

Article

Spiritual Growth of Said Nursi and Aleksander Solzhenitsyn in Prison

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Abstract: The article explores the approaches of individuals from two different religious traditions regarding prison spirituality: Said Nursi, who received a comprehensive classical education and furthered his knowledge through modern education, and A. Solzhenitsyn, who initially grew up as an atheist but rediscovered his religious upbringing while imprisoned, subsequently strengthening his spirituality over time. The research objectives of this article are to delve into the personal, intellectual, and spiritual transformations of these two influential figures during their time in prison, examining their pursuit of inner peace and the expansion of the heart. Additionally, it analyzes their development in parallel with the works they wrote. The experience of incarceration provided them with an opportunity to reflect on their own lives, independently of each other, and diagnose the societal issues prevalent in their respective times, such as atheism, materialism, hedonism, lack of spirituality, and excessive consumption. They then attempted to propose and develop solutions to these issues, not only for their immediate circles but also for the wider public. Thus, it is useful to identify these commonalities and differences, and then, discuss them from the comparative theological perspective set up by Francis J. Clooney, S.J. Their profound understanding of this crucial task of improving the lives of others enabled them to endure the hardships of prison and transform its detrimental effects into more fruitful endeavors. While there are similarities in their reflections on faith and the human condition, there are also notable differences in their approaches and perspectives. Nursi's prison spirituality centered on Islamic teachings and the pursuit of religious knowledge, while Solzhenitsyn's focused on ethical, moral, and existential evaluations in the context of atheistic and authoritarian regimes.



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1. Introduction

In this article, the spiritual lives of Nursi and Solzhenitsyn in prison will be discussed. In the beginning, the methodology will be briefly explained. And then we will analyse how Nursi turned from the 'Old Said' to the 'New Said' in developing his prison spirituality, and Solzhenitsyn's transformation, too, in achieving a great spiritual awakening, after going into prison as an atheist. In particular, we will explore how each of them overcame the difficulties he faced, how they protected their mental and spiritual health in terms of inner peace, and most importantly, how they transformed their perspectives on life, especially through the prison experience, from a self-absorbed or worldly outlook to a completely God-centered understanding. From a Muslim perspective, it is preferable to call this new way of thinking *tawhid*-centric. Finally, we will discuss both approaches to concepts such as death, patience, the destiny of the nation, and hope, all of which have an important role in the immunity that they developed against the attraction of the world.

2. Methodology

Nursi and Solzhenitsyn were clearly products of their own environments. Both were affected by the dominant discourses of their time and faced various problems, injustices,

and suffering. Even though there are similarities in their experiences in prison and exile—in each case caused by tyrannical regimes—their personal transformations and responses to authoritative governments still vary to some extent. One of the most important aspects of comparative theology is, as Francis X. Clooney eloquently puts it, engaging with others' religious practices (Clooney 2010; Özvarlı 2010) and experiencing their spiritual openness. The Second Vatican Council's document *Ad Gentes* reminds Christians to 'learn by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a generous God has distributed among the nations of the earth' (Vahide 2005, p. 231). John Dupuche sheds light on this issue by putting the questions: 'How are we inspired by other's inspiration?' As we all know that faith is first and foremost an experience, 'in what way are we touched by the hand of God that is felt in the heart of the other?' (Dupuche 2016). The result of this engagement is not to reach consensus, but, as Clooney makes clear, comparative theology's respectful approaches to, and communication with, others' texts and religious experiences can have the effect of empowering one's own spirituality and religiosity (Özvarlı 2010). In this article, however, I do not intend to shift from texts and focus only on experiences, for it is mainly from the texts themselves that we learn details of Nursi's and Solzhenitsyn's prison life. Reading their works together, back and forth, attending to similarities and differences (Clooney 2010; 16: p. 326), I attempt to clarify their unique spiritual experiences of prison.

3. Transformation of S. Nursi and A. Solzhenitsyn in Prison

It should be stated at the outset that there are differences between Nursi's and Solzhenitsyn's spiritual journeys. Superficially, in Nursi we observe a man who digs in to get more whereas in Solzhenitsyn we see a man who is rediscovering his childhood heritage and spirituality. One might say Nursi's transformation is vertical while Solzhenitsyn's is more horizontal. Even so, both transformations are continuous and take place gradually. One important commonality between the two is the climax of their transformations in the years of exile and imprisonment.

Nursi's transformation never detaches from his faith in the One God and, on this, he is always very vocal. In the early period of his life, he was extremely active in society, heavily engaged in politics, even assuming leadership, in order to mobilize as many co-religionists as possible to attend to political and social issues. In his youth he was ready to take part in meetings of all kinds and had great confidence in replying to every question that was raised. He published many journal and newspaper articles, including works to guide people concerning new developments in the last days of the Ottoman state. As his famous biographer Şükran Vahide notes, the transformation probably began in the second half of 1920 and was completed by the end of 1921, after which time Nursi set to work developing his new critical perspective. This period coincides with the years of his return to Istanbul in 1918 from imprisonment in Kostroma on the Volga River in Russia. The main shift in his understanding began with his observations in relation to 'ungodly programs' that the newly established Turkish Republic was carrying out. Immediately after the collapse of the Ottoman state, came radical secularism along with its promotion of irreligiosity, and the major threat to Muslim faith and tradition from the Bolsheviks' revolutionary communism. This paved way to the birth of the 'New Said', who was already developing during Nursi's solitary stay in Russian exile, especially during the long nights of winter, which gave him the opportunity to re-evaluate his faith and spirituality.

'New Said' clearly understands that it is almost impossible to transform society through political ambitions and elitist designs (Ozdemir 2022; 38, p. 540). In contrast to the early active political life of 'Old Said', 'New Said' chose not to challenge the new Turkish state and its laicist social engineers by engaging himself directly in politics (Hermansen 2008b; 19, p. 76). He concentrates, however, on personal transformation and its effect on social awareness. This is a slow but steady and gradual way to reform society compared with what he sees as the fruitless endeavors of top-down political reforms. This type of renewal includes sincerity, piety, a self-sacrificing attitude, and deep spirituality. His emphasis on the inner dimension of individual spirituality takes not only

the heart but also the mind into consideration. Nursi uses this technique to respond to modern positivistic skepticism, the critical questions of modernity and scientific atheism. To bring God back to the individual and society, he created a counter internal discourse of Islamic identity and morality. We can observe that ‘New Said’ decided to spend his energy on creating a one-to-one channel of communication with the local community, and on spreading knowledge through writing short treatises by hand and secretly distributing them to different parts of the country in order to raise consciousness among individuals (Ozdemir 2022; 38, pp. 537–40).

In Solzhenitsyn’s case, the various stages and sophisticated nature of his personal, intellectual, and spiritual transformation can be read in the lines of his works and are reflected in his many novels. This change began when he witnessed the Soviet army’s attitude towards German civilians during the Second World War. The first sparks of Solzhenitsyn’s spiritual transformation arose from his rational and ethical concern towards what was going on around him. As frequently mentioned by many scholars, Solzhenitsyn’s dominant intellectual mood during this transition period is scepticism (Ericson and Klimoff 2008, p. 178). The ardent communist,¹ who had for a long time no place for God in his heart, when he was first arrested, initially experienced shock. He vividly and powerfully depicts his arrest as a cataclysmic event such that he cries out in tribulation, ‘Lord! Lord! Under artillery shells and bombs I asked you to preserve my life. Now I ask you send me death’ (Matual 1982, pp. 36–37).²

His odyssey follows the stages of Dante’s description of the journey through *Inferno* (hell) and *Purgatorio* (purification process) to *Paradiso* (paradise). As in Dante’s allegorical reading, Solzhenitsyn’s journey towards God begins in *Inferno*. It was almost impossible for Solzhenitsyn, whose heart was burning for justice, truth, and concern for the life of others, to become passive and indifferent to what was happening around him. However, his wish to die is more a symbolic reaction to the vastness of injustice rather than a matter of personal will. As David Matual notes, while Solzhenitsyn’s journey from *Inferno* through *Purgatorio* begins modestly (Matual 1982, p. 38), the substantial transformation process in his life is steadily already beginning. Having met many different people among the political detainees and ordinary prisoners, he had the possibility to consciously observe this range of attitudes and re-examine his former life in the light of deep long-term reflection. Consequently, his imprisonment became an opportunity for him to find the true human image, the *imago Dei*, within apparently inhuman conditions (Kroeker and Ward 2012, p. 259). In one place, Solzhenitsyn tells us the story of a man similar to himself physically and psychologically, by the name of Igor Tronko, an *émigré*, ‘We became friends’, Solzhenitsyn says. ‘Both of us were weak, dried out, our skin was grayish yellow on our bones. Why had we collapsed to such an extent?’ The reason he gave was: ‘I think the main cause was spiritual confusion’ (Sartoprak 2012, p. 270). The title of Viktor Frankl’s book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, encapsulates Solzhenitsyn’s attitude to his experiences in the Gulag.³ He found his view strengthened that it is through a quest for sense and purpose in life that individuals can endure hardship and suffering (Bushkin et al. 2021; 17, p. 233). So, let us focus on what Solzhenitsyn discovered and underwent in prison that led him to see the importance of seeking meaning in life and honoring the Creator.

Solzhenitsyn encountered many devout religious people in prison. During a discussion with the inmate named Boris Gammerov about the prayer said by President Franklin Roosevelt and printed in a Soviet newspaper, Solzhenitsyn, without any hesitation, dismissed it as hypocrisy (Sartoprak 2012, p. 181). Gammerov’s response is very direct and sharp: ‘why do you not admit a statesman can sincerely believe in God?’ Solzhenitsyn, who was a devoted communist and atheist, asked Gammerov whether he believed in God. Gammerov’s reply astonished him: ‘of course’ (Sartoprak 2012, p. 181; Matual 1982, pp. 38–40). This simple occurrence had a strong impact on Solzhenitsyn. There were also many other fervent religious people, individuals, and groups, to whom he paid special attention. One passionate example is Anatolii Vasil’eish Silin, a former atheist who had become a theologian, philosopher, and poet, having embraced Christianity during his stay

in a German prisoner of war camp. Silin instructed Solzhenitsyn in understanding the problem of evil from a Christian perspective, and succeeded in convincing him rationally and spiritually.

An important encounter took place with another erstwhile atheist who had embraced religious faith, a medical doctor, with whom Solzhenitsyn shared an emotionally charged moment when he was told he had cancer and would not recover (Ericson and Klimoff 2008, p. 178). Straight after his emergency operation for the cancer (which was most probably abdominal), Dr. Boris Kornfel'd came, sat next to him in the recovery room and animatedly told him the story of his own conversion to Christianity. Dr. Kornfel'd was killed the following day (Ericson and Klimoff 2008, p. 14), and his passionate story left a strong mark on Solzhenitsyn. His recovery from the surgery is conveyed in his moving lyric poem, *Acathistus*, where he contrasts the apparent meaninglessness of his past life with the new possibility he found of living purposefully. He concludes 'Oh! Great God! I believe now anew! Though denied, You always with me . . . ' (Ericson and Klimoff 2008, p. 180). For Solzhenitsyn, these conversations are like wakeup calls or, as Nursi says, a compassionate slap (Nursi 2013b) from the hands of the most Merciful so as to allow people to realize their mistakes.

Solzhenitsyn recounts his spiritual journey with honesty (the transition from *Inferno* to *Purgatorio*, then to *Paradiso*) and discusses with sincerity what he experienced during his years of imprisonment and exile. Just as the flood, from which Noah and those with him in the ark are rescued, cleansed the entire earth, Solzhenitsyn sees exile as a thorough rinsing of himself from top to the bottom. Several times he points out how he felt vulnerable in prison, especially when he met religious people. He argues at length that his atheistic convictions did not have a solid basis, could not stand up to dispute and were not very productive. What he pictures himself as doing during prison conversations about matters of faith issues was simply to renounce it (Ericson and Klimoff 2008; 15, p. 178). With the passage of time, however, he began admiring and idealizing these same believing people. His *Gulag Archipelago* and other works are full of such exemplary figures. His fellow inmate, Maruyishkin, is a good illustration. By saving his daily allocation of bread, Maruyishkin accumulated seven full rations so that, when the time came to break the Lenten fast, he feasted for three full days at Easter time (Saritoprak 2012, p. 266). Solzhenitsyn could not hide his admiration for this man. Similarly, he found the story of a young girl named Zoia Lescheva impressive. After the arrest of her religious and pious parents, this young girl was put into an orphanage when she was just 10 years old. Her new state-owned custodians forced her to remove the cross from her neck. She firmly refused, however, and clearly made known her eager determination that the cross would remain part of her until death (Matual 1982, p. 38).

Solzhenitsyn perceived that these faithful people felt no despair or depression in the face of many calamities. When he noticed that some Catholic Lithuanian prisoners were making rosaries for themselves from bits of bread, he asked them to make one for him with 100 beads. The Lithuanians were moved by his devotion (Kroeker and Ward 2012, p. 259). This mutual interaction with religious people in prison day by day fostered the young Solzhenitsyn's development of a personal faith. Numerous religious men and women, young and old, suffered at the hands of the Stalinist regime but these faithful people resisted all the torture, pressure, and humiliation of a situation comparable to Dante's *Inferno*.

It is important to remember that Solzhenitsyn was well aware of how the Bolsheviks, once they had assumed power, systematically attempted to erase all people of faith and religious institutions. He gives several examples of this concerted effort at religious genocide but his admiration for religious people's fearless attitudes is always to the fore. Who were these fierce opponents of the communist regime? There are, for example, the Eastern Catholics—followers of Vladimir Solovyov—and Polish Roman Catholics priests (Saritoprak 2012, p. 37). Solzhenitsyn complains bitterly about the persecution of the Baptists,⁴ large numbers of Orthodox priests (in 1932, in Leningrad, many churches were closed simultaneously and large-scale arrests were made among the clergy) (Saritoprak 2012, p.

51), bishops, monks, and nuns,⁵ who were guilty of nothing and were executed by the regime on the basis of indiscriminate charges of vaguely counterrevolutionary offenses.⁶ While there were many church properties confiscated from the early days of the Bolshevik revolution (Saritoprak 2012, p. 342), Khrushchev ordered the closure of 11,000 out of the 20,000 remaining church buildings owned by the Russian Orthodox Church (Nursi n.d., p. 26). For Solzhenitsyn, the saddest part of this process of confiscation was the conversion of certain church buildings into warehouses or social clubs (Nursi n.d., p. 29), and even into prisons (Saritoprak 2012, p. 605).⁷ In brief, entire churches were confiscated and their members were imprisoned.

Solzhenitsyn describes the atmosphere of fear during this period, using the following example: 'A person, who is convinced that he possessed spiritual truth, is required to conceal it from his own children'.⁸ Children were deliberately taken from their families and forced to abandon their faith through threats and lies, while their parents were sent to prison (Solzhenitsyn 1976, p. 872). These sinister acts, for Solzhenitsyn, were far more dangerous than losing money, property or any entitlement to welfare. Despite the existence of such negative developments and suffering, many religious communities and individuals, in the midst of every type of torture in prison, preserved their calmness, spiritual well-being and self-discipline. As in Viktor Frankl's experience, the Gulag aided Solzhenitsyn in finding the underlying relationship between his chaotic external world as well as his hunger and search for meaning within persistent chaos and unceasing crises (Bushkin et al. 2021, pp. 232–33). In this way, Solzhenitsyn's transformation was provoked from Godless communist ideologies to traditional Russian Orthodox Christianity. Theologically speaking, his understanding of human nature went from vague humanism to a powerful conviction that through suffering Christ reveals the true *imago Dei*, and thus, the horrific experience of the Siberian camps could become the subject of redemption (Kroeker and Ward 2012, p. 251). Also, not to be forgotten is the importance Solzhenitsyn gave to human rights and social justice issues and their significant role in his spiritual awakening.

4. Inner Peace in Solzhenitsyn's Works

When Solzhenitsyn deals with the notion of spiritual narrowness and breadth, he generally takes the issue at two levels: one is personal, while the other is communal or national (whereby he means Russia). His prison experience made him value the liberation of people's souls as the prior importance to their bodily freedom. If people do not possess inner freedom, they are spiritually exhausted and never have the quality of real independence. For Solzhenitsyn, this is an essential requirement not only for personal but also for national salvation (Ericson and Klimoff 2008, p. 183). As Mahoney eloquently points out, Solzhenitsyn's main concern was not with politics in the first place but with the decline in spiritual integrity of all modern societies (Mahoney 2003, p. 69). Thus, he considers his imprisonment as a slow but steady purge, which gives him an opportunity for moral development and spiritual transcendence. He witnesses with every fiber of his being that the blessing and grace of God reach even behind the bars of an iron curtain's jails. For Solzhenitsyn, this is testimony to the fact that the authoritarian regime's evil forces, despite their copious means to harm and even destroy the body and mind of the people, never reach the soul of the faithful. This spiritual purgation made possible by life in prison allows Solzhenitsyn to re-examine his life and compare his Godless (or meaningless) past life with a growing level of spiritual consciousness in his new journey. As he goes on to say, 'I am the interstellar wanderer! They have tightly bound my body, but my soul is beyond their power' (Saritoprak 2012, p. 595).⁹ This slow but determined spiritual transformation of Solzhenitsyn's reminded me of a famous observation of Averroes (Ibn Rushd) to the effect that, 'if the egg in the brood is broken from inside, life begins; on the contrary, if it is broken from the outside, the potential life inside also goes out'. Clearly, from the early 1960s to the late 1970s, Solzhenitsyn was taking steps to break out of the communist shell which, up until that point, had clouded with darkness and gloom his potential for life.

Through protecting his soul from the regular corruptions of the materialistic Soviet state, this ensured that his relationship with God would be intensified. Awareness of the constant presence and intervention of God during his time in his prison gradually increased the possibility for him to live a meaningful and purposeful life even there. In his novels and other writings, with profound humanity Solzhenitsyn portrays this contrast between the exterior and the interior with profound humanity. When the light of faith penetrates the hearts of prisoners, and when their quest for the warm hand of God is achieved, and full resignation to His will, then their spirits become steadily stronger. How faith enlightens the heart in Solzhenitsyn's eyes is illustrated in his well-known play, *Candle in the Wind*, which was written in 1960. This play's original title is *The Light that is within Thee*, a phrase taken from the Gospel of Luke 11:35 that harmonizes with Solzhenitsyn's argument for the generous openness of Christian faith, in the face of hedonism and scientism (Ericson and Klimoff 2008, p. 179). It is significant that this play was written about the same time as the novel, *The First Circle*, which charts a similar transformation. For Solzhenitsyn, empowering the heart is closely related to the light of scripture and the revelation of God. Similarly, the characters in his novels appear serene and self-possessed despite the difficulty of staying alive under the harsh conditions of a prison camp (Derrick 1975; 26, pp. 285–86). Ivan Denisovich, for example, is weak in body but has great spiritual strength and fortitude of heart. Spiritual force and renewal, according to Solzhenitsyn, constitute a unique antidote to human misery and are the real key to genuine and lasting happiness. After experiencing inner joy and peace in prison, he no longer merely admires other believers at a distance; he has finally become one of them (Matual 1982, p. 40). Faith and spirituality, Solzhenitsyn epitomized in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, not only generate Ivan's inner peace and joy but also bring him to the point where he no longer complains in the face of torture and other terrible physical sufferings. This link between faith and lack of complaint under harsh conditions is dwelt upon in detail by Said Nursi.

Another important notion that Solzhenitsyn emphasizes is the relationship between inner peace and patience. Lady Matryone is a good illustration of this topic. Her patience and eagerness to help others made her forget all the troubles and hardships in her own life, paving the way to emerge with a pure soul (Derrick 1975, p. 288). An unselfish and self-sacrificing attitude is a pure remedy for many spiritual diseases and a direct path to inner peace. To be distinguished from the inner dimension of religious and spiritual consciousness, are ideologies and political parties who generally attempt to deal predominantly with the outer manifestations of difficulties, crises, and hardships (Matual 1982, p. 40). Even the freedom these offer comes from outside, in contrast to religious and spiritual freedom which come directly from deep in the heart. For Solzhenitsyn, a person is genuinely alive when he exhibits a strong self-sacrificing spirit. The prisoner who has attained the most sublime level of consciousness frequently has a better understanding of life than people who have not had the rigors of confinement (Matual 1982, p. 42) At this stage, we are faced with a different Solzhenitsyn. As Viktor Frankl points out, Solzhenitsyn internalized the notion that life is meaningful 'under all conditions and in all situations.' In other words, the claim is that people's lives are always potentially meaningful, (Landau 2019, p. 383). and Solzhenitsyn himself had the opportunity to actualize this potential in the Gulag. Nevertheless, even though the goal is the attainment of inner joy, the spiritual wounds inflicted on people by a Godless regime over more than 70 years take time to heal (Nursi n.d., p. 26).

In Solzhenitsyn's understanding, even when people are deprived of the Divine dimension of life, the inner peace and patient endurance of the human mind and will manifest themselves in the ability to learn from others and in the capacity to find meaning in all one's experiences, however painful and destructive (Muchnic 1970, p. 162). Solzhenitsyn's hero in this regard is Gleb Nerzhin in *The First Circle*. Despite his great misfortune, pain, and discomfort, Nerzhin is admirably open-minded, thoughtful, and interested in others' ideas; he loves truth, defends justice, and through his faith becomes the happiest of all the confined (Muchnic 1970, p. 162). Happiness of this kind is supported by the growth

of self-awareness, which helps Solzhenitsyn to pave the way for his understanding of eternal life (Ericson and Klimoff 2008, p. 133). Spiritual enrichment, patience, learning from others, and self-awareness remarkably transform the *Gulag* into a potential paradise. For Solzhenitsyn, the harsh and negative conditions in the darkness of confinement become spiritually more fruitful than all the possible achievements of a massive nation, a seemingly free land called the Soviet Union. Because he has been spiritually re-born in the *Gulag*, he feels no despair or depression (Matual 1982, p. 42). From the *Gulag* where he finds himself, Solzhenitsyn exerts great efforts to spread this paradise-like life to the entire Russian people. He believes that his Christian faith will bring back happiness to Russia. In him there is no shadow of doubt that his Orthodox faith is the only living spiritual force capable of achieving the spiritual healing of Russia from the atheistic communism which was causing such great distress for the people during the Soviet period (Nursi n.d., p. 20). Thus, for Solzhenitsyn, Christianity itself generates authentic national spiritual renewal and promises inner peace to Russia as a whole.

As is clear from the above discussion, Solzhenitsyn assesses the nation's strength or weakness in the light of the level of its spirituality rather than its level of industrialization (Nursi n.d., p. 20). He is very critical of the machine age that dehumanizes the people and fails to improve their way of life (Derrick 1975, p. 288). The genuine felicity of both the individual and the nation depends on the inner joy and spiritual well-being of the Russian people. Thus, Solzhenitsyn has a very simple understanding of the power of Christianity to constitute a solution to 'the great disasters that had befallen Russia.' Downfall can be expressed 'in four simple words; men have forgotten God'. This had been a motto when he was a child, a motto that he rediscovered in his maturity. Hatred of God, he was convinced, is never a route to happiness.

The Christianity which Solzhenitsyn promotes as a herald of inner peace is also relatively uncomplicated. His religiously oriented character is rooted in a quite simple faith that is based essentially on his belief in the existence of God (Ericson and Klimoff 2008, pp. 133–34). He dismisses philosophical systems in their entirety as inadequate. However valuable, none of them can be more than partly true. He never approaches God from deistic or pantheistic perspectives, for his only concern is to bring back traditional Orthodox and Biblical understandings of God (Derrick 1975, p. 286), and thus, prevent the drying up of religious consciousness in society. Because of this emphasis on the re-activation of religious awareness, some commentators consider his writings to have the aim to create a mystical union between God and the Russian soil and soul (Ericson and Klimoff 2008, p. 165; Muchnic 1970, p. 165). In this regard, however, Solzhenitsyn never accepts any unprincipled compromises or evasions (Derrick 1975, p. 283). This simple and undiluted understanding reminds me of a prophetic narration quoted by Ghazzali in his book *Ihya*: 'Be subject to the religion of old women in the End Times, *Alaykum bi-din al-ajâiz*.' (Imam Ghazzali n.d., I. 78).

5. Tranquillity and Inner Peace in Nursi's Works

Compared to Solzhenitsyn, Nursi is quite straightforward in bringing faith to life for his followers on every occasion. Faith, for him, 'is not a routine intellectual affirmation, rather it is a life of total commitment to dwell in the presence of God' (Haddad 2003, p. 247). He frequently says that, without faith, one becomes blind, and that, when one fumbles in the darkness of faithlessness, it is of no consequence how wide the world around people is, because they are either actually in prison or their world has been turned into a prison. Everything has become alien and one's heart will be full of sorrow and grief.¹⁰ The Qur'an alludes to the fact that it is God who contracts and expands, withholds and grants abundance: *wa Allāhu yaqbiḍu wa yabṣuṭ* (2:245). Since the Prophet says, 'the heart is between the two fingers of the All-Merciful; He turns it from state to state and gives it whatever form He wishes' (Muslim n.d.), Nursi talks about times when his heart causes distress and makes him suffer from extraordinary spiritual estrangement:

... And I wondered how it is possible to withstand all this cumulative darkness and the interlocking kinds of estrangement! My heart sought succour, saying 'O Lord, I am a lonely stranger, weak without power, sick and disabled, an old man without choice. So, I say; help, help, I hope for forgiveness and draw strength at your door O my God.'¹¹

He vividly explains how he extricates himself from this spiritual blockage and envelopment:

Lo and behold, the light of faith, the overflowing of the Qur'an, and the kindness of the Merciful began to supply me with strength which transforms those five kinds of dark estrangements into five luminary circles of companionship and joy. So, my tongue began to repeat; God is sufficient for us, the Most Excellent is He in whom we trust (3:173); and my heart recited the gracious verse 'now if they turn away (O Muhammad) say; God suffices me. There is no god save Him. In Him have I put my trust, and He is Lord of the tremendous throne (9:129)'. (Haddad 2003, p. 247)

In Nursi's eyes, faith in God changes one's life dramatically. Time-bound moods of contraction depart, and expansion and openness come about. As Fethullah Gülen explains, contraction and openness are mysterious 'bargains' and in tune with the heart's contracting with gloom and depression, then expanding with joy (Gülen 2006; I.167). So, it is not correct to think that one can experience the state of *bast* (openness, expansion, and joy) at all times. Having inner peace does not mean that one will be spared hardship, anxiety, grief, and depression. For the disruptive reality which may affect human life brings with it a host of crises such as death, natural disasters, severe discomfort, loneliness, inner turmoil, illness, injustices, imprisonment, accidents, and many other losses. Nursi's distinctive prominent quality, as M. Ulusoy says, lies in his response to these unexpected tragedies and traumatic crises with the feeling Ulusoy describes as ontological helplessness (Turner 2013; 206). In Nursi's approach, calamities can never have a paralyzing and destructive effect on the person under stress. No matter how intense the negative forces are, they never in themselves cause those affected to give up and disconnect from God. Having internalized faith in God and reliance on Him, the imprisoned know real freedom, sickness becomes good health, the aged, disabled and weak find strength in the life of the soul, and exile and loneliness become ways to form unshakable bonds and relations with the Creator, such that one becomes a friend of God.¹² In brief, how strong faith in God brings happiness to one's life is summarized in Nursian theology with the logical sequence: '... belief necessitates affirmation of Divine Unity, affirmation of Divine Unity necessitates submission to God, submission to God necessitates reliance on God, and reliance on God necessarily leads to happiness in this world and the next' (Nursi 2009, p. 323). For Nursi, spirituality enables believers to apply the lessons they have learned from faith to the trials and challenges that inevitably arise in daily life. It is one's spirituality that comes to the fore at moments of crisis, when the normal patterns of activity, work and relaxation are disrupted, relationships are strained, and things are not the way they should be (Michel 2008, p. 176). Anxiety diminishes if one's spirituality is based on authentic faith.

In this regard, it has been observed that a key term in Nursi's discourse of inner peace and tranquillity is faith in God, *īmān bi-Allāh*. He frequently mentions a motto taken from Ibn 'Aṭā Allāh al-Iskandarānī (d. 1309): *ma-dha wajada man faqadak wa-ma alladhi faqada man wajadak*, 'what did one find who lost You, and what one lost who found You?' That is, 'the one who finds Him (God) finds everything, while the one who does not find Him (God), can find nothing' (Nursi 2016; Keskin 2015, p. 88). Nursi was strongly convinced that the heart of people's real faith strengthens them to challenge the whole world and that with this faith one saves oneself from every kind of worldly burden. He adopts the image that one travels on the ship of life (*sefîne-i hayatta*) with full confidence and security against the mountainous waves of events.¹³ Thus, Nursi's understanding of faith is not just theoretical or dogmatic, but a way of life in which one is constantly connected with God. One example

of this importance of the *taḥqīq* (certainty and realization of the faith) is his declaration to those in prison:

I am seventy years old,¹⁴ and I know with complete certainty from thousands of experiences, proofs, evidence, and events that true enjoyment, pain-free pleasure, grief-free joy, and life's happiness are only to be found in belief and in the realm of the truths of faith.¹⁵

As Z. Sarıtoprak and Z. Keskin argue convincingly, another dimension of inner peace in Nursian theology is related to the beautiful names of God. Keskin points out that the means to inner peace are as many as the 99 names of God. In her view, Nursi finds a way to attain inner peace when the world is decoded through these names of God, so that events in one's life can be given meaning in such a way as to satisfy the heart and mind (Sa'di Shirazi 2023; 31, p. 329; Keskin 2015; 82, p. 232). Keskin calls Nursi's reading of worldly events in the light of God's names and attributes a *tawḥīd*-centric approach (Keskin 2015, p. 233). To make this method more understandable, she chooses three of these names—All-Powerful (*al-Qādir*), All-Just (*al-ʿAdl*) and All-Merciful (*al-Raḥmān*)—and shows how these manifest within the universe and offer a source of inner peace. These names play a significant role in the actual process of attaining inner peace, namely, in that they satisfy human persons' inner and outer senses and faculties. Because Nursi gives detailed explanations of the inner faculties (*laṭāʾif*), such as *sirr* (secret), *khafā* (hidden) and *akhfā* (most hidden), in addition to the well-known five senses (seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling), these faculties, unseen but profoundly felt by God-conscious believers, are like opened windows looking out into the world of the unseen (Hermansen 2008a, p. 86). Faith is the main source of every means to reactivate these superabundant spiritual senses and manifests the boundlessness of God's names on earth. It is important to remember here Nursi's emphasis, along with faith, on *tawḥīd*. It is impossible for a heart that does not know Allah, does not accept His unity, and does not worship Him with all its being, to attain total peace and happiness. At most, one may think one is happy, but the struggle is constant. An unbelieving heart, according to Nursi, not only fails to find inner peace, but it is also empty, just as the Qur'an states *wa af'idatuhum ḥawāʾ*, '... their hearts are void (as if filled with air)'.¹⁶

As mentioned briefly above, both Nursi and Solzhenitsyn see the heart as the home and primary key to a human person's being and non-being.¹⁷ They sincerely believe that the heart is the true expression of a person's spiritual existence. Fethullah Gülen puts this well when he says of the human heart that it is:

the pathway to one's ultimate depths. Human virtues are cultivated on the hillsides of the heart; faith, love, and spiritual pleasures are the fruits of its garden. Not only is it a vital organ of the physical being, but it is also the spiritual centre of the body, including the emotions and (intellectual and spiritual) faculties, such as perception, consciousness, the senses, reasoning, and willpower. (Gülen 2006; I.22; Keskin 2015, p. 130)¹⁸

Seen and unseen faculties are embedded in the heart. It is a unique place which, when approached graciously, leads a person to ultimate happiness in this world and the Hereafter, without any bewilderment or confusion. Failure in this regard, however, eventuates in real misery. To illustrate the dimensions of the vital organ of the heart and its spiritual centre of gravity, Nursi refers to certain prophetic reports, poems, and proverbs. According to a well-known (but, to some extent, disputable) sacred tradition, 'neither the heavens nor the earth encompass Me (God), but the tender heart of My believing servant does'.¹⁹ Here, in figurative speech, is portrayed the breadth of the human heart. Similarly, as an ancient Arab proverb puts it, *makān/dār al-ḍiq yasa al-f al-ṣadīq*—'even the narrowest of places is large enough for a thousand friends' (Hirtenstein 2008, p. 287). For Solzhenitsyn, the heart alone gave strength to those who suffered for a half century under the Soviet system, and allowed them to stay alive and fight for their rights (Solzhenitsyn 1974; 13: p. 23). For the rest, however, he does not greatly elaborate on the nature and faculties of this great

spiritual source. Nursi, on the other hand, frequently refers to the dimensions of the heart, at times expanding, at other times contracting. Personal, cultural, and social breadth is always related to the expanse of the heart, no matter where one lives or what one does! This notion has spiritual and metaphysical dimensions, as Nursi reminds his readers more than once when he quotes the poem:

سَمُّ الْخِيَاطِ مَعَ الْأَحْبَابِ مِيدَانُ أَرْضِ الْفَلَائِةِ مَعَ الْأَعْدَاءِ فَجَنَانُ

With enemies the broad earth is like a small cup, while with friends a needle's eye becomes a broad arena (Nursi 2013b).

That is to say, one's expanse and measure of happiness, peace, and inner joy, parallel one's breadth of heart. The heart possesses tremendous capacity because of this connection to the Al-Merciful (*wus'ā*, wideness). It is a Ka'ba of human body (Chittick 1989, p. 107). Nursi in this regard uses the following important terms: *sakīna* (tranquility, the indwelling presence), *inshirāḥ* / *infītāḥ*, *iftitāḥ* (openness and breadth of heart), *riḍā* (contentment), *iṭmīnān*, *ṭumanīna* (serenity and peacefulness of heart), *salām* (peace), *farāsa* (deep understanding), *ḥusn al-zann* (positive opinion), *khushū'*, *khashyah* (deep reverence for God), *istighrāq* (rapture), *nashwa*, *nasha* (state of joy), *shawq* (enthusiasm, spiritual desire), *waqār* (dignity), *haybah* (awe-inspiring appearance), *inqilab* (constant change), *ḥuzn* (sorrow), *ṭarab* (distress), *'inkisār* (be broken), *qabḍ* or *'inqibāḍ* (contract) and *baṣṭ* or *'inbisāṭ* (expansion).²⁰ Neither should one forget the relationship between these concepts and the names of God.²¹ Here, we will focus only on the notion of *sakīna* to show how one can attain serenity and tranquillity. It is important also to note that Nursi, having reorganized and paraphrased a famous *sakīna* invocation (*Qaṣīda-i Arjūza*²² from Gumuskhānawī's famous *Majmū'āt al-Aḥzāb*), read the *sakīna* prayer regularly and requested his followers to do so constantly. Traditionally, one had to read the nine specifically chosen Qur'anic verses nineteen times (the total equaling 171) based on the names of God: *Fard*, *Ḥayy*, *Qayyūm*, *Ḥakam*, *'Adl* and *Quddūs* (Nursi 2013b, p. 425; Nursi nd., 119).

One should also remember that the same text (i.e., Gumuskhānawī's book) contains a specific prayer called *du'ā li-daf' ḍiq al-ṣadr* (a prayer for expelling or driving out narrowness from the chest or breast), which is attributed to Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765). *Sakīna* in Islamic tradition is different from the Jewish and Christian understanding of *shekinah*.²³ It generally means silence (derived from *sukūnah*), calmness, and steadiness such that a person experiences tranquillity (Gülen 2006; I.104).²⁴ In the context of Islamic spirituality, it also means that the heart has come to rest as a result of its connection with God, so that it is not shaken by worldly fear, grief, or anxiety, and finds peace, integrity, and harmony between the inner and the outer worlds (Gülen 2006; Keskin 2015). *Sakīna* is a way to bring about the harmony of inner peace with outer beauty. It is affiliated with the unseen realm rather than drawing its strength from the world that the physical eye can see (Keskin 2015, p. 47). While *sakīna* is understood to be the 'beginning of being freed from theoretical knowledge and awakened to the truth, *iṭmīnān* is considered to be the final point or station' (Gülen 2006; I.139; Keskin 2015, p. 48). The Qur'an draws attention to the notion of *iṭmīnān* with this verse: 'Indeed, in the remembrance of God do hearts find peace, *alā bi-dhikr Allāh taṭmainnū al-qulūb*'.²⁵

Other concepts also refer to different dimensions of the heart. *Riḍā*, for instance, means 'showing no animosity or rebellion against misfortune, and accepting all manifestations of destiny without complaint and even peacefully'. Generally speaking, Muslim scholars speak about two types of *riḍā*: contentment with God and contentment with what comes from God. *Riḍā* with God ensues when one is content with His arrangement of affairs, while *riḍā* with that which comes from God is contentment with His decree (al-Qushayrī 2007).²⁶ This is a state where there will be no traces of hatred, jealousy, deceit, destructive thoughts, empty feelings, or any type of evil inclination (Keskin 2015, p. 42). Nursi follows the Prophetic tradition in adopting a positive perspective on God and others, leading to a positive view of life: 'a person who sees the good in things has good thoughts. And he who

has *good* thoughts receives pleasure from life'.²⁷ Positive opinion is the mindset in which everything is viewed, perceived, or evaluated on a positive note (Keskin 2015, pp. 48–49).

6. Desire for Eternity and Renunciation of Worldly Possessions and Property

Another dimension of inner peace is based on a trio of relationships between the self, the world, and the Hereafter. Nursi and Solzhenitsyn both express their displeasure with people simply submitting to their desires and hunger for worldly gain. Authentic desire, according to Nursi, is boundless and everlasting; therefore, the human heart cannot be satisfied with the incomplete joys of this world (Horkuc 2010). Furthermore, as Nursi reminds readers in the *Second Flash*, 'this worldly realm is the field of testing, and the abode of service. It is not the place of pleasure, reward, and requital (Nursi 1995, p. 23). In fact, we can extend Nursi's view into our own civilizational present. It is by prioritizing the world and worldly things that we arrive at the root of our postmodern melancholy. We live in an age of unprecedented wealth, but in the realm of narrative and symbol we are deprived. So, the anxious ache for meaning that we feel goes unrelieved. As de Tocqueville puts it, 'the short space of threescore years can never content the imagination of man; nor can the imperfect joys of this world satisfy his heart' (Solzhenitsyn 1983). The extra decade or two of life expectancy we in the 21st century have added to de Tocqueville's projection does not vitiate his point (Solzhenitsyn 1983). As Sa'di Shirazi expresses it in his hopeful love of spring which breathes life into the human soul: 'another life is needed (*omre dighar be-bayad*), for time was spent in this one in hopefulness' (Ray 2012). For Nursi and Solzhenitsyn, achievement of this state is an unceasing and lifelong process.

As Solzhenitsyn writes, 'a dozen worms cannot go on and on gnawing the same apple forever that if the earth is a finite object, then its expanses and resources are finite also . . .' (Nursi n.d., p. 20). Since a human being's life span is short and the resources available in the world are limited, any attempt to find full meaning in life goes unrealized. Both our scholars, however, have provided solutions to satisfy the human yearning for eternity. The first of these is akin to conventional mystical practices: begin by renouncing every worldly attachment. The mystics, these great-souled people, who possessed the highest self-consciousness, wisdom, and serenity, frequently exhort others as follows: 'do not pursue what is illusory', namely, properties, positions, even emotional attachments such as family and friends. People lose their souls to possessions and attachments and are thus never able to find inner peace. For Solzhenitsyn, 'whoever renounces everything, s/he will win out.' In relation to prisoners in particular, this means that they too must spiritually divest themselves of all possessions and obliterate from their heart whatever attachments they may have had (Matual 1982, p. 40).²⁸

Nursi, on the other hand, uses the Naqshibandī Sufi order's famous motto: 'one should abandon or renounce four things: the world, the hereafter, self-existence and even abandon the abandonment' (*tark-i dunyā, tark-i 'uqbā, tark-i hastī, tark-i tark*) (Nursi 2016, p. 38). This complete renunciation is the only way to achieve ultimate peace and salvation. It is also wise to note that desiring nothing except for God is unspoiled attachment and a basic condition of real freedom. Nursi goes further and theologizes the relationship between how one's limitless desires and the struggle to attain them lead to feelings of impotence (*ajz*) and poverty (*faqr*). As Keskin rightly points out, the answer to this question lies in the gap that is felt between what one seeks and what one can achieve. So, how does feeling weak and poor lead to happiness? This is simple in Nursi's philosophy: through the realization of one's weakness and limitation, one can establish a connection with the immeasurable power and mercy of God.²⁹ Thus, a person's weakness becomes their strength; their poverty becomes a means of richness (Keskin 2015, p. 144).³⁰ According to Nursi, this gap between seeking and achieving leads to desire for the All-Powerful One, the One 'Who sees all things, and is present everywhere, Who is beyond space, exempt from impotence, free of fault, and far above all defect' (Keskin 2015, pp. 142–43). When people can understand their limitations, weaknesses, impotence, and incapacities, they become spiritually powerful and

their souls ascend to the truth with deep conviction and firm faith by relying completely on the All-Powerful and All-Wise God.

In this context, it is useful to dwell briefly on certain basic concepts and phenomena to which both scholars draw attention. In the following sections, therefore, I deal, summarily, with the themes of death, ultimate victory, hope and patience.

7. Death

Renunciation of worldly possessions and yearning for immortality are directly connected to inner peace. However, a dimension is still missing, namely, the notion of death. It may be stated from the outset that Nursi's and Solzhenitsyn's approaches to the concept of death are extremely positive. The idea of death plays a vital part in helping them both to be at peace with many negative details and otherwise anxiety-provoking and harmful elements. Both authors consider death to be a peaceful transition. Nursi describes death as similar to receiving a discharge certificate from the military, which indicates that one has completed one's work or mission in life. He sees death as a great bounty because it means being freed from the obligations of life, which have become burdensome after a certain age. Moreover, death allows us to join and be united with our friends who have already travelled across to that other realm (Nursi 2016, p. 25). For us all, death means liberation from worldly constraints. Religious persons have a strong faith that there is a life after death and that this world is not the end. Their souls will live on freely. Solzhenitsyn, in a poem concerned with the meaning of life and the mystery of death, describes death as a crest onto which the road of his life has now ascended (Ericson and Klimoff 2008, p. 180; Mahoney 2003, p. 68). So, death is not a chasm, but it means real union with our loved ones. Thus, a person can approach it without fear.³¹ Death is a bridge between this world and the Hereafter; thus, in the absence of the notion of death, temporary suffering in this world and its relationship to inner peace cannot be understood clearly. Since death opens the doors of the Hereafter and the Day of Judgement, one should not worry about the injustices of this world. Those who are on good terms with death, who do not excessively fear or abhor it, are at peace with themselves.³² That is why death should never be forgotten: *Memento mori*.

Hope and ultimate victory having lived during troubled and distressing times—one having witnessed the collapse of the Ottoman state while the other saw many atrocities committed by the communist state—Nursi and Solzhenitsyn have great hope; their faith in God's sustenance assures them that the good will always triumph over evil (Ericson and Klimoff 2008, p. 189). Nursi considers the victory of injustices and despotic practices to be temporary and, basing his views on Qur'anic verses, declares that the victory belongs to righteous believers.³³ Truth will be triumphant and cannot be overcome (Haddad 2003, p. 249). Solzhenitsyn, in line with Nursi, clearly perceives the triumph of the human spirit over totalitarianism (Hunter 2003, p. 12). He constantly brings hope to the situations he faces and is able to declare that, no matter how strong communism is, it will never extinguish the faith of Christian people (Ericson and Klimoff 2008, p. 134). Nursi, from the perspective of Islam, also worked tirelessly to instill hope and limitless faith in every strata of society. For both, the major sin of humanity is hopelessness and inveterate pessimism, because despair is destructive at both individual and societal levels. Nursi, using a time-based metaphor, says that, just as every winter is followed by spring and every night by morning, so too humankind shall have a morning and a spring. On another occasion, as Nursi writes: 'I was in exile at the time; I felt a despairing sorrow, a regretful penitence, a longing for assistance. Suddenly, the all-wise Qur'an came to my aid. It opened a door of hope so powerful and afforded a light of consolation so true that it could have dispelled despair and darkness a hundred times more intense than mine' (Nursi 1996, p. 39; Keskin 2015, p. 201; Michel 2008, p. 180). Nursi clarifies that, even from the condition of deepest winter, there would be a paradise-like spring, and the following generations would see it (Nursi n.d., p. 75).³⁴ In addition, Nursi strongly affirms that faith frees the human being from the morass of despair; it illuminates the past and the future and makes the present

bearable (Haddad 2003, p. 248).³⁵ Therefore, faith is not only a source of light and power but the origin of hope and an antidote to hopelessness.³⁶

Solzhenitsyn internalizes the notion of spring in the context of prison and says: ‘Spring promises every happiness to the prisoners . . . I would become wiser here. I would come to understand many things here. Heaven! I would correct my mistake.’ He also discloses his hope with these words: ‘Beneath that bright heaven you had to imagine your bright future life, sinless and without error’ (Santoprak 2012, p. 212). Both scholars have great confidence in their respective religious traditions and they call upon these traditions to compete openly with the despotic regimes that restrict every civil and fundamentally human benefit for society. Solzhenitsyn demands: ‘allow us a free art and literature, the free publication of books . . . allow us philosophical, ethical, economic and social studies, and you will see what a rich harvest it brings and how it bears fruit for the good of Russia’ (Nursi n.d., p. 18). This enthusiastic pro-active approach characterizes the mission of both men: planting the seeds and waiting for harvest in the time of the coming generations. It became the natural habit of them both to face their troubles with active patience, address them with faith, and start each new day with vivid hope. As Erich Fromm writes, when people have faith, they wait for the Messiah every day and are not disappointed when he does not come. ‘it is the paradoxical hope to expect the Messiah every day, yet not to lose heart when he has not come at the appointed hour’ (Fromm 1976). Despite the fact that it may seem contradictory from the outside, there is hope in the waiting.

8. Patience

Along with hope and the victory of the righteous, a further important feature of both authors is their dealing with hardship and suffering through patience. Patience is a praiseworthy virtue for each of them. It enables complete reliance on God’s limitless mercy and empowers a person to resist the relentless suppression of faith by the State. At the same time, *Sabur* is one of the sublime names of Allah, and it is clear that whoever is patient will become a part of this lofty name with manifestation of its many different dimensions and fragrances. Nursi, for example, finds a proper response to calamities and suffering in displaying great gratitude to the Creator, because grace abounds in thankfulness. Otherwise, if people keep complaining, their suffering increases and, intentionally or unintentionally, they risk blocking or curbing the grace of God, so that, consequently, these calamities become larger until finally they are unable to be borne. If, on the other hand, one disregards or relativizes hardships, they tend to disappear (Haddad 2003, p. 248). Similarly, all the commendable characters in Solzhenitsyn’s works are the epitome of patience. They portray both admirable equanimity and inner peace in the face of any calamity. They forget their troubles and are ready to help others. They are always spiritually sound characters (Derrick 1975, pp. 286–87).

9. Destiny of the Nation: Altruistic Life and Love

As already mentioned, Nursi’s and Solzhenitsyn’s altruistic natures make them concerned not only for their own destiny but for the fate of the whole people. While countless human beings in their times were laboring under violent pressure, oppression, and suffering, both men could think not only of the final goal of true freedom, but also the social justice and human rights dimensions of inner peace are very much alive in both scholars’ approaches to the many marginalized people. In their writings are countless clues and open statements that testify to the pain they felt when they looked at their homelands and the world. Nursi explicitly states that, while he can bear his own pain and sorrow, he has been broken and crushed by the grief of other Muslims. As he elaborates, he felt deeply every blow inflicted on the world of Islam as inflicted primarily on his own heart (Ulusoy 2008, p. 143; Keskin 2015, p. 210).

Solzhenitsyn’s heart beats in a likewise mode. As O’Brien points out, Solzhenitsyn’s heart bleeds not simply for himself but for his country and compatriots, and for humanity at large (Nursi n.d., p. 14). Reading between the lines, we observe that each of our authors sees

himself as having a God-given mission to look after his fellow creatures, resonating both with those who have already suffered and with those who are yet to suffer. Solzhenitsyn describes the situation with the expressions: 'I have been in the red burning belly of the dragon . . . he was not able to digest me. He threw me up. I have come to you as a witness to what it's like there, in the dragon's belly' (Solzhenitsyn 1974, p. 25).³⁷ In another place, Solzhenitsyn finds spiritual renewal amid intense suffering. For him, this is an opportunity to see the true human image, the *imago Dei*, within the apparently inhuman (Kroecker and Ward 2012, p. 259).³⁸

Similarly, Nursi cries out: 'Because by nature I feel excessive pity and compassion for my fellow being, I have experienced the suffering of thousands of my brothers in addition to my own pains, and therefore it is as though I have lived for hundreds of years' (Aydin 2003, p. 217). When he lost his mother, and then his nephew, he said ' . . . half of my private world died with the death of my mother and now, with the death of Abdurrahman (his nephew) the other half died'. He believes, however, that his large Islamic family, and the compassion which embraces all humanity, will enable him to overcome these deaths, which weighed so heavily on him, and enable him see that God had replaced his nephew with 30 Abdurrahmans, referring to his deceased nephew's name with his committed and hard-working pupils (Keskin 2015, p. 228). This is especially important in terms of understanding Nursi's compassion for the civilians who died in Europe during the Second World War and is evidence of his warm and spacious heart for humanity.³⁹

Clearly, there are strong parallels between Solzhenitsyn's and Nursi's suffering love of others, and the deep inner peace of their spiritual lives. One of the explanations for their unceasing efforts to bring peace to society lies in the understanding of love as the source of spiritual and mental solace, and as the climax of experiences of the real. Solzhenitsyn believes that the power of love is the quality of a good human being (Derrick 1975, p. 286). Thus, such great power should not be ignored in human relations and in attaining inner peace. Nursi also elaborates on the notion of love and its relation to inner peace. Following Islamic mystical traditions, he argues that infinite love, when it is directed to finite things, can only bring grief and sorrow. As Rumi notes, this is fake love (Sa'di Shirazi 2023, p. 332). In addition, when the time of separation comes from the time-bound objects of love, pain, and grief for the specious lover will be multiplied (Tocqueville 2023, p. 446). To love God, the eternal existent being, is considered the sole cure for these wounds of separation. Nursi sincerely advises his followers to lean on this unshakeable Almighty and All-powerful being and assign or refer their incapacity and unsolved problems to Him (Nursi 1995, p. 30). In this context, he comforted himself with the help of many Qur'anic verses where genuine inner peace can be found, and where it marvelously and valiantly resists and withstands every conceivable kind of torture. Nursi's most frequently quoted verses are:

God is enough for us, and He is the best disposer of affairs.⁴⁰

And put your trust in God. God suffices as One on Whom to rely (and to Whom to refer all affairs).⁴¹

. . . In Him have I put my trust, and he is Lord of the tremendous throne.⁴²

Finally, it is important to note his eloquent summary of the reason for existence:

Be certain of this, that the highest aim of creation and its most important result are belief in God (*iman-i bi-Allah*). And the most exalted rank in humanity and its highest degree are the knowledge of God (*marifat Allah*) contained within belief in God. And the most radiant happiness and sweetest bounty for jinn and human beings are the love of God (*muhabbat Allah*) contained within the knowledge of God. And the purest joy for the human spirit and the sheerest delight for man's heart are the rapture of the spirit (*lazzat-i ruhaniya*) contained within the love of God. Indeed, all true happiness, pure joy, sweet bounties, and untroubled pleasure lie in knowledge of God and love of God; they cannot exist without them. (Nursi 2016, p. 265)

10. Conclusions

As indicated in the article, while both Nursi and Solzhenitsyn were subjected to unspeakable persecution, it never occurred to either of them to respond with violence. Despite the countless hardships, tortuous imprisonment, and debilitating exile that they went through, they were able to discern the hidden beauty, kindness and goodness even behind all kinds of injustices, however much pain and distress these inflicted on them. Nursi turns prison experience into a school, seeing every phenomenon as a reflection of God's attributes, and evaluating the visible and invisible (*mulk* and *malakut*) from the perspective of God's beautiful names. In short, whatever comes from God is good. More importantly, nothing is eternal in this mortal world. Both sadness and happiness are temporary. To put it in Nursi's words, 'the absence of pleasure is pain, and the absence of pain is pleasure'.⁴³

Solzhenitsyn's prison experience invites him to explore and rediscover the religious and moral education he received in his childhood, the truth of which had been obscured by brainwashing in the communist ideology of the Soviet Union. More specifically, we can define Solzhenitsyn's journey in prison in terms of restoring his Christian faith. Remaining faithful to the truth of faith which he had rediscovered after a time when following other directions, he was tireless in emphasizing that the human path is one of commitment, not to mortal phenomena, but to the eternal Creator: 'Do not pursue what is illusory—property and position; all that is gained at the expense of your nerves decade after decade and is confiscated in one fell night' (Saritoprak 2012, p. 592). For both Nursi and Solzhenitsyn, the sharp difference between sadness, distress, sickness, and old age, on the one hand, and joy, peace, youth, and health, on the other hand, almost disappears in their thinking. In Nursi's words, the width of their world was directly proportional to the width of their hearts. Although the world physically narrowed with their incarceration behind thick walls and the cruelty with which they were treated, no jailer, tyrant, or autocrat could impose limits on their spiritual pathways or the journeys of their souls. It was precisely the quality of their relationship with God, of which we learn abundantly from their writings, that bespoke the quality of their lives. Despair does not feature in the vocabulary of these two giants of the spiritual life, and a tasteless existence oscillating between hope and despair is a foreign concept to them. They had mastered the art of living gratefully in the present moment, and appreciating its beauty, no matter under which dreadful conditions they were forced to abide.

The secret of their peaceful and fruitful lives in prison can be understood to reside, on the one hand, in their strong sense of attachment to God and to others, and in their broadness and maturity of heart, on the other. The experience of incarceration offered each of them the opportunity to review their own lives, enabling each, independently of the other, to diagnose the ills of their contemporary societies—such as atheism, worldliness, hedonistic lifestyle, lack of spirituality, and overconsumption—and try to propose and develop a way out, both for their close associates and for the general public. Their awareness of this fundamental task to better the lives of others allowed them to bear the harshness of prison and transform its harmful effects into more fruitful endeavors.

According to Nursi, prison spirituality is one of the purest types. The regular performance of prayers together with fellow inmates, the frequent, and shared invocations of God, and constant reading of the Qur'an: all contributed to developing a deeply spiritual environment in our prison cell. Making spirituality his top priority empowered him and his pupils to focus on soul and mental health while they were in prison, and to ward off the effects of the toxic political and cultural propaganda that was rife in the country. As Nursi does not tire of saying, I have observed very clearly that even time and space differ according to the spiritual degree of people living in the same environment at the same time. What seemed a long period of time for one was, for another, just like a second. Relating this to ourselves and our spiritual experience in prison, we found it highly regrettable that a moment that was very precious for ourselves, and that we wanted not to pass, would slip away from others in the blink of an eye.

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Notes

- 1 He describes his upbringing as: ‘The social environment has such an impact that it gets into the brain of the young man and little by little takes over, so that from age 18, I did change internally, and from that time I became a Marxist, a Leninist and believed in all these things’ (Ericson-Klimoff, *The Soul and Barbed Wire*, 18).
- 2 Solzhenitsyn’s gradual transformation is depicted in *the Little Grain*. In this work, he had long avoided giving religious testimonies, preferring to let his faith ‘flow silently but incontrovertibly’ (Ericson-Klimoff, *The Soul and Barbed Wire*, 133).
- 3 Ghazali’s confession in his autobiography *al-Munqiz* is very relevant in the case of Solzhenitsyn: From the period of adolescence, that is to say, previous to reaching my twentieth year to the present time when I have passed my fiftieth, I have ventured into this vast ocean; I have fearlessly sounded its depths, and like a resolute diver, I have penetrated its darkness and dared its dangers and abysses. I have interrogated the beliefs of each sect and scrutinized the mysteries of each doctrine, in order to disentangle truth from error and orthodoxy from heresy. I have never met one who maintained the hidden meaning of the Qur’an without investigating the nature of his belief, nor a partisan of its exterior sense without inquiring into the results of his doctrine. There is no philosopher whose system I have not fathomed, nor theologian the intricacies of whose doctrine I have not followed out. (https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Confessions_of_al-Ghazali accessed on 25 June 2023). I would like to thank anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to Ghazali’s confession.
- 4 These people were persecuted on the grounds they refused to listen to preachers sent by an atheist state with full authority (O’Brien, ‘Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn and the Evils of Soviet Communism’, 15).
- 5 Solzhenitsyn gave a tragic example about the imprisonment of nuns and prostitutes. They were sent to prison together, but, through a lenient article of the legal code, the prostitutes were allowed, after three years, to return home with full suitcases, while nuns were never able to return to their home and families (Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918–1956*, 38).
- 6 Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918–1956*, 326.
- 7 According to Solzhenitsyn, the struggle of the Russian Church started very early. Bolsheviks wanted to blame every calamity that befell Russia on the attitude of the Church. For instance, they blamed the Church for the famine in the Volga region, for, if believers had sacrificed whatever they had, there would have been no famine. However, it must be stated that the Russian Church was eager to help people in distress, but not by state force and anarchy. See Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918–1956*, 342–345.
- 8 After a poem written by Tanya Khodkevich: ‘you can pray freely, but just so God alone can hear’. Solzhenitsyn says she received a 10-year sentence for these verses (Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918–1956*, 37). Intolerance was a common and prevalent reflex during these tough days under the communist regime.
- 9 According to Matual, Solzhenitsyn now possesses the highest consciousness, deepest wisdom and greatest happiness (Matual, *The Gulag Archipelago: From Inferno to Paradiso*, 42).
- 10 See the original text: ‘Eğer o göz küfür zulmetiyle kör olursa; dünya, genişliğiyle beraber bir hapisane şekline girer. Bütün hakaiki kevnîye, nazarından gizlenir. Kainat ondan tevahuş eder. Kalbi ahzan ve ekdar ile dolar’ (Nursi 2013a).
- 11 *Yâ Rabb, garîbem, bîkesem, zaîfem, nâtüvânem, alîlem, âcizem, ihtiyarem, bî-ihiyarem, el-aman-gûyem, afo-cûyem, meded-hâhem, zidergâhet İlâhî!* (Nursi 2007).
- 12 Thomas Michel deals with this topic eloquently. At one point in his treatise, message of the sick, Nursi coins a startling paradox: ‘for you, he tells the readers of *Risale-i Nur*, illness is good health, while for some of your peers good health is a sickness’ (Michel 2008).
- 13 In Nursi’s words: ‘Evet, hakikî imânı elde eden adam, kâinata meydan okuyabilir ve imânın kuvvetine göre, hâdisâtın tazyikâtından kurtulabilir. “Tevekkeltü alallah” (Allah’a tevekkül ettim/Hûd Sûresi: 56.) der, sefine-i hayatta kemâl-i emniyetle hâdisâtın dağlarvâri dalgaları içinde seyrân eder’.
- 14 At other times, it is said to be 75 years.
- 15 Nursi’s original statements are: ‘Ey zevk ve lezzete mübtela insan! Ben yetmiş yaşında binler tecrübelerle ve hüccetlerle ve hadiselerle aynelyakin bildim ki: hakiki zevk ve elemsiz lezzet ve kedersiz sevinç ve hayattaki saadet yalnız imandadır ve iman hakikatleri dairesinde bulunur. Yoksa dünyevi bir lezzette çok elemeler var. Bir üzüm tanesini yedirir on tokat vurur, hayatın lezzetini kaçıtır. Ey hapis musibetine düşen biçareler! Madem dünyanız ağlıyor ve tatlı hayatınız acılaştı; çalışınız, ahiretiniz dahi ağlasın ve hayatı bakiyeniz gülsün, tatlılaşsın, hapisten istifade ediniz. Nasıl bazan ağır şerait altında düşman karşısında bir saat nöbet, bir sene ibadet hükmüne geçebilir. Öyle de, sizin ağır şerait altında herbir saat ibadet zahmeti; çok saatler olup, o zahmetleri rahmetlere çevirir’ (Nursi, *Sözler*, ‘Onuncu Söz’). Nursi’s contemporary, famous Turkish exegete Elmalılı Muhammed

Hamdi Yazır (d.1942), has a similar approach: ‘Elem ve lezzet bütün zihayatta müştereken icrâyı te’sir ediyorlar. Diğerlerinden fazla olarak insanlardan yalnız hadisatın kendileri değil, tasavvurları da müessir oluyor. Tasavvuru elem bir elem, tasavvuru lezzet de bir lezzet oluyor. Bu sûretle insanlar ezvâk içinde müteellim, âlâm içinde mütelezziz bile olabiliyorlar . . . Böyle her lezzeti hayır, her elemi şer addederek hayır ve şerri bizzat vicdanı ferdilerinin ân-ı te’sirleriyle ölçenlerin nazarlarında o lezâiz ve âlâmdan başka bir mabûd yoktur’ (Muhammed Hamdi Yazır, ‘Hayat ve Ubudiyet’, (prepared by C. Köksal-M. Kaya), Elmalılı M. Hamdi Yazır Makaleler I. İstanbul, (Winkler 2011, pp. 229–32)). See also for information about Elmalı’lı 29. (Albayrak 2016).

16 Verse 14:43. Translation is taken from Ali Ünal’s work.

17 Solzhenitsyn, ‘Men Have Forgotten God’, 9–10.

18 Zeki Sarıtoprak draws attention to the two faces and functions of the spiritual heart, namely: centre of peace and centre of violence (Sarıtoprak, *ibid.*, 327). This is also noted by Solzhenitsyn several times in various articles and books.

19 *Ḥadīth* as cited in Nursi, *The Words*, 141.

20 Some of these concepts are discussed by Keskin in detail. See Keskin, *ibid.*, 38–40. *Qalb* (heart) comes from Arabic expression *taqallub* which means alterations, transformation, change, fluctuation, variability, inconstancy etc. God is the turner of hearts (*muqallib al-qulub*) (Chicctick, *ibid.*, 106). Here, it is useful to remember the famous mystic Junayd al-Baghdadi’s saying: a believer’s heart changes seventy times a day, while an unbeliever’s always stays the same. Junayd’s statement is in complete harmony with the concept of the state of expansion and contraction.

21 *Fattāh, Qābiḍ, Bāsiṭ, Salām, Muḥsin* and *Rādī*. In other words, God is the main source for different states and stations of the heart. Another point that should not be forgotten theologically, as Imam Bayhaqī points out, is that such names are mentioned or said together with their opposites that complement each other. Allah is not only *Bāsiṭ* (the Reliever), but also *Qābiḍ* (the Constrictor). Alternatively, not only *Nafi* (the Beneficial or Creator of Good), but also *Dārr* (the Creator of the Harmful) (See Muhammed Hamdi Yazır, *Hak Dini Kur’an Dili*, Hashir Surah Tafsir, verses 18–24).

22 *Arjūza* is believed to be inspired by Imam Ali, the cousin of the Prophet and fourth caliph.

23 The concept “Shekinah” in Jewish thought focuses mostly on the presence of God that may manifest itself during several types of ordinary religious activities, such as the prayer and Torah study already referred to and visiting the sick, practicing hospitality and Sanhedrin, giving charity, practicing chastity before marriage and faithfulness within marriage—doing all these ordinary things frequently will help produce greater faith, confidence, and peace of mind. But the Jewish focus is more on the opportunity to experience God’s presence personally in a daily activity than on an individual’s personal spiritual growth. These somewhat different emphases between *sakinah* and *shekinah* are not opposites. They are simply two different perspectives—like seeing a lion from the front or from the side (Allen S. Maller (2013). *Sakinah and Shekinah: One word two perspectives. Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 48:259–60).

24 The word *tâbût* (ark or chest) mentioned in the Qur’an (2:248) also has a connection with serenity (*sakinah*) and the heart. For this reason, *tâbût* is thought of as a chest that contains knowledge and wisdom and gives peace to people. In summary, there is a deep relationship between serenity and knowledge. Information that is internalised and transformed into action gives people inner peace and tranquillity, while protecting self-consciousness (*wijdan*), which is the consciousness of consciousness (*şuurun şuur* in Turkish), against all kinds of external and internal unrest. Even more interesting is, in verse 2:247, the Qur’an says God has chosen Talut (Saul) as a leader of the Jews and He blessed and increased Saul abundantly in knowledge and stature. Curiously, the Qur’an uses the word *bastatan* (from *basit*), which means expansion.

25 Qur’ân 13:28. See also Keskin, *ibid.*, 47–48.

26 Rābi’a al-Adawiyah (d. 801), a famous female Sufi, describes *riḍā* as ‘When one rejoices at afflictions as much as s/he rejoices at bounty’ (al-Qushayrī 2007, *al-Qushayrī’s Epistle on Sufism*, p. 208).

27 The famous hadith says ‘Anyone from among you must not die without having a positive attitude towards God, (*ḥusn al-zann*). Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, *al-Ṣaḥīḥ al-Muslim*, (ed.) Muḥammad Fuād ‘Abd al-Bāqī, Beirut: Dār Iḥyā al-Turāth al- Arabī, IV.2205 (Hadith no: 2877).

28 In another place, he gave this powerful advice: ‘Live with a steady superiority over life—do not be afraid of misfortune, and do not yearn for happiness; it is after all the same; the bitter does not last forever, and the sweet never fills the cup to overflowing, it is enough if you do not freeze in the cold and if thirst and hunger do not claw at your insides. If your back is not broken, if your feet can walk, if both arms can bend, if both eyes see, and if both ears hear, then whom should you envy? And why. Our envy of others devours us most of all. Rub your eyes and purify your heart and prize above all else in the World those who love you and who wish you well’ (Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918–1956*, 592-1).

29 A famous saying is attributed to Prophet Muhammad, but many scholars do not authenticate it: *man ‘arafa nafsaḥū faqad ‘arafa rabbahū* ‘s/he who knows herself/himself knows her/his Lord’. Imām Nawawī said there is no well-established tradition about this from the Prophet. See (Yazır 1998, I.129). Nevertheless, this frequently referenced tradition shows that self-awareness is a way to be aware of one’s real potential. (Keskin, *ibid.*, 234).

30 A compelling example is given of a soldier who can drive out all the inhabitants of a town if he acts in the name of a government. In such a case, none of the inhabitants would try to harm the soldier, even though there may be 100 or 1000 inhabitants (Nursi, *The Words*, 16).

31 When Solzhenitsyn was 84 years old, having suffered two heart attacks, a reporter from the New Yorker once asked him whether death scared him. He confidently declared, ‘in any case I have no fear of death’ (Hunter, ‘Solzhenitsyn: the Last Prophet’, 12).

32 Nursi also says ‘*Risale-i Nurun* mahiyetini dikkat ve tefekkürle okuyarak anlayıp tahkiki bir imana sahip olan halis Nur talebeleri; ölümden, hapisten, zindandan ve hiçbir beşeri eza ve cefadan korkmazlar’/the followers of the *Epistle of Light* never be afraid of death, prison, jail or any type of human torture and pressure’ (Nursi, *Sözler*, (23. Söz 3. Nokta) 285).

33 When one looks at the Qur’anic narratives, it can be seen they always end with decent finishing. Nursi also shares his methodology of how to approach the Quranic text in an experiential way. It seems that he considers the Quran as a living text that can answer our existential questions and problems: One time when I had been isolated from everything by ‘the worldly’, I was afflicted with five kinds of exile. I suffered, too at that time of old age from five illnesses arising in part from my sorrows. Due to the heedlessness resulting from the distress, I looked not to the lights of the *Risale-i Nur*, which would have consoled and assisted me, but straight to my heart, and I sought my spirit. I saw that dominant in me were an overpowering desire for immortality, an intense love of existence, a great yearning for life, together with an infinite impotence and endless want. But an awesome transience was extinguishing the immortality. Suffering that state of mind, I exclaimed like the sorrowing poet:

While my heart desires its immortality, Reality wants the passing of my body;

I am afflicted with an incurable ill which not even Luqman could cure! (Nursi, *The Fourth Ray*, <http://www.erisale.com/?locale=en&bookId=204&pageNo=71#content.en.204.70>).

34 Interestingly, Nursi pronounced a similar expression while he was in jail in Eskişehir.

35 In the 13th Ray (*Şualar*) Nursi also says: ‘certainly, what we have to do before anything else is not to be alarmed and not to despair, not to become hopeless, but to strengthen each other’s morale and not to be frightened but to meet this calamity trusting in God. We have to recognize that the mountains which the inane, clamorous journalists make out of molehills, are indeed simply molehills, and thus not to be given any importance. The life of this world, especially at this time and under these conditions, is without value. Whatever happens to one, one should meet it contentedly’.

36 The word Iblis (Satan) in the Qur’an literally means ‘being hopeless and despair’. The main reason for this despair (*iblās*) is disbelief (Khalil b. (Ahmad n.d.), *Kitab al-Ayn*, Cairo: Dar wa Maktabat al-Hilal nd. VII.262; Ibn Manzur (n.d.), *Lisan al-Arab*, Beirut: Dar Sadir nd., VI.30).

37 He also shows his patience and resilience with the words: ‘We the dissidents of the Soviet Union, do not have any tanks, weapons, organisations . . . our hands are empty. We have only a heart and what we have lived through in the half century of this system. And when we have found the firmness within ourselves to stand up for our rights, we had done so. It is only by firmness of spirit that we have withstood’ (Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr, ‘Detente Democracy’, 23).

38 It is safe to say that in both the Christian and Islamic traditions there is a very prominent understanding that testing and suffering play an active role in defining the way of the prophets. For this reason, what Wahb b. Munabbih reported by saying ‘I saw it in the book of an apostle’ seems to have become the norm: ‘if you enter the path of the oppressed people, please your heart, because it will lead you to the path of the prophet and righteous servants’ (Ebu Nuaym-Ibn Cevzi 2000. *Sahabeden Günümüzde Allah Dostları (Hilyetü’l-Evliya ve Sıfatu’s-Safve)*. Translated by Sait Aykut, İstanbul: Şule, p. 123).

39 At this juncture, it is worth mentioning a letter by Nursi to his students:

Although he was in exile in Kastamonu under dire conditions, he sent a letter to his students, again revealing his ethics of compassion and his feelings about the war and its devastating consequences: “Due to my compassionate and sensitive nature, I was shaken by the cataclysms that have brought disaster, loss, poverty, and hunger to men, coming as they have in this harsh winter, and at a time of calamitous spiritual cold. Then suddenly I was reminded: in such calamities, there is a certain kind of mercy and reward for the victims, even if they are non-believers” (Nursi 2012). He further claims that “the innocent victims of such divine calamities become, in a sense, martyrs.” (ibid). Although the letter was written during the War, Nursi is not interested in hearing news about who was winning the War. It is also important to look at newly published article on Nursi’s ethics of compassion: (O’Brien 1994). A New Ethics of Compassion for Animals: Said Nursi on the Rights of Flies. *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 6: 53–80.

40 Qur’ān 3:173.

41 Qur’ān 33:3.

42 Qur’ān 9:129. For other frequently mentioned verses See ‘Do not despair of God’s mercy’ (29:53); ‘Is not Allah Sufficient for His servant? (39:36); “...Be aware that it is in the remembrance of God that hearts find rest and contentment” (13:28); ‘Everything will perish save His countenance. His is the command, and unto Him ye will be brought back’. (28:88).

43 It should be noted that the idea in this expression ‘zevâl-i lezzet elem olduğu gibi, zevâl-i elem dahi lezzettir’ originally belongs to Imam al-Ghazzali and Said Nursi used it in many of his epistles, *Risale-i Nur*.

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