

# True justice is beyond the reach of Modernistic reason: on some similarities in the writings of Said Nursi and Jacques Derrida

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”Man, whose life is so brief, cannot experience the true essence of justice in this transient world; [---] this passing and transient world is far from manifesting such wisdom and justice for man”<sup>1</sup> Thus said the Kurdish Islamic thinker Bediüzzaman Said Nursi in the little Turkish village of Barla in 1925. At the Cardozo Law School in metropolitan New York in the autumn of 1989 the French post modern philosopher Jacques Derrida said:

justice is incalculable, it requires us to calculate with the incalculable; and aporetic experiences are the experiences, as improbable as they are necessary, of justice, that is to say of moments in which the decision between just and unjust is never insured by a rule.<sup>2</sup>

Their remarks seem to be in some senses compatible, in content if not in their style of expression. That might be surprising, given that they come from two men of very different surroundings and circumstances. I will propose an explorative reading of the *Risale-i Nur* through the writing of Jacques Derrida as a way to broaden the understanding of the place of justice in Said Nursi’s life and work. I will also elaborate on what the similarities between these two thinkers on worldly justice from so different angles are. Of course it has also to be considered on what levels the similarities are situated. Maybe they are not as compatible as it might seem from a first glance.

As a conclusion I will try to argue that, since the theories of worldly justice of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi and Jacques Derrida have common traits, the conflict between Islam and Western

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<sup>1</sup> Said Nursi, Bediüzzaman, *The Words: On the nature and purposes of Man, Life and all things, From the Risale-i Nur Collection 1*, Sözlür Publications, Istanbul, 2004, 10<sup>th</sup> Word, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida, Jacques, ”Force of Law: The ’mystical foundation of authority’”, in *Deconstruction and the possibility of Justice*, Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (ed.), Routledge, NewYork/London, 1992, p. 16.

philosophy as described in the *Risale-i Nur* is not applicable today. Nursi's discussions on Islam and Western philosophy are closely tied to the specific circumstances in late Ottoman and early republican Turkey. Within the field of Western philosophy there are new traditions and styles born after Said Nursi's time that shares much of the critique of positivistic philosophy and modernist Western civilization that Said Nursi formulated. This means that there is room for dialogue and some recognition of the others similar work from these two sides. This is of course also an argument meant to challenge all those who claim that East is East and West is West and that there exists a fundamental difference between the Western and the Islamic civilization.<sup>3</sup>

Since this article appears in a setting where Said Nursi is the main focus and therefore is fully presented throughout the book, I will start by setting Derrida in a context of what can be called a post modern critique of Western modernity. Jacques Derrida may be called *the* philosopher of post modernity. He is one of the most revered European philosopher of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and father of the fields of so-called deconstruction and post structuralism. "Derrida's name has probably been mentioned more frequently in books, journals, lectures, and common-room conversations during the last 30 years than that of any other living thinker." wrote *the Guardian* in its obituary.<sup>4</sup>

This is of course no conclusive argument for the choice of Derrida for a comparative reading of Said Nursi and contemporary Western philosophy. But as stated there are explorative possibilities in such a reading, and the example will hopefully prove its worth.

#### *Derrida as an Algerian Jew*

Derrida, who died in 2004 at the age of 74, was of Algerian Jewish decent. His critique of Western modernity was not only intellectual or philosophical, it also stemmed from a sense of exclusion that made him more acutely aware of the discrepancies between modernist rhetoric and action. Robert Young have argued that rather than being some philosophical vogue in Paris, it was the French atrocities in Algeria that gave birth to post modernism.<sup>5</sup> Derrida was educated in French culture at the same time as the French colonial rule in Algeria turned into

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<sup>3</sup> I have developed this further in Grinell, Klas "Beyond East and West: Fethullah Gülen and border thinking", in *Peaceful coexistence: Fethullah Gülen's initiatives in the contemporary world*, ed. Ihsan Yilmaz, Leeds Metropolitan University Press, London, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/2004/oct/11/guardianobituaries.france> (accessed 25th Mars -08)

<sup>5</sup> Young, Robert, J. C., *Postcolonialism: an historical introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2001.

war, a war eventually won by the Algerians. The rift between rhetoric and action was deep and acute. But I think Derrida's earlier confrontation with a harsh and wide spread anti-Semitism in French Algeria during the Second World War was even more formative and important to his views on Western civilisation. He had suffered beatings in the streets, insults for being a dirty Jew, and in 1942 he was barred from school for almost a year solely because of his alleged Jewishness. A Jewish identification was forced upon him by the Vichy regime, even though he came from a rather francified family.<sup>6</sup> Had he lived his youth in a different setting, Jewishness might never have become an issue for him.

In Algeria, as in all colonial places, it became violently clear and visible that Western modernity did not only mean the declaration of Human rights and belief in democracy; it was also a deadly practice to restrict those rights to Westerners only. In the words of Anne McClintock: "imperialism is not something that happened elsewhere – a disagreeable fact of history external to Western identity. Rather, imperialism and the invention of race were fundamental aspects of Western, industrial modernity."<sup>7</sup>

#### *Post colonial studies: derridian offspring*

McClintock can be called a post modern, post colonial thinker. A common ground for post colonial studies, very much inspired by Derrida, is a critique of the scientific belief in the possibility of a full and objective knowledge of man. The established scientific knowledge of Man and his role in the world have been formulated in the West, often this knowledge have been used to justify geopolitical injustices. A clear formulation of this view can be found in Edward Said's important book *Culture and Imperialism*. In that book Said is saying that even the high culture of Western modernity, like the novels of Jane Austen or operas of Verdi, is closely linked and dependent on colonial imperialism. The 'Progress' and 'Development' of the West can never be fully understood without a simultaneous consideration of the oppression of the rest of the world that took place at the same time and according to the same foundational ideas. The non-Western world has had to play the role of a total opposite and Other to the West. That means that what in positivistic modernity has been viewed as objective scientific knowledge of the inhabitants of other parts of the world is tainted by colonial power.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Powell, Jason, *Jacques Derrida: a biography*, Continuum, London, 2006, pp. 9.

<sup>7</sup> McClintock, Anne, *Imperial leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest*, Routledge, London, 1995, s. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Said, Edward W., *Culture and imperialism*, Vintage Books, New York, 1994. For an introduction to post colonial critique, see Gandhi, Leela *Postcolonial theory: a critical introduction*, Edinburgh University Press,

Modern empiricism said that if people turned out to be different, that had to be accepted. And since empirical observations very often took the white middle aged male as a norm, non-Westerners and women appeared to be different and therefore inferior.<sup>9</sup>

### *Said Nursi as an Ottoman Kurd*

Said Nursi was born in 1877 in Bitlis province, in a rather ordinary family that in Sukran Vahides words “were among the settled Kurdish population of the geographical region the Ottomans called Kurdistan”.<sup>10</sup> For the same purposes as I stressed the Jewishness of Derrida I want to lay weight on the Kurdishness of Said Nursi.

During the reign of the Young Turks Committee of Union and Progress Said Nursi, also known as Said Kurdi, lobbied for the educational rights of Kurdish children in the East, dressed in traditional Kurdish garb. His straightforward and uncourtly manners got him arrested and sent to mental asylum.<sup>11</sup> In the fourteenth Ray he quotes a former governor who tried to scare away his friends by picking on the fact that he was a Kurd and a follower of the Shafi legal school, different from the hanafi Turks.<sup>12</sup> To reach out in Istanbul he had started communicating in Ottoman Turkish, his third language after Kurdish and Arabic, which he from then on used as the vehicle for his teachings. Still he faced suspicion because of his Kurdish origin.

The full association with a Western reformist identity was never possible for him, and when the Republic opted for Turkish modernization in opposition to Islam he was sent into “compulsory residence” in various locations decided by the Republican regime until the coming to power of Adnan Menderes and the Democratic Party in the 1950s. Said Nursi died in 1960.

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Edinburgh, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Larrain, Jorge, *Ideology and cultural identity: modernity and the Third World presence*, Polity Press, Oxford, 1994, pp. 23.

<sup>10</sup> Vahide, Sükran, *Islam in modern Turkey: An intellectual biography of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, SUNY Press, Albany, 2005, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Vahide, pp. 33. It can be noted that 50 % of the seats in the parliament of 1908 were held by ethnic Turks.

<sup>12</sup> Said Nursi, Bediüzzaman, *The Rays collection, From the Risale-i Nur Collection 4*, Sözlük Publications, Istanbul, 2002, 14<sup>th</sup> Ray, p. 398.

Said Nursi's critique of Tanzimat and the Young Turks Turkism and view of progressive reforms as de-islamification has at least one foot in Kurdistan, always viewed as backward and belated. One can find different layers of experiences of coloniality in Said Nursi's biography.

*Said Nursi and the critique of modernity/coloniality*

Colonialism is fundamental in modernity and therefore it affects not only former colonizers or colonized peoples. It has deep effects on all countries, not the least those, such as my own home country Sweden or Said Nursi's Turkey, who have enrolled to modernity. Mucahit Bilici has described "Kemalist modernization in Turkey by the state [---] as cultural self-colonization."<sup>13</sup> Said Nursi called its supporters "pseudo-patriotic irreligious deviants who hid under the veil of Turkism and in reality are the enemies of the Turks."<sup>14</sup> He made a distinction between Turkish nationalism, which could include him as a Kurd united by religion with true Turks, and Turkism upheld by imitators of Europe.<sup>15</sup>

The history of the West in the West have for too long been written only from an inside perspective. It is our revered ideas, the basis of our identity and its history that all too often has been glorified. As long as only those who benefited from the spread of modernity was invited to write its history, the idea of what modernity meant was very much one eyed and blind to all its dark sides.

In time, more or less colonized people from the peripheries of modernity made their way into the metropolitan centers and their experiences resulted in very different stories being told. This happened on a broader scale in the 1960-ties. That was also the time when the environmental down sides of modernity's technoscientific spread started to show. Pesticides and exploitation of natural resources had created catastrophic effects for nature. To more and more people of the West it became obvious that the confident trust in Western man's abilities to rationally control the world was somewhat arrogant, and that modernization could be dangerous and lethal in the longer run.

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<sup>13</sup> Bilici, Mucahit, "Forgetting Gramsci and remembering Nursi: Parallel theories of Gramsci and Said Nursi in the space of Eurocentrism" in Ibahim Abu-Rabi (ed.), *Islam at the Crossroads: On the life and thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, SUNY Press, New York, 2003, p. 168.

<sup>14</sup> Said Nursi, Bediüzzaman, *Letters: 1928-1932, From the Risale-i Nur Collection 2*, Sözlük Publications, Istanbul, 2001, 29<sup>th</sup> letter, p. 492.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 503.

These critiques struck at the very heart of positivistic modernity. The critique could no longer be said to be just religious irrationalism or reactionary opposition to Development. But still most Western academics would only listen to voices trained in their own tongue. In the last decade or so more and more people are starting to realize that a similar critique have been present all along in the parts of the world that suffered from the colonial spread of modernity. Said Nursi is one of those earlier critics from the borderlands of modernity.

The global spread of industrialism and modernity took place with the colonial imperialism that Eric Hobsbawm in his influential *The age of Empire* dates to the period between 1875 and 1914.<sup>16</sup> The link between colonialism and modernity is no mere coincidence. The modern capitalistic world system, built with resources from the exploitations made by European colonial imperialism, is a foundational part of modernity. Persons like Said Nursi, growing up in an unprivileged part of an Empire under constant defeat from European powers, were more likely to meet the colonial practices of the West than most Western historians and philosophers who tasted its sweet fruits.

I think there is something to what Mucahit Bilici have argued about the similarities between Said Nursi and Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. But I would also like to stress differences related to Said Nursi's belonging to a strong alternative to Modernistic Europe, even if he came from a Kurdish marginality he was an Ottoman imperial official and military volunteer as well as an Islamic official. He could have opted for a blank rejection of European modernity – a possibility not open to someone like Gramsci.

There is a long tradition of critiques from within the margins of modernity. Gramsci is a political one from the imperial hey days; Derrida is a philosophical one from the post colonial era. Bilici argues that we who come from within those margins of modernity must acknowledge and high light those outside critiques, like Said Nursi's, that carry similar messages. But we must not subsume those outside voices into just a different shade of our own. If we draw to hard on the similarities the non-Western thinkers will come forward as mere imitators, or not fully developed versions of Western post modern critique.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Hobsbawm, Eric J., *The age of empire: 1875-1914*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1987.

<sup>17</sup> Bilici, Mucahit, "Forgetting Gramsci and remembering Nursi".

There are affinities in the different strands of critique against modernity that exists, and have existed, around the world. There are also certain elements that seem to be present almost everywhere. One is the critique of the one dimensional understanding of man and nature in positivistic modernity. This would imply that there is something of importance in the argument that a positivistic and self sure modernism lacks respect for the limitations of its beloved reason.<sup>18</sup>

The world is far more complex and sensitive than technoscientific progressivists have been able to see. The self assurant trust in modernisation has lead to very serious conditions for our globe. Technoscience must be held in check by something. That is a conclusion that many different people have drawn from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. What this something ought to be seems to be much more difficult to reach agreement on. When it comes to the formulation of alternatives Said Nursi and Derrida aren't very close. And it is difficult to see that Derrida has any clear positive alternative.

There are similarities in the different critiques of positivistic, modernistic belief in a just social order based on scientific methods. These different traditions and fields might also find inspiration and support from the other critiques coming from different angles.

This fact must not lead to the assumption that the different critics all strive for the same goals. From an Islamic perspective one can distinguish between three types of reason – human, prophetic and divine. True Justice is possible only for God and the Prophets.<sup>19</sup> There is a range of positions on how to view the possibilities to apply true godly justice in this world. In the settlements after the battle of Siffin the Kharijites criticised caliph Ali for his decision to let his dispute with Muawiya be settled by arbitrators. They argued that a judgment was for God alone, men should not try to settle what only God could judge.<sup>20</sup> Said Nursi is of course no Kharijite, but in a discussion of the wars in Ali's times in the fifteenth letter Said Nursi seems to come to the conclusion that both Muawiya and Ali could only strive for relative justice. In the political realities of this world no one can apply pure justice, the decisions will always be tainted by politics and turned into a choice of the lesser evil. Spiritual and worldly

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<sup>18</sup> Leaman, Oliver, "Nursi's place in the Ihya' tradition", *The Muslim World* (LXXXIX), 1999.

<sup>19</sup> Suhrawardi, Shihab al-Din Yahya, *Hayakal al-Nur/The Shape of Light*, interpreted by Tosun Bayrak, Fons Vitae, Louisville, 1998, p. 95.

<sup>20</sup> Hawting, G. R., "The Significance of the Slogan 'la hukma illa lillah' and the References to the 'Hudud' in the Traditions about the Fitna and the Murder of Uthman" in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 41, No. 3. (1978), pp. 460.

rule cannot be combined.<sup>21</sup> But this fact must not lead to extremist stances like the Kharijites', Nursi stressed.<sup>22</sup>

On the topics of prophetic and godly justice Derrida have nothing whatsoever to say. His hope for a better future is a more Jewish one, and much more agnostic – we can only keep the possibility open and wait and see. One day we will know. The exploration of similarities between Said Nursi and Derrida concerns only the human level.

### *The metaphysics of presence*

One of the starting points in Derrida's extensive writings is the critique of what he calls the metaphysics of presence. Scientific objectivity rests on an assumption that it is possible to get an objective view of reality. But from where does the scientific witness observe reality? Can Man really be present in an observable reality? The scientific trust in the observability of the world is metaphysical, Derrida claims.

There is no privileged or obvious presence in time or space from where man and his reason can see, understand and explain the world. Derrida argues that reality is always in motion, and that time therefore always is out of joint. It is impossible to find any place, any restricted present, where the observer can come to rest and from where he could see and understand the world. As soon as one tries to rest in a present *now*, a displacement takes place, time runs away from the observer and a difference between a time just past and the present arises. This means that it is impossible to make a difference between a real presence in a present and a representation of a present that has just passed.

We can therefore never understand what reality is or who we are, at best we might see what was, and who we were, a moment ago. Understanding always lags behind, since the circumstances we try to understand have always already changed. That means that objective observation and positivistic understanding is ultimately impossible. Reason is always belated and the world is too rich to be fully observed or understood by reason. This also means that any decision will always rest on the analysis of a situation that no longer is present.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Said Nursi, *Letters*, pp. 74 and *The Flashes collection, From the Risale-i Nur Collection 3*, Sözlük Publications, Istanbul, 2004, 14<sup>th</sup> Flash, pp. 131.

<sup>22</sup> See for example Said Nursi, *Flashes*, 4<sup>th</sup> Flash, pp. 40 and 13<sup>th</sup> Flash, p. 108.

<sup>23</sup> The most thorough explanation of this is given in Derrida, *La Voix et le phénomène: Introduction au problème du signe dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*. Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1967, chapter 4-5.

This argument on human reason could be seen as compatible with the view held by Said Nursi, and religious critics of philosophy in general, that man is not a self sufficient animal but a creature that on its own is impotent, weak, poor, and in need.<sup>24</sup> For Nursi and other religious thinkers this shows our deep need for humility and religious guidance. And as Said Nursi argues for example in the 10<sup>th</sup> Word there is lots of proof for the believer that there is divine justice in the Hereafter. “Since man is not called to account and judged in fitting fashion while in this world, it follows that he must proceed to a Supreme Tribunal and a final felicity.”<sup>25</sup>

### *Justice according to Derrida*

For Derrida a certain humbleness is crucial. We must realise that philosophy or science can never decide what is just. But according to Derrida the inescapable out of joint-ness of time makes justice a *possible* ideal and a *possible* way of behaving towards others. Every moment is in a fundamental way always open, and any experience can never be more certain than a maybe. This means that we always have a choice, and therefore we are always responsible for that choice. We can not say that it was the only reasonable way to act. Reason isn't conclusive. Since it is impossible to know for sure, laws can never be complete or decided to be just. Derrida speaks of justice as “a messianic hope” that is always unfulfilled in this world. True justice is a problem beyond the reach of philosophy and jurisprudence. That means that the Laws governing a state can never be proven to be Just, they can only be legitimate or not. Justice in this world can never be more than a promise and a hope.<sup>26</sup> Derrida's argument for the incompleteness of worldly justice is compatible with Nursi's view. But Derrida is agnostic about the possibility of the divine justice that lies at the heart of Nursi's argument.

Said Nursi meant that modern civilization was built on force, egoism, conflict, racialism and hedonism.<sup>27</sup> We have already seen that post colonial critique hold similar views. But one thing can be elaborated on further, since it is a prominent feature in both Derrida's and Said Nursi's theories of Justice – namely *force*.

### *Force and legitimacy: Derrida and Nursi*

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<sup>24</sup> See for example Said Nursi, *The Words*, 30<sup>th</sup> Word, p. 564.

<sup>25</sup> Said Nursi, *The Words*, 10<sup>th</sup> Word, pp. 90.

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, “Force of Law”, pp. 17.

<sup>27</sup> Said Nursi, *Seeds of reality*, seed 61, in *The Letters* s. 548 or *Words*, 30<sup>th</sup> Word, 561-69.

A law of course needs to be enforced to have any relevance. To discuss this aspect of justice Derrida elaborates on the German philosophers Immanuel Kant and Walter Benjamin, who both expressed the view that there can be no worldly justice without force.<sup>28</sup> But where is the line between this unavoidable use of force to uphold the Law, and unjust violence? That is one of the major questions in Derrida's text. Is there a non violent force?

To say "I am just!", or "This is just" is to betray justice, Derrida says.<sup>29</sup> We cannot know what is just, and to enforce what is not just is an act of violence. As long as modern civilization rests on a firm belief in the conclusiveness of Reason, it will rest on a violent force. "Modern civilizations [...] point of support is force", says Said Nursi. Derrida and Said Nursi can be read as supporting each other on that point. But Derrida goes on to say that a justice without force is not possible either. Justice that has no power to be enforced is no justice. Nursi would probably argue that God is the All-Powerful and All-Just, and that it is only in the level of divine justice that the problem can be solved. But when he stood in the courts of the Turkish Republic defending the *Risale-i Nur*, his friends and himself, he was facing this very problem and addressed it. In Afyon Court he defended himself and at one point said in response to all the harassments he had had to suffer: "Is it not unprecedented tyranny in the name of justice? Is it not an unprecedented miscarriage of justice on account of the law?"<sup>30</sup>

Derrida would say that the law never can be just, or at least we can never decide if it is in accord with justice. In a context where revelation is not a valid argument we have no way to decide. So we can't expect or demand that the Law shall be just. We can only demand that it should be legitimate.<sup>31</sup> And that is precisely the argument followed by Nursi when he was prosecuted. Probably because he understood that an argument from revelation or the Qu'ran would not be considered valid. It would rather have been seen as a proof of his guilt. In addressing the Afyon Court he reviewed his case from the principles of the Republic. The Republic embraces a principle of freedom of conscience that must be applied also to the students of the *Risale-i Nur*, he argues. A conviction in the case could not be legitimate, it would show that the court rulings of the Republic are not in accordance with the principles it itself says it embraces. Whether those principles are just or not might be another question.

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<sup>28</sup> Derrida, "Force of Law", pp. 29.

<sup>29</sup> Derrida, "Force of Law", p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Said Nursi, *The Rays*, 14th Ray, p. 373.

<sup>31</sup> Derrida, "Force of Law", pp. 16.

Even one who finds them not to be just can demand that the laws shall be legitimate and upheld.

I want my rights within the bounds of the law. I accuse of being criminals those who act against the law in the name of the law. The laws of the Government of the Republic certainly reject the arbitrary acts of such criminals. I am hopeful that my rights will be restored to me.<sup>32</sup>

*Against positivism, in different ways*

Mucahit Bilici's demands the recognition of Said Nursi's, and other non-Western intellectuals', contribution to the critique of modernity.

I would agree that reading Said Nursi gives a fuller and more elaborated understanding of Western modernity. I would also argue that a reader of Said Nursi can get a fuller and more elaborated understanding of modernity and worldly justice by reading Jacques Derrida.

There are interesting similarities in the critique of positivistic philosophy in these two writers. Both are anti-dualistic and deeply suspicious of the dichotomy of tradition vs. modernity. Derrida will often try to show that the shady place in between the clear sides of a dichotomy is more fundamental and original. Nursi does not, as is all too common, set up a choice between Islam and modernity. His way ahead is in a blend of the two sides that are truer and more original, more Islamic. Said Nursi's differentiation between two sorts of Europe is a well known example. He is no rough critic of Europe who says everything European is sinful or bad. Rather he sees a true civilization in Europe that needs to be recovered in the name of justice and right.<sup>33</sup> In a similar way Derrida is searching for a truer use of the European philosophical legacy. Derrida translator and post colonial critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has said that deconstruction is a persistent critique of what one cannot not want.<sup>34</sup> I think the phrase is suitable also for Said Nursi's relation to modern scientific enterprises.

Said Nursi or Derrida are no new age mystics who feel contempt for reason or science. They are criticizing those who use reason as an argument for oppression, and they both do it in the

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<sup>32</sup> Said Nursi, *The Rays*, 14th Ray, s. 455.

<sup>33</sup> Said Nursi, *The Flashes*, 17<sup>th</sup> Flash, p. 160. On this issue see Brodeur, Patrice C., "The Ethics of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's dialogue with the West in the light of his concept of 'Europe'", in Ian Markham and Ibrahim Ozdemir (ed.) *Globalization, Ethics and Islam: The case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, Ashgate, Burlington, 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *Outside in the teaching machine*, Routledge, London, 1993, "introduction".

name of a higher reasonability. But at that point it also becomes clear how big the differences are between one who has only a vague messianic hope that such a pure reason does exist, and one who stands firm in the belief in revelation and a supreme tribunal.

Derrida's religion is a very opaque monotheism bereft of any revelation. There is nothing higher than reason, but there are all too many that think too highly of what we can know for sure. So, Derrida and deconstruction teaches humbleness, it is a humbleness that stems from the fact that we never can rest assured that we are correct and righteous. That is its moral imperative. It is a constant reminder that we cannot know. Its centre is therefore emptiness. There is no room, or use, for prayer or supplications in its religiosity. The *Risale-i Nur* on the contrary is born from a firm contact with God, the All-Wise and All-Knowing. Where Derrida sees a faint and unreachable dream, Said Nursi sees an All-Powerful Maker and Sustainer. On that ontological level they are incompatible.

Deconstruction is about morality and justice. It is in line with the phrases *Allahu Akhbar* and *Deus semper Major* – God is always Greater. But deconstruction rather says that reason is always smaller: not describing, not knowing that to which it is smaller. It might be seen as somewhat affiliated with Ismaili thought as expressed in the *Rasail Ikhwan al-Safa*, or negative theology taken to its very extreme. From that follows that there are fields of morality connected to classical ethical and religious virtues that it has little to say about. For example the central virtue of patience (arab. *sabr*, lat. *patientia*).<sup>35</sup> Said Nursi wrote:

[H]uman advances and the attainments of civilization, which are to be observed, have been made subject to him [man] not through his attracting them or conquering them or through combat, but due to his weakness. He has been assisted because of his impotence. They have been bestowed on him due to his indigence. He has been inspired with them due to his ignorance. They have been given him due to his need. And the reason for his domination is not strength and the power of knowledge, but the

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<sup>35</sup> In a hadith recorded in Sahih Bukhari (8:477) the prophet Muhammad said “he who remains patient, Allah will bestow patience upon him, and he who is satisfied with what he has, Allah will make him self-sufficient. And there is no gift better and vast (you may be given) than patience.” (trans: Muhsin Khan). On this concept in relation to Nursi, see Asfaruddin, Asma, ”Patience is beautiful’: Qur’anic ethics in Said Nursi’s Risale-i Nur” in *Globalization, Ethics and Islam*. Patience is a virtue for all abrahamic religion, but maybe more important in mainstream Islam than in mainstream Christianity, even if it is hard to speak about such broad categories. For the classical Catholic Christian version of patience, see *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 1920, Literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Part II of Part II, Q. 136, “Patientia”.

compassion and clemency of the Sustainer and Divine mercy and wisdom: they have subjugated things to him.<sup>36</sup>

The All-Compassionate is one of the central divine names in the *Risale-i Nur*. It is he who sits at the supreme tribunal.<sup>37</sup> But the workings of the All-Compassionate are beyond even the dreams of Derrida who only operates on the level of human reason.

### *Conclusion*

There are some similarities in the experiences from the margins of modernity of Derrida and Said Nursi, and there are similarities in their critique of one dimensional positivism and an over confident assurance that human reason alone can govern the world. I have tried to show this on the subject of worldly justice.

From a post structuralist perspective religion can be seen as encompassing a reasonable humbleness in front of the incalculability of existence. A Nurculuk perspective could find support for the need of religious morality to control the scientific advances of modernity in Derrida's writings. Both perspectives argue that true justice is beyond the reach of human reason. But their respective strategies and aims should not be subsumed under each other. There are also unbridgeable differences especially regarding the role of a Creator, and of Revelation.

Still, the differences between Derrida and Nursi on the subject of true justice are no bigger than the differences between Derrida and the students of philosophy under attack by Nursi. We should not continue to divide the debate along the lines of Islam and Western philosophy. That hides more than it shows.

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<sup>36</sup> Said Nursi, *The Words*, 33<sup>rd</sup> Word, p. 337.

<sup>37</sup> Said Nursi, *The Words*, 10<sup>th</sup> Word, p. 76.