

Said Nursi and Rufus Jones on the Spiritual Life

Michael Birkel
Earlham School of Religion, USA

Abstract

Although they almost certainly never heard of one another, Said Nursi and Rufus Jones were contemporaneous mystics and leaders of spiritual renewal in their respective Muslim and Quaker communities. A comparison of their writings reveals a high correspondence of thought on the spiritual life: a sense of awe, a sacramental view of life in which God is available to all and a democratisation of the mystical life. This in turn inspires a pluralistic appreciation of God's mystical presence in other religious communities, even as one acknowledges the distinctive truth of one's own. For each writer, this process opened a path to respond to the challenges of modernity in the early twentieth century.

Keywords

Rufus M. Jones, Said Nursi, interfaith dialogue, mysticism, Quakerism, Islam

Said Nursi¹ and Rufus Jones² were contemporaneous mystics and leaders of spiritual renewal in their respective Muslim and Quaker communities. A

1 Said Nursi is not yet well known outside of (mostly Turkish) Muslim circles. I first learned of him through conversation with Zeki Saritoprak, then through Salih Sayilgan and Zeyneb Sayilgan. This essay grows out of a paper that I delivered to a conference on Said Nursi at the kind invitation of Ian Markham. I express my gratitude to all these Said Nursi scholars.

2 The bibliography of Rufus Jones is considerable. See Bernet, C., *Rufus Jones (1863–1948)*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009, pp. 137–46. Elizabeth Gray Vining's biography (Vining, E. G., *Friend of Life: the biography of Rufus M. Jones*, London: Michael Joseph, 1959) remains eminently useful. Leigh Eric Schmidt sets Rufus Jones in his wider American religious context (Schmidt, L. E., *Restless Souls: the making of American spirituality*, San Francisco, CA: Harper, 2005, pp. 230–38), as does Gary Dorrien (Dorrien, G., *The Making of American Liberal Theology: idealism, realism, & modernity, 1900–1950*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003, pp. 364–71 *et passim*). Given both Rufus Jones' massive influence on Quakerism and the perennially controversial nature of mysticism, the literature

comparison of their writings reveals a high correspondence of understanding of the dynamics of the inward life: a sense of awe, inspired by beauty, that leads to a sacramental view of life in which God is available to all. This results in a democratisation of the mystical life, which in turn inspires a pluralistic appreciation of God's mystical presence in persons of other religious communities, even as one stands firmly in one's own and acknowledges its particular, distinctive truth. For each writer, this process opened a path to respond to the challenges of modernity in the early twentieth century.

Rufus Jones and Said Nursi

The lifespan of Rufus Jones, 1863–1948, overlaps significantly with that of Said Nursi, 1877–1960. Both were prominent religious leaders in their day and each left a sizeable collection of writings. Each of them responded to pressing issues of modernity that the early twentieth century posed, and each drew upon the mystical tradition of his religious community as a resource for that response.

Rufus Jones was fundamentally a religious philosopher, an exponent of divine immanence and a believer in the human potential to transform society. His rural youth in a village in Maine gave him a practicality and a capacity to communicate with people of all educational backgrounds. He never lost these traits, even though his adult life was spent as a professor of philosophy at Haverford College in Pennsylvania. He shared the liberal, progressive, optimistic spirit of his age, but was no mere rationalist. As a contemporary of Evelyn Underhill, Friedrich von Hügel and William Ralph Inge, he lived in an era of revived attention to mysticism. Like them, Rufus Jones rejected the materialist assumptions of the prevailing social science at that time. For him, the human personality is more than simply the result of external forces. Religion begins with inward, personal experience. Rufus Jones was acquainted with mysticism both experientially and as a scholar, and he wrote extensively and vividly on the spiritual life. He especially loved the fourteenth-century mystics Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler, though the mysticism that he promoted for his own day differed. The mysticism of Rufus Jones valued the external world and inward experience as loci where divinity revealed itself. Union with God drove the mystic back into

on Rufus Jones is at times contentious, and he has been alternately praised or blamed for what a particular writer sees as right or wrong with liberal Quakerism ever since. See, for example, Aiken, G., 'Who took the Christ out of Quakerism? Rufus Jones and the person and work of Christ', *Quaker Religious Thought* 116 (2011), pp. 37–53, and Rock, H., 'Rufus Jones Never Did Establish that Quakerism Is a Mystical Religion', *Quaker Studies* 21 (2004), pp. 49–66. The most recent monograph (Holt, H., *Mysticism and the Inner Light in the Thought of Rufus Jones*, Quaker, Leiden: Brill, 2021) makes excellent use of private correspondence, examines, among other things, the influence upon Rufus Jones of William James, Josiah Royce and others, and focuses on psychology and Rufus Jones' theology of human–divine relationship (or, as she argues, commonality) in his conception of the Inner Light.

the world for service. No longer reserved for the few, the mystical life was within the reach of all, who could trust their intuition of the nearness of the God who dwelt within them. Jones himself was a person of service, a founder and long-time chairperson of the American Friends Service Committee, whose relief efforts in Europe during and after the two major wars of the twentieth century earned the agency and its British Quaker counterpart the Nobel Peace Prize in 1947.³ Rufus Jones was an active ecumenist.⁴ Through his gifts as a widely travelled orator and a writer of over fifty books, he exerted a greater influence on other Protestants than any previous Quaker.

Like Rufus Jones, Said Nursi lived his early years outside urban centres of culture.⁵ His home was in the eastern provinces and the ethnically Kurdish region of what is today the modern nation of Turkey but that in the first portion of his life was the Ottoman Empire. Also like Rufus Jones, he saw himself as an educator, through the founding of schools and through his abundant writings. And again like Rufus Jones, Said Nursi was profoundly influenced by the mystical traditions of his religious community, such as such as ‘Abd al-Qadir Jilani, Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi, ibn al-‘Arabi and Abu Hamid Muhammad Ghazali,⁶ yet found them insufficient and unsuited for the modern world, preferring a more open, democratised understanding of the inward life. The natural world proclaimed the mysteries of divinity. The mystic must engage the social world, particularly efforts for justice—a longstanding Islamic ideal. During and after the First World War, Said Nursi engaged in service and reform work and laboured for renewal, although, unlike Rufus Jones, he largely withdrew from the political sphere particularly because he was regularly subjected to internal exile in eastern Anatolia. While Rufus Jones flourished in the midst of modern liberal Protestantism, Said Nursi dwelt in a context of fierce conflict between religious conservatives and nationalist secularists, though he preached a third way to both, promoting dialogue and pluralism. Finally, like Rufus Jones, Said Nursi’s influence was broad and deep. It has been estimated that the Nur community, as his followers call themselves, numbers several million.

3 The AFSC was active both domestically and internationally during these years (<https://www.afsc.org/content/history-afsc>, accessed 04/12/2021) but the motivation for the Nobel Prize was ‘for their pioneering work in the international peace movement and compassionate effort to relieve human suffering, thereby promoting the fraternity between nations’ (<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1947/friends-committee/facts/>, accessed 04/12/2021).

4 See Angell, S. W., ‘Rufus Jones and the Laymen’s Foreign Mission Enquiry: how a Quaker helped to shape modern ecumenical Christianity’, *Quaker Theology* 3 (2000), pp. 167–209.

5 Markham, I. S., and Pirim, S. B., *An Introduction to Said Nursi: life, thought and writings*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011, particularly pp. 3–19, 40–49, 60–61.

6 Turner, C., *The Qur’an Revealed: a critical analysis of Said Nursi’s Epistles of Light*, Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2013, pp. 75–76, 88–89, 507.

Awe

How does one listen to the words of another tradition? What might one hear?

Perhaps the first thing noticed by the newcomer and non-Muslim is the profound sense of awe in the writings of Said Nursi. This deep feeling of reverence in the presence of the divine mystery pervades much of his work. It invites the reader into a comparable experience of wonderment and brings to mind the words of the great Jewish philosopher and mystic of the last century, Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel described awe as ‘a way of being in rapport with the mystery of all reality’.⁷ It ‘is the sense of wonder and humility inspired by the sublime or felt in the presence of mystery Awe, unlike fear, does not make us shrink from the awe-inspiring object, but, on the contrary, draws us near to it. This is why awe is compatible with both love and joy’.⁸ Heschel notes that awe is ‘an insight better conveyed in attitudes than in words. The more eager we are to express it, the less remains of it’.⁹

Why do pious Muslims read Said Nursi? For disciples of Nursi, reading his works is an encounter with the presence of the holy. Non-Muslims guests can also feel the invitation to spiritual presence that his writings extend. That is what one encounters in such passages that describe the cosmos as a vast, orderly edifice that is a reflection of the divine names.¹⁰ Nursi describes a world in which an outsider can be a guest.

The humble bee can inspire the type of awe described by Abraham Joshua Heschel:

All living beings, for instance this adorned flower or that sweet-producing bee, are Divine odes full of meaning which innumerable conscious beings study in delight. They are precious miracles of power and proclamations of wisdom exhibiting their Maker’s art in captivating fashion to innumerable appreciative observers. While to appear before the gaze of the Glorious Creator, Who wishes to observe His art Himself, and look on the beauties of His creation and the loveliness of the manifestations of His Names, is another exceedingly elevated result of their creation.¹¹

7 Heschel, A. J., *God in Search of Man: a philosophy of Judaism*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1955, p. 74.

8 Heschel, *God in Search*, p. 77.

9 Heschel, *God in Search*, p. 75.

10 Turner, *The Qur’an Revealed*, p. 34. In this essay I will make use chiefly of Colin Turner’s work as a resource for Said Nursi’s thought because it is the largest volume in English on Nursi and because it contains a vast number of lengthy quotations from Nursi’s writings. Other important volumes on Nursi published in English include Vahide, Ş., and Abu-Rabi’, I. M., *Islam in Modern Turkey: an intellectual biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005; Markham and Pirim, *Introduction to Said Nursi*; Michel, T., *Insights from the Risale-i Nur: Said Nursi’s advice for modern believers*, Clifton, NJ: Tughra Books, 2013; Markham, I. S., and Sayilgan, Z., (eds), *The Companion to Said Nursi Studies*, Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017.

11 Turner, *Qur’an Revealed*, p. 56.

If the lowly bee can yield a sense of wonder to the attentive observer, the world as a whole can be nearly overwhelming, as Said Nursi wrote:

The All-Powerful and Wise One Who created this cosmos created also life as a comprehensive summary of the cosmos, and concentrated all of His purposes and the manifestations of His Names therein. So too, within the realm of life He made of provision a comprehensive centre of activity and created within animate beings the taste for provision, thus causing animate beings to respond to His dominicality and love with a permanent and universal gratitude, thankfulness and worship that is one of the significant purposes and instances of wisdom inherent in the creation of the universe. Were there to be an eye capable of witnessing and comprehending the whole surface of the earth at one time, in order to perceive the beauties of the Names of Compassionate and Provider and the witness they bear to Divine unity, it would see what sweet beauty is contained in the tender and solicitous manifestation of the Compassionate Provider Who sends to the caravans of animals at the end of winter, when their provision is about to be exhausted, extremely delicious, abundant and varied foods and bounties, drawn exclusively from His unseen treasury of mercy, as succour from the unseen and Divine generosity, placed in the hands of plants, the crowns of trees, and the breasts of mothers.¹²

This deep sense of awe can shape a reading of Said Nursi. Even someone not within the historical Muslim community can feel the invitation into divine presence. Reading becomes not simply a means of acquiring information or engaging critically with ideas. Such reading situates one on holy ground.

Similarly, awe was a pervasive presence and a gateway to the spiritual life for Rufus Jones. In his autobiographical *Finding the Trail of Life*, for example, he notes the role of awe and describes it as a ‘religious feeling’ that he found in natural phenomena such as woods, stars and lightning, as well as in the hushed silence that followed daily Bible reading in his childhood home.¹³

What follows are some categories that can facilitate the consideration of commonalities between Said Nursi and Rufus Jones.

Beauty

Beauty can inspire awe. Both Said Nursi and Rufus Jones were touched by beauty. Colin Turner writes of Nursi:

Now according to a Prophetic Tradition,¹⁴ God is beautiful and He loves beauty. Beauty, like the rest of the names, requires ‘mirrors’ if it is to be observed, and the existence of Divine love means that it must be observed: that Beauty is loved

12 Turner, *Qur’an Revealed*, p. 48.

13 Jones, R. M., *Following the Trail of Life*, New York: Macmillan, 1947, pp. 77, 58, 54 and 34, respectively, as well as pp. 49–58 generally.

14 A Prophetic Tradition or *hadith* is a narrative attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. Collectively, such traditions constitute, after the Qur’an itself, a major source of religious authority in Islam.

implies that it is also seen, and that beauty is seen implies that there are ‘mirrors’ in which it is seen. And the existence of those mirrors is motivated by the force of love which not only appreciates in an absolute sense that beauty but also wills, by dint of that love, that beauty be made manifest. Again ... God requires the existence of mirrors in which to observe His beauty, and the observation of His beauty is motivated by love. Moreover, Nursi maintains, all of the activity we observe in the phenomenal world—the constant flux and flow of existents and events—is underpinned by a ceaseless Divine activity that is fuelled—for want of a better term—by Divine love.¹⁵

For his part, Rufus Jones writes that ‘the Nature that presents the occasions for Beauty, Goodness, Truth, and Love ... is a Nature deeply interfused with Spirit—Coherence, Order, Significance, and Meaning’,¹⁶ that ‘to the mystic he [God] becomes real in the same sense that experienced beauty is real’.¹⁷ Succinctly put, ‘we find Him [God] when we enjoy beauty’.¹⁸

Divine Availability

Beauty and awe are evidence of God for both Said Nursi and Rufus Jones. For some, these are the first paths toward God to be experienced, although there are other conduits to divine availability. Both Nursi and Jones wrote passionately about God’s accessibility in this world of creation. Because in Christian teaching the human person is created in the image of God, Rufus Jones finds the primary path to God to be an inward one:

There is some inner meeting place between the soul and God; in other words, that the divine and human, God and man, are not wholly sundered. In an earlier time God was conceived as remote and transcendent. He dwelt in the citadel of the sky, was worshiped with ascending incense and communicated His will to beings beneath through celestial messengers or by mysterious oracles. We have now more ground than ever before for conceiving God as transcendent; that is, as above and beyond any revelation of Himself, and as more than any finite experience can apprehend. But at the same time, our experience and our ever-growing knowledge of the outer and inner universe confirm our faith that God is also immanent, a real presence, a spiritual reality, immediately to be felt and known, a vital, life-giving environment of the soul.¹⁹

The early twentieth century was an age of remarkable scientific progress, whether in the laboratory or in the realm of the human psyche. For Rufus Jones, such discoveries could be occasions of wonder, pointing beyond themselves to the

15 Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, p. 435.

16 Jones, R. M., *Spirit in Man*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1941, p. 57.

17 Jones, R. M., *Spiritual Energies*, New York: Macmillan, 1922, p. 144.

18 Jones, R. M., *Religious Foundations*, New York: Macmillan, 1923, p. 41.

19 Jones, R. M., *The Inner Life*, New York: Macmillan, 1916, pp. 97–98.

presence of a benevolent divinity. Both what we know and what we cannot know urge us beyond.

There are depths in our consciousness which no private plumb line of our own can sound; there are heights in our moral conscience which no ladder of our human intelligence can scale; there are spiritual hungers, longings, yearnings, passions, which find no explanation in terms of our physical inheritance or of our outside world. We touch upon the coasts of a deeper universe, not yet explored or mapped, but no less real and certain than this one in which our mortal senses are at home. We cannot explain our normal selves or account for the best things we know—or even for our condemnation of our poorer, lower self—without an appeal to and acknowledgment of a divine Guest and companion who is the real presence of our central being.²⁰

Steeped in the Islamic mystical tradition of ibn al-‘Arabi, Said Nursi understood the world as a manifestation of Divine presence. God’s essence is unknowable, but the names or attributes of God are revealed in the created world. To that degree, the divine can be known.²¹ As Colin Turner notes, the key to belief for Nursi lies in deciphering the signs in the created book of the cosmos, in reading the book of creation ‘in the name of God’.²²

Borrowing from a term from Christian theological tradition, Colin Turner uses the word ‘sacramental’ to describe Said Nursi’s understanding of that which is not God. Christian tradition understands a sacrament as a ritual that is an outward sign of an inward reality and a means of divine grace. In some ways, it may be comparable to the Islamic understanding of *ayat*, signs of divine presence.

Nursi’s exposition of Divine Unity is based on his uncompromisingly theocentric depiction of the phenomenal world as a divinely-penned ‘book’ ... revealed as nothing less than manifestations or individuations of the Divine attributes of perfection. Nursi’s view of all existence that is other-than-God is thus a wholly sacramental one, in which the transcendent sacred and the Source of all existence, i.e., the Divine, pervades all things.²³

Rufus Jones likewise finds that pervasive presence of God. He does not hesitate to call this reality sacramental. As a Quaker he refrained from participation in external sacramental rituals, but he found meaning in the language of sacrament as an external indication of an inward truth and a mediation of divine grace.

It is a sacramental universe through which Deep calleth unto Deep and significant realities of the impalpable and intangible sort ‘break in’ on us and answer to our deepest being. We reach through the veil of what we call matter and are in a higher World which is kin to our minds and to which, as great amphibians, we really belong. In fact we lie open-windowed to it and partake of it. This Over-World of

20 Jones, *Inner Life*, pp. 100–01.

21 Turner, *Qur’an Revealed*, p. 18.

22 Turner, *Qur’an Revealed*, p. 58.

23 Turner, *Qur’an Revealed*, p. 52.

Beauty, Goodness, Truth, and Love is as truly and obviously beyond the welter and storms of the processes of matter and the basic stuff of the universe as our minds are above and beyond the swirl of the brain paths which somehow correlate with minds and appear to be the occasion for thought.²⁴

Elsewhere he wrote in a similar vein,

We have sound reason to believe that what is highest in us is deepest in the nature of things. We become organs of a spiritual kingdom and stand in vital relation to an Eternal Mind and Heart and Will with whom we cooperate.²⁵

Human beings are capable both of recognising and responding to this sacramental quality of reality. As Colin Turner points out, Said Nursi holds that humankind has a receptivity to the impress of the divine names or attributes. Of all creatures, humans alone are able to reflect all of the divine names, provided that they can look beyond the external, phenomenal world to the inner realm that is the source of those qualities.²⁶

Rufus Jones espoused a comparably profound sense of connection. Drawing on the early Christian writer Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215), he posited a ‘mutual and reciprocal correspondence’ between the human spirit and God:

The essential characteristic of [mysticism] is the attainment of a personal conviction by an individual that the human spirit and the divine Spirit have met, have found each other, and are in mutual and reciprocal correspondence as spirit with Spirit.²⁷

Democratisation of the Mystical Life

Because the world is sacramental, all people are beckoned to the spiritual life. Mysticism is available to all. Both Said Nursi and Rufus Jones could be said to have democratised the mystical life, holding it as a possibility for people in all walks of life. It was not the private realm of spiritual elites.

24 Jones, *Spirit in Man*, pp. 57–58.

25 Jones, R. M., *The Testimony of the Soul*, New York: Macmillan, 1936, p. 69.

26 Turner, *Qur'an Revealed*, p. 91.

27 Jones, R. M., *The Trail of Life in the Middle Years*, New York: Macmillan, 1934, pp. 192–92. The phrase from Clement is found in his *Stromateis* 2.4.16. Rufus Jones was so attracted to Clement of Alexandria that he published a volume of translations of excerpts, *Selections from the Writings of Clement of Alexandria*, London: Headley Brothers, 1914. There, on pp. 55–56, he renders the relevant passage as: ‘Knowledge, accordingly, is characterised by faith; and faith, by a kind of divine and mutual correspondence, becomes characterised by knowledge’ (original emphasis). Rufus Jones used the same expression to describe silent worship: ‘it may be an intensified pause, a vitalised hush, a creative quiet, an actual moment of mutual and reciprocal correspondence with God’. Jones, R. M., ‘The Spiritual Message of the Religious Society of Friends’, in Friends World Conference, *Report of the Commission I*, 1937, p. 13. Quoted in Britain Yearly Meeting’s *Quaker Faith & Practice*, London, 2nd edn, §2.16 (<http://qfp.quaker.org.uk/chapter/2/>, accessed 04/12/2021).

Colin Turner writes of how Said Nursi, while deeply influenced by the Sufi tradition within Islam, nonetheless was cautious of it. It can be exclusive and elitist, and it can be self-deceptive and therefore spiritually dangerous. Nursi wrote that his 'path is much broader and more universal'.²⁸ As Colin Turner puts it, 'not only is his path safer and surer, Nursi claims, but it is also more inclusive and accessible'.²⁹

Rufus Jones distinguished between what he called negative mystics and affirmation mystics. The former, he claimed, emphasised retreat from the physical world that is perceived by sense and studied by reason. They laboured to encounter God by dint of ascetical feat. They strove for the fleeting moment of ecstasy, which they experienced as a loss of personal individuality in an infinite sea of divinity.³⁰ Affirmation mystics, for their part, valued the external world as a location of divine disclosure. Union with God integrated the self and impelled the mystic back into the world to serve society. Rufus Jones held that many more people had had mystical experiences than was commonly supposed. A nascent mystical consciousness, though perhaps not fully developed, was present in most religious persons, but since, throughout history, most of them did not possess the literary gifts to record their experiences, they have not been recognised. Mystical experiences come in mild as well as intense degrees, he held. Rufus Jones described mystical experience as a direct and immediate awareness of divine presence, the encounter of human spirit and divine spirit.³¹ With the assistance of these two concepts of affirmation mysticism and of a range of mystical experience, Rufus Jones redefined the mystical life, opening the depths of the spiritual life to a multitude of readers.³²

Corollaries of the Democratisation of the Mystical Life

There are corollaries to this democratisation of the mystical life. The first is a practical orientation to the spiritual life. Colin Turner puts it crisply when he writes, 'One always gets the impression that Nursi's theology was, on the whole, intended to be more practical than speculative.'³³ Said Nursi was above all

28 Turner, *Qur'an Revealed*, p. 353.

29 Turner, *Qur'an Revealed*, p. 354.

30 Rufus Jones had his own extraordinary experiences, even if he did not regard them as essential to the mystical life. He reflects on these in Jones, R. M., 'Why I Enroll with the Mystics', in Ferm, V. (ed.), *Contemporary American Theology: theological autobiographies*, New York: Round Table Press, 1932, pp. 206–09 and 213–14.

31 Jones, *Inner Life*, pp. 178–81. See also his *Social Law in the Spiritual World*, London: Headley Brothers, 1904, pp. 131–38.

32 For an account of the impact of Rufus Jones on the general reader see Hedstrom, M. S., 'Rufus Jones and Mysticism for the Masses', *CrossCurrents* 54 (2004), pp. 31–44.

33 Turner, *Qur'an Revealed*, p. 85.

responding to the profound needs of his day, and his writings intended to address those needs, just as his efforts in education did.

Rufus Jones shared this practical orientation. He wrote:

In putting the emphasis for the moment on the inner way of religion, we must be very careful not to encourage the heresy of treating religion as a withdrawal from the world, or as a retreat from the press and strain of the practical issues and problems of the social order.³⁴

The affirmation mystics, as he called them,

do not make vision the end of life, but rather the beginning. They are bent on having an immediate first-hand sense of God—but not just for the joy of having it. More important than vision is obedience to the vision. There are battles to fight and victories to win. God's Kingdom is to be advanced.³⁵

Said Nursi expressed a similar reservation about ecstasy for its own sake. As Colin Turner puts it, 'he offers what he believes is the "sober"—and thus safer—path to apprehending the reality behind the existence of the cosmos'.³⁶

A second corollary of this democratisation for each of these thinkers is an emphasis on community. The religious community, or 'brotherhood' as Said Nursi puts it, is where, for example, the spiritual life is experienced, where one can learn virtues such as sincerity and selflessness. Nursi urged that 'one should try to forget the feelings of one's own carnal soul and instead live in one's mind with one's brothers' virtues and feelings'.

For Rufus Jones, his experience as a Quaker laid great importance on community. Friends hold that all who gather to worship have equal access to God, and so anyone present may feel called upon to speak words of edification to those assembled. Just as the individual served the community through sharing inspired words, the community in turn could enable the individual to become more fully aware of the presence of God.³⁷ Rufus Jones further wrote that when gathered in a powerful sense of divine presence the community itself can attain a 'high level of social communion' in which 'the most delicate sense of truth' can be attained.³⁸ In other words, discernment of truth is a community undertaking.

The third corollary of this democratisation of the mystical life concerns the boundaries of religious communities and the transcendence of those boundaries by shared concern and conviction.

As Colin Turner points out, Said Nursi's thought lends itself to a wide understanding of the Islamic concept of submission:

³⁴ Jones, *Inner Life*, p. 14.

³⁵ Jones, *Social Law in the Spiritual World*, p. 135. One of the earliest books of Rufus Jones was entitled *Practical Christianity* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1899), the very title of which indicates his concrete orientation to the mystical life.

³⁶ Turner, *Qur'an Revealed*, p. 4.

³⁷ Jones, *Inner Life*, pp. 103–04.

³⁸ Jones, *Social Law*, p. 173.

As Nursi's use of the terms involved shows, there are two modalities of submission: the formal, which for ease of understanding we can call 'upper case-I Islam', that is, Islam the religion; and the internal, or 'lower case-i islām', which signifies the submission of the heart and spirit in response to the information accepted by the intellect. The distinction between Islam and islām confirms the possibility firstly that some Muslims are not actually muslim in the Quranic sense of the word; and, secondly, that some non-Muslims may also be considered muslim.³⁹

Similarly, for Rufus Jones, spiritual experience can rise above denominational identity and foster a broader unity among human beings.⁴⁰ He spoke positively of the sixteenth-century spiritual reformers Sebastian Franck and Caspar Schwenckfeld, whose notion of the Church was at once both inward and transcendent of ecclesial boundaries. Similarly, in the following century, Jakob Boehme, whom Rufus Jones deeply admired, differentiated the stone church from the broader, invisible and, in his view, more genuine Church.⁴¹

Rufus Jones' writing were widely read in his day among mainstream Protestants in North America. He intentionally wrote for a broad Christian audience, yet he spoke from his deep experience as a Friend. Consequently, many of his readers became attracted to some elements of Quakerism, although they did not want to abandon their existing religious affiliation. In 1936 Rufus Jones initiated the Wider Quaker Fellowship, which grew to become an association of people of diverse religious backgrounds who felt nourished by the gifts of the Religious Society of Friends and yet did not wish formally to seek membership there. This Fellowship is one instance of how Rufus Jones' ideas of the universal availability of the mystical life widened religious horizons.

Nonviolence

Related to the concept of reconsidering the role of religious boundaries is a commitment to nonviolence. A universalisation of spiritual experience and truth can imply that commonalities triumph over differences. One can become resistant to the notion of enmity and therefore to the need for or justification of violence.

Quakers of course are widely recognised as having a longstanding commitment to nonviolence—what they call the peace testimony. Rufus Jones subscribed to this Quaker teaching, and he was eager to correct the all-too-frequent misunderstanding of pacifism as somehow related to being passive.

39 Turner, *Qur'an Revealed*, p. 286.

40 For his views on religious 'unity' rather than 'uniformity' see Jones, R. M., *A Preface to Christian Faith in a New Age*, New York: Macmillan, 1932, pp. 143–50.

41 For Franck and Schwenckfeld see Jones, R. M., *Spiritual Reformers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, New York: Macmillan, 1914, pp. 46–87. For Boehme see Birkel, M., and Bach, J., *Genius for the Transcendent: mystical writings of Jakob Boehme*, Boston: Shambhala, 2010, pp. 60–61, 84–91.

Pacifism means *peace-making*. The pacifist is literally a peace-maker. He is not a passive or negative person who proposes to lie back and do nothing in the face of injustice, unrighteousness and rampant evil. He stands for 'the fiery positive'.⁴²

On a practical level, one demonstration of Rufus Jones' commitment to nonviolence was his work as a founder and long-time chair of the board of the American Friends Service Committee, a relief organisation that was committed to feeding and caring for the victims of war on both sides of the conflict. This might be seen as a social manifestation of the concept of widening boundaries that was discussed earlier.

While scholars of Said Nursi are quick to point out that he was not a full-fledged pacifist and that he was a combatant during the First World War, they also recognise his redefinition of the notion of jihad. Jihad, of course, had always meant much more than simply conducting warfare, although Muslims throughout much of their history had understood it as applying to the violent exertion of force. For his part, Said Nursi disentangles the notion of an Islamic civilisation from an Islamic state. The goal is an Islamic state of mind.

To be truly human is to live in the manner prescribed by the Quran, namely to aspire to reflect the attributes of God and become His vicegerent, His *khalifa*. This means that he must endeavor to establish for himself not an Islamic state, but an Islamic state of mind.⁴³

As Colin Turner notes, Said Nursi's comments on jihad are few but 'unambiguous and incisive: the only kind of jihād that is appropriate for the present age, he says, is "spiritual" (*ma'nawī*) or moral jihād'.⁴⁴ For Said Nursi, 'the time for militant jihād against external human enemies is over, for the simple reason that the threats posed by such enemies are no longer physical but, rather, ideological and intellectual'.⁴⁵ In the words of Nursi himself, 'For conquering the civilised is through persuasion, not through force as though they were savages who understand nothing. We are devotees of love; we do not have time for enmity'.⁴⁶ The jihad that is fitting to this age is the 'jihad of the pen'.⁴⁷

42 Jones, R. M., *The New Quest*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928, p. 97.

43 Turner, *Qur'an Revealed*, p. 535.

44 Turner, *Qur'an Revealed*, p. 563. See also p. 561, where jihad is described as 'a purely moral and spiritual endeavour'. Here one might recall that the horrors of the First World War, which Rufus Jones and Said Nursi experienced although differently, brought many people to at least a temporary embrace of non-violence. This turn appears to be permanent for Said Nursi. For Rufus Jones, of course, it was an essential teaching of the Religious Society of Friends all along.

45 Turner, *Qur'an Revealed*, p. 563.

46 Turner, *Qur'an Revealed*, p. 563.

47 Turner, *Qur'an Revealed*, p. 569. Interestingly, this concept of the jihad of the pen was espoused by other Muslims in the early twentieth century, such as Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. I learned of this from Fazeel S. Khan. See Birkel, M., *Qur'an in Conversation*, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014, pp. 160–61.

In sum, although there are of course considerable differences between these two thinkers, reading them in juxtaposition points to commonalities. These include an appreciation of beauty, a sense of divine availability, a sacramental quality to the world that points to the reality and the nearness of its creator, a profound experience of connectedness with God that is accessible to all and a democratisation of the inward life. This spiritual egalitarianism in turn leads to a practical orientation to serve the world, to a deep valuing of the religious community and to a transcending of the boundaries of religious identities that in turn expresses itself in a commitment to non-violence. Such a progression of thought may appear straightforward in retrospect to some, but in fact both Rufus Jones and Said Nursi drew these conclusions while many in their respective communities did not. This shared outlook is all the more remarkable for the fact that it was shared across an otherwise formidable theological difference. The fact that they held these views in common points to suggestive possibilities for interfaith understanding, even though neither of them pursued specifically Muslim–Christian dialogue in their day.

What happens when we allow interfaith dialogue to begin with the mystics? Each of these two thinkers was profoundly shaped by his community's mystical tradition, and each believed that this mystical tradition could serve as a resource for responding to the challenges of modernity. That mystical orientation informed the openness of each writer toward inter-religious understanding, even as each stood solidly within his own tradition. It can be argued that this solid identity as Muslim or Quaker enabled each to travel to the boundary of that tradition to engage with persons from other traditions. At the same time, those established identities resulted in profound differences. If asked, for example, Said Nursi would certainly have disagreed with Rufus Jones' insistence that group worship without ritual and without liturgically ordered speech is the best. Likewise Rufus Jones would have been puzzled by Said Nursi's deeply held concept of divine determination and its consequences upon one's understanding of the human person.⁴⁸ Yet, because each would speak of what many (though not all) would recognise as the heart of his community's wisdom and the individual's innermost experience, it seems more than possible that they would have recognised each other as kin,

48 Quakers had rejected the doctrine of predestination since the seventeenth century. Robert Barclay, for example, famously referred to it as a 'horrible and blasphemous doctrine'. Barclay, R., *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, Glenside, PA: Quaker heritage Press, 2002, p. 98. For his part, when Nursi writes of the person 'who believes in Divine Determining and grasps the wisdom behind it. Free from the monomaniacal desire to control things which are far from his grasp, and refusing to carry the burden of a whole world on his shoulders, he places his trust in the Sovereign and is able to live at peace with himself and his world' (Turner, *Qur'an Revealed*, p. 397), one can recall Calvin's declaration that the doctrine of predestination is one of assurance and comfort. See J. Calvin, F. L. Battles (trans.) and McNeill, J. T., (ed.), *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960, pp. 920–87.

and perhaps experienced in that encounter the spiritual awe described earlier in this essay.

This discovery of significant common ground in the thought of Rufus Jones and Said Nursi raises the question of the value of such a comparison for Quaker studies. I undertook this exploration as someone who is a student of Quaker studies as well as someone who has for many years been active as a participant in interfaith dialogue, especially between Muslims and Christians, through in-person settings such as conferences as well as in writing.⁴⁹ Beyond an exploration of two historical figures, this finding of a correspondence of ideas invites theological reflection. The limits of a journal article do not permit lengthy expatiation on the matter, so I close with some queries, as befits the Quaker tradition. What might be the role of awe in interfaith understanding? What does a shared experience of transcendence, across religious boundaries, suggest about the nature of religious community? The noted Buddhist Jack Kornfield entitled one of his books *After Ecstasy, the Laundry*⁵⁰—if one experiences an exhilarating sense of mutual recognition in an interfaith encounter, akin to what Quaker Douglas Steere called ‘mutual irradiation’,⁵¹ what tasks lie ahead after the power of that moment fades?

Author Details

Michael Birkel is Professor of Christian Spirituality at the Earlham School of Religion, Richmond, Indiana, USA. His works include *Silence and Witness*; *A Near Sympathy*; *Engaging Scripture*; *Qur’an in Conversation*; *Quakers Reading Mystics*; and (with Charlotte Northrop) *Quakeriana Latina: Quaker Texts in Latin from the 1670s*.

Mailing address: Earlham School of Religion, 228 College Avenue, Richmond, IN, 47374, USA.

Email: birkemi@earlham.edu

49 See, for example, Birkel, *Qur’an in Conversation*; Birkel, M., ‘Reading the Qur’an as a Quaker’, *Friends Journal* (August 2019), pp. 22–23; Birkel, M., ‘A Pedagogy of Listening: teaching the Qur’an to non-Muslims’, in Patel, E., Peace, J. H., and Silverman, J. N., (eds), *Interreligious-Interfaith Studies: defining a new field*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2018, pp. 98–106.

50 Kornfield, J., *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*, New York: Bantam Books, 2000.

51 Steere, D. V., *Mutual Irradiation; a Quaker view of ecumenism*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1971.