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Al-Farabi and Said Nursi on the Civilising Mission of the Prophets*

Elmira Akhmetova**

Abstract: This paper studies the role of prophethood in building a civilisation with special reference to the writings of Al-Farabi and Said Nursi. In order to elucidate the thought of Al-Farabi, the ideas of Ibn Sina are consulted in some parts of the paper. The first part of the paper defines the term “true civilisation” (or an “ideal state” according to Al-Farabi), its foundations and peculiarities from the viewpoints of these three Muslim scholars. It suggests that, on one hand, a human being cannot achieve his main goal, i.e. *felicity*, without living in a society, and, on the other, his most fundamental need is the need for religion, revealed by the prophets. Therefore, these three scholars argued that the real civilisation, which can make its citizens happy, satisfied and equal without any exception, originates from divine laws. As paper finds, Said Nursi articulated that the mission of the prophets, besides establishing of the worship to One God, also includes bringing of economic and political justice, social stability, ethical enhancement and emotional inspiration to his society, which are the fundamental requirements for the building of strong civilisations but beyond the power of an ordinary man. Based on the ideas of the scholars, the paper concludes that, according to the Muslim scholars, the prophets sent by God were the best law-givers and founders of the most excellent civilisations.

Keywords: civilising mission of the prophets, Said Nursi, Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, true civilisation, happiness, Muslim philosophers

* Some concepts used in this paper were presented at the 10th International Bediuzzaman Symposium: The Role and Place of Prophethood in Humanity’s Journey, IIKV, 2013, Istanbul, Turkey.

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Abstrak: Kertas kerja ini mengkaji peranan kenabian dalam pembetulan satu tamadun dengan rujukan khusus terhadap penulisan-penulisan Al-Farabi dan Said Nursi. Untuk mendalami pemikiran Al-Farabi, idea-idea Ibn Sina adalah dirujuk dalam beberapa bahagian kertas kerja ini. Bahagian pertama kertas kerja ini mendefinisikan terma “tamadun sejati” (atau “negeri unggul” mengikut Al-Farabi), asas-asasnya dan keunikan-keunikannya daripada pandangan tiga ahli falsafah Muslim tersebut. Kertas kerja ini mencadangkan bahawa di sebalik pendapat bahawa seseorang insan tidak akan mencapai matlamat utamanya iaitu, kemurahan hati tanpa hidup dalam masyarakat, selain daripada keperluan utamanya iaitu keperluan kepada agama yang didedahkan oleh para nabi. Oleh itu, ketiga-tiga ahli falsafah tersebut membincangkan bahawa tamadun yang sejati yang dapat membuatkan rakyat-rakyatnya bahagia, berpuas hati, dan saksama tanpa pengecualian, adalah berlandaskan undang-undang Ilahi. Said Nursi turut mengutarakan bahawa misi nabi-nabi selain daripada mendirikan sembahyang kepada Tuhan turut membawa keadilan ekonomi dan politik, kestabilan sosial, peningkatan etika dan inspirasi emosi kepada masyarakatnya. Kesemuanya ini merupakan keperluan asas untuk pembangunan ketamadunan yang kukuh tetapi di luar kuasa insan biasa. Kertas kerja ini turut menyimpulkan bahawa ahli falsafah Muslim serta nabi-nabi yang diutuskan adalah pembawa undang-undang terbaik dan sebagai pengasas tamadun yang paling cemerlang.

Kata Kunci: misi peradaban para nabi, Said Nursi, Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, tamadun sejati, kebahagiaan, ahli falsafah Muslim

Introduction

Contemporary studies in social sciences are generally inclined to lessen the role of religion in the development of human societies to a social control mechanism. Structural-Functionalist theory of religion, for instance, acknowledges the essential role of religion in building societies as the source of morality and solidarity. Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) said that religion serves four major social functions: social solidarity, social control (such as the prohibition of killing), the provision of meaning and purpose of life, and lastly, psychological and emotional support (such as wedding celebrations) (Renzetti and Curran, 1998: 448). The Conflict Theory of religion, yet, claims that religion, rather than being a bonding force, is a source of conflict that divides or stratifies society. The founder of this theory, Karl Marx (1818-1883) believed that the ruling class uses religion to maintain its position of dominance over the lower classes, keeping them from rebelling against aggressive conditions by promising them a better life in the hereafter. The

Symbolic Interactionists, on the other hand, believe that people usually create the religious connotations out of their need to explain happenings in their lives and the world around them. (Renzetti and Curran, 1998: 448-450). While discussing ancient civilisations, Marvin Perry stated that religion was the central force in the primary civilisations as it provided satisfying explanations for the operations of nature, helped to ease the fear of death, and justified traditional rules of morality. In addition, “religion united people in the common enterprises needed for survival – for example, the construction and maintenance of irrigation works and the storage of food. Religion also promoted creativity in art, literature and science. In addition, the power of rulers regarded as gods or their agents, derived from religion.” (Perry, 1992: 10). But is it feasible for an ordinary man to claim to be God’s agent, unite people around him and become their ruler? Also, if the role of religion in early human societies was to bring social stability, then could a civilisation be established and function without the help of religion or prophets? Are all civilisations equal in providing happiness to their citizens? Who were the first rulers of early civilisations? And, what were the exact roles of prophets in their societies and civilisations in the interpretations of Muslim scholars? Consequently, this article is an attempt to respond to these questions by studying the ideas of several distinguished Muslim philosophers and intellectuals, namely Al-Farabi (870-950), and Said Nursi (1877-1960) on the civilising mission of the prophets.

Al-Farabi, along with his successor, Ibn Sina (980-1037) is celebrated to be the most important philosophical figures in the traditional Muslim scholarship, who have explicitly treated the question of prophecy (Fazlur Rahman, 1958:11). Both of these earliest Muslim thinkers were instrumental in transmitting the doctrines of Plato and Aristotle to the Muslim world. The ideas of a contemporary Muslim thinker, Said Nursi, on the other hand, represent the development of the theory of the civilisational mission of the prophets in Muslim scholarship up to recent times.

Civilisation as a Necessity

The word “civilisation” is derived from *civilis* (‘civil’), a Latin term ultimately related to *civis*, “citizen”. “Civilisation” was not used in its modern sense to mean the opposite of “barbarism” – as contrasted to “civility”, denoting “politeness” or “civil virtue” – until the eighteenth

century, when it was first coined in its modern form in Europe after the French Revolution. By the nineteenth century, following the European overseas expansion to Africa and Asia, the word “civilisation” had been used to justify European imperialistic ambitions or subjugation of non-European societies. At present, civilisation is commonly understood as a progress and enhancing the quality of life (Braudel, 1995: 4; Akhmetova, 2008: 44-49).

Discussions on the development of human society began much earlier when the ancient Greek philosophers acknowledged the necessity of society for the perfection and materialisation of individual life. Plato, for instance, stated that “at the start, a city or a state, in my opinion, comes into being because no one of us is enough in himself. Every man is dependent on other men” (Zakaria, 2002: 63). The Plato’s student, Aristotle believed that man is born for life in an organised association of a city-state, that “man is by nature a political animal (*politikon zoon*), and that everybody has a natural desire to be part of such an association” (Walzer, 1985: 429).¹ In the eleventh century, a Muslim philosopher Al-Farabi elaborated this idea of the social nature of man into a well-established theory. In his *Mabādi Ārā’ al-Madīna al-Fāḍila*, Al-Farabi described a man as a social being by virtue of his natural endowment. He pointed out that human being has to live in a society not only to satisfy his immediate and undeniable needs but because he will otherwise be unable to fulfil his destiny and obtain his ultimate perfection (*al-kamāl*). As he said,

In order to preserve himself and to attain his highest perfection every human being is by his very nature in need of many things which he cannot provide all by himself; he is indeed in need of people who each supply him with some particular need of his. Everybody finds himself in the same relation to everybody in this respect. Therefore man cannot attain perfection, for the sake of which his unborn nature has been given to him, unless many (societies of) people who cooperate come together who each supply everybody else with some particular need of his, so that as a result of the contribution of the whole community all the things are brought together which everybody needs in order to preserve himself and to attain perfection. Therefore human individuals have come to exist in great numbers, and have settled in inhabitable (inhabited?) region of the earth, so that

human societies have come to exist in it, some of which are perfect, others imperfect (Walzer, 1985: 229).

Al-Farabi concluded that human being cannot achieve his ultimate goal, *felicity*, without living in a society. Interestingly for Ibn Sina, who was born three decades after the death of Al-Farabi, men have found it necessary to establish cities and form associations for mutual help. He believed that man is not born self-sufficient. Individuals need each other in order to obtain the necessities of life, and so they establish societies suitable for their purposes. In his major work entitled *Maqalāt*, Ibn Sina denied similarity between man and animals, saying that man differs from animals in the sense that he cannot form a proper life when isolated as a single individual, managing his affairs with no associates to help him satisfy his basic wants (*darūriyāt hājātihi*). What he needs is that his life should be complemented by his fellow men, the other, in turn, by him and others like him. Only by such division of labour, said Ibn Sina, people become sufficient units (*mukfiyan*) for existing (Zakaria, 2002: 53). In sum, Ibn Sina required the establishment of societies for the exchange of commodities. He suggested that men, by cooperating with others, can produce more goods than what an individual singly can. Surplus, in turn, leads to material prosperity and more advanced civilisations.

Al-Farabi's *Al-Madīna Al-Fāḍilah*

The core of Al-Farabi's theory on the rise of civilisations rests on the idea that the main purpose of humankind is to establish *al-madīna al-fāḍila* (the perfect/ideal/excellent state) where inhabitants can reach real happiness. Al-Farabi gave two reasons for living in a society: to satisfy his needs and to obtain his ultimate perfection. He emphasised that man can obtain his ultimate perfection and reach felicity (*sa'ādah*) only in an ideal state. To him,

The city, then, in which people aim through association at cooperating for the things by which felicity in its real and true sense can be attained, is the excellent city, and the society in which there is a cooperation to acquire felicity is the excellent society; and the nation in which all of its cities cooperate for those things through which felicity is attained is the excellent nation. In the same way, the excellent universal state will arise only when all the nations in it cooperate for the purpose of reaching felicity (Walzer, 1985: 106).

Subsequently, Al-Farabi differentiated three types of ideal communities depending on their sizes: the smallest ideal political unit is the city (*al-madīnah*), which is the part of the territory of a middle-sized association, the nation (*al-ijtimā'*). The largest union covers the whole inhabited earth under cultivation, which Al-Farabi called *al-ma'murah*. This word *al-ma'murah* of Al-Farabi is from the same root as Ibn Khaldun's *'umrān*. According to Erwin Rosenthal, the smallest unit of Al-Farabi, the city, resembles Plato's *polis*. The large association, comprising the whole civilised world, and the middle-sized nation might be Islamic civilisation (Rosenthal, 1985: 126). Al-Farabi described the features of the excellent city accordingly,

The excellent city resembles a perfect and healthy body, all of whose limbs cooperate to make the life of the animal perfect and to preserve it in this state. Now the limbs and organs of the body are different and their natural endowments and faculties are unequal in excellence, there being among them one ruling organ, namely the heart, and organs which are close in rank to that ruling organ, each having been given by nature a faculty by which performs its proper function in conformity with the natural aim of that ruling organ. The same holds good in the case of a city. Its parts are different by nature, and their natural dispositions are unequal in excellence. There is in it a man who is the ruler, and there are others whose ranks are close to the ruler. Below there are people who perform their actions in accordance with the aims of those people (Walzer, 1985: 231-233).

Al-Farabi accordingly emphasised that, “the limbs and organs of the body are natural, and the dispositions which they have are natural faculties, whereas, although the parts of the city are natural, their dispositions and habits, by which they perform their actions in the city, and not natural, but voluntarily” (Al-‘Alā’, 1986: 104). In another work, entitled *Religion (Milla)*, Al-Farabi asserted that real happiness cannot be obtained in this world, but in the next life, hereafter, only. Therefore, the establishment of an ideal state was not the main purpose of people in this life for him; rather, it was a tool to achieve real happiness, Paradise. Al-Farabi also stated that man alone is helpless to understand the purpose of life, even to find out the right way of life, or understand and practice morality. Only in perfect cities, which are established by

the Laws given by the prophets through revelation, man can attain the genuine purpose of his life, Paradise (Al-‘Alā’, 1986: 104-106).

In fact, Al-Farabi distinguished two types of authority: the ideal state through which the real happiness is attained, and the ignorant cities under which assumed happiness is attained (Rosenthal, 1985: 119). He differentiated a number of political units, which were the opposite of the excellent city: the ‘ignorant’ city (*al-madīna al-jahiliyya*), the wicked city (*al-madīna al-fāsiqa*), the city which has deliberately changed its character (*al-madīna al-mubaddala*), and the city which has missed the right path through faulty judgment.

The ignorant city in Al-Farabi’s thought was a city whose inhabitants do not know true felicity. Even if they were rightly guided to it they would either not understand it or not believe in it. The wicked city, on the other hand, was “a city whose views are of the excellent city; it knows felicity, God Almighty, the existents of the second order, the Active Intellect and everything which as such is to be known and believed in by the people of the excellent city; but the actions of its people are the actions of the people of the ignorant cities” (Walzer, 1985: 255-259). The city which has deliberately changed, according to Al-Farabi, was a city whose views and actions were previously the views and actions of the people of the excellent city but they have been changed and different views have taken their place, and its actions have turned into different actions. The city which missed the right path (the ‘erring city’) was described by Al-Farabi as a city which aimed at felicity after this life, and holds about God Almighty. But the first ruler of this city was a man who falsely pretended to be receiving “revelation,” he produced this wrong impression through falsifications, cheating and deceptions (Walzer, 1985: 259).

It seems that Al-Farabi had not stipulated the role of the prophethood or religion as a prerequisite for establishing cities, states or a civilization, although he agreed that the prophethood plays the vital role in establishing excellent cities. In chapter 18, entitled *Views of Cities Which are Ignorant of the True God*, he emphasised on the absence of the *maḥabbah* (love) in such cities that unites inhabitants of the perfect political units. Citizens of ignorant cities, Al-Farabi underlined, dislike each other; there is aggression, fighting for recognition and disunity exist among different groups, tribes, and city states. These people

will not be united, except out of necessity, like during wars. However, when emergency disappears, disunity and animosity return. Al-Farabi compared people of ignorant cities with animals who attack other animals and seek to destroy them without gaining any apparent benefit from it. If the other animal does not have this intention (of fighting), it tries none the less to enslave others in so far as it can use them. This is the way in which relations between different individuals of one and the same species are arranged in the same way. These existents are then let loose to try to overpower other counts as the most perfect. The victor will always either attempt to destroy the other, because it is in the other's nature that his existence is detrimental and harmful to his own existence, or to press him into service and enslave him, because he considers that the other exists for his own sake only (Walzer, 1985: 483-484). In order to provide stability, there shall arise the established laws of buying and selling, and the mutual exchange of honours and kindness, and other things of that kind. But people will not achieve real stability, cooperation, justice and real happiness, due to the absence of harmony, morality, justice, stability, *mahabbah* and laws, given by the prophets (Walzer, 1985: 303). Al-Farabi was not optimistic about the future of these ignorant cities, as he stated that these cities will be ruled in two ways: "Whoever is capable of straightforward attack will act accordingly and who is not, will succeed by cheating, fraud and treachery, ruse, hypocrisy, deceit and leading people astray" (Walzer, 1985: 315).

In sum, the ideal states, which were founded by the prophet-rulers, for Al-Farabi were the actual and normal states. But if the balance in the society collapses, Al-Farabi observed, these perfect states will go astray, and people will lose truth, happiness, right path, morality, stability, solidarity and all virtues which had been achieved under the leadership of the prophet-ruler.

Said Nursi's Classification of True versus Low Civilisations

In line with the ideas of Al-Farabi, Nursi considered that man is destined for eternity, and for everlasting happiness and perpetual misery. On the Day of Judgment, he will receive either reward or punishment (Nursi, 2004a: 188). Therefore, in order to reach everlasting contentment, man's most fundamental need is the need for religion; the need to differentiate the good and evil, to recognise and worship God and to obey His laws.

The main aim of mankind in this world is to establish true civilisation, founded on the positive truths of revelation. According to Nursi, true civilisation should comprise the real happiness of all, or at least the majority (Nursi, 2001: 548). On the example of Islamic civilisation, Nursi described the fundamental principles of true civilisation accordingly:

The principles of Qur'anic civilisation are positive. Its wheel of happiness turns on five positive principles: its point of support is truth instead of force, and the constant mark of truth is justice and balance. Security and well-being result from these, and villainy disappears. Its aim is virtue instead of self-interest, and the mark of virtue is love and mutual attraction. Happiness results from these, and enmity disappear. Its principle in life is co-operation instead of conflict and killing, and its mark is unity and solidarity, and the community is strengthened. Its service takes the form of guidance and direction instead of lust and passion. And the mark of guidance is progress and prosperity in way of benefitting humanity. The spirit is illuminated and reflected in the way it requires. The way it unifies the masses repulses racialism and negative nationalism. It establishes in place of them the bonds of religion, patriotic relations, ties of class, and the brotherhood of believers. The marks of these bonds are a sincere brotherhood, general well-being; defence in the case of external aggression (Nursi, 2004b: 745-746).

According to Said Nursi, the contemporary Western civilisation acts contrarily to the fundamental laws of the revealed religions. For that reason, its evils have come to outweigh its good aspects, its errors and harmful aspects preponderates over its benefits; and general tranquillity and a happy worldly life, the true aims of civilisation, have been destroyed (Nursi, 2002a: 128-129). Western civilisation, as Nursi believed, has been founded on five negative principles:

Its point of support is force, the mark of which is aggression. Its aim and goal is benefit, the mark of which is jostling and tussling. Its principle in life is conflict, the mark of which is strife. The bond between the masses is racialism and negative nationalism, which is nourished through devouring others; its mark is collusion. Its enticing service is inciting lust and passion and gratifying the desires. But lust transforms man into a beast (Nursi, 2001: 548).

Nursi thus named modern civilisation as ‘low’ or ‘malignant’ civilisation, which has destroyed the principle of frugality and contentment, and increased wastefulness, greed, and covetousness. It has opened up the way to tyranny and what is unlawful. Through encouraging people to take advantage of the means of dissipation, it has also cast those needy unfortunates into total laziness. It has destroyed the desire for effort and work. It has encouraged depravity and dissipation and wasted their lives on useless things. Furthermore, it has made those needy and lazy people ill. Through abuse and prodigality, it has been the means of spreading a hundred sorts of diseases (Nursi, 2002a: 130). Therefore, Nursi was not very confident about the future of modern civilisation unless it will adjust its basic principles and return back to the original teaching of Christianity. He said that no nation can continue in existence without religion. Particularly if it is absolute unbelief, it gives rise to torments more grievous in this world than Hell (Nursi, 2002b: 374).

Nursi’s critique of modern civilisation, as Syed Farid Alatas stated, was not biased or one-sided. Firstly, Nursi did not reserve moral critique for the West alone. He did not deny that modern Muslim societies were also having dire sicknesses such as despair and hopelessness, the death of truthfulness in social and political life, love of enmity, ignoring the luminous bonds that bind the believers to one another, and despotism (Alatas, 2010: 22-23). Secondly, when Nursi was identifying the Western civilisation as a ‘low’ civilisation, he did not criticise its whole foundations, virtues and values. In fact, Nursi saw two different faces of modern Europe. His famous statement “Europe is two” refers to the distinction between first Europe based on original teachings of Christianity and second Europe that was corrupt, harmful and “low” civilisation, founded on the philosophy of naturalism and atheism (Nursi, 2004a: 160). As Tomas Michel noted, Nursi focused mainly on the ‘second Europe,’ because he has no quarrel with the ‘first Europe,’ which retains the values of faith, justice, and social harmony. He was concerned rather with warning people about what is involved in modern civilisation so that they can take the necessary measures to withstand its dangerous charms. He was seeking to refute corrupt Europe’s false claims and lay bare its harmful philosophical infrastructure (Michel, 2004: 81).

In sum, the position of religion, and the implementation of its principles and values in political, economic and social structures of that

particular civilisation was the main indication for Nursi in distinguishing true civilisations from the “low” or “malignant” ones. Real civilisation, which is capable to make its citizens happy, satisfied and equal without any exceptions, as Nursi suggested, originates from the divine laws. In the following pages, we shall elaborate more on the role of the prophets in building true and ideal societies.

The Prophet as a Ruler and Lawgiver

A careful reading of the works of Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina gives the impression that both philosophers emphasised on the central role of prophets in building excellent cities and societies. Al-Farabi, for instance, assumed that the ruler of the excellent city cannot be just any man, because rulership requires two fundamental conditions: firstly, the ruler should be predisposed for it by his inborn nature, and, secondly, he should have acquired the attitude and habit of will for rulership which will develop in a man whose inborn nature is predisposed for it. The art of ruling the excellent city, according to Al-Farabi, cannot just be any chance art, not due to any chance habit whatever (Walzer, 1985: 239).

Al-Farabi further described qualities of the ruler of excellent cities. Firstly, he is the best and the perfect person in his society. He is an intelligent man who receives Divine Revelation, and God Almighty grants him with revelation through the mediator of the Active Intellect. This man becomes a prophet, “who warns of things to come and tells of particular things, which exist at present... This man holds the most perfect rank of humanity and has reached the highest degree of felicity. His soul is united as if it were with the Active Intellect... He is the man who knows every action by which felicity can be reached” (Walzer, 1985: 245-247).

Secondly, the ruler should be a good orator, who would be able to arouse people’s imagination by well-chosen words. Also, the ruler should be able to lead people well along the right path to felicity and to the actions by which felicity is reached. Lastly, according to Al-Farabi, the ruler should “be of tough physique, in order to shoulder the tasks of war” (Walzer, 1985: 247). At the same time, since not every human being can understand the right path to felicity, they need a teacher (*al-mu’allim*) and a guide (*al-murshid*) in the way of reaching their ultimate goal. For this reason, the ruler of the excellent city, who is the lawgiver

(*wādi' al-nawāmis*), must also be the educator of people, their guide and their head (*al-mudabbir*) (Zayid, 1988: 54).

According to Al-Farabi, there are only two types of people who are suitable to be a perfect ruler of the excellent state: a prophet or philosopher. He assumed that all knowledge and truth revealed through the prophets can ultimately be known through philosophical efforts. At the same time, Al-Farabi acknowledged that revelation revealed through prophets has a real and true value. He argued the true value of revelation revealed through prophets by pointing to three factors: firstly, it is a form of God's guidance in educating the man; secondly, revelation's ability to convey truths to all levels of mankind; and, lastly, revelation's ability to motivate a man to action. The philosophical endeavour of reaching the true knowledge, on the other hand, is a very long process. Also, only extremely few individuals of the society could reach that very high level of understanding. But "revelation enables one to easily accept what revelation prescribed as good and evil acts and how one should live a good life" (Ahmad, 1998: 25-27).

Ibn Sina does not deny the possibility that philosophers could reach the Universal Single Truth by their efforts and reason. However, he does not give the career of lawgiver to the philosophers. Rather, according to Ibn Sina, only prophets are suitable to be lawgivers for their society. Giving plain facts or philosophical meanings of happiness and pain to the masses, as he argued, will create confusion in society. The ordinary soul cannot grasp the truth in its universality; he needs much simpler explanation (Jamalpur, 1971:190). Thus, the lawgiver must avoid any complicated ideas because men are usually unable to perceive the truth in them. The masses are unable to understand complicated issues. Only a few people among them can comprehend the verity of such matters that is the truth of divine unity (*al-tawḥīd*) and divine remoteness (*al-tanzīh*). In fact, the masses would inevitably deny the truth of such a thing (*yukādhibunu bi mithli hadha al-wujūd*); they would fall into dissensions, and indulge in disputations and analogical arguments that stand in the way of their civic duties ('*an a' mālihim al-madaniya*). They might even be led to adopt views contrary to the city's welfare (*salah al-madīna*) and opposed to the imperatives of truth. Their complaints and doubts would multiply, making it difficult for a man to control them. Thus, Ibn Sina concluded, not philosophers, but merely prophets are able to provide peace and harmony in society by allegorically presentation of

the Single Universal Truth (Zakaria, 2002: 60). Ibn Sina thus described religion as a primitive figuration of truth belongs to the masses as he said, “religions are intended to address the multitude in terms intelligible to them, seeking to bring home to them what transcends their intelligence by means of metaphor and symbol. Otherwise, religion would be of no use whatever” (Jamalpur, 1971: 191).

Al-Farabi also exposed the aspect of the revelation of using symbols to convey its truths. By using symbols, he said, revelation achieves two major objectives: firstly, it is able to convey its truths to everyone with varying levels of intellectual capacity and ability; and, secondly, it is able to motivate people into action (Ahmad, 1998: 27). He asserted that:

The prophet achieves his task by the ability to translate religious consciousness into a definite pattern of laws for people to follow. In order to achieve this, the prophet must not only be a true philosopher of a highest degree with total comprehension of theoretical knowledge, but also have the ability to translate these theoretical truths into action for people to follow through the promulgation of laws. Thus, the prophet must also be a law-giver (Ahmad, 1998: 36).

Isham Pawan Ahmad summarised the thought of Al-Farabi on the political and legislative tasks of the prophet accordingly:

For al-Farabi, whenever there is a prophet alive in that time, he must become the ruler. This is because his rulership is superior to all other forms of rulership because not only does he perfectly understand the theoretical knowledge but he is able to translate this knowledge into symbols which are best able to represent these truths and also at the same time motivate man to action and live according to these truths (Ahmad, 1998: 39-40).

In *Kitab al-Najāt*, Ibn Sina also asserted that, “It is necessary for man to live in cooperation, cooperation entails contracts, transactions ... which themselves are impossible without law and justice. Law and justice are impossible without a law-giver and a determinator of justice” (Jamalpur, 1971: 186). At the same time, Ibn Sina assumed that only prophets are suitable to be lawmakers for their societies. As Erwin I. Rosenthal observed, revelation for the Muslim philosophers was not simply a direct communication between God and man, not only a transmission of right beliefs and convictions, a dialogue between a personal God of

love, of justice and of mercy and man whom he has created in his image; it is also and above all a valid and binding code for man, who must live in society and be politically organized in a state in order to fulfill his destiny. In short, it is the law of the ideal state (Rosenthal, 1985: 116). The concept of the prophethood in the thought of Ibn Sina accordingly is ethically oriented (Ibn Sina, 1960, X: ii; Avicenna, 1980:531-535).

Accordingly, Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina emphasised on the vital role of the prophets in the formation of civilisations and states as the first rulers and lawgivers. The second ruler, if he is not a prophet, should follow all laws of the first ruler who was prophet and established laws for this community or state. According to Al-Farabi, the second ruler should have at least six qualities:

- (1) He will be a philosopher.
- (2) He will know and remember the laws and customs with which the first sovereign had governed the city, conforming all his actions to all their actions.
- (3) He will excel in deducing a new law by analogy where no law of his predecessors has been recorded, following for this deductions the principles laid down by the first Imams.
- (4) He will be good at deliberating and be powerful in his deductions to meet new situations....
- (5) He will be good at guiding the people by his speech to fulfill the laws of the first sovereigns as well as those laws which he will have deduced in conformity with their principles after their time.
- (6) He should be of tough physique in order to shoulder the tasks of war (Walzer, 1985: 251-253).

Being aware of the fact that it is almost impossible to find all these qualities in one person, Al-Farabi suggested that, when one single man who fulfils all these conditions cannot be found but there are two, one of whom is a philosopher and the other fulfils the remaining conditions, the two of them will be the sovereigns of this city (Walzer, 1985: 253). Consequently, if the prophet-ruler was the main condition for the establishment of the excellent city, the philosopher, then, shall be the main condition to keep this city alive.

In sum, Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina firmly established the political and legislative significance of prophethood. At the same time, they assigned to the prophet the principal task of bringing mankind the divine law for its guidance, preservation and salvation. The function of revelation for them was to persuade the masses of the laws and rules, to instruct

them in it and to educate them in it using persuasive means to action in order to attain the ultimate success, supreme happiness. In the following pages, we shall discuss the educating role of the prophets from the viewpoint of the *Risale-i Nur*.

The Civilising Mission of the Prophets

While observing the Said Nursi's approach towards the role of the prophets in building of civilisations, at least four aspects need to be addressed. Firstly, Nursi regarded the existence of prophethood to be essential for mankind as he stated that, "Divine power does not leave the ant without leader, or bees without a queen; it surely would not leave mankind without prophet or code of laws. In any case, the order of the world demands this" (Nursi, 2004b: 734). He also mentioned that, "The sacred Creator of so ornamented a cosmos must of necessity have a Noble Messenger, just as the sun must of necessity have light. For the sun cannot exist without giving light, and Divinity cannot be without showing itself through the sending of prophets. Is it at all possible that a beauty of utter perfection should not desire to manifest itself by means of one who will demonstrate and display it?" (Nursi, 2004b: 72).

For Nursi, man is designed to make progress through learning and there is always his innate need for faith and guidance from God. Man needs to learn everything when he comes into the world; he is ignorant, and cannot even learn completely the conditions of life in twenty years. This means that man's innate duty, as Nursi stated, is to be perfected through learning and to proclaim his worship of God and servitude to Him through supplication (Nursi, 2004b: 324). The prophets were playing the central part in this learning process. Very often, Nursi described the prophethood in mankind as the "summary and foundation of man's good and perfections," while the "True Religion" is the index of prosperity and happiness" (Nursi, 2004a: 174).

Secondly, Nursi repeatedly stressed on the superiority of the prophets over the philosophers in worldly as well as religious affairs (Nursi, 2004b: 246). In the world of humanity, from the time of the Prophet Adam up to now, he observed, two great currents, two lines of thought, have always been and will so continue. Like two mighty trees, they have spread out their branches in all directions and in every class of humanity. One of them is the line of prophethood and religion, the other the line of philosophy in its various forms. Whenever those two

lines have been in agreement and united, that is to say, if the line of philosophy, having joined the line of religion, has been obedient and of service to it, the world of humanity has experienced a brilliant happiness and social life. Whereas, when they have become separated, goodness and light have been drawn to the side of the line of prophethood and religion, and evil and misguidance to the side of the line of philosophy (Nursi, 2004b: 561). Thus Nursi stated that:

The line of prophethood considered, in the manner of a worshipper, that the aim of humanity and duty of human beings is to be moulded by God-given ethics and good character, and, by knowing their impotence to seek refuge with Divine power, by seeing their weakness to rely on Divine strength, by realizing their poverty to trust in Divine mercy, by perceiving their need to seek help from Divine riches, by seeing their faults to ask for pardon through Divine forgiveness, and by realising their deficiency to be glorifiers of Divine perfection (2004b: 563).

Also, with the help of revelation and miracles, the prophets revealed the truths of resurrection, the supreme gathering, hell-fire, paradise and other pillars of belief, which are impossible to be understood by rational criteria or the science of philosophy (2004b: 111). Nursi said that “The twenty-four thousand prophets, who are the most renowned of mankind, have unanimously proclaimed and proved through their miracles that eternal happiness and immortality in the hereafter are true” (2002b: 233).

The third dimension of the Nursi’s thought on the prophet hood is related to the civilising mission of the prophets. Along with discussing the importance of the prophets as the law-givers and first rulers for their community, he stressed more on the educational, ethical and social functions of the prophets in the formation of societies. In fact, for Nursi, the basic task of the prophets was the establishment of the faith and keeping mankind on the right path. Nursi said:

I saw among the convoys of mankind that were travelling towards the past, was the luminous, radiant caravan of the prophets, the veracious ones, the martyrs, the saints, and the righteous. They were scattering the darkness of the future and travelling the road to post-eternity on a straight way, a direct highway. The phrase was showing me the way to

join the caravan, indeed, it was joining me to it. Suddenly I exclaimed: “Glory be to God! Anyone with an iota of intelligence must know what a loss it is not to join that long, light-scattering caravan which is illuminating the future and travelling in perfect safety (Nursi, 2001: 463).

These prophets have continually striven to teach and prove basic teachings of belief in order to save human beings from hell-fire (2002b: 260). At the same time, God entrusted them with duties necessary for the existence of creatures in the universe such as mercy, wisdom, and justice, as necessary as food and water, and air and light (2002b: 601-602). In *The Flashes Collection*, Nursi asserted that the Noble Prophet (s.a.w.) was sent to mankind as a guide and leader to be followed so that men should learn the rules of social and personal life from him, become accustomed to obeying the laws of the All-Wise One of Perfection, and act in conformity with the principles of His wisdom (116). In the *Rays Collection*, Nursi again confirmed that Muhammad (s.a.w.) was a proof of himself as brilliant as the sun, through the powerful testimony to his messengership and veracity of his thousands of miracles, attainments and perfections, and his elevated character and fine morality (2002b: 594):

God’s Messenger (Peace and blessings be upon him) was sent by the Creator of the Universe, and that with all his conduct and practices was the most perfect, the most loyal, the highest of all men, whose perfections were the most elevated, and through the light of Islam that he brought, gave the best of all news to men, and gave them the most sacred consolation, and who has taken under his spiritual rule fourteen centuries and one fifth of mankind, and to the book of whose good deeds pass the equivalent of all the good deeds performed for one thousand three hundred years by his community, and that he is the reason for the universe’s existence and is God’s Beloved. It proves also with brilliant proofs that both the hereafter, and Paradise and Hell are certain and definite (2002b: 547).

While discussing the role of miracles in the prophetic mission of Muhammad (s.a.w.), Nursi stated that, “For God Almighty sent him in the form of a human being so that he might be a guide and leader to human beings in their social affairs, and in the acts and deeds by means of which they attain happiness in both worlds; and so that he might

disclose to human beings the wonders of Divine art and His dispositive power that underlie all occurrences and are in appearance customary” (2001:122).

In fact, in the *Nineteenth Word*, Said Nursi distinguished three important dimensions of the prophetic mission of the Prophet (s.a.w.) in building a true civilisation. Firstly, the Prophet (s.a.w.) brought the essential values for social stability such as justice, mutual assistance, mercy and wisdom; secondly, he, being moulded by God-given ethics, strengthened his *ummah* through ethical enhancement; and, thirdly, he provided his followers with a strong inspiration through directing them towards the eternal happiness. As a ruler and guide, Muhammad (s.a.w.) was able to remove numerous ingrained habits from intractable, fanatical large nations with slight outward power and little effort in a short period of time, and in their place he so established exalted qualities that they became as firm as if they had mingled with their very blood (2004b, p. 246). Subsequently, he achieved very many extraordinary feats in an extremely short period, which were not possible to achieve for an ordinary man or ordinary ruler.

Now, consider how, Nursi said, eradicating in no time at all their evil, savage customs and habits to which they were fanatically attached, he decked out the various wild, unyielding peoples of that broad peninsula with all the finest virtues, and made them teachers of all the world and masters to the civilised nations. See, it was not an outward domination; the Prophet (s.a.w.) conquered and subjugated their minds, spirits, hearts, and souls. He became the beloved of hearts, the teacher of minds, the trainer of souls, the ruler of spirits (2004b: 245). In the *Letters*, stressing on the power of the revelation and religion in civilising the nations, Nursi again articulated, “Who other than Muhammad the Arabian (s.a.w.) has turned the world’s wrongdoing into righteousness, saved men from sin and associating partners with God, and transformed politics and world rule?” (2001: 209).

Focusing on the exceptional power of the revelation in inspiring people towards social and political advancement, Nursi observed accordingly:

The confirmation made with a strong faith that permitted men to sacrifice their lives and their property, their fathers and tribes, by the renowned assembly known as the Companions,

who found themselves among a primitive people and in an unlettered environment, devoid of all social life and political thought, without any scripture and lost in the darkness of a period between prophets; and who in a very brief time came to be the masters, guides, and just rulers of the most civilised and politically and socially advanced peoples and states, and to rule the world from east to west in universally approved fashion (2001: 263).

It is the belief, said Nursi, that makes man into man; indeed, it makes man into a king. Unbelief, on the other hand, makes man into an extremely impotent beast (2004b: 323). As a result, the age of prophethood of Muhammad (s.a.w.) was one of true felicity. For through the light he had brought, he had turned the most primitive and illiterate of peoples into the masters and teachers of the world (2002b: 150). In the *Rays Collection*, Nursi again articulated that:

The Companions of the Prophet, regarded as the most elevated and esteemed group after the prophets, through the light of Muhammad (s.a.w.) came in a short time to govern with justice from east to west despite being illiterate nomads, and becoming advanced, educated, civilised masters, teachers, diplomats and just judges, they defeated world powers and made that century into an age of happiness. After scrutinizing every aspect of his conduct, through the power of the many miracles they witnessed with their own eyes, they abandoned their former enmities and the ways of their forefathers, and many of them such as Khalid ibn al-Walid and Ikrima Ibn Abu Jahl gave up the tribalism of their fathers. Their embracing Islam in truly devoted and self-sacrificing manner, and believing in Muhammad's veracity and messengership at the degree of 'vision of certainty' forms an unshakeable universal testimony (2002b: 597-8).

Another very important point mentioned by Said Nursi in his *Risale-i Nur* is that the prophets, along with the mission of the establishment of the faith, morality and just rule, were sent by God to encourage peoples to make material progress, and scientific and technological developments. For instance, the ultimate just rule of Solomon and his ability in subjugating of the air, the ship of Noah, the knowledge of David of the tongues of the birds, the mastery of Jesus in medicine, and many other miracles were signs/commands of God to encourage

peoples towards the elevated arts, dominical medicine, sciences, and technological and industrial developments (2004b: 262-270).

Nursi further asserted that the miracles of the prophets (Peace be upon them) between Adam and Muhammad (s.a.w.) all indicate a wonder of human art or craft, and Adam's (s.a.w.) miracle indicates in concise form, besides the bases of those crafts, the index of the sciences and branches of knowledge, and of the wonders and perfections, and urges man towards them (2004b: 272). At that sense, civilisational enhancement becomes an essential part of the faith and the noble mission of human being in this life:

O Sons of Adam! Since as a proof of their superiority over the angels in the question of the vicegerency, I taught your forefather all the Names, you too, since you are his sons and the inheritors of his abilities, should learn all the Names and in your position as holder of the Supreme Trust demonstrate before all creatures your worthiness. For the way is open to you to rise to exalted rank such as holding the highest positions over all beings in the universe, and for vast creatures like the earth to be subjected to you. Come on, step forward, adhere to all My Names, and rise! But your forefather was once deceived by Satan, and temporarily fell to the earth from a position like Paradise. Beware! In your progress, do not follow Satan and from the heavens of Divine wisdom thus fall into the misguidance of 'nature.' Continuously raising your head and studying carefully My Most Beautiful Names, make your sciences and your progress steps by which to ascend to those heavens. Then you may rise to My dominical Names, which are the realities and sources of your sciences and attainments, and you may look to your Sustainer with your hearts through the telescope of the Names" (2004b: 264).

As for the Qur'an of Miraculous Exposition, the supreme miracle of Muhammad (PBUH), Nursi considered that most of the Qur'an's verses are keys to a treasury of perfections and guides to a store of knowledge. Since the Qur'an shows in detail the reality of the teaching of the Names, it points clearly to the true goal of the sciences and branches of knowledge, which are truth and reality, as well as the perfections, attainments, and happiness of this world and the next. With truly powerful encouragement, it urges man towards them. It encourages and

urges in such way it says: “O man! In the face of manifestations of dominicality, the elevated purpose of the universe is man’s universal worship and submission to God, while his furthest aim is to attain to that worship by means of those sciences and perfections.” In stating this, Nursi asserted, it hints: “At the end of time, mankind will spill into science and learning. It will obtain all its strength from science. Power and rule will pass to the hand of science” (2004b: 272).

Lastly, according to the *Risale-i Nur*, sacred laws change according to the ages. Just as clothes change with the change of the seasons and medicines change according to dispositions, Nursi elucidated, so sacred laws change according to the ages, and their ordinances change according to the capacities of peoples. At the time of the early prophets, since social classes were far apart and men’s characters were both somewhat coarse and violent, and their minds, primitive and close to nomadism, the laws at that time came all in different forms, appropriate to their conditions. There were even different prophets and laws in the same continent in the same century. Then, according to Nursi, since with the coming of the Prophet of the end of time, man as though advanced from the primary to the secondary stage, and through numerous revolutions and upheavals reached a position at which all the human peoples could receive a single lesson and listen to a single teacher and act in accordance with a single law, no need remained for different laws, neither was there necessity for different teachers (2004b: 500-501). This last point of Nursi once more confirms the flexibility of the sacred guidance and the importance of social and educational developments for the mission of the prophets.

Conclusion

The paper discussed the issue of the necessity of the prophet hood in the building of a true civilisation with special reference to the ideas of Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Said Nursi. It revealed that these Muslim scholars agreed that human being cannot achieve his ultimate goal, everlasting happiness, without living in a society. At the same time, his most fundamental need is religion, revealed through the prophets. According to these three scholars, the age of prophet hood of Muhammad (s.a.w.) was one of true felicity. Through the light of belief he had brought, he had turned the most primitive and illiterate of peoples into the most civilised masters and teachers of the world. Therefore, the true civilisation, which is capable to make its citizens happy, satisfied and

equal without any exception, originates from the divine laws. Said Nursi, accordingly, stated that the mission of the prophets, besides establishing the worship of One God, also includes bringing economic, social and political justice, social stability, ethical enhancement, as well as inspiring people to make material progress, as well as technological and industrial developments, which are the fundamental requirements for building strong civilisations but beyond the power of an ordinary man.

Endnotes

1 For this article, the author mainly uses Al-Farabi's *Mabādi Ārā' al-Madīna al-Fāḍila* work in translation into English by R. Walzer in 1985.

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