs and violence is a wrong though a popular assumption. There are other factors that are at the root of the violence problem which need addressing by a multi-agency intervention including home, school, community, academia and government. In order to prevent violence and to develop resilience in the community against it, values education should be utilised as a strategy. The previous literature and research have demonstrated some successful interventions although this success is not always quantifiable. The analysis of a Turkish case where famous scholar Said Nursi adopted teaching and practice of compassion and wisdom provides a useful example for values education against violence. Thus, in such an age of increasing misunderstanding, anger, tensions and inequalities that can foster tendency towards violence in the societies, Nursi's teachings of compassion and wisdom can provide an alternative to violence in the society. In order to reduce violence and to increase resilience against it, the values of compassion and wisdom can be adopted in values education programs integrated into school curricula or delivered in less formal community based programmes.

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