33

BEDIÜZZAMAN SAID NURSI

Zeki Saritoprak

Bediüzzaman Said Nursi was born in 1876 in the small village of Nurs in the province of Bitlis in Eastern Anatolia (modern-day Turkey). Although we are not sure of the exact day of his birth, he died on March 23, 1960, in the city of Urfa in Southeastern Turkey, a city believed to be the birthplace of Abraham. His life, particularly since the days of his adolescence, is very well known and recorded. He himself divided his life into two periods: Old Said (*Eski Said*), from 1876 to 1920; and New Said (*Yeni Said*), from 1920 to 1949. Some of his biographers consider the period of 1949 until his death as a third period in his life, due to his limited involvement in politics, at least at the level of voting.

Nursi lived through three remarkable periods during the last two centuries. He lived in the era of the Ottoman Empire and witnessed its collapse. He also witnessed the era of constitutionalism, a reform in the Ottoman Empire which gave more space to democracy and the parliamentary system. Finally, he lived in the era of republicanism, and observed the establishment of the modern Turkish secular state. His lifetime spanned an era of immense reform in the Islamic world.

From his youth, Nursi manifested an extraordinary talent and questioned everything around him. In his early life he was called Molla Said (*Master Said*). Sometimes he was called Said-i Kurdi in reference to his ethnicity. It was not unusual in the Ottoman era to name people by their regions, of which Nursi's was mainly Kurdish. Later, he used as his last name "Nursi" in reference to his village to avoid being associated with Kurdish nationalism, although his opponents insisted on calling him by the more divisive term "Kurdi."

He received his education in local Ottoman institutions called *madrasa*s, or religious seminaries. After learning the Qur'ān and some basic Islamic knowledge in his family environment, Nursi went to the local *madrasa* in pursuit of knowledge. He studied for only three months in the *madrasa* system. He attended several of these institutions and met with the teachers there asking them to teach him the summaries of their syllabi. These three months of learning became the basis of his future scholarship. As a self-taught scholar, Nursi would later say that, "in thirty years of learning in my life, I learned only four phrases. One is, 'I am not the owner of myself.' Second, 'Death is real.' Third, 'My Lord is One.' And, fourth, 'the self (*ana*) is a criterion to understand the attributes of God' " (Nursi 1996b: II, 1297, *Mesnevi-Nuriye*).

During this period, Nursi spent time in some Naqshabandī Ṣūfī lodges. One of these Ṣūfī masters, Abdurrahman Tağī, found great capacity in young Said hinting at Nursi's importance and asking elder students to take care of him. Despite his

Naqshabandī environment, he felt more intimacy with the great Ṣūfī master Shaykh ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 1166), after whom the Qādirī order is named.

Nursi was blessed with a photographic memory. On one occasion, Nursi read an entire page of a book from his memory after only a glance. Upon witnessing this, his teacher was amazed to find such a memory as well as capacity for analysis in the same person. It was from episodes like this that Nursi gained his name, Bediüzzaman, which means the "wonder of the age."

In this early period of his life, in 1892, Nursi met with various personalities including some students of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897), who prompted the pan-Islamic policy of the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II; and a member of *Sanusi Tariqah* who struggled against colonization in Africa. Later, he would say that he was awakened politically after these meetings. Also, he became aware of some Turkish intellectuals, such as Namik Kemal, whose idea of freedom stirred a passion in Nursi which resulted in his famous statement: "I can live without bread, but I cannot live without freedom." Nursi called Ali Suavi (d. 1878), Hoca Tahsin (d. 1881), Namik Kemal (d. 1888), Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905) as his predecessors in the idea of the unity of Muslims.

Nursi was not satisfied with the situation of the *madrasa* system. He found it very old and incompatible with the requirements of the modern age. In one of his analyses of this system, he said, "It has replaced *Ulum-i ʿaliya* [high sciences] with *ulum-i ʾaliya* [basic grammar rules]" (Nursi 1996b: II, 2000, *Muhakemat*). He sought educational reform and re-organization of the *madrasa* system, but was also very aware of the positive general public opinion of these institutions. Therefore, he wanted to establish a university under the name of *Medreseʾuz-zehra* (*c.* 1902), with locations in Eastern and Southeastern Turkey. This was to be a full university which would serve the world of Islam. He considered this project the most important endeavor of his life. As al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, met the educational needs of the African continent, he envisioned a similar, but larger, university to meet those needs of Muslims on the Asian continent. Nursi believed that modern science did not contradict Islam. He attempted to reconcile religion and science. He said, "The light of conscience is the sciences of religion, and the light of the mind is the natural sciences. By bringing these together, the truth will come out as a result. The lack of the modern sciences causes fanaticism, while the lack of religious sciences causes skepticism" (Nursi 1996a: 127)

He found three main enemies in the Islamic world: ignorance, poverty, and division. He believed that these enemies could be defeated by the "weapons" of knowledge, art, and unity. He envisioned that this university would play an important role in combating these enemies. To establish this university, he went to the capital of the Ottoman Empire, Istanbul, and met with Sultan Abdülhamid II (d. 1909) to propose his idea. The Sultan was interested in this project, but his associates did not see it as important. Nursi, however, did not give up. He proposed the idea to the next Sultan, Sultan Reşad (d. 1918), who accepted his proposal and financially supported the project. However, the project ultimately failed because of World War I, in which Nursi himself needed to participate to protect his homeland from the Russian invasion.

Before participating in the war as a volunteer lieutenant colonel, he spent some time between 1893 and 1907 in the palaces of the governors of Bitlis and Van. The palaces

housed libraries with numerous volumes of Islamic references and Western classics, and also contemporary printed media. While staying with the governors, Nursi memorized more than 80 of these works, which later became essential references for him in exile where he had no books whatsoever. He also came across a newspaper article that quoted William Gladstone (d. 1898), the British colonial secretary at the time as saying, "So long as the Muslims have the Qur'ān we shall be unable to dominate them. We must either take it from them or make them lose their love of it." In response to this, Nursi said, "I shall prove and demonstrate to the world that the Qur'ān is an undying and inextinguishable sun" (Nursi 1996b: II, 2131, *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* [*Biography*])

Also prior to the World War, in 1912, Nursi visited Damascus and gave a remarkable sermon in Arabic to a large group of people, including hundreds of scholars, at the Umayyad Mosque, in which he talked about the problems of the Islamic world and the importance of Muslim–Christian dialogue. The sermon was later revised and translated into Turkish by Nursi.

After the outbreak of the war, Nursi fought and was wounded. He was taken to Siberia as a prisoner of war where he spent two years and three months. After his successful escape at the end of the war from a Russian camp in the Spring of 1918, Nursi overcame all obstacles and made his way across Europe back to Istanbul. After arriving in the capital, Nursi was appointed as a member of the *Dār al-Ḥikma al-Islāmiyya* (Islamic House of Wisdom). This was the highest religious institution in the Ottoman Empire. In this institution Nursi's specific duty was to answer questions posed by foreigners.

Nursi's homeland in this era was undergoing an interesting development. The Ottoman Empire came to an end and a new modern state was established with the formation of a new parliament in 1920. While the new government was working to establish a new Turkish Republic, the largest city in the country, Istanbul, was occupied by British forces. Nursi, living in this city, defended it by distributing his anti-occupation writings. The new government of Ankara invited Nursi to come there several times to show their appreciation for his actions against the British occupation. Nursi finally accepted to go to Ankara. Here, he gave his famous speech to the parliament in which Nursi disagreed with the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (d. 1938) on the role of religion in Turkish society. In this speech, Nursi spoke about the importance of prayer and one's relationship with God. He wanted the administrators to be respectful of the religious rights of people. Nursi's speech did not please the leaders of the new government. In exchange for his cooperation with the new government, Nursi was offered a good salary, a palace, and a seat in the parliament. However, Nursi rejected all of these and preferred to lead an ascetic lifestyle in Eastern Anatolia.

In 1925, the Shaykh Said Piran (d. 1925) uprising occurred in the Eastern part of Turkey against the Ankara government. Although Nursi was not involved in this uprising and rejected the invitation of Shaykh Said to join it, as a precaution the government sent Nursi into exile in Western Anatolia. Nursi spent the next 35 years of his life in exile, writing his works. In order to have purity of mind and body, he abandoned the reading of newspapers (of which he used to read eight daily), as well as smoking cigarettes.

Nursi's writings, like his life, can be divided into two eras, the Old Said and New

Said. In the Old Said era, Nursi wrote several books, most of which are still available in many languages, including Turkish, Arabic, and English.

One of these books is called *Muhakamat* ("Analyses"), which was intended to be an introduction to Nursi's *tafsīr* (commentary on the Qur'ān), which he planned to be 60 volumes. He wrote the only part of this *tafsīr* while at the front in World War I and it is called *Işaratu'l-I'caz* ("The Signs of Miraculousness"). This is the interpretation of the first chapter of the Qur'ān as well as the first 16 verses of the second chapter.

Another small book Nursi wrote is called *Münāzarāt* ("Dialogues"). It details questions and answers given during his visits to tribal leaders in Eastern Anatolia. It was written as an attempt to convince them of the importance of democracy and freedom and that these ideas were compatible with Islam. Another of these early writings is called the *Mesnevi-i Nuriye* ("The Couplets of Light"), which was originally written in Arabic. Although it is not poetry, it is still very beautifully written. On many occasions, Nursi compared his *Mesnevi* to that of Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273) and believed that as Rūmī's *Mesnevi-i Şerif* served many people throughout history, so his *Mesnevi* would also serve people in their faith in the future. The book was later translated into Turkish by Nursi's brother, Abdulmecid (d. 1967).

In the introduction of the *Mesnevi*, Nursi mentions that he was very interested in logic and philosophy and therefore wanted to search for a way to reach the reality of realities. One can see in Nursi's writings that he considers important figures such as Imām ʿAlī (d. 661), al-Jīlānī, al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), Rūmī, and Sirhindī (d. 1624), as his spiritual masters. Unlike many Ṣūfīs, he was not satisfied with walking the path to God only with the heart since his mind and his thought were "branded" by philosophy. After reading Sirhindī's book, *Maktūbāt* ("The Letters"), Nursi believed that Sirhindī instructed him to "take one direction," that is to follow only one teacher, and Nursi thought this teacher must be the Qur'ān and said, "The real master is the Qur'ān. And, therefore taking one direction would be possible through the masterhood of the Qur'ān" (Nursi 1996b: II, 1277–8, *Mesnevi-i Nuriye*). Then he walked in this special spiritual path with "open eyes" to find the reality beyond realities. The New Said's writings are the result of this journey.

The writings of the New Said era are collectively called *Risale-i Nur* ("The Treatises of Light"). These can be roughly divided into three parts. The first and major part is the *Hakaik-i Imaniyye* ("The Truths of Faith"). The second part is called *Mudāfa'alar* ("Court Defenses"). The third is called *Lahikalar* ("Appendices"), which consists of correspondence with his students. These three parts are presented in his four major books: *Sözler* ("The Words"), *Mektubat* ("The Letters"), *Lem'alar* ("The Flashes"), and *Şualar* ("The Rays"). Many of these books have been translated into various languages, but there are still some that are only in Turkish. In his writings, Nursi answered hundreds of questions and elaborated on themes such as theology, Sufism, reconciliation between science and religion, Islamic law, questions about his personal life (e.g., why did he not marry, why did he not grow a beard, etc.), and social issues. Some of these treatises are very well known, such as *Ayetu'l-Kubra* ("The Greatest Sign"), the seventh "ray" in the book *The Rays*. This treatise, as Nursi himself put it, is "the experience of a traveler who asks the universe about his Creator." Another is *Haşir Risalesi* ("The Treatise of Resurrection"), which is the tenth "word" in his

book *The Words*. It is an interpretation of the Qur'anic verse: "Look at the evidences of the mercy of God, how He revives the earth after it was dead. Surely, He will revive the dead and He is All Powerful" (Qur'ān 30:50).

With regard to the style of his writings, one can see a semi-uniform approach that starts with a Qur'anic verse or a question, either from a student or from his own soul (*nafs*), on which Nursi would elaborate. He used a great deal of analogy, especially when he spoke of the invisible world, and was a champion of parables. In his writings Nursi avoided detailing the views of his opponents because he thought that by thoroughly explaining a negative idea he might negatively affect the pure minds of people. Also, he did not preach, but always addressed his own soul and hoped others who shared his spirituality would benefit from his writings.

All of these writings were written in exile, and some of them while in prison. It is worth noting that one cannot find the negative influences of Nursi's prison environment in his writings. In fact, Nursi called prison the *Medrese-i Yusufiyye* ("School of Joseph"), in reference to the Qur'anic and Biblical figure who was unjustly imprisoned by the King of Egypt.

To give an example of one of his writings, one can look at his *Tabiat Risalesi* ("Treatise on Nature"), which is the 23 "flash," in his famous collection *The Flashes*. Nursi gives an account of the situation of his time. He explains why he wrote the treatise: "the reason for the writing of this book is the attack against the Qur'ān by using nature against religion and anything that they did not understand they call it 'superstition.' Through this they wanted to weaken the truth of faith of Islam." He says:

> I went to Ankara in 1338 [1922] and the people of faith were enjoying the victory against the Greek army, but among their views I found the very deceiving idea of atheism entering the minds and poisoning the hearts and I was afraid that this "monster" would attack the main principles of faith. Then, this verse of the Qur'ān, helped me to write against the idea of irreligiosity: "Their messengers said, 'Is there a doubt about God, the Creators of Heaven and Earth?' (Qur'ān 14:10)".
>
> (Nursi 1996b: I, 682, *Lem'alar*)

It is highly possible that when Nursi refers to the idea of irreligiosity he was referring to Ludwig Büchner (d. 1899), who mentioned these ideas in his book *Force and Matter: Empirico-philosophical Studies* (1870). The translation of this book was already available in Turkish and influenced many Turkish intellectuals. In his treatise on nature Nursi responds to Büchner's claim of the imperishability of matter. He wanted to show the divine power in nature and that God had created nature, and that nature was not the Creator. Nursi said, "Nature is only an art and cannot be the Artist . . . it is the law, but not the Lawmaker" (Nursi 1996b: I, 682, *Lem'alar*)

Despite his strong responses to European materialistic philosophy, Nursi carefully distinguished between two Europes: the Europe inclined towards materialism and the Europe which benefited from the divine references and helped humanity with sciences and technology. Nursi was very positive about the second Europe. For this reason, he did not hesitate to praise some European philosophers, scholars, and writers. For example, he praised the German chancellor Otto von Bismarck (d. 1898),

Thomas Carlyle (d. 1881), the Scottish philosopher, and the influential British historian Edward Gibbon (d. 1794).

Today, Nursi still is considered one of the most influential figures in modern Turkey, despite being dead for nearly 50 years. The readers of his writings come from various segments of society, from lay people to college students to members of parliament. There are many aspects of Nursi and his writings that attract millions of people. First, one has to remember that he was a very well-known scholar in the era of the Ottoman Empire. Secondly, he was imprisoned by the government of his time and oppressed. Despite this, however, he never acted violently and never allowed his students to respond with violence. He created a strong, but non-violent, movement. The strong opposition of the government to religion as opposed to Nursi's firm stand against any irreligiosity certainly made him a symbol of religious sentiment in Turkey.

Nursi's community grew to become a powerful and widespread force in Turkey, although it always remained loose-knit and non-political. Because it did not affiliate itself with any political party, it attracted members of all parties. In fact, he and his students always avoided political involvement. Nursi coined a very famous statement in this regard which became a principle for his students: "I take refuge in God from Satan and politics." Nursi believed that one should focus on faith, rather than politics, since faith is essential for the afterlife.

His books still carry very powerful and eloquent messages regarding faith and religion. Therefore, they have successfully attracted younger generations. After the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*, Nursi's writings are the most read books in Turkey. It is worth noting that Nursi's writings were hand-copied because the government of the time did not allow his students to use printing machines. By the time the government allowed them to print Nursi's works in 1958, over 700,000 copies of his writings had already been copied by hand. Nursi called his *Risale-i Nur* "a collective miracle of the Qur'ān in this century" (1996b: I, 522, *Mektubat*).

Today, his writings are universally esteemed. Academic meetings are often held to discuss his life, views, and writings. In recent decades, Islamic scholars such as Fethullah Gülen (b. 1941) have broadened the horizon of Nursi's thought and successfully managed to lead the establishment of hundreds of schools in Turkey and around the world, as well as media institutions and publications.

References and further reading

Abu-Rabiʿ, I. M., ed. (2003) *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, Albany: SUNY Press.

Bonner, A. (2004) "An Islamic Reformation in Turkey," *Middle East Policy*, 11: 84–97.

Mardin, Ş. (1990) *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Markham, I. Ozdemir I., eds. (2005) *Globalization, Ethics and Islam: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishers.

Nursi, Bediüzzaman Said (1996a) *Münāzarāt*, Istanbul: Yeni Asya Nesriyat.

—— (1996b) *Risale-i Nur Kulliyat*, Itanbul: Nesil Yayinlari.

Saritoprak, Z. (1997) "The Mahdi Question According to Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," in *Third International Symposium on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: The Reconstruction of Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century and Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, Istanbul: Sözler, 483–96.

—— (2000) "Said Nursi's Teachings on the People of the Book: A Case Study of Islamic Social Policy in the Early Twentieth Century," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, 11: 321–32.
—— (2005) "An Islamic Approach to Peace and Nonviolence: A Turkish Experience," *The Muslim World*, 95: 413–27.
Vahide, Ş. (1992) *The Author of the Risale-i Nur: Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, Istanbul: Sözler.