Living the Sunna, Cultivating the Brotherhood
Following the Prophet Muḥammad in a Sufi Inspired Reformist Community in Contemporary Turkey

Fabio Vicini

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, there has been a widespread tendency in academic, journalistic, and even cinematographic accounts of religious life in Muslim-majority countries to associate strict adherence to the exemplary conduct of the Prophet Muhammad (sunna) with Salafism, that is, a “radical”, if not “fundamentalist”, expression of contemporary Islam. Apart from drawing a simplistic portrait of the diverse and often fragmented phenomenon that is “Salafism”, such accounts overlook the central role that the imitation of the sunna has historically played, and still plays, in the life of ordinary Muslims around the world. A broad array of theologically varied movements ranging from Sufism to more reformist-oriented ones also stress the importance of adhering to the Prophetic sunna. This chapter illustrates this aspect by presenting an account of the prominent place that the imitation of the Prophet Muhammad’s exemplary conduct occupies in the self-discipline and socialising practices of the Suffa community.

The Suffa community is an offshoot of the Nur movement, an Islamic revivalist current that emerged in the three decades following the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 from a growing group of students of Said Nursi (1877–1960). Nursi was an Islamic scholar of Kurdish origin who had been educated as a child in the Naqshbandī-Khālidī Sufi circles of south-eastern Turkey. Despite conventional views that tend to contrast Sufism and Islamic reformism,

1 I would like to express my gratitude to Ercüment Asil for his advice and helpfulness, and to Nelly Amri, Rachida Chih, and Stefan Reichmuth for their many suggestions about how to improve the chapter.
3 The name of the community is a reference to “aḥl al-ṣuffa”, a group of companions of the Prophet Muḥammad who, according to the Islamic tradition, lived in one section of the Medina Mosque. The term “ṣuffa” is usually translated as “bench” or “banquett” in reference to the portico or vestibule that was found in that section of the mosque. Tottoli, “Ahl al-Ṣuffa”.

© FABIO VICINI, 2023 | DOI:10.1163/9789004522626_009
This is an open access chapter distributed under the terms of the CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.
I choose to label this movement as both Sufi-inspired and reformist. Indeed, despite Nursi’s claims that the Nur path is different from that of the Sufis, the *Risale-i Nur* (The Epistles of Light) (ca. 1925–49) – Nursi’s magnum opus and the movement’s main text – expresses a cosmology that is largely indebted to the Sufi tradition, and particularly to Ibn al-ʿArabi’s metaphysics. Yet the movement is reformist in view of its advocacy for reform of the Islamic tradition to respond to the intellectual challenges that secular and materialist discourses have posed to Muslim-majority societies especially since the second half of the nineteenth century. In this vein, since its inception, it has promoted a bottom-up project for societal reform aimed at educating new generations of Turkish Muslims in both Islamic ethics and modern science.

Based on the reading of Nursi’s *Risale-i Nur* and on ethnographic materials gathered in Istanbul between 2009 and 2010, this chapter examines the relevance of the *sunna* as a pattern of Muslim civility that takes on a historically specific form within the Sufi community. In the first part, it illustrates the role that the figure of the Prophet Muḥammad plays in the path of knowledge promoted in the *Risale*. Then, it investigates how the imitation of the *sunna* is at the centre of the daily practices and sociability forms that shape Muslim life within the Sufi community. Particular attention will be given to the way conforming to the *sunna* intersects with Muslim norms of virtuous behaviour (*adab*). Finally, the chapter sheds light on the collective dimension of Prophetic piety by illustrating how both the *sunna* and *adab* are embedded in the ideal of brotherhood for how the latter is actualised within the community’s daily life.

1 **Theoretical Framework**

As will be shown, the ideal of Muslim brotherhood (*uhuvvet*) is a key theme of the *Risale* that Nursi puts in strict connection with the cultivation of the key virtue of sincerity (*ihlas*). According to him, unity of brotherhood had to

---

4 For the close links between some Sufis and different types of reformist movements, see also Weismann, “The Hidden Hand”; and Weismann, “The Politics of Popular Religion”.

5 Vicini, “Thinking through the Heart”; Vicini, *Reading Islam*. The *Risale-i Nur* is a fourteen-volume collection of Nursi’s commentary on the Qurʾān (*tefsir*) in which Nursi aimed at a reconciliation between the allegedly incompatible domains of modern science and religious knowledge.


7 The ethnographic materials reported in the second part of the chapter have already appeared in Vicini, *Reading Islam*.
be searched by his followers to counter the challenges posed by the Kemalist elites with their secularist policies and the materialist ideologies they upheld. As it has been argued in recent sociological works on Islam, brotherhood is a malleable concept that has historically provided Muslims with a flexible pattern for thinking and organising interpersonal relations along delocalised transregional networks. It has been used in Muslim societies to generate solidarity and interconnectivity in a diverse ensemble of settings: from the more classic types of ṭarīqa and futuwwa organisations to today’s Islamic communities such as Suffa, as well as many others of both Sufi and reformist orientation. As such, the ideal of brotherhood represents a long-standing pattern of Muslim civility that largely predates modern forms of social cohesion based on national or ethnic identity.

In this regard, it must be clarified that in the case of the Suffa community, and of the Nur movement in general, such an ideal has been reinterpreted through the more rigid organisational form of “community” (cemaaat), which developed in parallel with the gradual urbanisation of the country that began in the 1960s and 1970s. At the time, long-standing networks of Muslim solidarity that had regulated religious practice and social life in the countryside for centuries were reconfigured within major Turkish cities in the form of cemaats. Such communities first emerged to assist migrants to settle in these cities while, at the same time, spreading a message of social justice and moral integrity that the newcomers felt had been lost in the hostile urban environment. As such, the cemaats tended to be more inclusive and, accordingly, broader than traditional ṭarīqas. When compared with conventional religious networks, they were also organised around a more rigid and hierarchical structure, like the one that distinguished modern forms of social organisation such as associations, trade unions, and political parties. This responded to the need for more coordinated and goal-oriented collective behaviour to be effective within the

8 Salvatore, The Sociology of Islam. Salvatore here elaborates upon Max Weber’s sociological notion of brotherhood/fraternity (Verbrüderung). Although he acknowledges Weber’s Orientalist biases, he finds in brotherhood a useful sociological tool for thinking Muslim forms of organisation as beyond, for example, the Western-centred notion of community. Informed by a discussion of the work of Marshall Hodgson, Salvatore also argues that “spiritual” brotherhoods of the kinds promoted in the Sufi ṭarīqas and futuwwa organisations have been especially relied upon and empowered in the Islamicate world following the Mongol conquests, when the Sufi networks highly contributed to the expansion of a trans-civilisational ecumene between 945 and 1503.

9 Salvatore, The Sociology of Islam.

10 Vicini, Reading Islam, 56–59.

11 Bulaç, Din, Kent ve Cemaat; Yavuz, Islamic Political Identity.
environment shaped by modern organised society. As shown below, indeed, although Nursi’s conceptualisation of *uhuvvet* was certainly based on long-standing Muslim notions of brotherhood, it also incorporated some elements of these modern forms of organisation because he thought this was the only possible way to counter what he saw as the forces of disbelief that drove the Turkish state and society after 1923.

However, relying on a sociologically informed notion of brotherhood is still useful, as it allows us to put the *Suffa* case in an enduring trajectory of patterns of Muslim civility in which brotherhood has long intersected with the other two key patterns that are discussed in the chapter: *adab* and *sunna*. As it will be illustrated, my interlocutors looked at the *sunna* as an ideal model for living a Muslim life in a way that included inter-individual patterns of behaviour, forms of sociality and reciprocity that were modelled on Sufi *adab* and on an original reinterpretation of the Muslim ideal of brotherhood. By abiding by the exemplary conduct of the Prophet Muhammad, they aimed to embody key virtues of the community such as self-restraint (*fedakarlık*) and sincerity and purity of intentions (*ihlas*), which are, in turn, cardinal to the cultivation of the unity of brotherhood. Although these virtues had already been upheld within Sufi *taṣriqa* and *fuṭuwaya* organisations of the past, in the *Suffa* case they are reinterpreted and empowered in accordance with the Nur mission of saving faith by strengthening brotherhood in times of disbelief. As such, the *Suffa* case illustrates how the *sunna* is reinterpreted and actualised in a historically specific manner in contemporary Turkey to adapt to new social and political circumstances.

2 Between Hagiography and the Distinctive Nur Way

The Nur movement distinguishes itself from other Islamic revivalist movements of the last century and a half for its particular combination of traditional and modern attitudes towards knowledge and religious authority. This trait becomes clear in the distinctive way in which the *sunna* is conceived within the movement. Following Nursi, the Nur brothers see the Prophet Muhammad as one of the major sources of revelation and knowledge. Before addressing this point, however, it is useful to linger for a moment on Nursi’s biography and his alleged descent from the house of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*).

From a young age, Said Nursi had displayed an original attitude towards the established methods of the transmission of knowledge within Islam. For

---

12 Vicini, “Rescuing the Muslim Collective Self”.


instance, when earning his diploma (ijāza) in only three months at the young age of fourteen at a local medrese located in Bayezit (today’s Doğubayazıt, a small town at the foot of the Mount Ararat located in the eastern province of Van), Nursi allegedly refused to pass through all the commentaries and expositions that the other students were asked to read, preferring to focus only on a selection of sections of each work containing the main points. This attitude in approaching the Islamic sources through reason and logic reflected the new spirit of the times and nurtured his successive interest in modern scientific methods and discoveries. Between approximately 1895 and 1907, indeed when he lived under the patronage of local notables and governors in the region of Van, Nursi embarked on the study of subjects such as astronomy, geography, chemistry, mathematics, and physics, which had been of interest among Ottoman scholars and students since at least the eighteenth century. Nursi studied these topics mainly via manuals and compendiums that he found in the libraries of his hosts. At that time, Nursi was also politically active. In the immediate aftermath of the Young Turk Revolution of July 1908 he openly supported the need for introducing a constitution based on the principles of citizenship and freedom in the empire – a set of reforms which, he believed, had to be grounded in the sharīʿa. It seems that Nursi had an ambivalent relationship with the revolution. On the one hand, he worked closely with members of the Committee of Union and Progress (İttihat ve Terakki) to promote constitutional ideas among the ‘ulamā’, medrese students, and, particularly, his fellow Kurds. On the other hand, he was also tried for his alleged support of the counter-revolution also known as the 31 March Incident – for which, however, he was later acquitted. In any case, Nursi believed that a compromise was possible between the old system enshrined in Islamic principles and the new constitutional order. These hopes were definitively dashed years later by the virulence of the Kemalist reform programme that followed the foundation of the Republic in 1923, which threw him into a deep personal crisis. When he overcame it, he rejected his previous life as an emerging public intellectual and political activist, as he became convinced of the need to go back to core Islamic teachings.

13 Vahide, Islam in Modern Turkey, 10.
14 Vahide, Islam in Modern Turkey, 51–58.
15 These issues were addressed by Nursi in a speech he delivered on the third day of the revolution titled “Address to Freedom” (Divan-i Harb-i Örфи).
16 For a discussion, from an inside-Nur perspective, of Nursi’s involvement in the revolt and the role played by the newspaper Volkan, its funder Derviş Vahdeti, and his party organisation the Muhammadan Union (İttihad-ı Muhammedi Cemiyeti) therein, see Vahide, Islam in Modern Turkey, 65–81.
These traits of his personality, however, should not lead us to downplay the fact that his rise to prominence as a Muslim scholar after 1923, and in good part also before, was largely built upon his reliance on a language full of stories, themes, and metaphors that had been used by Muslim saints, learned men, and Sufi masters for centuries. According to Şerif Mardin, it was the aura of mystery and reverence Nursi was able to erect thanks to his mastering of such language that helped him build his charisma among ordinary Muslims of the Anatolian region.¹⁷ For instance, as confirmed by Nursi himself in several passages of the Risale, it is said that when dictating the text to his students, he was directly inspired by God and might not have been fully aware of what he was stating. That would explain why Nursi allegedly had to re-read his magnum opus thousands of times after completing it. For sure, within the Nur circles Nursi is still considered a renewer (müceddit, Ar. mujaddid) of Islam, one of those Muslim guides who according to Prophetic tradition appear on the earth at the turn of every Islamic century to renew the Islamic message.¹⁸ In the view of the members of the Nur movement, Nursi came into this world to reinterpret revelation in line with modern scientific discourse and save religion from the intellectual torpor into which it had fallen in the previous two centuries.

Similarly, whether Nursi should be considered a seyyid (Ar. sayyid) – a direct descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad – or not has been the subject of speculation among his followers. In the Risale, Nursi has been reported to have said to some interlocutors that he might indeed be a seyyid but that this could not be known with certainty given how today generations of families are not recorded as they used to be in the past:

I cannot know whether I am a seyyid or not. In this time, the lineages cannot be known with certainty. ... As a matter of fact, and spiritually speaking, I have taken lessons about truth from ‘Ali (may God be pleased with him). And because, in a sense, the family of the Prophet is composed of students of the true light (hakikî Nur şakırtline şâmil olmasından), I can also be counted as from the lineage of the Prophet (âl-i beyt).¹⁹ However, these are the times of the moral personality (şahs-ı manevi), and in the Nur mission there is no space for conceit, individualism, or individual

¹⁷ Mardin, Religion and Social Change, 3–8, 36–37.
¹⁸ Algar, “The Centennial Renouncer”; Donzel, “Mudjaddid”.
¹⁹ Interestingly, by using the expression “âl-i beyt” in place of “ahl al-bayt”, Nursi seems to follow a distinction similar to the one discussed by Ibn ‘al-Arabi, for whom the former expression did not designate exclusively the biological family of the Prophet, as “ahl al-bayt” does, but also his “closest advisors” as well as the “pious-gnostics-believers”. See Addas, La maison muhammadienne, 142–54.
goals, nor for honour and glory. ... [So] I thank God that He did not make me exalt myself, nor has He made me long for reaching this individual, and [made] for me excessive, recognition. And even if such a recognition would be given to me, in order not to ruin the sincerity of the Nur path, I know I would feel obliged to renounce it.20

In this passage, Nursi leaves open the possibility that he might indeed be a seyyid. Even if not so, in a cunning move, he hints at a “spiritual” line of descent from the Prophet via his son-in-law ‘Alî, in view of the fact that the latter and all his descendants are, after all, followers of the same path of “true light” (ḥakiki Nur) that he promotes in the Risale. Both these statements envisage a strategy aimed at retaining the charismatic aura that an association with the Prophet’s line of descent brings on his person. It is for analogous reasons that his followers today claim that Nursi was a müceddit. All these kinds of assertions resemble those of many other revivalist movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which have relied on a connection with Muḥammad and his sunna to mobilise their followers.21

By contrast, in the second section of the statement, Nursi clearly affirms the priority of the Nur collective mission over the realisation of any individual goal.22 In open opposition to Sufi models of authority, indeed, Nursi preferred to downplay his authority as a master and to exalt the Risale as the primary source of guidance for his followers. He believed that in a modern era in which the forces of unbelief have united and threaten religious traditions, it is the unity of brotherhood through the “secret of sincerity” (surr-i ihlas) that must prevail over any ambition to qualify him either as a master (şeyh) of the sort that

20 Translated by the author. The entire quote in the original Turkish reads: “Ben, kendimi seyyid bilemiyorum. Bu zamanda nesiller bilinmiyor. Hubuki âhir zamanın o büyük şahsi, Âl-i Beytten olacaktır. Gerçi mãnen ben Hazret-i Ali’ın (r.a.) bir veled-i mânevisi hükmünde ondan hakikat dersini aldım ve Âl-i Muhammed Aleyhisselâm bir mânâda hakiki Nur şâkırtlerine şâmil olmasından, ben de Âl-i Beytten sayılabilirim. Fakat bu zaman şâhs-i mânevi zamanı olmasından ve Nurun mesleğinde hiçbir cihette benlik ve şâhisiyet ve şâhsı makamları arzu etmek ve şan şerefl kanzamak olmaz; ve surr-i ihlasa tam muhalif olmasından, Cenâb-i Hakka hadsiz sânır ediyorum ki, beni kendiime变得irmememisinden, ben öyle şâhsı ve haddimden hadsiz derece fazla makmata gözüümü dikkem. Ve Nurdaki ihlasi bozmamak için, uhrevi makmat da bana verilse, birakmaya kendimi mecbur biliyorum” (Nursi, Emirdag Lahikas, 267). However, as remarked also by a commentator of this passage written in one of the main websites dedicated to the Risale, Nursi has never entirely rejected the hypothesis that he could be a seyyid; he only claimed that this could not be proved. Bediuzzamansaidnursi.org, “Üstad seyyid midir”.

21 Reichmuth, “Aspects of Prophetic Piety”.

22 Vicini, Reading Islam, 84–87.
was found in the Sufi ṭariqas or as a descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad. In other words, although Nursi, and especially his students, hinted at the possibility of him being a seyyid as a way of boosting his authority and charisma, this was considered irrelevant, or even dangerous, in view of the challenges that they had to face as Muslims in modern times. For this reason, any individual detail regarding Nursi’s persona was overshadowed by the urgency to foreground the importance of unity in brotherhood to accomplish what in their eyes was religious service to society (*hizmet*).  

### 3 Prophetic Piety in the Nur Tradition

Just like the figure of Said Nursi, who did not have to inspire pious devotion or charismatic attachment, the person of the Prophet Muḥammad also underwent a process of “rationalisation” in the *Risale*, where his image was put at the service of Nursi’s modernist reinterpretation of Islam. In his magnum opus, Nursi upholds a path to Muslim awareness based on meditative reflection (*tefekkür*, Ar. *tafakkur*) on creation (e.g. Q 3:19; and many other occurrences concerning the signs (*āyāt*) given by God and *tafakkur*). This form of reflection highlights the role of the human intellectual faculties (*fikr*), but the heart continues to play an important mediating function, as it does for most forms of gnosis in the Islamic tradition. As I have illustrated elsewhere, the exercise of *tefekkür* has a long-standing genealogy and was already discussed by medieval Muslim scholars including Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), who has an entire chapter on *tafakkur* in his *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* (*The revival of the religious sciences*). However, this method has been in time seen as being excessively

---

23 The term *hizmet* covers a multi-layered set of meanings in Turkish Islam. It has a long genealogy that goes back to the Arabic notion of *khidma* (the act of total submission to God). This notion is also axial in Sufi vocabulary, especially in *ādāb al-mashāiykh* and the relationship with “brothers” in the path, according to the hadith “sayyid al-qawm khādimuhum”, and Q 49:2. See Thibon, *L’oeuvre d’Abū ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Sulamī*, 624 (index). In the Nur movement, Nursi has generally used it to refer to his students’ collective action of copying, correcting, and spreading the *Risale*’s message, and this is how it is mainly used by members of the Sufia community today, though also the financial support provided by small businessmen can be counted as part of it. In contrast, within another Nursi-inspired contemporary Muslim group, the Gülen community, the meaning of the term has extended far beyond its members’ preaching activities to include other more mundane actions such as providing financial backing to its activities. For more on the term, see Vicini, *Reading Islam*, 45–49. See also Agai, *Zwischen Netzwerk und Diskurs*, 392 (index).

24 Vicini, *Reading Islam*, 109–23; Vicini, “Thinking through the Heart”.
Living the Sunna

reliant on human intellectual faculties and, for this reason, discouraged by, among other scholars, Ibn al-ʿArabi himself. As a consequence, tafakkur came to be overshadowed by the other key practice of dhikr (remembrance or invocation of God) within Sufism. Several centuries later, amid the sweeping transformations of Turkish society following the demise of the Ottoman Empire, for exactly the same reasons, Nursi not only praised tefekkü, but he even distinguished it from dhikr in more radical terms than the medieval Sufi scholars would have probably done. At the time, Sufism was rejected as backwards by the modernising secular elites in early republican Turkey who had espoused European epistemologies emphasising reliance on reason and the intellect rather than on intuition and faith. This probably pushed Nursi to promote a kind of meditative exercise that emphasised the use of “reflection” (tefekkür) more than intuitive experience. At the same time, however, his view of nature and the cosmo as the most evident manifestations of God’s existence and divine power of creation (halıkyet) to be meditated upon through tefekkür continues to be largely indebted to an Akbarian cosmology that sees the reflection of the only and unique principle of truth, namely God, in the diversity and multiplicity of creation.

In line with such a cosmology, the Risale refers to Muhammad as “the greatest truth of the universe” (kainatin en büyük hakikati) and, relatedly, as “the most evident proof of the existence and unity of God” (Allah’ın varlık ve birliğine en açık ve en parlak bürhan). Whereas the perfect mechanisms that regulate the natural world are already proof of God’s design, the perfect example set by the Prophet Muhammad is another. This vision reflects the Islamic cosmogonic view of a reality prior to existence, that of the “Muḥammadan light” (al-nūr al-muḥammadî), according to which the Prophet would be at the origin of the world that is found, among other Muslim thinkers, in Nursi as well as Ibn al-ʿArabi. In the Risale, Nursi uses a language infused with scientistic terminology to pinpoint Muḥammad’s prophetic mission and the example he set for other Muslims as the clearest sign of God’s existence vis-à-vis materialist and areligious claims. In line with basic Islamic tenets, Muḥammad is considered the seal of all prophets and a figure that exemplifies all the best qualities and

26 Gardet, “Fikr”.
27 For works illustrating how the Sufis were under attack by both reformist scholars and modern nationalist discourse, see Bruinesse, “Sufism”; Ewing, Arguing Sainthood; Sirriyeh, Sufis and Anti-Sufis.
28 Chittick, The Sufi Path of Knowledge.
morals (ahlak-ı hasene) that are enshrined in the Islamic tradition. However, he is also pointed to as one of the three principal muarrifs, the sources of spiritual and intellectual light that make God known to humans beside the Qurʾān and the universe. As such, Muḥammad is recognized as the maximum expression and symbol of comprehension and awareness (idrak ve şuur timsali) of the unity of the universe and, hence, of divine truth.

Regarding Muslim pious demeanour, Nursi also elaborates upon the idea of the “illustrious sunna” (Sünnet-i seniye), according to which following the sunna in their daily actions Muslims can cultivate a stronger relationship with God than by any other means. In his view:

Complying fully with the sunna is a way of recalling the noble Prophet (peace be upon him). That recalling and remembrance are transformed into recollection of the divine presence. In fact, when the “illustrious sunna” (Sünnet-i seniye) is respected in even the least significant aspects, in the conduct (adab) of eating, drinking, and sleeping, those customary and natural acts become meritorious acts of worship (sevablı bir ibadet) in compliance with the sharīʿa (şerʿî bir hareket). Because through such commonplace actions a person thinks about how to behave in conformity with the noble Prophet’s (peace be upon him) example and conceives of them as the conduct of the sharīʿa. Then he recalls that he [the Prophet] is the owner of the sharīʿa. And in this way, his heart becomes favourably disposed towards the truth of the sharīʿa, which comes from Almighty God, the true Lawgiver, and he gains a new sense of divine presence and worship.

As the Prophet is an example of perfection that proves the existence and unity of the universe, following his sunna in minute detail is a way of recalling him and his presence through every single daily action. This is an act of “remembrance” of the Prophet’s exemplary conduct which, according to Nursi, allows Muslims to increase their degree of adherence and conformity to the prescriptions of the truth of the sharīʿa. In turn, the imitation of the sunna is a way to

---

30 Nursi describes the Prophet Muḥammad as the most beautiful and kind (cemilli), a mix of goodness, patience, and clemency (halimi), patient (sabiri), grateful (şakiri), devout (zahidi), humble (mütevası), chaste (afifi), generous (cevadı), gracious (kerimi), merciful (rahimi), and just (adili). See Nursi, Eski Said, 557. Reported in Sorularlasaidnursi.com, “Risale-i Nur gözüyle Efendimiz”.

31 Nursi, İşaretül İ'cāz, 446; Sorularlasaidnursi.com, “Risale-i Nur gözüyle Efendimiz”.

32 Nursi, Lem'aalar, 50. Translated by the author, based on Vahide’s translation found in Nursi, The Flashes, 85.
strengthen one’s connection with the source of creation. As such, complying with the exemplary conduct of Muḥammad provides them a path for the cultivation of their connection with God; a path that is grounded upon a parallel process of spiritual and intellectual opening generated by tefekkūr. In this light, the figure of Muḥammad remains strongly inspirational as an example of conduct that Muslims must follow to open themselves to the divine truth.

Similar to tefekkūr, which cannot be reduced to a rational enterprise alone, the imitation of the sunna in the Nur tradition cannot be understood without recognising its spiritual implications. All these practices are aimed to establish a connection between the human soul (ruh) and divine truth, namely God. As it has been noted, the Risale mentions the connection that is established in the Qurʾān (3:29) between love for the Prophet and love for God by defining it an “inimitable conciseness” (icâz mucize).\(^{33}\) The text also contains numerous references to the practice of invoking blessings upon the Prophet (al-ṣalāt ʿalā l-nabī) and its universal and beneficiary dimension for the Muslim community.\(^{34}\) An element of pious devotion towards the Prophet permeates Nursi’s Risale. At the same time, however, the Prophet Muḥammad is extolled without any display of emotions, mainly as a source of intellectual and spiritual enlightenment – quite in contrast to the emotional preaching based on the Prophetic sīra, as practised by Gülen, a contemporary Islamic Turkish preacher who has been inspired by Nursi, and his movement.\(^{35}\)

---

\(^{33}\) Hamidouné, “La pratique de la ‘prière sur le Prophète’”, 516.

\(^{34}\) Hamidouné, “La pratique de la ‘prière sur le Prophète’”, 38.

\(^{35}\) See, for example, Gülün, Sonsuz Nur, the most famous collection of his sermons. This is a passionate account of the lives of the Prophet and his Companions that sets out their distinctive virtues and qualities, thereby presenting Muslims with a model of ideal piousness to which they should aspire. The text extensively relies on authoritative Islamic ḥadīth, but also on biographical accounts of the Prophet Muḥammad (ṣiyer, Ar. siyar) that have never been accepted as official sources of the Islamic tradition. These stories were reported by Gülün in his speeches using highly emotional tones and postures, and often invoking tears and cries to recall in the listeners the adversity and trouble that the Prophet and his Companions endured during the early years of Islam. Before 2016, the whole DVD collection of Gülün’s video-taped sermons could be found in the community’s NT stores. These DVDs as well as other online videos of Gülün were often watched together by community members during meetings. See Sunier and Sahin, “The Weeping Sermon.”
Living the Sunna

As hundreds of thousands of countrymen abandoned their villages to move to the major Turkish cities in search for an occupation in the 1960s and 1970s, they were drawn into burgeoning urbanised religious networks that, apart from offering religious guidance, also provided people with social, economic, and educational opportunities. The Istanbul branch of the Suffa community is not an exception. It was established in the 1980s as an offshoot of the first branch, which had been founded in the eastern city of Erzurum in the late 1970s. The coup of 1980, which followed a previous one in 1960 and another in 1971, had put an end to years of high social and political tension between leftist and ultra-nationalist groups in the country. However, it had once again strengthened the hand of the military over society, particularly over religious communities which had continued to survive underground since the abolition of the Sufi lodges in 1925. Yet these were also the years of the “Turkish–Islamic synthesis”, a new national vision of Turkish history that was spread through schoolbooks and television, which incorporated a tamed version of Islam to cushion the influence of leftist ideologies in the country.³⁶ While the tension between the secularist camp and the religious communities continued, more space for action and organisation was now available for religious groups to operate in the country.³⁷

Like most such communities, Suffa relied on the financial support of local entrepreneurs (esnaf) to establish its main centres in the city and to offer residence facilities to university students with a religious-conservative background coming to Istanbul for their studies. The houses affiliated with the Nur movement have traditionally been referred to as dershanes – literally, “place (hane) for lesson (ders)” – since the 1930s, when they already functioned as centres for reading, copying, and disseminating the Risale.³⁸ Today in the main urban centres like Istanbul, they generally work more as residence places for groups of five to fifteen students, and as venues for collective readings for older members. The dershanes circumscribe an enclosed space where a process of Muslim socialisation takes place by which the students cultivate those Islamic virtues that are upheld by the community such as submission to God (ubudiyet), self-sacrifice (fedakarlık), and sincerity in brotherhood (ihlas).

³⁶ Yavuz, Islamic Political Identity, 71–73.
³⁷ It must be noted that already back in 1967, the introduction of a lenient legislation on vakıfs had de facto given religious communities the opportunity to reopen foundations after more than forty years of prohibition. See Bilici, “Sociabilité et Expression Politique Islamiste”.
³⁸ Agai, Zwischen Netzwerkund Diskurs, 391, 394; Yavuz, Islamic Political Identity, 162–70.
Contrary to journalistic accounts portraying the imitation of the *sunna* as the exclusive trait of “Salafi” groups to which I pointed at the beginning of this chapter, people at *Suffa* also follow the exemplary conduct of the Prophet Muḥammad in their daily activities. This should not come as a surprise considering the strong influence that Sufism has had on the Nur movement. Although Salafi customs of growing a beard and wearing traditional Islamic clothes in public are highly discouraged within the *Suffa* community because they contradict the inclination of its members to mingle with society, within the enclosed space of their houses, the students strived to conform to the exemplary conduct of the Prophet Muḥammad down to the minutest details. One first example of the many ways in which my interlocutors did so was the performance of the daily prayer. The cadence of the five obligatory prayers (*sabah, öğle, ikindi, akşam, yatsı*) dictated the rhythms of the day and defined the schedule of the houses by strictly imbuing community life with an intense spiritual atmosphere. While during the day students perform the prayer in one of the many mosques scattered around the city, in the morning and evening they prayed together as a community (*cemaat olarak*) under the guidance of the most authoritative brother present (*imam*) wearing a special robe (*kübbe*) and hat (*takke*). Grouped in line behind him, the students followed his recitations and movements, falling synchronically on the floor a few tenths of a second after him at each genuflection. After performing the obligatory Muslim prayer-cycles (*rekat*), the students repeated God’s ninety-nine names (or attributes) in unison, beginning with formulas of glorification and praise to God (*Sübhanalla, Elhamdüllah, Allahu Ekber*) thirty-three times each. Every time, a number of supplementary *rekats* were added. My interlocutors informed me that the Prophet and his community used to do this in their prayers. The ritual was concluded with one or more additional silent supplications (*duʿāʾ*) that they made individually. These were followed by the recitation of one chapter of the Qurʾān (*sūra*) by the brother who had led the prayer.

It was still in compliance with the *sunna* that the students also accomplished some extra religiously meritorious practices, including weekly fasts (*oruç*) on Mondays and Thursdays, or additional prayers at night (*tehecciūd*). Beyond the strict domain of religious devotional practice, the conduct of the Prophet Muḥammad also shaped the entire set of behaviours and etiquettes that distinguished community life in the houses, including activities such as eating, drinking, and sleeping. For instance, apart from the customary Muslim hygienic rule of eating with the right hand, meals were usually consumed on the floor by sitting with one of the two knees leaning on the ground and the other bent on itself. This foot was steadily planted on the carpet-covered floor and the upper part of the thigh pushed against the lower part of the intestine.
The habit allegedly corresponds to the way the Prophet used to eat, and it was indicated by my interlocutors as good for human health. Students believed that by keeping one of their legs pushed against their intestine they could better understand when they were satiated. By so doing, they avoided overeating, which would be not only unhealthy but also not in compliance with community rules of self-restraint. For analogous reasons, the students also used to drink on their knees and in three separate sips. They imitated the Prophet even in the way they slept, lying on their right side, keeping their legs slightly bent, and their hands under the head.

A combination of scientism and faith distinguished my interlocutors’ approach to the exemplary conduct of Muḥammad. They indeed believed the sunna to be the reflection of God’s commandments and hence saw it as shielding a hidden scientific knowledge which must be discovered. Rather than medicalising the sunna to justify the need of keeping up with it, the case was the opposite. The Prophet’s model of conduct was seen by them as preceding any scientific discovery. Since it is a model suggested by God via the example provided by the Prophet, it contains a wisdom that modern science will confirm sooner or later. As such, the sunna does not contain a model of perfect conduct because it is healthy, but it is healthy because it is in line with a God-given order. And the scientific confirmation of the healthiness of such conduct is but a confirmation of the already miraculous nature of the Qur’ānic message that it enshrines.39

5 Adab and the Social Dimension of the Sunna

While all the examples that I have mentioned so far describe behavioural prescriptions that regard individual conduct, the sunna had also far-reaching collective implications for my interlocutors. As it regulated daily life and key shared moments of the community, the sunna was enshrined in the Nur path’s main aim of achieving unity within brotherhood (uhuyvet) through the

39 On the miraculous evidence of the Qur‘ān, see Telliel, “Miraculous Evidence”. The thesis of the scientific reliability of the sunna (but also of the whole Qur‘ānic message) has been taken to its extremes in the Gülen community. Tee, The Gülen Movement; Zengin Arslan, “Reading the Universe”. For instance, the sleeping habit described above was discussed within seemingly scientific articles that I found in both old and new issues of the community’s magazine Sızıntı. These articles were aimed at demonstrating that sleeping on the right side was better for the heart, blood circulation, and other bodily functions, whereas sleeping on the opposite side was considered harmful. See, for example, Coşkun, “Sağ Yatarak Uyum”. 
constant search for the key virtue of sincerity in religion (ihlas, Ar. ikhlāṣ).

For my interlocutors compliance with the exemplary conduct of the Prophet Muhammad was not simply a matter of following down to the minutest details a set of religious prescriptions; it was part of a pattern for proper behaviour that was conducive to strengthening relations of amity and brotherhood with other members of the community. In other words, rather than as a set of prescriptions, they looked at the exemplary conduct of the Prophet Muhammad as an ideal model for living a Muslim life in a way that included inter-individual patterns of behaviour and forms of sociality and reciprocity. These sociability patterns were, in turn, seen by them as inherent to the process of embodying some key virtues of the community such as self-restraint (fedakarlık) and ihlas, and of learning how to reconstruct a sense of religious brotherhood in modern times.

How the exercise of self-restraint was actualised in daily routine behaviour among fellow brothers in religion can be seen in the way the sunna shaped all sociability forms within the community, from more informal and relaxed moments like drinking tea, eating chips, or chatting, to more formal ones, such as collective meetings. Sociability forms are here intended as people's capability of inhabiting a particular social space by interacting with other people according to certain standards of behaviour and etiquette which, however, cannot be reduced to the outward performance of a habit as they also include people's own ideas of their self and how this is thought of in relation to other selves.

This is where, in the view of my interlocutors, the sunna is conflated with the other two interrelated notions of edep (Ar. adab) and ahlak (Ar. akhlāq). In pre-Islamic times, the term adab was often used as a synonym of sunna. Its original Arabic meaning can be rendered as “tradition” intended as a “habit, hereditary norm of conduct, custom derived from ancestors and other persons who are looked up to as models”. In the course of history, different layers of meaning have been added to adab, from more ethical and social connotations

---

40 Nursi's view of brotherhood is mainly theorised in the Risale's twentieth and twenty-first chapters of “The Flashes” (Nursi, Lemşalar). As I will illustrate in the next section, Nursi was convinced that strengthening Muslim brotherhood was even more important today than in the past given the widespread materialism and disbelief of the time, which for him was incarnated by the secularist ideology of the new-born Turkish Republic.

41 See Vicini, Reading Islam, 63–96. See also Vicini, “Do Not Cross Your Legs”, in which I have suggested that anthropological explorations of Islam should move in a direction that includes an understanding of Muslim practice which does not limit itself to the prescriptive dimension of the tradition but should examine also sociability forms.

42 Vicini, “Do Not Cross Your Legs”, 96.

43 Gabrieli, “Adab”.

---

Living the Sunna
implying ideas of good upbringing, urbanity, and courtesy, to more intellectual ones referring to the sum of knowledge that made a man apt to court life.\textsuperscript{44} On the one hand, the term was integrated into the Islamic tradition, within which it soon began to overlap with the set of ethical rules and moral behaviour (akhlāq) exemplified by the Prophet Muḥammad’s words and deeds (hadith). On the other, it remained associated with elite culture. In this regard, during what Marshall Hodgson called the middle periods of Islamic history (945–1503), adab developed into an original element of Islamicate civility indicating a “knowledge tradition” inherited from pre-Islamic Persianate court culture that “embraced the ensemble of the ethical and practical norms of virtuous and beautiful life ideally cultivated by a class of literati”.\textsuperscript{45} Adab maintained such distinctive capacity of synthesising key patterns of Muslim civility well into the modern era. Although since the early twentieth century it has at times overlapped with modern national discourses, it has continued to retain its Islamic specificity.\textsuperscript{46}

Given its malleable nature, adab has taken different connotations in different places and moments and it “is [better] defined by the multiplicity of its uses” than by a specific set of practices.\textsuperscript{47} In the Suffa community, the word overlapped with the concepts of ahlak and sunna and indicated the set of rules of etiquette and correct manners that my interlocutors used to address each other. Therefore, students were said to be following the Prophet’s good manners (edep) and ethics (ahlak) when they spoke to their fellow brothers in polite and gentle tones, using the respectful form “siz” (you, pl.), addressing them as elder brother (abi) and not by their first names, avoiding slang, or greeting new people by standing up and replying to the proverbial form of salutation selam aleiküm with aleiküm selam.

These and other relational forms became particularly manifest during visits (ziyaret) by members of the community who they were not familiar with, and who had to be addressed more formally. During these events, after salutation, the guests approached the students who were standing in a circle. Going counterclockwise, they shook the students’ hands and hugged them twice, first on the left and then on the right side. Then, they would sit within the circle with the older guests sitting in better places at the right side of the most senior brother. Finally, all participants briefly introduced themselves, and only after the ritual presentation had ended would mutual conversation, supposedly

\textsuperscript{44} Mayeur-Jaouen and Patrizi, “Ethics and Spirituality in Islam”, 1–5.

\textsuperscript{45} Salvatore, The Sociology of Islam, 123.

\textsuperscript{46} Mayeur-Jaouen, “Introduction”, 10–11.

\textsuperscript{47} Farag, “Private Life”, 94.
inspired by love for the fellow brothers (*muhabbet*), begin. During these *ziyarets*, the attendees displayed a certain ability to find topics of conversation, even if they did not know each other well. The important aspect was to avoid moments of silence that would bring about embarrassment or improper arguments causing disputes or disagreement. The brothers were careful not to raise their voice and to speak gently. Normal conversations were usually full of jokes, which often served to break the ice. However, joking was to be done with due respect towards others. It was important to arouse collective amusement and laughter rather than having jokes that would exclude some people. Brothers always behaved towards each other with extreme respect, gentleness, and smiles.

These behavioural patterns were all claimed to be modelled on the way the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions allegedly behaved when they gathered to discuss religion, economics, or pressing political issues. They defined a path of inter-subjective interaction that wrapped up all community meetings, from more consultational ones (*istişare*) to normal *ziyarets*. Compliance with the *sunna* absorbed time and space into a way of life in which good manners, moral conduct, individual and collective behaviour, and the Islamic past and present converged. In this sense, for my interlocutors, the Prophet’s tradition did not merely represent the utmost example for moral individual conduct, but the all-encompassing model of organisation of community life in which most daily activities, ritualised performances, and meditative practices of the community (*tefekkûr*) could not be separated from each other. As such, it defined more than a set of routinised behaviour or a model for “Islamic conduct”. It also circumscribed a pattern of Muslim civility by means of which they, at the same time, intended to cultivate their pious selves and reconstruct Muslim forms of solidarity and association in contemporary society.

6  
Brotherhood as a Matrix of Civility

In the *Suffa* community, the view of the *sunna* as a model for inter-individual relations rests on the flexible bond provided by the ideal of brotherhood in religion (*uğurbet*) that Nursi discusses in the *Risale*. There is no space to illustrate this aspect in full here, but this idea takes a central place in the text as both an ideal form of social organisation for Muslims in modern times and as an ethical principle. As theorised by Nursi in the twentieth and twenty-first chapters of “The Flashes”, one of the main four books of the *Risale*, the achievement

---

48 Nursi, *The Flashes*.
of unity in brotherhood should be the primary goal for Muslims all over the world in the contemporary era; and such unity can only be achieved through sincerity (ihlas), a key Muslim virtue that the Nur brothers must strive to cultivate, dedicating themselves entirely in self-sacrifice (fedakarlık) to their other fellow brothers. Nursi established a direct link between the notion of brotherhood and the key virtue of ihlas. This reflected his view that in modern times Muslim processes of ethical formation must be linked with solid and effective forms of social organisation. Accordingly, within the Suffa community there was a circular relationship between the primary ethical goal of taming the nefs (ego), the embodiment of the key virtue of ihlas, and the cultivation of a sense of the Muslim self as closely linked to the idea of religious brotherhood.

An interesting example of the way the cardinal virtue of ihlas was spotlighted by my interlocutors during their readings and conversations is the highly ignominious character attributed to the sin of gossiping or talking behind another’s back (gybet). The topic was often raised in the houses when students jokingly warned those who complained about some small flaw in other students’ character, attitude, or behaviours not to commit gybet. But it was also the subject of specific lessons, such as the one that Yasin, a young doctor and former student residing in the houses of the Suffa community, made in front of a group of university students one evening in one of the houses of the community located in the notoriously pious neighbourhood of Fatih, where I was conducting my research. His lesson was based on the concluding section (hatime) of the twenty-second chapter of “The Letters,” a writing that Nursi had entirely dedicated to this particular sin. In it, Nursi analyses the Qur’anic verse “would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother?” (Q 49:12).

Yasin introduced the passage by referring to a hadith in which, after admonishing one of his female Companions for backbiting another, the Prophet Muhammad reportedly ordered her to spit out the piece of meat she had in

---

49 Although to my knowledge no discussion of futuwwa is found in the Risale, the emphasis put by Nursi on solidarity and self-sacrifice for the fellow brothers is reminiscent of some of the values of this kind of institution. A type of association emerging in ninth-century Persia, futuwwa (lit. “young manliness” or “chivalry”), was a youth male organisation that promoted values such as generosity, self-sacrifice, camaraderie, and mutual respect. Originally distinct from Sufism and characteristic of artisanal professional circles and urban neighbourhood associations, between the tenth and thirteenth centuries it often overlapped with Sufi brotherhoods and was discussed in parallel with the concept of adab in Sufi treatises. See Ridgeon, “Reading Sufi History”.

50 For a thorough discussion, see Vicini, Reading Islam, 84–96.

51 Nursi, The Letters.

52 Abdel Haleem, The Qur’an.
her mouth, which was indeed immediately expelled.⁵³ Yasin emphasised how committing such a sin should be hated as much as perpetrating cannibalistic or other inhuman acts. Then he started reading the text at a point where Said Nursi interrogates an imaginary interlocutor about what had happened to his sense of civility that pushed him to commit such a vile and wild act. Of particular interest is the fifth passage of the “Letter”, in which Nursi compares the sin of gıybet to “mercilessly (insafsızca) biting the moral personality (şahsi manevi)” of the brotherhood, of which the imaginary sinner does not realise he is himself part of, so that he is inadvertently “biting his own limbs”. As also explained by Yasin, backbitti ng is a sort of poison (zehir) that can spread easily and fast through the community if somebody starts committing it. Luckily, he added, it does not seem to be a concern for their community today, but he warned the students to always keep their guard up because it is easy to start gossiping about other brothers. Interestingly, Yasin concluded his reading by observing that this would compromise not only the capacity of each one of them to achieve sincerity of faith, but also that of the whole community to survive and bring forth its mission to revitalise faith in contemporary society. For my interlocutors, not committing the sin of gıybet was a prerequisite for achieving ihlas individually and, by this means, to cultivate and maintain unity in brotherhood both within the Suffa community itself and within the Muslim umma at large.

7 Conclusion

The case of the Suffa community illustrates the way the sunna continues to provide Muslims across the world with a model for individual behaviour and social organisation that is not the monopoly of any specific expression of Islam. The Prophet Muhammad remains a focus of emulation for a vast array of differently inclined movements, ranging from jihadist and Salafist groups to reformist-oriented revivalist movements and Sufi orders. Indeed, two souls which have long been considered in contradiction with each other in the literature cohabit within the Nur tradition. On the one hand, by hinting at a possible link of descent between himself and the Prophet of Islam, Nursi constructed his authority as a charismatic Muslim leader and a renewer of the tradition. On the other, he minimised the importance of such a lineage – and of the charisma he might draw from it – to extol the figure of Muhammad as a

⁵³ According to the sources, the interlocutor and reporter of the hadith was the Prophet Muḥammad’s third and youngest wife, ʿĀʾishah who had just observed how the skirt of a woman who had passed by was too long. Es-Suyuti, Peygamberimizin Mucizeleri, 200–202.
perfect refraction of God’s creative magnificence on earth and, hence, as “the most evident proof of the existence and unity of God”. By doing so, he placed the Prophet at the centre of his project for “rationalising” the Muslim path to knowledge via his emphasis on tefekkür. In what can be seen as an attempt to keep these two aspects together, Nursi linked himself with the Prophet through ‘Ali’s role as intercessor and guide on the Muslim path to the truth, but he minimised the importance of the bloodline. In such a perspective, the Prophet’s charisma comes to be embodied by him through knowledge and, via him, by the community of students of the true light (hakiki Nur) that he aimed to establish. For my interlocutors to follow the Prophetic path down to the minutest detail did not simply reflect conformity towards Muslim standards of conduct. It was also the best means to approximate a perfect conduct reflecting a divine order of things and, by this means, to achieve a fuller awareness of God’s creative force. In line with the teachings of the Risale, the imitation of the sunna was part of a path to knowledge; a way of achieving Islamic awareness by emulating a model of perfection which is also described in the Qur’ān and refracted in creation. As argued by Nursi, by constantly remembering the Prophet’s conduct, Muslims would increase their compliance with the shari‘a and, hence, strengthen their connection with God. In this regard, the imitation of the sunna within the Nur tradition can be regarded as another possible source of “gnosis” beside the other main practice of intellectual meditation (tefekkür). Complying with such a model of perfect conduct in their daily life, the Nur brothers aspire to achieve a degree of spiritual and intellectual awareness that they see as a requirement for contemporary Muslims to face the challenges posed by the materialist and areligious worldviews that spread following modernisation.

Moreover, by actualising the exemplary conduct of the Prophet Muhammad via adab and sunna within brother-to-brother interactions, my interlocutors strove to practise and incorporate the historically specific version of Muslim civility that Nursi wished to promote with the Risale. In this regard, following standards of behaviour based on self-restraint, self-sacrifice, and respect for other brothers that are embodied by the sunna was seen by my interlocutors as conducive to the achievement of the virtue of sincerity (ihlas). This is the main virtue that the Nur brothers uphold because it allows them to strengthen their unity in brotherhood. Beyond epitomising long-standing patterns of Muslims civility, unity in brotherhood was also a social and political need that Nursi felt was essential for the Muslims of his time, and that my interlocutors continue to consider essential today, if they wish to fight the forces of unbelief and bring forth their revivalist mission in society.

In this light, I have suggested to think of the sunna as a pattern of Muslim civility that takes on a historically specific form within the Sufī community. In
this community, compliance with the *sunna* in daily interactions is profoundly intertwined with standards of behaviour inspired by *adab* tradition as well as by the ideal of brotherhood upheld by Nursi in the *Risale*. These are all models that shape daily life within the community and are generative of historically specific social formations. Whereas the model of the Prophet Muḥammad has historically sustained, and continues to sustain, Muslim life all over the world, it has been reinterpreted locally through different prisms. The *Suffa* case is one manifestation of such processes of reinterpretation of the *sunna*, one that seems to hang in the balance between models of Prophetic piety that have been cultivated within medieval Sufism and the practical need of reinterpreting such models to face the intellectual challenges of modern times.

**Bibliography**

**Primary Sources**


**Secondary Literature**


