

The Role of Said Nursi's Spiritual Discourses in Contextualizing Islamic Moral Psychology

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Abstract

*The Ottoman Empire was deeply rooted in organized traditional spirituality, but the secularization of modern Turkey created significant challenges for traditional scholars and Sufi masters. Living through these turbulent times, Said Nursi chose neither confrontation nor isolation; instead, he pioneered a new form of spirituality grounded in Qur'anic reasoning and practical engagement. This study examines the role of Nursi's spiritual discourses in contextualizing Islamic moral psychology, focusing on how spirituality shapes individual moral development. By integrating concepts such as divine inspiration, spiritual cognition, and shared practice, Nursi offers a comprehensive framework for moral transformation within the Islamic tradition. Through thematic and comparative analysis of Nursi's primary works—particularly *The Words*—this research also evaluates the applicability of his ideas in modern religious counseling. In doing so, it highlights Nursi's contribution to the broader project of contextualizing Islamic scholarship in response to modernity. Ultimately, the study argues that Nursi presents a holistic and contextually grounded model of Islamic moral psychology, effectively bridging the gap between spiritual tradition and contemporary moral discourse.*

Keywords: Moral Psychology, Spirituality, Moral Development, Religious Counseling, Islamic Morality

دور الخطابات الروحية لسعيد النورسي في تأصيل علم النفس الأخلاقي في السياق الإسلامي

سيد محمد محسن

المستخلص

كانت الدولة العثمانية متجدّرة بعمق في مؤسسات التصوف بطرقه المتوارثة، غير أن علمنة تركيا الحديثة أنتجت تحديات خطيرة أمام علماء الدين ومشايخ التصوف، وفي ضوء هذه التحولات المضطربة، لم يختر سعيد النورسي نهج المواجهة ولا العزلة، بل ابتكر نمطاً جديداً من التزكية يقوم على التدبر القرآني والممارسة العملية بالنظر إلى متطلبات العصر وقيوده. تبحث هذه الدراسة في دور الخطابات الروحية للنورسي في باب تأصيل علم النفس الأخلاقي ضمن سياقه، مع التركيز على الكيفية التي تسهم بها القوة الروحية في تشكيل النمو الأخلاقي للفرد. يقدم النورسي تأصيلاً متكاملًا للتزكية، وهي النمو الأخلاقي بلغة علم النفس الأخلاقي في إطار التراث الإسلامي من خلال مفاهيم عديدة منها: الإلهام الإلهي، التدبر الروحاني، والممارسة الجماعية. إضافة إلى ذلك، وبناء على تحليل موضوعي ومقارن للأعمال الأصلية للنورسي، ولا سيما الكلمات، تقوم الدراسة بتقييم طرق تطبيق أفكاره في مجال الإرشاد الديني المعاصر، وبهذا، تبرز إسهام النورسي في مجال تجديد علوم التراث في ضوء متطلبات العصر ومشاكله وقيوده. تخلص الدراسة في النهاية إلى أن النورسي يقدم نموذجاً شاملاً متوافقاً مع سياقه في مباحث علم النفس الأخلاقي، وهو جدير بالاعتناء في ردم الفجوة بين التصوف المتوارث والخطاب الأخلاقي المعاصر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: علم النفس الأخلاقي، الروحانية، النمو الأخلاقي، الإرشاد الديني، الأخلاق الإسلامية.

Introduction

Morality is a fundamental component of all major religious traditions, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, with religious beliefs in supernatural monitoring promoting moral conduct (Norenzayan, 2014). Religious scholars have not only explored the nature of moral principles but have also investigated how individuals develop, understand, interpret, and apply these principles (Afrilsah, 2024). They have examined how emotions, cognition, and social influences contribute to the formation and expression of moral behavior. These discussions fall within the domain of moral psychology, a field that examines how individuals feel, think, and behave in relation to moral issues, as well as how they undergo transformation, strive for moral actualization, or fail to achieve it (Tiberius, 2023). In the context of Islam, both Muslim mystics and jurists have explored the roles of the soul, spirit, and psyche in the realms of *Tazkiah* (spiritual purification) and *Taklif* (juristic responsibility), focusing on how these concepts relate to the attainment of moral principles and the fulfillment of juristic duties. For example, Sufi masters have investigated *Ahwal* (spiritual states) to understand and interpret the deeper conditions of the soul, spirit, and psyche, which influence individuals to behave in certain ways. In this regard, dreams are also seen as essential messages that need to be decoded and explained. To facilitate this process, Sufi masters recommend disciplined practices to attain *Maqamat* (moral-spiritual stations) (Taftazani, 1989). On the other hand, Muslim jurists emphasize that juristic responsibility is closely tied to an individual's psychological state. In this context, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "*The Pen has been lifted from three: from the child until he reaches puberty, from the sleeper until he wakes up, and from the insane until he regains his sanity*"

(An-Nasa'i, 3432). As a result, children's responsibilities are not the same as those of adults, and individuals with mental health conditions are exempt from many duties (al-Zuhayli, 2006a). Consequently, for both Muslim jurists and mystics, the investigation of cognitive processes and emotional states constitutes a critical component in the determination and actualization of moral principles. Thus, the psychology of morality, or Moral Psychology, is considered a key approach in Muslim tradition.

Accordingly, Muslim scholars assert that humans are born with *Fitrah*, an inherent moral compass that directs them toward goodness, truth, and worship. The Prophet (peace be upon him) stated: "*There is none born except that they are created according to their true nature. It is their parents who make them a Jew, a Christian, or a Magian*" (Sahih Muslim, 2658b). From this, scholars conclude that although humans are born morally pure and capable of recognizing and practicing virtuous deeds while avoiding sinful or indecent behavior, external influences can lead them to deviate from the right path. In this context, reasoning plays a vital role, as it enables individuals to distinguish between truth and falsehood. In other words, the development of moral behavior is closely linked to how individuals perceive and understand ethical principles. In this regard, the majority of Sunni jurists integrated Divine Command Theory (*Naẓariyyat al-Amr al-Ilāhī*) with Natural Law Theory (*Naẓariyyat al-Qānūn al-Ṭabī'ī*), with the former indicating that morality is based on God's commands, and the latter defining morality as inherent in the natural order and thus discoverable through reason. Accordingly, Muslim scholars argued that most actions possess inherent moral qualities that reason can perceive, based on their attributes and consequences. However, this does not imply that religious law always commands what reason regards as good or forbids

what it sees as bad, as human reasoning remains limited and imperfect (Hājj, 1900). Additionally, intentions are critical in determining what is morally right or wrong, as jurists emphasize: "Matters are judged by their intentions" (al-Zuhayli, 2006b). Furthermore, local customs play an important role in interpreting and applying morality, as Islam emphasizes the collective wisdom of Muslim societies. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "*Indeed, Allah will not gather my Ummah upon deviation, and Allah's Hand is over the Jama'ah. Whoever deviates, deviates to the Fire*" (Jami` at-Tirmidhi, 2167). Unlike jurists, Muslim mystics were more concerned with what goes on inside a person – the thoughts and emotions that can lead them to make the wrong moral choices. They believed that simply knowing what is right and wrong isn't enough; truly living out those values in everyday life is what shapes a person's character and helps them stay on the right path. To achieve this, one must be mindful of their inner states and, if necessary, consult with spiritual guides who can analyze and offer remedies for inner conflicts. Additionally, regular *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah) and *Suhbah* (companionship with virtuous individuals) are fundamental for maintaining sound psychological and spiritual states (Taftazani, 1989). As Allah states in the Qur'an: "*Surely, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find comfort*" (13:28), and "*O believers! Be mindful of Allah and be with the truthful*" (9:119). To sum up, while humans are born with an innate moral compass, external influences, reasoning, intentions, and local customs all significantly shape ethical behavior. Both Sunni jurists and Muslim mystics emphasize the importance of both internal and external factors in maintaining moral integrity (al-Ghazali, n.d.).

Despite the significant contributions of Islamic tradition to the study of moral psychology, modern socio-political changes, intellectual shifts, and external influences in Muslim-majority countries have caused substantial disruptions. These disruptions have fragmented the once-integrated relationship between spiritual and legal aspects of moral practice. Muhammad Qasim Zaman (2010) noted, “No rupture is greater in the history of Islam than that brought about by the impact of Western modernity. As Marshall Hodgson observed at the end of his magisterial history of Islamic civilization, modern Western societies have managed to retain a much deeper, more coherent, and more integral relationship with their traditions than have Muslim societies: the former are far more “traditional” in this sense than the latter” (p. 7). Contrary to common assumptions, the relationship between tradition and modernity is not simply a binary of old versus new, nor is it a dichotomy between blind imitation and critical thinking. Instead, all major traditions are evolving through new interpretations and applications. Furthermore, critical thinking is not exclusive to modernity but is a universal human trait. For both Zaman and Hodgson, tradition serves as a shared framework through which Muslims form their normative discourse, shaped by ongoing interactions within their communities and with external forces, influenced by political and cultural contexts. Zaman’s argument is not that modern Muslims are less Islamic, but rather that they lack the emotional connection and commitment to the shared language, terms, and meanings that earlier generations practiced (Zaman, 2010). This rupture has led to significant divisions within Muslim communities, as they have lost common expressions and visions, even though the majority still seek to live as good Muslims. As a result, people’s moral questions, hopes, and ideas about right and wrong become muddled,

making it harder to reflect, grow, or even recognize when they are falling short. This is why the psychological dimensions of morality in the Muslim tradition can't be fully understood without considering the competing narratives shaped by specific historical and cultural contexts. In this sense, Said Nursi provides an important example of how Muslim scholars address the task of contextualizing moral psychology in the modern era.

Active during the early secular period in Turkey, Said Nursi recognized a significant threat to the Muslim world—one that could not be addressed solely through political means. He argued that materialism and atheism posed the greatest dangers not only to the Muslim world but to humanity as a whole. For Nursi, the most important contribution to society was to restore and strengthen people's faith (Mohammad, 2019). While Ottoman Islam had its own established body of literature, Nursi sought to reinterpret this tradition, incorporating new expressions of logic and reason through the language of the Qur'an (Nursi, 2017). Furthermore, Nursi put his teachings into practice by engaging extensively with his followers and reaching out beyond his immediate circle (Mohammad, 2020). As a result, Said Nursi was not simply a scholar who accepted the emerging realities of modernity and secularism by retreating into a private sphere. This is manifested in the fact that Nursi's works do not merely remain on library shelves; rather, they are read not only by academics but also by the general public, thereby contributing to the construction of faith and moral character among the widest segments of society. For Nursi, Islam was not just an institutionalized doctrine; it was a comprehensive message for humanity, one that must be shared and practiced through social means. In this regard, it is essential to explore how Nursi understood moral development and

transformation, particularly at the individual level, as this forms the foundation for broader societal change.

The primary aim of this study is to examine how Said Nursi links spirituality to moral psychology. Specifically, the study will explore how Nursi observes and addresses the moral development and transformation of individuals in relation to spirituality. The goal is to understand how innate nature, emotions, cognitive processes, and social interactions—according to Nursi—influence people's choices of behavior. Additionally, the study will investigate how moral development connects to Nursi's central theory, which focuses on the actualization of verified, empirical beliefs—referred to as *Iman Tahqiqi* in Nursi's terminology. The study will also analyze the challenges and limitations of applying Nursi's views on moral psychology in religious counseling. Ultimately, the study will argue that Nursi's spiritual teachings provide a comprehensive framework for Islamic moral psychology, grounded in both legal and mystical traditions, and applicable to contemporary religious counseling when implemented thoughtfully.

Methodology

As previously discussed, this study aims to explore the relationship between spirituality and moral psychology through the lens of Said Nursi's teachings. Specifically, the research will investigate how individuals develop moral values through their innate nature, emotions, cognitive processes, and social interactions. Accordingly, the following research questions have been formulated: First, how is morality cultivated and developed through divine inspiration, mental-emotional cognition, and social interactions? Second, how is moral development linked to *Iman Tahqiqi* (verified experimental beliefs), a concept propelled by Nursi?

Third, what are the challenges and limitations of applying Nursi's perspectives on moral psychology in religious counseling?

To address these questions, we conducted a systematic review of the literature using keywords such as 'spirituality,' 'morality,' 'psychology,' 'moral psychology,' 'emotions,' 'cognition,' and 'social influence' in relation to Said Nursi. We explored databases including Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Scopus, and Academia.edu. To further support the research, the study will analyze these concepts as presented in Nursi's primary works, specifically as explained in *The Words*. The data will be analyzed through thematic and comparative analysis to examine Nursi's views in relation to Islamic tradition. As this study is primarily theoretical, empirical research will be necessary to assess its practical application, both historically among Nursi's followers and in future religious counseling practices.

Literature Review

A significant amount of scholarly research has examined 'spirituality,' 'psychology,' and 'morality' based on Said Nursi's perspectives. Despite their importance, no theoretical study has been specifically conducted to explore the intersection of these concepts. Although the terms are interdependent, as only humans practice both spirituality and morality, it is imperative to explore the underlying emotional and cognitive conditions that enable people to engage with these frameworks.

For example, in "Religion and the Moral Being of Man: A Critical Analysis of Said Nursi's Thought and Its Relevance in Addressing Postmodern Claims Against Religious Morality," Abd Rahman (2021) criticizes moral nihilism, which denies the existence of absolute ethical truths or standards.

The study highlights how Nursi effectively challenges postmodern critiques of religion, arguing that true faith is essential for understanding and achieving genuine moral excellence. While Abd Rahman's research focuses on the importance of morality, our study will examine how morality develops in connection to spirituality, specifically exploring how Nursi links moral growth to spiritual/psychological development. Furthermore, Pramono, Latief, and Widodo (2024) adopt a similar approach in their article "Ethical Politics in the View of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: A Response to Political Pragmatism," in which they explore Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's political ethics as a response to political pragmatism, emphasizing six foundational principles: monotheism, consultation, freedom, justice, equality, and nationalism, all rooted in Islamic values. The study contends that Nursi argued politics should be grounded in religious morals to regulate human desires, promote societal prosperity, and serve the public good, rather than advancing self-interest. Therefore, the research underscores the importance of moral values, with a specific focus on political ethics. Moreover, in "Moral Philosophy in the Qur'an from the Viewpoint of the Risale-i Nur Said Nursi," al-Marzuqi (2013) argues that the moral philosophy in Risale-i Nur, based on the Qur'an, explores the idea that evil is not fundamental but a means to recognize good, with humans as the source of moral evil. Nursi reflects on his personal struggles, emphasizing that what appears as evil, such as death, is actually a form of divine mercy, and argues that human freedom is limited by divine will. Thus, this study focuses more on the metaphysical aspects of morality, particularly the problem of evil. Additionally, Pirim and Pirim (2017), in "The Concepts of Morality and Ethics in the Risale-i Nur," argue that Nursi rejects the secular foundations of ethics. They briefly discuss the

development of morality but do not elaborate further. The study concludes that Nursi's faith-based moral system emphasizes responsibility and accountability, viewing humans as agents of God, whose belief in the hereafter reinforces ethical conduct and drives personal, social, and global transformation.

On the other hand, Yucel (2024) in “Purpose-driven Life in Islam and Emotional Stability: Examining Said Nursi's Perspective,” emphasizes the significance of living a purpose-driven life for emotional stability and well-being. Drawing on Said Nursi's belief that emotions are divine gifts, Yucel argues that emotional stability is achieved when these emotions align with their intended purpose. The study explores Nursi's connection to Ibn Sina's theory of pleasure and advocates for spiritual practices that foster emotional healing, resilience, and personal growth, ultimately guiding individuals toward a deeper relationship with the divine and enhanced emotional stability. While Yucel's study focuses on how a purpose-driven life promotes emotional stability, our research shifts the focus to examine how emotional management influences moral development and its articulation. Moreover, Ihsan, Rahmadi, and Jamal (2022) compare the spiritual perspectives of Abraham Maslow and Said Nursi, highlighting Maslow's secular humanistic psychology, which emphasizes self-actualization, and Nursi's Sufi psychology, rooted in divine obedience. They argue that while both theories recognize a Higher Entity, Nursi's Tawhid-based spirituality offers a more holistic solution to modern existential struggles. Although this study links spirituality to well-being, it does not address the development of morality based on the intersection of spirituality and psychology. Furthermore, in “The Ethical Framework of Said Nursi,” Abu Bakr Al-

Azawi (2013) explores some aspects of morality, including *fitrah*, religion, and comprehensiveness. The research aims to examine Nursi's ethical thought through his writings and activities, with a particular focus on analyzing his comprehensive Qur'anic ethical system, which is grounded in scientific and natural principles. However, it does not address the emotional, cognitive, and social aspects of moral development. Finally, although not from Nursi's perspective, Abdullah (2014) in "Virtues and Character Development in Islamic Ethics and Positive Psychology," explores how emotional management plays a central role in character development within Islam, emphasizing the cultivation of positive virtues and the control of negative emotions. The study concludes that integrating virtue ethics with positive psychology can provide a framework for emotional management, fostering self-development and enhancing interpersonal relationships in alignment with Islamic values. While the study highlights the importance of emotional management for virtues and character building, emphasizing the significance of psychological moral development, it does not address the roles of innate, cognitive, and social factors.

The literature review highlights a significant gap in research on the intersection of spirituality, psychology, and morality according to Said Nursi's work. While existing studies explore aspects of spirituality, morality, emotional stability, and political ethics, they largely fail to address how emotional and cognitive factors interact to shape moral development within Nursi's spiritual framework. This gap suggests a need for theoretical studies that integrate these elements to better understand how spirituality influences moral growth through social, emotional, and cognitive processes, specifically within Nursi's teachings.

Contextualizing Islamic Moral Psychology

This subsection examines the concept of contextualization and its significance in articulating the Islamic tradition—particularly in the field of moral psychology—within the framework of modernity. It also explores how Said Nursi approached contextualization, examining the various means and modes of moral development.

Firstly, although "contextualization" is a widely used term—referring to the process of interpreting a text, idea, or event by situating it within its specific temporal, cultural, geographical, and historical context, either where it originated or where it is being applied—the connotation of the term extends far beyond its literal definition, encompassing significant political and cultural dimensions. Not everything requires contextual interpretation, suggesting that there are two layers of terms: some serve as reference points, while others are less obvious and demand new articulation and imagination. One critical perspective on this concept comes from Ibrahim al-Sakran (2014), who critiques the idea of contextualization. He argues that it serves as an orientalist tool that diminishes Muslim subjectivity by decentering Muslim voices and perspectives. According to al-Sakran, orientalist scholars often prioritize the historiographical/cultural development of Islamic sciences over engaging with the traditions themselves, which results in an approach that favors certain intellectual schools, themes, perspectives, and questions, while marginalizing others. This process, al-Sakran contends, displaces and silences the voices and experiences of Muslims. However, not all scholars share this view. Others advocate for a more balanced approach, arguing that, when applied properly, contextualization can serve as a tool to anticipate contemporary

issues, predict future meanings, and clarify the relationship between the Qur'an's text and its applications. As Sobirin and Djubaedi (2024) suggest, the goal of contextualization is to elucidate religious writings, prevent misinterpretations, foster new interpretations, and offer solutions to the complexities of religious texts. They emphasize that contextualization, far from being an orientalist tool, can be essential for the ongoing interpretation of Islamic tradition.

In this context, it seems that contextualizing Islamic tradition is not merely optional but, in many ways, a necessary step. For instance, Qasim Zaman (2010) argues that the greatest rupture in Islamic history stems from the impact of Western modernity, which has led to divisions within Muslim communities due to a loss of shared language, terms, and meanings—despite a continued desire to live as good Muslims. By addressing these fractures, contextualization can foster a more unified understanding across Muslim communities, helping them reconnect with shared language, terms, and meanings while adapting to contemporary realities. Brentjes (2024) further expands on this idea, suggesting that contextualization can serve as a tool "to find the local, the specific, and the unique that together shape a piece of knowledge either as a practice or as a result" (p. 42). While some critics argue that the view of knowledge as local and specific implies a static existence, recent projects using contextualization show how knowledge changes, transfers, and transforms across different cultures and societies—much like an airport with many arrivals and departures (Brentjes, 2024). Thus, it can be argued that contextualization of Islamic tradition is not just beneficial but essential for bridging historical, cultural, and modern divides. By doing so, it ensures that interpretations remain relevant, dynamic, and reflective of diverse Muslim experiences in a rapidly changing world.

Secondly, Said Nursi's writings are neither juristic nor mystic in nature. He did not attempt to explain Islam through legal perspectives or Fatwas, although there are many legal rulings within his literature, which suggests that he was fully aware of legal doctrines. Moreover, his treatises cannot be classified as extensions of mysticism or Sufi traditionalism, which are deeply institutionalized through *Silsila* and *Tariqah*, with their systematic hierarchies, orders, and activities. For Nursi, legal and mystic discourses are considered secondary concerns, while a strong belief in and understanding of the core tenets of Islam is his primary focus. Mohammad (2020) observes, "The challenge for Nursi is belief. He is aware of how the twin threats of modernity and secularism are undermining belief. The fear of Islamic practice (a recovery of explicitly Islamic governance in Turkey) had led to a denial of the resurrection, the authority of the Quran, and even skepticism about God" (p. 5).

Nursi's approach closely aligns with sermon literature, a medium for conveying advice through both speech and writing, with the intent to foster worship, discourage disobedience, and promote virtuous behavior by softening the heart (Rashid, 2022). However, Nursi does not limit his efforts to merely softening the heart; he also seeks to engage the cognitive faculties of his audience. This suggests that, although his language is accessible, it carries a philosophical depth, even though philosophical discourse is not his primary aim. Consequently, Nursi articulates his arguments primarily through examples and narratives. In the preparation of this article, we revisited the first part of *the Risale-i Nur, The Words*, which reveals that Nursi's primary audience consists of the *Nafs*, *Qalb*, and *'Aql*—the soul, heart, and intellect. In this regard, it appears that, for Nursi, these

psychological faculties serve as the key instruments for the contextualization of Islamic tradition within the framework of modernity.

For example, in *the second word*, which aims to illustrate the perspectives of both believers and unbelievers on the world, and how true happiness and peace of mind are attained through belief in God and Islam, Nursi shared a story about two individuals: a believer and a nonbeliever. He stated, “If you want to understand what great happiness and bounty, what great pleasure and ease are to be found in belief in God, listen to this story, which is in the form of a comparison” (Nursi, 2008, p. 27). The terms ‘happiness, bounty, pleasure, and ease’ all indicate that Nursi is trying to explain the benefits of *Iman* from a sensual and emotional perspective. Moreover, to compare something, we need to use our cognitive abilities, and the storytelling made the narrative accessible to everyone. The synopsis of the story is as follows: two men embarked on a journey—one with a selfish, pessimistic outlook and the other with a godly, optimistic mindset. The selfish man saw only despair and suffering, while the devout man encountered joy, prosperity, and celebration, finding happiness in both the land and the people around him. The story highlights the importance of properly managing cognitive and emotional faculties, as they facilitate how we experience and understand the world around us. In short, it can be argued that Said Nursi approached the issues of contextualization through easy-to-understand stories, examples, and wise words, offering deep insights for the heart, intellect, and soul.

Moral Psychology in Said Nursi’s Thought

This subsection will explore how Said Nursi connects *Iman* to morality through various psychological faculties. More specifically, it will investigate how individuals—according to Nursi—develop, understand,

interpret, and apply moral principles based on spirituality/*Iman Tahqiqi*, which deeply influence the innate nature, heart, intellect, and soul. These psychological faculties, in turn, facilitate and articulate moral judgment and application. Accordingly, this section will address the first and second questions of the study, which are as follows: first, how is morality cultivated and developed through divine inspiration, mental-emotional cognition, and social interactions? Second, how is moral development linked to *Iman Tahqiqi* (verified experimental beliefs)?

A) Faith and Morality

Firstly, many studies already confirm the argument that, according to Said Nursi, *Iman* is the foundation of morality. For instance, Ihsan et al. (2023) assert that “The principles of morality introduced by Nursi focus on one main discussion: strengthening faith. Strengthening faith will lead people to a more noble and perfect life goal” (p. 130). Furthermore, Abd Rahman (2021) critiques moral nihilism, while Pramono, Latief, and Widodo (2024) challenge political pragmatism, with both emphasizing the crucial role of faith in moral judgment. Accordingly, it is safe to say that Said Nursi is not unique in this regard, as Muslim scholarship has long asserted this relationship between belief and morality. As a result, this thesis became a fundamental creed in Islamic tradition. For example, Imam Sanusi argued that rational morality—morality based solely on reason—is one of the key foundations of disbelief. According to him, if we assert that moral judgments are based on rational objectives, divinity becomes dependent on human actions and perspectives, which contradicts divine sovereignty (al-Sanusi, 2009). Consequently, this study will not assess whether Nursi links *Iman* to morality; instead, it will analyze how he conceptualizes, articulates,

and works to strengthen the relationship between religious belief, moral judgment, and practice.

Accordingly, one key question in this context is why Muslims do not necessarily become morally good; in other words, why do Muslims commit bad deeds despite knowing immorality and its implications? More specifically, why does belief not affect and influence people equally? These questions are essential for confronting moral nihilism and political pragmatism, both of which challenge belief-based moral standards. For Nursi, the answer lies in how we internalize and practice belief, and how we comprehend and interact with psychological and social factors. In other words, this is not a one-way connection: belief controls and produces moral behavior through other factors, and according to those other factors, Iman influences individuals differently. Hence, not only does knowledge motivate people to act morally, but it is also how we imagine, employ, and manage knowledge that matters the most. While describing how disbelief affects our experience and interpretation of the world, Nursi notes that the selfish man, consumed by negativity, sees only suffering, despair, and misery wherever he goes, tormented by his own grim view of the world. Nursi further explains the causes: “You have lost your sense of judgment. The ugliness within you seems to have been reflected outward, so that you have mistaken laughter for weeping and imagined relief to be plunder and destruction. Come to your senses and purify your heart, so that this veil of affliction may be lifted from your perception and you may perceive the truth.” (Nursi, 2017, p. 4). Highlighting how our inner states influence our practical observance, Nursi explores the idea of reflection—how our contemplation, mindfulness, experience, and spiritual devotion inform and reform both our pleasure and morality. To manage this, Nursi suggests the purification of

hearts, which encompasses aspects of intellect, soul, and psyche within ourselves.

B) The Heart as Reflective Mirror

Secondly, unlike Muslim mystics, Nursi highlights the heart as a way to explore and examine our beliefs. Accordingly, beliefs are manifested in our inner faculties: comprehension, imagination, motivation, and perception, which, in turn, shape and change our moral judgment and behavior. However, the relationship between beliefs and morality can best be described and explained as a dynamic reflection. Our convictions are echoed in our everyday decisions through simulation by our hearts. Our hearts and the associated faculties mirror our beliefs into our actions. Although we sometimes do not simply copy our convictions, rather, we invent and create new behaviors that, as a result, reformulate our beliefs based on experienced desires. Consequently, these reformulated convictions shape our future thought processes to confirm intended pleasures.

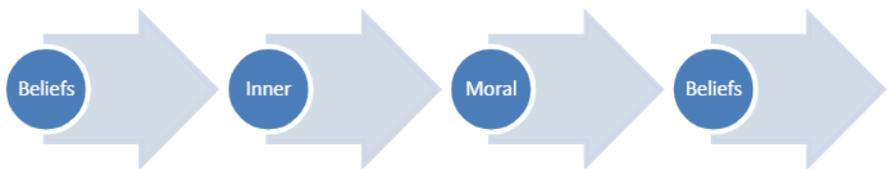


Figure 1: The Dynamic Reflection Between Beliefs and Morality

Dynamic Reflection is the idea that our beliefs and our sense of morality are constantly influencing each other. Our beliefs shape how we decide what's right or wrong, and then, when we act on those decisions, we experience emotional and mental reactions—like feeling guilty, proud, or reflective—which make us think about whether our beliefs were right in the first place. These feelings and thoughts can either reinforce the beliefs we already hold

or cause us to rethink them entirely. This ongoing back-and-forth between our beliefs and our actions creates a continuous cycle that evolves as we grow and reflect on our experiences. For example, the Prophet (peace be upon him) reportedly said, “Weep, and if you cannot weep, then pretend to weep” (Sunan Ibn Majah, 4196). According to this prophetic tradition, we believe that weeping is important, which motivates us to act as if we are crying. As a result, we may develop stronger beliefs and experience real weeping.

In a similar vein, Nursi shared the example of two brothers, one a believer and the other a nonbeliever, and the impacts of beliefs on both of them. He concludes, “Whoever makes this fleeting life his purpose and aim is in fact in Hell, even if apparently in Paradise. And whoever turns all seriousness toward eternal life receives the happiness of both worlds. However difficult and distressing this world may be for him, since he sees it as the waiting room for Paradise, he endures it and offers thanks in patience” (Nursi, 2017, p. 23). This highlights how our beliefs shape our conception, perception, and sensation. Nursi further connects this to the following verse: “Know that evil is from yourself, and good is from God” (4:79). According to Nursi (2017), “If you compare other differences in the same way, you will understand that the evil-commanding soul of the first brother has prepared a sort of hell for him, while the good intentions, good will, good character, and good thoughts of the other have allowed him to receive abundant bounty, experience true happiness and prosperity, and display shining virtue.”

Hence, it can be argued that believers maintain a dynamic relationship with their moral perception. Although our behaviors usually mirror our conscious

convictions, we may complicate things further through our own imagination, impulses, emotions and innovations.

C) *Fitrah* and Morality

Thirdly, Abu Bakr Al-Azawi (2013) explores the role of *Fitrah* in Said Nursi's moral framework. According to Al-Azawi, Nursi believed that morality is deeply rooted in human *Fitrah* (inner nature), which inclines individuals toward truth and righteousness. For Nursi, the inclination toward perfection is a natural law of the universe, embedded in human nature. Al-Azawi (2013) argues that this supports the perspective of ethicist Muhammad Abdullah Draz and confirms the Quranic stance, which mentions: “*And by the soul and the One Who fashioned it, then with the knowledge of right and wrong inspired it!*” (91: 7-8). This implicitly highlights the role of *Fitrah* in moral development, suggesting that moral principles are inherently preferable and recognizable by human reflection and emotions.

Nursi frequently used the terms "nature" and "natural" in relation to morality. For instance, Nursi (2017) argued that philosophical analysis can, at times, delude us with worldviews that obscure our very moral, aesthetic, and epistemic essence—what he referred to as *kamal al-fitrah al-saleemah*. “For example, it (philosophy) says that man's creation is ordinary, despite its being a comprehensive miracle of power, and looks on it indifferently. But then with cries of astonishment, it points out as an object of instruction a person who has diverged from the perfection of creation, and has three legs or two heads” (Nursi, 2017). According to Nursi, as long as individuals preserve their *Fitrah*—the innate epistemic and moral essence—they naturally embody the values of creation, reflecting their true selves and

authentic beliefs. When this connection is severed, moral perception becomes distorted, opening the door to deviations and harmful innovations. However, there is always an opportunity for return to *Fitrah*—people can return whenever they repent to God and realize the true nature of existence. After describing the horrors of World War, Nursi notes that “the cruel and true face of world politics is becoming evident, as it is the broadest, most suffocating, and most deceptive veil for heedlessness and misguidance, most certainly and without the slightest doubt. Since the life of this world—which is the metaphorical beloved of mankind—is thus ugly and fleeting, man’s true nature will, with all its strength, seek eternal life, which it genuinely loves and longs for, just as there are indications of this taking place in the North, the West, and in America.” (Nursi, 2011, v.2, p. 440). For Nursi, whatever people desire, they do not yearn for deeply. This paradox is a key aspect of moral development: we constantly configure and reconcile our preferences through complex inner processes. We seek pleasures that go against our beliefs, yet we also return to our nature and morals despite our desires.

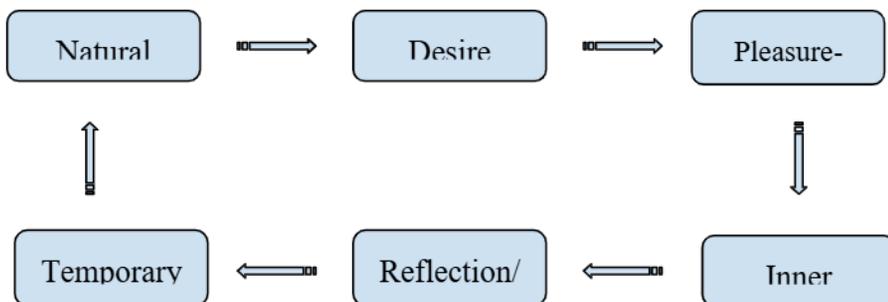


Figure 2: Cycle of Moral Tension in Nursi’s Thought

Nursi's cycle of moral tension illustrates how our connection to Fitrah (innate moral essence) shapes our actions. Desires often—or sometimes—conflict with our values, creating inner struggles as we choose between pleasure and our beliefs. Through reflection, we either adjust our desires or continue pursuing pleasure. This cycle repeats as new desires emerge, highlighting the importance of Fitrah and ongoing self-examination. Without true beliefs, individuals lose direction, and inner conflicts may drive them to seek pleasure as an escape from life's challenges: “It is for this reason that a corrupt person often resorts to either drunkenness or amusement, in order to escape the disturbance and constraint imposed by reason.” (Nursi, 2017, p. 13).

D) Morality Through the Inner Faculties

Fourthly, the heart, soul, intellect, spirit, and psyche are considered interconnected concepts in Islamic tradition. According to Imam al-Ghazali, despite having several connotations, these terms share some key characteristics, which are as follows: A) The essence of humanity, B) Primary consciousness, C) The identification of objects, and D) Holding responsibility for human actions and the rewards associated with them (al-Ghazali, n.d., vol. 3, 4). Despite sharing these key characteristics, their usages may differ depending on the context. For instance, the heart, soul, and spirit (*Qalb* and *Ruh*) may represent spiritual consciousness, which serves devotional purposes, while the intellect (*'Aql*) may denote rational and cognitive functions, and the psyche (*Nafs*) may suggest emotional and mental processes. Thus, it is clear that, although they may become functionally separated, they do not exist -essentially- divided or

disconnected. Hence, whenever Muslim scholars criticize the intellect or the psyche, they focus on functions, not on any specific inner organs.

In this context, Nursi bases the differentiation between heart and intellect: “Yes, even were the globe to become a bomb and explode, it is quite possible that the worshipper of Allah with a completely illuminated heart would not be frightened. He would instead simply behold, in sweet wonderment, the extraordinary power of the Independent and Eternally Besought. If a famous philosopher, considered to have an ‘enlightened’ intellect - but who had a dead heart, and was openly sinful - were to see a comet in the sky, he would be trembling on the ground, saying, ‘what if this stray comet crashes into the earth?’” (Nursi, 2017, pp. 6-7). For Nursi, both the heart and mind can think, decide, and develop judgments. However, they may reach different interpretations and conclusions based on their beliefs and worldviews—illuminated and enlightened in Nursi’s terms. Consequently, Nursi criticizes over-dependence upon the intellect and the psyche, “So look, o bewildered one! You give assent to the claims of your deceitful imagination, your troubled intellect, and your misleading soul” (Nursi, 2017); “man thinks of their worldly parallels that he has seen in autumn and spring, and then, with awe in his heart, easily accepts what the intellect would otherwise refuse” (Nursi, 2017). Thus, according to him, the intellect may become “a tool of misery” (Nursi, 2017, p. 13). Nevertheless, Nursi argues that all of these functions are gifted to serve devotional and spiritual purposes, “so too those to whom truth and certainty have been unveiled are unanimously agreed that the subtleties inscribed in the book of man’s heart, the senses written down in the notebook of his intellect, the equipment contained in his essential character, are all turned towards

Eternal Bliss; they have been given to man and fashioned in accordance with this ultimate goal” (Nursi, 2017).

Accordingly, one key question in this context is to explore and explain how the heart, soul, intellect, and psyche functionally interact with each other and contribute to moral development. To begin with, the heart and soul represent the perseverance of *Fitrah*, the natural inclination toward good and beauty. Moreover, they highlight openness to receiving spiritual inspiration and deep contemplation of nature and divine texts, particularly the Holy Quran in the Islamic context—with wonder, admiration, and respect toward the higher entity and concerns: “with awe in his heart,” as described by Nursi. This process ensures a strong reflection between beliefs and morality, as we explained earlier, through spiritual observation. Hence, Nursi summarized his project as: "Since the Risale-i Nur has performed the service ...as a herald to the treasures of the Qur’an in a fashion that illuminates and heals completely both the heart, the spirit, and the emotions, and has no source or authority other than the Qur’an and is its miracle, it performs that duty perfectly" (Nursi, 2008, p. 168). It is worth noting that Nursi primarily addresses ‘the heart, the spirit, and the emotions’ by both *Nur* and *Shifa*, illuminating and healing, and the source for Nursi is the Holy Quran.

Primary Audience	Method	Source
A) The heart (<i>Qalb</i>), B) the spirit (<i>Ruh</i>), C) emotions (<i>Shu'ūr</i>),	A) Illuminating (<i>Nur</i>) B) Healing (<i>Shifa</i>)	The Holy Quran

Figure 3: Nursi's Approach to Strengthening Iman and Morality

Like other Muslim scholars, Nursi sees the intellect and the psyche not as separate parts, but as different functions. Hence, criticizing the intellect and the psyche does not mean rejecting reason and emotion, as they are also functions of the heart and spirit. Thus, we must explore why Nursi was so critical of the intellect and the psyche—describing them as 'a tool of misery.' Nursi carefully summarizes this as follows: “The mind, for example, is an instrument. If you use it for the sake of the lower self, not selling it to Allāh, it becomes an ominous, irritating and exhausting instrument, burdening your poor helpless head with painful memories from the past, and all the terrifying things that the future holds. It is reduced to the level of an accursed and harmful instrument. Most of the time, it is this that forces the open sinner to run to drunkenness, or frivolity - to be rid of the irritation and disturbance caused by the mind.” (Nursi, 2008, p. 13). In the context of moral development, this confirms the *Cycle of Moral Tension*, as we proposed earlier. Accordingly, the heart, soul, intellect, spirit, and psyche are best described as phases of this *Cycle of Moral Tension*.

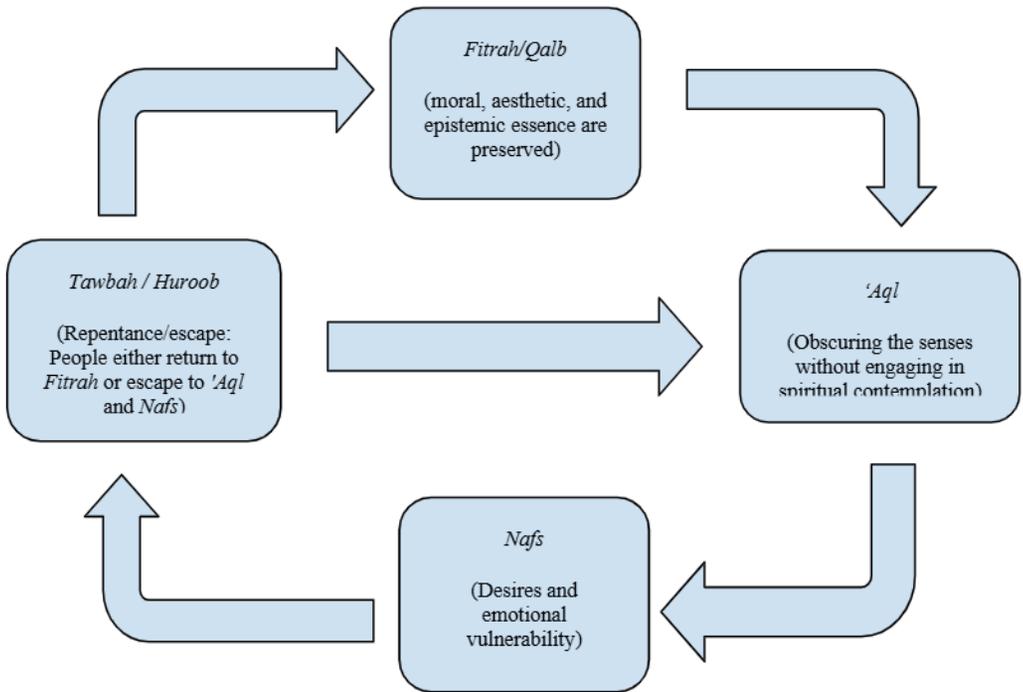


Figure 4: The Phases of Mental and Moral Development

The Phases of Mental and Moral Development describe how *Fitrah/Qalb*, *'Aql*, and *Nafs* are not distinct organs; rather, they are functions, stages, and transitions that determine how we approach and balance our beliefs with mental and sensual pleasures. Accordingly, the heart, soul, and spirit—often referred to as *Qalb* and *Ruh*—can be seen as parts of our spiritual awareness, helping us connect deeply with faith and devotion. In contrast, the intellect (*'Aql*) represents our ability to think, reason, and understand, while the psyche (*Nafs*) reflects our inner emotional world and mental struggles. Ultimately, we are given two options: *Tawbah* (repentance) and *Huroob* (escape), which reflect two paths people take—either turning back to their original purity (*Fitrah*) or fleeing into the domains of ego-driven intellect (*'Aql*) and desires (*Nafs*). Though these discussions are not new in

Islamic tradition, Nursi's contributions are unique in modernity, as they focus on strengthening belief and its reflections on 'the heart, the spirit, and the emotions' to purify, illuminate, and heal the moral, aesthetic, and epistemic senses.

E) Morality and Social Factors

Lastly, for Nursi, social factors are also essential to develop and reform our moral judgement. He (2017) notes "Since the struggle for livelihood together with lack of reliance on God has bewildered man's spirit, and Naturalist and Materialist philosophies have blinded his intellect, just as the social environment does not strengthen a person's mind and capacity in the matter of interpreting the Divine law, so it confuses and scatters them". For humans, the search for livelihood is a key aspect in understanding people's perspectives, as it shapes how they construct meaning, make sense of their experiences, and form relationships. According to Nursi, modern humans have lost their trust in God, while naturalist and materialist ideologies have deepened their delusions. Unfriendly social relations and difficult circumstances further contribute to inner contradictions and misunderstandings. Although spiritual reflection and moral tensions are deeply personal matters, they are also shaped by dominant cultural and social structures. This suggests that our inner workings are governed and articulated by social factors as well.

Ultimately, it can be concluded that beliefs are deeply connected to moral development through various mental processes. To explain these dynamics, we used the models of spiritual reflection and moral tensions. Moreover, we examine how these dynamics are applied to different functions of mental processing, which are described as phases of mental functions.

Nevertheless, social factors play a significant role on how we manage our inner complexities.

Challenges and Limitations

Before concluding, this subsection will address the third question, which involves exploring some issues and limitations in applying Said Nursi's moral psychology. The current study is theoretical in nature, so it is important to identify key limitations for practical application, which will lay the groundwork for future research directions. For Nursi, beliefs, morals, and free will are not merely 'theoretical' concepts that 'pertain to knowledge' (Nursi, 2017); rather, they shape how we perceive, articulate, and express ourselves and others. Hence, discussing these applied limitations is crucial to Nursi's project.

To start with, one key limitation is the measurement of issues related to religiosity, spirituality, mental processing, and degrees of reflection. Turner (2015) argues that while empirical evidence supports the benefits of religion on well-being, the subjective nature of spiritual experiences makes them difficult to measure scientifically. For Nursi, however, our human nature, *Fitrah*, can assess and compare themes without any particular standards, as many of them are abstract and unique in their very existence. Nursi (2017) notes, "By using small samples of attributes like partial knowledge, power, and will given to your life as units of measurement, it is possible to understand through those measures the absolute attributes and sacred qualities of the All-Glorious Creator" (p. 220). Senses are essential for Nursi only for transcendence: "To weigh up on the scales of the senses, the bounties stored in the treasuries of Divine mercy, and to offer universal thanks" (Nursi, 2017, p. 220). Nevertheless, contemplation will remain a

personal and subjective approach, which will limit its methodological application.

Moreover, Nursi does not focus on definitions, concepts, or propositions, which he could have easily copied directly from the Qur'an, the prophetic tradition, theology, or jurisprudence. Instead, it is the process and dialogue that matter most to him. He explains that his primary audiences are the heart, the spirit, and the emotions—not the intellect and reason. For Nursi, the journey itself is what brings light and healing. His goal is not merely to reach an endpoint but to explore divine light (*Nūr*) by deeply reflecting on the messages of the Holy Qur'an: "All those who have discerned the reality of things and penetrated the mysteries, and all the wise and the sage who have journeyed in the realm of the inner dimension of things, have declared: 'Glory be to God!'" (Nursi, 2017); "My brothers, I observed a subtle point concerning God's unity, which suddenly became clear... on a journey of the imagination and mind" (Nursi, 2017). Accordingly, while the open and unstructured nature of his writings is a key part of Nursi's approach, there is also value in gently organizing his insights—especially when applying them in the context of religious counseling. With thoughtful adaptation to people's age, gender, profession, and cultural background, his teachings can become even more accessible and meaningful. This kind of adaptation does not take away from Nursi's core mission; rather, it brings his vision closer to people's everyday lives—whether that means Nursi for Children, Nursi for the Elderly, Nursi for Women, Nursi for the Poor, Nursi for the Wealthy, Nursi for Students, and so on.

Furthermore, for Nursi, psychology and morality cannot be separated from belief and spiritual contemplation. This perspective, however, could be

broadened to include non-Muslims and unorthodox believers, as they too may benefit from immediate attention and support. Ismail and Yasin (2023) explore Said Nursi's approach to non-Muslim rights in *Risalah al-Nur*, emphasizing justice, religious freedom, and coexistence in pluralistic societies. They conclude that Muslims should unite to demonstrate Islamic dignity toward non-Muslims and avoid unhealthy rivalry. Accordingly, it might be helpful to extract some universal principles that can be applied to non-Muslims and heterodox believers. The holy Quran mentions: *Allah does not forbid you from dealing kindly and fairly with those who have neither fought nor driven you out of your homes. Surely Allah loves those who are fair* (60: 8). Nevertheless, the ultimate solution, according to Nursi, must be articulated through the lens of true belief: “Through the light of belief, it shows to the heart of a believer that death is not execution, but a change of abode; that the grave is not the mouth of a dark well, but the door to light-filled worlds; and that for all its glitter, the world is like a prison in relation to the hereafter” (Nursi, 2017, p. 63).

Last but not least, personal reflection and contemplation do not raise issues of privacy, human dignity, or respect. However, when applied to others in the context of religious counseling, mentors and guides must follow specific standards to avoid harmful impacts. As mentioned earlier, for Nursi, this is not about specific information, nor is there a particular destination. Hence, mentors and guides are, at best, facilitators of the spiritual journey, helping to bring peace and harmony to our hearts and emotions—to become illuminated in Nursi’s terms.

Conclusion

This study seeks to explore how Said Nursi connects spirituality with moral psychology, focusing specifically on his observations and approach to the moral development and transformation of individuals in relation to spirituality. The primary results are as follows:

1) In Islamic tradition, understanding morality isn't limited to normative descriptions—it is deeply connected to the inner world of thoughts, emotions, and spiritual growth. Both mystics and jurists recognize that a person's mental and emotional states play a significant role in the development and embodiment of moral values. These discussions can be broadly defined as *moral psychology*.

2) The influence of Western modernity is considered one of the most significant ruptures in Islamic history. As a result, the continuity of tradition appears less intact in Muslim societies than in their Western counterparts. Consequently, modern Muslims have struggled to imagine and articulate a shared language, set of terms, and sense of meaning in matters of moral psychology. As such, contextualization has become essential for understanding, interpreting, and applying the emotional and cognitive aspects of morality.

3) Contextualization involves interpreting texts or ideas within specific cultural, historical, or geographical settings. Islam encourages this process to maintain relevance and clarity across diverse communities. In essence, Islam's inherent ability to contextualize allows for the harmonious integration of beneficial local customs, demonstrating its adaptability and respect for diverse cultural expressions.

4) Many scholars affirm that, for Said Nursi, faith (*Iman*) is the foundation of morality, emphasizing that belief shapes moral judgment not through abstract knowledge alone, but through its internalization, practice, and interaction with psychological and social factors. Nursi argues that moral failure among believers stems not merely from a lack of belief, but from a failure to purify the heart and mind, as inner corruption distorts perception and behavior—underscoring the need for spiritual reflection and devotion

5) The study concluded that, according to Said Nursi, various mental processes are intricately linked to beliefs and moral development. To explain these dynamics, we presented models of spiritual reflection and moral tensions, where a 'model' refers to a conceptual framework used to explain or illustrate complex ideas, such as the interactions between spirituality and moral struggles.

6) The model of spiritual reflection argues that beliefs influence our inner faculties, shaping our moral judgment and behavior through a dynamic reflection, where cognitions, emotions and actions not only mirror but also creatively reformulate our convictions based on desires and experiences.

7) The model of moral tensions argues that individuals who preserve their innate *fitrah* reflect their true selves. However, disconnecting from it risks a moral distortion in the circular reflection of beliefs and actions, leading to greater inner conflict and deviation. Repentance, however, allows for a return to true beliefs and the innate *fitrah*.

8) The heart, soul, intellect, spirit, and psyche are most accurately viewed as stages within this Cycle of Moral Tension, where *fitrah/qalb*

preserves moral, aesthetic, and epistemic essence, followed by 'Aql, which obscures the senses if not based on spiritual contemplation, then Nafs, driven by desires and emotional vulnerability, and finally Tawbah/Huroob, where individuals either return to *fitrah* through repentance or escape into intellect (*'Aql*) and desires (*nafs*).

9) According to Nursi, social and economic pressures, along with the influence of materialist ideologies, distort moral judgment and weaken spiritual clarity. He emphasizes that while moral reflection is personal, it is also shaped by the broader cultural and social environment.

10) There are key opportunities for further development in applying Nursi's ideas practically, such as addressing the challenge of measuring subjective spiritual experiences, structuring his approach for broader applicability, fostering inclusivity beyond Muslim communities, and establishing ethical standards in religious counseling.

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