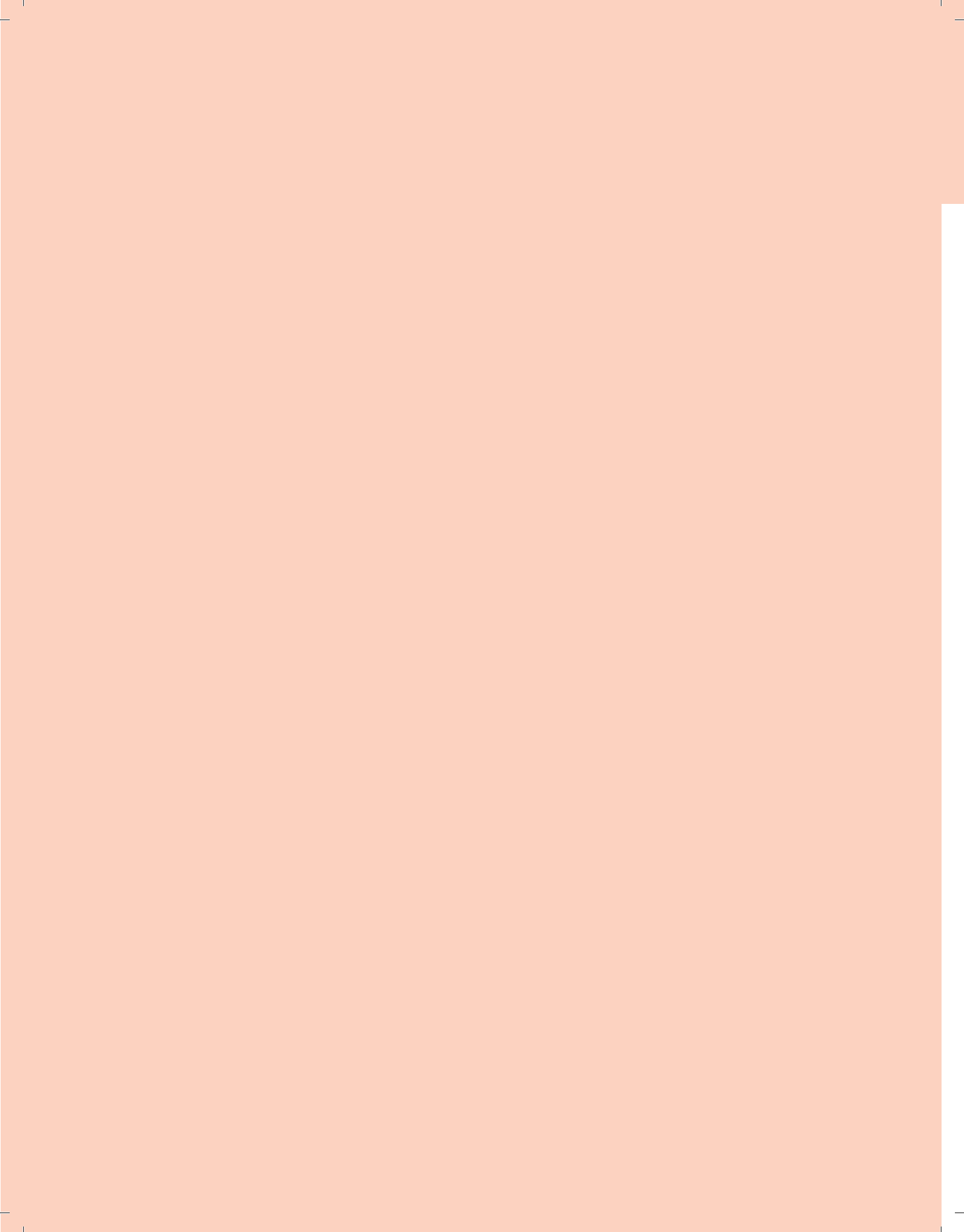


GRADUATE STUDENT FORUM



DISCOURSE OF TAWHEED IN KABIR'S POETRY AND SAID NURSI'S RASÂ'IL: COMPARATIVE VERNACULAR LITERARY ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

In an era when modernity was expected to diminish the role of religion, the works of scholars like Said Nursi and Kabir continue to offer compelling and persuasive vernacular approaches to understanding the divine, even in the era of hypermodernity. This research paper delves into a comparative analysis of the concept of “tawḥīd” as employed by Indian scholar Kabir in a vernacular context and Islamic Turkish scholar Said Nursi in an Islamic context. It explores why these scholars’ perspectives are significant and how their understanding of God, developed in distinct temporal and geographical contexts (India and Turkey), has impacted their respective societies. Kabir, an Indian mystic poet nurtured in a Muslim family but educated by a prominent Hindu Guru from the Bhakti Movement, approaches “tawḥīd” with the vernacular tools of poetry. On the other hand, Said Nursi, a Turkish Islamic scholar with a deep knowledge of religious sciences, including Quran, Hadith, and Tafsir, deploys vernacular literary techniques within his treatises, such as stories, metaphors, parables, and analogical reasoning, to convey the concept of “tawheed” derived from Islamic sources.

This paper aims to explore the unique ways in which both scholars employ vernacular literary techniques to convey the meaning and significance of “tawḥīd.” It highlights their departure from conventional philosophical arguments and underscores their belief that these vernacular techniques are a legitimate means to convey profound philosophical concepts to a wider audience as religious revivalists.

Keywords: Kabir, Said Nursi, vernacular tawhid, Bhakti, *nirguna*, *sagun*

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No one can enter Paradise without iman (the Islamic way of believing in Allah), but there will be many who will enter Paradise without tasawwuf. One cannot survive without a staple diet, but one can live without eating fruit.¹

Said Nursi's response to Sufi saints and those following *tasawwuf* is a simple answer to their questions. The significant difference between Said Nursi and Kabir is that Nursi represents a system, whereas Kabir is a part of that system. Nevertheless, both are pivotal figures within their respective times and places.

When we consider the context of time and place, it becomes evident that the Indian subcontinent has been the birthplace of various religions and religious developments since the beginning of the second millennium AD. Sheldon Pollock recognizes this era as the Vernacular Millennium or Vernacular Age. It is a region where other religions and ideas, such as Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, have had equal opportunities to practice and spread their doctrines.

Religion and religious discourse have always been integral aspects of the social system and the lives of its people. This is why the Indian Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen, states that India has a long tradition of debate and discussion. Nevertheless, religion in India has never remained static. Various movements have developed in response to evolving spiritual, socio-economic, and political situations.

The caste system in India has a long history dating back to ancient times. During the time of Muslim rule in medieval India, Hindu society was rife with social anomalies, such as the rigidity of the caste system, irrelevant rituals and religious practices, blind faith, and social dogmas. The society also suffered from polytheism, segregation, severe economic disparity due to casteism, and untouchability. As a result, Indian society was weakened.

Islam, which arrived in India in the 8th century, presented a significant challenge to the Hindu tradition. It offered a monotheistic understanding in contrast to the polytheistic worldview and advocated the idea that all human beings are equal to God, as opposed to the caste system. Moreover, the Muslim rule in Hindu lands had yet to be fully accepted.

The Bhakti movement emerged as a response to Islam, with a focus on reforming the

1 Anis Ahmad. "Ustaz Bedüzzaman Said Nursi: His Impact on Contemporary Islamic Thinking", *Third International Symposium on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (Proceedings)* (Istanbul: Sözlür Publications, 1997), 369.

Hindu tradition. The saints and gurus of the Bhakti movement preached against the caste system in local languages to ensure their message reached the masses. However, Kabir stood out in this movement. Historians Harbans Mukhia and Prof. Prushottam Agrawal discuss Kabir's unique approach. According to Mukhia, Kabir had a different worldview based on his experiences with his surroundings, grounded in reason and logic, which set up a dichotomy between reason and faith, a frequent theme in his work.

Kabir emphasized the primacy of reason (*mā'qūlāt*) over received faith (*taqlīd*) with a spiritual approach. Among all the Bhakti figures, Kabir was the most prominent. His use of poetry and blunt satire in the local language helped him delve into the essence of the human spirit.

This medieval Bhakti movement in India had a profound impact on the country's literature and language. Akbar was greatly influenced by the Bhakti and Sufi philosophers, which led him to adopt a secular stance in the realm of religion. In the Indian context, secularism does not mean opposition to religion but rather a broader understanding of religious diversity. Abu'l Fazl, the author of Akbar Nama and one of Akbar's most important courtiers and advisors, was deeply influenced by the Bhakti-Sufi saint Kabir. This influence played a significant role in the conceptual development of *sulh-i kul*.²

The Bhakti movement, which was influenced by the Islamic tradition and the concept of *tawḥīd*, began advocating for the equality of all humans in society and rejected all forms of caste systems. It originated in the South in response to the conquest of northern India by Muslim rulers. This movement gained momentum in South India in the 8th century AD and eventually spread to Northern India by the 15th century. The Bhakti movement is typically associated with the 15th and 16th centuries. The earliest reformer-saints in the South were Adi Shankaracharya, who achieved unique success, and Ramanuja. However, Kabir's understanding differed from that of the Bhakti figures and was closer to that of Sufi figures within the Islamic tradition. When we analyze the religious development in India, it consistently aimed to approach the concept of *tawḥīd* in some way. Kabir was one of the scholars who lived in both Islamic and Vedic traditions and attempted to bring the Islamic understanding of *tawḥīd* to the Bhakti movement.

In contrast, Said Nursi, who was born and raised entirely within the Islamic tradition and environment in the village of Nurs in Bitlis Province in eastern Anatolia in 1877, occupies a

2 Harbans Mukhia, "Lessons for Our Turbulent Times from Kabir and Akbar", The Wire Magazine, 12/OCT/2015.

different time and place, but the context remains similar. The context is the Western influence on Muslims, as well as ignorance, poverty, and societal conflicts. Şükran Vahide, who accurately translated his entire treatises of the *Risale-i Nur* into English, writes about him, noting that he was exceptional from an early age. This was evident in his instinctive dissatisfaction with the existing educational system and his rapid completion of the established course of study, earning a diploma after just three months at the local *medrese* (religious school) in Doğubayezid when he was only fourteen or fifteen years old.³ In other words, young Said demonstrated both a remarkable memory and an extraordinary ability to acquire knowledge. He completed a rapid secondary and advanced level education in the theology schools of Eastern Anatolia and was renowned for his strong memory, sharp intellect, and courage. Many scholars and his teacher, Mullah Fethullah, acknowledged his superior knowledge, with Fethullah giving him the title *Bediüzzaman*—the unequaled of the time.

The reason why Said Nursi wrote *Risale-i Nur*, a collection of a six-thousand-page commentary on the Quran, can be understood by tracing his life journey. He observed the conflict, poverty, and ignorance prevalent in society. People had lost sight of why they were in this world and what they were fighting for; they had forgotten the essence of their existence and their ultimate destination. Fueled by his deep knowledge of the Quran, *hadith*, and *sunnah*, and driven by the problems, questions, and suffering he encountered, he embarked on writing answers based on the Quran, *hadith*, and *sunnah*. It's worth noting that he was imprisoned during the time he was writing this magnum opus. His literary approach and religious devotion influenced fellow inmates, who eventually became his followers and respectfully called him *ustad* due to his knowledge and understanding.

This paper aims to explore the understanding of God developed by Kabir and Said Nursi in different times and places, specifically India and Turkey, in distinct social and political contexts and their impact on society. Kabir, an Indian mystic poet, was raised in a Muslim family but received his education from a Hindu Guru who was a prominent figure of the Bhakti Movement. In contrast, Said Nursi, a Turkish Islamic scholar, extensively studied religious science, the Qur'an, Hadith, and Tafsir. He also served as a soldier during World War I and opposed participating in the war. Furthermore, he endured a lengthy imprisonment by the Turkish government due to his religious beliefs.

3 Şükran Vahide. "Chapter 1: Bediüzzaman Said Nuri and the Risale-i Nur", in *Globalization, Ethics and Islam The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, edited by Ibrahim Ozdemir (New York, Taylor & Francis, 2017), (Google book).

In his treatise titled *Risale-i Nur*, Nursi employs various literary techniques to provide “proof” and convey the meaning of “*tawhid*” (the oneness of God), which he derived from the Quran, Hadith, and the Sunnah. Kabir, on the other hand, falls outside the realms of Islamic and Vedic traditions due to his illiteracy. Nevertheless, they share a common trait: both employ vernacular literary techniques. While Kabir relies on poetry, primarily in oral form, Nursi uses stories, metaphors, parables, and methods of analogical reasoning to elucidate abstract philosophical concepts to the general public through literary means. This paper will delve into the specific vernacular approaches adopted by these two scholars, highlighting their unique oral and literary techniques as valid forms or components of “proof,” distinct from merely adopting formal philosophical rational arguments.

I. CONCEPTUAL HISTORY: MONOTHEISM, TAWHĪD AND BRAHMAN

The term “God” with a capital “G” has been conceptualized in academia as a universal term for the monotheistic concept of God. However, the monotheistic concept of God differs in Hindu, Islamic, and Christian traditions, represented by Brahman, Allah, and God, respectively. For example, *tawhīd* is an Arabic term that has been conceptualized in the Islamic tradition. I would like to reference the historian and pioneer of Begriffsgeschichte, Reinhart Koselleck, to understand the historical semantics of such terms. “*Tawheed*” in literary terms means “unification,” which involves making something one or asserting oneness. This term originates from the Arabic verb “*wahḥada*,” which means to unite, unify, or consolidate.⁴

The first part of the shahada (the Islamic declaration of faith) emphasizes the declaration of belief in the oneness of Allah. However, the term used to refer to Allah (i.e., “*Tawhīdullah*”) goes beyond mere acknowledgment. It signifies the realization and maintenance of Allah’s unity in all of a person’s actions, whether directly or indirectly related to Him. This belief asserts that Allah is One, without a partner in His dominion (*Rububiyah*), without similitude in His essence and attributes (*Asma was-Sifat*), and without rival in His divinity and in worship (*Uluhiya/Ibadah*). These three aspects serve as the basis or foundation for the categories into

4 Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips. *The Fundamentals of Tawheed* (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: International Islamic Publication House, 2005, 17.

which the science of Tawheed has traditionally been divided.⁵

In contemporary academic discourse, “monotheism” and “*tawhīd*” are often used as synonymous terms, implying that these words carry the same conceptual connotations regarding the belief in and the unity of God. However, according to *Begriffsgeschichte*, or conceptual history, the meaning of *tawhīd* differs from that of monotheism. Tawhīd categorically rejects idolatrous worship. In contrast, in the Hindu or Vedic tradition of monotheism, idol worship is prevalent. Even in Christianity, the concept of Jesus as God is presented in human form. However, Islamic *Tawhīd* presents a distinct perspective; Allah is the All-Powerful Creator of the entire universe, and He transcends our ability to imagine Him. It is considered haram (prohibited) to envision Allah, but His essence can be perceived through His manifestations.

Nevertheless, the term *monotheism* has been universalized, and God is understood as One or Unity in modern academic discourse. Monotheism, which is a combination of two words: ‘*mono*’ and ‘*theism*’. The *mono* is from the Greek origins, and it means ‘one’ or ‘single’, while *theismis* also derived from the Greek word *theos*, which means God. Thus, monotheism denotes, literally, one God or one thought about God.⁶ It stands for the belief in one personal God as the Creator and the Supreme Ruler of the universe.⁷

Hinduism is a religion that encompasses diverse perspectives on the concept of God. Various traditions within Hinduism hold differing theistic views. Scholars have classified these views as polytheism, monotheism, henotheism, panentheism, pantheism, monism, agnosticism, humanism, atheism, or nontheism. However, the monotheistic strand of Hinduism believes in the idea of Oneness and reveres *Brahman*, the Unity, or the *Paramatma*, signifying the supreme soul. This tradition posits a single Creator, referred to as *Ishwarah* or God, who is Almighty, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent and is credited with creating the entire universe. It is important to note that Hinduism as a whole does not mandate such a belief and is often considered a non-monotheistic religion by scholars of religion. Many Hindu traditions share the Vedic concept of a metaphysical ultimate reality and truth, known as *Brahman*.

According to Jan Gonda, a Dutch Indologist and the first Utrecht Professor of Sanskrit, *Brahman* originally denoted the “power immanent in the sound, words, verses, and formulas

5 Ibid.

6 Abdurezak A. Hashi. “Between Monotheism and Tawhid: A Comparative Analysis”, 3, No. 02 (1435H/2013), 23-29.

7 Ibid.

of the Vedas” in the earliest Vedic texts. Hindu traditions rooted in or associated with the Vedic scriptures maintain the notion of a metaphysical ultimate reality, which they identify as Brahman. Adherents of these traditions within Hinduism hold deep reverence for Hindu deities and view all of existence as aspects of Brahman. In Hinduism, deities are not regarded as Almighty, Omnipotent, Omniscient, or Omnibenevolent, and the pursuit of spirituality is seen as a quest for the ultimate truth, which can be pursued through various paths. Like other Indian religions, deities in Hinduism are believed to be born and undergo cycles of existence, being born and dying in each *kalpa* (cycle of existence).⁸

The indigenous religious system of India is traditionally classified into two broad categories based on a fundamental principle: *āstika* (orthodox) and *nāstika* (heterodox).⁹ The criterion for orthodoxy lies in the acceptance of the Vedas as an authoritative source of knowledge. Among the systems considered orthodox, the Advaita tradition has arguably exerted the most profound and far-reaching influence.

The term “*Brahman*” is a Vedic Sanskrit word and is a fundamental concept within Hinduism. It finds its roots in the Vedas and is extensively discussed in the early Upanishads. Brahman, as the Cosmic Principle, is often described as “*Sat-cit-ānanda*,” signifying truth, consciousness, and bliss. It is the One who reveals itself, the absolute Spirit, a Formless and Manifestation-less entity.¹⁰

Brahman, a central concept in the Vedic tradition, is intimately linked with the concept of Atman, representing the soul or self. This concept of Brahman can take on a personal, impersonal, or *Para Brahman* (transcendental) form.¹¹ In dualistic schools of the Vedic tradition, such as the theistic Dvaita Vedanta, *Brahman* is distinct from *Atman* (soul) in each being, aligning with the conceptual framework of God found in many major world religions.¹²

In non-dual schools of the Vedic tradition, like Advaita Vedanta, *Brahman* is understood as being identical to the *Atman*. Here, all Atmans and Brahman are not separate entities; they are one and the same, transcending the boundaries of space and time. *Brahman* is omnipresent, residing within every living being, thus signifying a spiritual unity as the oneness of all existence.¹³

8 Ahmed Sayeed. Reason is the Rhythm of Cosmos, Authors Tree Publishing, 2021, 37

9 Anantanand Rambachan. Advaita Worldview, The God, World, and Humanity (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 1.

10 Klaus G. Witz. The Supreme Wisdom of the Upanishads: An Introduction (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1988), 228.

11 Ibid.

12 Arvind Sharma. Advaita Vedānta: An Introduction (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 2007), 18.

13 Ibid, 20.

It is important to note that in the Vedic tradition, prayer is predominantly centered around ritual, and these rituals are performed within the context of “*kriya*” or work, with “*kriya*” holding the underlying meaning of sacrifice.¹⁴

Understanding of God in Vedic tradition-

aham brahmāsmi - Yajur Veda, Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1.4.10 (I am Brahman)

ayam ātmā brahma - Atharva Veda, Mandukya Upanishad 1.2 (This Self is Brahman)

tat tvam asi - Sama Veda, Chandogya Upanishad 6.8.7 (You are that Brahman)

prajnānam brahma - Rig Veda, Aitareya Upanishad 3.3 (Consciousness is Brahman)¹⁵

II. NIRGUNA (GOD WITHOUT ATTRIBUTE) AND SAGUNA (GOD WITH ATTRIBUTE)

Within the Vedantic tradition, Advaita Vedanta delves into the concepts of *Brahman* as both *saguna Brahman* (*Brahman* with attributes) and *nirguna Brahman* (*Brahman* without attributes).¹⁶ The *nirguna Brahman* represents Brahman as it truly is, and one might draw a parallel with Kant's philosophy, as he referred to it as “*noumenon*” (Ding an sich) - the thing as it exists in itself. On the other hand, *saguna Brahman* is introduced as a means to comprehend the *nirguna Brahman*. In this context, one could relate it to Kant's “*phenomenon*,” where things are understood through their attributes, which are perceived through the senses.

Nevertheless, within Vedic schools of thought, the concept of *saguna Brahman* is often considered illusory. For instance, in these schools, the idea of *saguna Brahman*, including avatars or reincarnation, is viewed as a helpful symbol, path, and tool for those individuals who are still progressing on their spiritual journey. However, this concept is ultimately transcended and abandoned by those who attain full enlightenment.

The Bhakti movement in Hinduism has constructed its theosophy around two fundamental concepts of Brahman: *Nirguna* and *Saguna*.¹⁷ Krishan Sharma has argued that the definition of Bhakti, which centers on devotion to a personal deity, perpetuates an

14 Michael Myers. *Brahman: A Comparative Theology* (Padstow Cornwall: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 70.

15 Jay Narayan. *Namaste: An Illustrated Guide to the Hindu Way of Life* (London: JL Samskritam Publications, 2023), 45.

16 Witz. *The Supreme Wisdom of the Upaniṣads*, 256.

17 Karen Pechilis Prentiss, *The Embodiment of Bhakti*, 21.

orientalist agenda that leans towards monotheism, emphasizing Vaishnavism. This emphasis is driven by privileging the *saguna* conception of God.¹⁸ She critiques the early orientalist for their role in formulating this definition of Bhakti, and she also scrutinizes modern scholars who perpetuate it by citing the religious perspective of figures like Kabir. Sharma perceives Kabir as an advocate of *nirgun* bhakti, a vision of God as formless or devoid of attributes.

Kabir's concept of monotheism revolves around the notion of a *nirguna* God, which is rooted in Indian dualism, in contrast to Advaita (non-dualism), and shares affinities with Islamic *tasawwuf*. Harbans Mukhia, an Indian historian specializing in Medieval India, highlighted in one of his lectures that Kabir was introducing a novel concept, one that transcended the age-old dichotomy between denominational religions. Instead, he proposed a dichotomy between universal religiosity and denominational religions.

For Kabir, the idea of one God no longer represented a single community but extended to encompass all of humanity. This perspective eliminated rivalry among gods and brought them all within a single fold. It was a uniquely Indian approach to resolving religious disputes. In lieu of emphasizing distinctions between Allah and Ishwar, he conceptualized a singular, universal God, and in place of denominational religions, he envisioned a universal religiosity.

Kabir would assert, "*Bhai re do jagdis kahan se aaya; kahu kaune bauraya*" (Brother, where have two gods come from? Who has misled you into believing it?) and affirm, "Allah, Ram, Karim, Kesav, Hari, Hajrat—they are all the same identity." This central theme permeates his entire collection of poetry.

Harbans Mukhiya writes about bhakti in medieval India, noting that within the Islamic world, significant and invigorating debates were already taking place on various aspects of religion. Many Sufi ideologues were expanding the boundaries that a dogmatic view of Islam had imposed. Mansur al-Hajjaj, for instance, challenged these boundaries with his timeless proclamation, '*an al-Haqq*' ('I am the truth, or I am God'), signifying that truth or God resides within each one of us, and no one holds a monopoly over it. Ibn al-Arabi introduced the concept of the unity of being (*wahdat al-wujud*), which paved the way for pantheistic or various paths to approaching God, in contrast to the rigid path prescribed by theologians.¹⁹ These debates also extended to discussions on the relationship between reason and faith among intellectuals, with figures like Ibn Sina playing a significant role.

18 Ibid.

19 Harbans Mukhia, "Lessons for Our Turbulent Times from Kabir and Akbar", *The Wire Magazine*, 12/OCT/2015.

On the other hand, Said Nursi perceives philosophy as valuable, yet he observes that many philosophers have lost their way of comprehending tawhîd. They often lack clarity in their thoughts, rendering their understanding challenging for the common people. In his treatise *"The Words,"* specifically in the thirteenth chapter, he notes, "Regarding philosophy, it obscures behind the curtain of the ordinary all the extraordinary miracles of power and passes over them ignorantly and indifferently. It merely presents as noteworthy anomalies that have departed from the extraordinary, deviated from the order of creation, and fallen short of the perfection of their true nature."²⁰

Regarding Sufism, Nursi remarks, "No one can enter Paradise without *iman* (the Islamic way of believing in Allah), but there will be many who will enter Paradise without *tasawwuf*. One cannot survive without a staple diet, but one can live without eating fruit."²¹ Nursi developed a straightforward understanding that is accessible to the common people while containing depth for scholars. He introduced the "art and artist theory" and employed a Qur'anic methodology to grasp tawhîd, drawing from the revelations found in the Qur'an.

In his treatise "The Words," Nursi offers a lucid and straightforward explanation of tawheed. He particularly elaborates on Surat al-Ikhlâs in the Qur'an, which expounds on the Divine Unity, in the "Twenty-Fifth Word," referring to it as a treasury of knowledge.

Değerli Kardeşimiz (dear brother)

The one who creates an apple must certainly be able to create all the apples in this world and to bring the vast spring...²²

To enable a tree to bloom, it requires air, water, soil, sunlight, various elements, and the entire universe. The tree must exist within a comprehensive system where everything is interconnected and guided by divine wisdom. Should any component of the universe fail to function, the tree cannot thrive. Therefore, the tree's survival and the blossoming of its beauty can only be achieved when all the wheels of the universe are in operation.

20 Risale-i Nur, *The Words*, The Thirteenth Word, 150.

21 Anis Ahmad, 360,

22 *The Words*, "Tenth Word, Seventh Truth", 90.

III. LINGUISTIC AND LITERARY BASE USED TO CONVEY THE MESSAGE IN KABIR'S POETRY AND NURSI'S RISALE

The similarity between Nursi and Kabir lies in their use of linguistic approaches to convey their messages. Nursi primarily wrote in Turkish rather than Arabic or Persian to ensure that local people could easily comprehend his teachings and reach the masses. Kabir, being illiterate, couldn't write, but he employed his oral skills in vernacular languages, with some believing he used Awadhi. Ramchandra Shukla referred to this style as *sadhukkadi*. Nevertheless, his unique style, exemplified by phrases like "Kahat Kabir Suno Bhai Sadho" (Kabir says, listen, O saint), was adopted in various languages by common people who could create poetry in a similar manner.

Both Kabir and Nursi employed confrontational language and symbols in their messages. Nursi used stories, metaphors, parables, and analogical reasoning techniques to elucidate abstract philosophical concepts to the masses, while Kabir relied on poems. Another commonality is their direct and blunt tone. For instance, Nursi used different tones as he communicated with the reader, such as "O my dear brother" or "O my brother of the hereafter." At times, it appears as if he's speaking to himself, using phrases like "O my lazy soul," "O rebellious soul," or "O my wretched soul sunk in heedlessness."²³ In certain passages of his writing, he comes across as very straightforward, as if his intention is to awaken the reader, using expressions like "O denier" and "O sons of Adam."²⁴ His writing exudes liveliness, and, as he once stated, "If you want to meet me, read *Risale-i Nur*." He writes in a conversational style, as if he were engaged in a dialogue with the reader.

Kabir, on the other hand, is illiterate and unable to write, but his voice carries immense power. He conveys his message through poetry in the local language, making it accessible to common people. His couplets are sung by both Hindus and Muslims, fostering a shared understanding throughout northern India. His signature line or "*Chhap*," which identifies him, is quite distinctive: "*Kahe Kabir suno bhai*" or "*Kahat Kabir suno bhai*" – both meaning "Brother, listen to what Kabir says" or "Listen, Kabir says." This emphasis on "listening" aligns with India's oral tradition.²⁵

23 Ibid, 47.

24 Ibid, 91.

25 Linda Hess. *Bodies of Song Kabir: Oral Traditions and Performative Worlds in North India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 140

Kabir's style is uniquely characterized by frequent, direct addresses, questions, and challenges to the listener-reader, underscoring the oral nature of his communication.

Some kill the cock, others the goat;
They say it is all proper
To the Lord, all creatures are dear
To escape, what excuse will they offer? (153)

And

The donkey is far better than Brahmin
Dog is better than other castes
The cock is better than the Mullah
They wake the people by their blasts. (180)
If Khuda lives only in Masjid (mosque)
Who looks after the rest of the world?
If Ram is lodged in the temple idol
Who takes care of the universe?
Is east the about of Hari (Ram)
And West that of Allah?
Search your heart for both of them
There live both Karim and Ram
They are one and the same
Creator of the Universe.
Men and women are His image
And Kabir is son of both Ram and Karim,
His preceptors are Guru and Pir alike.
Says Kabir, the wise preceptor
Has given the know-how anon
To realise the supreme Lord, Rama,
By simple practice of loved-devotion.²⁶

Said Nursi, as an Islamic scholar raised within the Islamic tradition, draws from the Prophetic tradition and the knowledge revealed to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). He utilizes

26 Kabir's Dohe. (Couplet from Kabir), ed. and trans. GN Das (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), 7.

the Qur'an to elucidate the universe as a work of art and Allah as the Creator. His use of metaphors and stories in a literary sense serves to convey divine wisdom, profoundly impacting our reasoning. With belief, an individual ascends to the highest heights, while unbelief leads to the lowest depths.²⁷

In 2012, when I first read *Risale-i Nur*, I encountered a small book from *The Words*, specifically the section on "*Belief and Man*." It focused on the topic of *iman* (belief) and explained it through a parable. Nursi's writings clarify how *iman* brings clarity, and the absence of it leads to anxiety and fear. He effectively explores the relationship between man and belief.

I saw in a vision an awesome bridge built between two high mountains situated opposite one another. Beneath the bridge was a valley of great depth. I was on the bridge. A dense darkness had enveloped every part of the world. I looked to my left a vast grave....²⁸

He delves into nearly every aspect of life's profound questions that a person can contemplate. All existential inquiries and the meaning of life were conveyed through revelations to the Prophet (PBUH). Nursi's Treatises, a collection of 13 substantial volumes, serves as a commentary on the Qur'an. How can one comprehend the Qur'an in this modern age? He employs the story of the Prophet Yunus as an allegory to address contemporary issues, an issue he considers to be 10,000 times more substantial than the whale that swallowed Hazrat Yunus.

Why do we require *iman*, and what is its significance? Why is prayer essential? What is the meaning of *Bismillah*, and why do we commence everything with it? He uses stories, parables, and metaphors to expound upon these concepts. This technique distinguishes him as the most widely read scholar of our time. It's quite possible that his teacher aptly bestowed upon him the title *Bedüzzaman*, signifying "man of the age."

Kabir was born and raised in a different time and place, India, where society had a vastly different landscape, including distinct conflicts. The caste system was prevalent, and the multitude of gods and goddesses complicated the religious and social fabric. Tensions revolved around figures like Ram and Rahim (Rama and Allah). In this context, Kabir emerged as a problem solver, offering an understanding of *tawhîd* that transcended both Islamic and Vedic dictums. From his poetry, it appears that he did not align with either tradition exclusively; rather, he seemed to have a grasp of both.

²⁷ The Words, "Twenty Third Word, First Chapter".

²⁸ The Words, Twenty-Third Word.

In my interpretation, Kabir did not stand against any particular religion; instead, his opposition was aimed at societal dogmas. His objective was to eliminate these dogmas by enlightening people with his questioning approach. In this pursuit, he followed the path of love, which is widely recognized by many scholars as Bhakti.

Why bump that shaven head on the earth,
Why dunk those bones in the water?
Why wash your hands and mouth, why chant
With a heart full of fraud?
Why bow and bow in the mosque and trudge
To Mecca to see God?
Search in the heart, in the heart alone:
There live Ram and Karim!²⁹
Reading books everyone died, no one became any wise.
One who reads the words of love, only became wise.
To kill your pride you take all pains
Pride causes fall of man.
He who has banished anger
And also pride from mind
To everyone is kind and dear
Has no enemy to find.³⁰

Will Durant, the author of the book "Our Oriental Heritage: The Story of Civilization," offers insights on Kabir, the eminent lyric poet of the medieval era. Durant suggests that Kabir's mission to harmonize Islam and Hinduism revolved around the concept of a universal God, devoid of the need for temples, mosques, idols, or castes. In essence, Kabir advocated for the worship of one God.³¹ Durant's perspective on Kabir is as follows:

O God, whether Allah or Rama, I live by the name.... Lifeless are all the images of the gods; they cannot speak, I know it, for I have called aloud to them... what avails it to

29 The Bijak of Kabir, translated by Linda Hess (Oxford: Oxford Publication, 2012).

30 Kabir's Dohe. (Couplet from Kabir), Ed. and trans. GN Das (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), XXIV.

31 Will Durant. Our Oriental Heritage: The Story of Civilization (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1942), 588.

wash your mouth, count your beads, bathe in holy stream and bow in temples, if, whilst you mutter your prayers or go on pilgrimages, despitefulness is in your heart.³²

IV. SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IMPACT

There are some scholars and researchers, such as Mohan Singh Karki, GN Das, and Muhammad Hedyatullah, who interpret Kabir as a synthesizer, bridge, and messenger between Hinduism and Islam. However, in my understanding, presenting Kabir as a synthesizer or bridge between the two religions may not be accurate. He didn't actively aim to bridge the gap; instead, his focus was on fostering understanding and encouraging people to question prevailing superstitions and ritual practices.

The tradition of Kabir has continued to evolve since he composed his works orally nearly six centuries ago. Most Kabir scholars believe that he never wrote his words down. Instead, they were transmitted through the voices of people who sang and recited them, assigning meaning and adapting them over time.³³ Kabir was particularly drawn to the humble and oppressed segments of society at his time, and it was they who followed him most ardently.

Don't oppress the poor and weak
Think not they are helpless,
Remember, the breath of lifeless blower
Can burn steel to ashes.³⁴

However, his ideas shattered the hegemony of the upper-caste and dominant sections of society. His language and expressions were simple yet highly rhetorical. As a result, *Kabir's Vaani*, or the voice of Kabir, became more widely spoken than Sanskrit. It was easier for the common people, the majority, to understand. Another reason for this was that his couplets often took a satirical form. Some scholars and followers of Kabir use the title "Kabirpanth" to identify with his teachings, including individuals like Mohan Singh Karki and GN Das.

There is a famous quote by Nursi: "*May Allah protect us from Satan and politics.*" However,

³² Ibid, 588.

³³ Ibid, 3.

³⁴ Kabir, G. N. Das, *The Maxims of Kabir*, 19.

to understand Nursi's priorities, it's essential to consider the context. He was well aware that Islam calls for both social and political change. The challenge he faced was where to begin and how to break the vicious circle of secularism, materialism, and hedonism. In all sincerity, he believed that addressing matters of faith was the first and most appropriate methodological step.³⁵

However, it's important to note that Nursi was not suggesting a mystical approach in his *Risale-i-Nur*. He clearly indicated his intention to construct a complete Islamic society and system, not a partial or limited reform.

V. TRACING THE ORIGIN OF THOUGHT AND INTELLECTUAL LOCATION OF KABIR AND SAID NURSI

Regarding his life, some stories suggest that Kabir was abandoned by a Brahmin widow due to societal pressures and left as a newborn on the banks of a river. He was found and raised by Neeru and Neema, a Muslim weaver couple who were unable to provide him with a formal education due to their impoverished circumstances. As a result, Kabir remained illiterate. Growing up in a Muslim family, he gained some fundamental knowledge of Islam. Later, he chose Ramananda as his Guru. Ramananda was a renowned Hindu ascetic who had brought the religious revival, originally initiated by the great 12th-13th Century Brahmanism reformer Ramanuja in South India, to Northern India, rooted in the Vedantic School. While Kabir learned from Ramananda, he did not adopt his teaching style, which was text and yoga-based. Instead, Kabir focused on the oral tradition because he could not read or write.

Said Nursi, on the other hand, exhibited exceptional qualities from a young age. He memorized the Qur'an in his early years and received his initial education from his elder brother, Mullah Abdullah. He also attended a medrese (Qur'anic school) and completed his education at institutions in Eastern Anatolia. His teacher, Mullah Fethullah, bestowed upon him the title "Bedüzaman." Nursi's origins and the foundation of his thought were deeply rooted in Islam, shaping his worldview.

35 Anis Ahmad, 369.

VI. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MONOTHEISTIC CONCEPT

Kabir's monotheistic concept of God, as reflected in his poetry, is characterized by three main attributes: nirguna (without attributes), nirankar (without shape), and niranjan (flawless). At the core of Kabir's way of thinking and speaking lies the firm belief that God is entirely devoid of attributes or qualities. Consequently, God cannot be comprehended in our ordinary state of consciousness, and we cannot even imagine or fully know Him.³⁶ It may appear contradictory when Kabir describes his relationship with God, likening it to a maternal one in phrases such as "*hari janani, main balak tora*"³⁷ (God is like a mother, and I am Her child). This portrayal is intriguing as it attributes female qualities to God. Kabir's perception of God extends to describing God as a father, friend, husband, and Hari (God), each with distinct attributes.

Kabir's approach to understanding God revolves around appreciation and love for creation. He asserts that God is beyond human comprehension and cannot be directly known. Instead, God is to be worshipped and revered, and it is not feasible to contemplate God's essence directly. Thus, the question arises: how can one love the unknowable and the entirely transcendent? According to Kabir, it is impossible to love God directly. Instead, one must love God through His manifestations, much like loving a piece of art that reflects Him. God reveals Himself through intermediaries, and yet these intermediaries are not part of God Himself. When Kabir speaks of "loving" God, it seems that he might be referring to cultivating a pure love for God's manifestations and thereby establishing a connection with his "*nirgun* God." In this sense, Kabir's perspective is more expansive, emphasizing the importance of developing a relationship with God through nature, which encompasses humans, animals, the environment, society, duty, and more. Kabir appears to be reacting to and disheartened by the artificial aspects of life, such as superstitions and misguided religious practices. Since Kabir had no formal education and was illiterate, his knowledge and understanding are rooted in personal experience and love.

The Thirtieth Word from *Risale-i Nur* addresses the concept of "*Ana*" or the "I" or Identity, which I find relatable to Kabir's understanding. Kabir advocates distancing oneself from the "*ana*" or ego, refraining from declaring, "I am Muslim" or "I am Hindu," and instead aims

36 Kabir: The Weaver's Songs, trans. & with an introduction & Notes by Vinay Dharwadker, Penguin Book. (Google book).

37 Shrikant Prasoon. *Knowing Sant Kabir* (Mumbai: Pustak Mahal, 2009).

to become immersed in the “I” of God. Another poet from the Indian subcontinent, Bulleh Shah, was influenced by Kabir’s teachings. There is a poem by Bulleh Shah that reflects Kabir’s influence and is related to the Thirteenth Word of Risale-i Nur:

Going to Makkah will not solve our problem and we won’t know the truth
Even if we offers hundrades of prayers
Going to river Ganga will not solve anything either
Going to Gaya (Buddhist place) will also not help us to know the ultimate truth
Oh Bulleh Shah, this search will only end, when we will remove ego from our hearts,
When we will stop thinking about I and start thinking of ourselves as one with God.

Nursi emphasizes the need to be very careful when it comes to understanding the concept of “I” or “*ana*.” He dedicates almost seven pages to explain the complexity of this dichotomy of “I.” He addresses the question of why knowledge of the attributes and Names of God Almighty is connected to the “I.” This “I” is so profound that it serves as the gateway to the world. However, it is also a intricate enigma and a challenging puzzle to unravel.

The All-Wise Maker has entrusted humanity with an “I” that contains clues and examples, which reveal and help us recognize the truths regarding the attributes and functions of His Divinity.³⁸ When this “I” takes on a quality of denying God Almighty, it becomes the color of atheism and associating partners with God. In this condition, even if the entire universe is filled with radiant signs, a dark spot within the “I” conceals them, as though extinguishing their light.³⁹

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has undertaken a comprehensive exploration of the intellectual and spiritual contributions of two exceptional figures, Kabir and Said Nursi. Despite their distinct origins and historical contexts, they share a common thread in their emphasis on *tawḥīd*, the monotheistic concept of God. My understanding of both figures reveals that they are essentially on the same page, both expounding the concept of *tawḥīd*.

38 The Words, “Thirtieth Word”, 558.

39 Ibid, 560.

Kabir, who emerged in a society marked by complex religious and caste-based conflicts, used his simplicity and directness to challenge prevailing dogmas. His unique style of vernacular poetry, which fused elements of both Islam and Vedic traditions, resonated with the common people, emphasizing the significance of monotheism while rejecting rituals and superstitions.

In contrast, Said Nursi, deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition, dedicated his life to strengthening the foundations of faith. Through his writings, notably the monumental *Risale-i Nur*, he provided profound insights into the relationship between faith, philosophy, and the modern world. His use of allegories, metaphors, and stories made complex theological concepts accessible to a wide audience. The intellectual locations of Kabir and Said Nursi, though distinct, converge on the common theme of emphasizing the direct relationship between individuals and the divine. Kabir sought unity through love, while Nursi advocated for strengthening iman as the foundational step to address broader societal issues.

Although Kabir and Nursi lived in different times and places, there is a remarkable commonality in their understanding of *tawhīd*. Kabir's vernacular poetry had a significant impact on South Asia in the 15th century, changing the sociopolitical and religious landscape and perhaps acting as a resistance to British secular and civilizational influences. Similarly, Said Nursi's approach to religious interpretation in vernacular language connected the masses, resisted European secular policies against religion, and continues to influence modern Turkey as the Nursi movement.

This research highlights the enduring relevance of these two figures, transcending geographical, temporal, and religious boundaries. Their impact on religious thought, social harmony, and the quest for truth continues to inspire scholars and seekers alike. As we look to the future, further research could delve deeper into a comparative analysis of Kabir and Said Nursi, exploring their commonalities and differences more comprehensively. Additionally, future investigations might focus on their contemporary relevance in an increasingly interconnected and pluralistic world, where their messages of monotheism, simplicity, and love remain as pertinent as ever.

In essence, this paper underscores the enduring power of vernacular figures and religious revivalists to shape the intellectual and spiritual landscapes of their times and beyond. As we advance in our understanding, we must remain committed to unraveling the depths of their wisdom and sharing their insights with a global audience.

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