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A Critique of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's *Risale-i-Noor* (*The Epistle of Light*)

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Abstract

Said Nursi, the most influential Islamic Philosopher with an objective of safeguarding and strengthening of belief in God, devoted all his efforts to reveal the truths and realities of belief as depicted in the Qur'an. In his masterwork *Risale-i-Noor* (*The Epistle of Light*) he viewed human moral nature and religion to explain life. For Nursi, the key to belief consist the deciphering the signs which exist 'in the self and on the horizons' in order to open the key to creation the proposed study will seek to investigate into the major impact of Nursi for his search for answers to man's existential dilemma of his own being. Nursi was critical of his fellow being for the blind imitation of Europe. It was not that he shunned every idea of West; but he was also in favor of constitutionalism and republicanism. Man is faced with a choice: belief in the sovereignty of God or belief in the sovereignty of man- the conflict took a rational claim in the realistic ideology of Nursi.

Keywords

Said Nursi; *Risale-i-Noor (The Epistle of Light)*; *The Qur'an*; Faith.

Said Nursi, one of the most important and influential Islamic scholars of the twentieth century, attracts particular intellectual attention for his nonpareil work of Quranic exegesis *Risale-i-Noor (The Epistle of Light)*. The Qur'an's aim is to guide man to belief and the *Risale* should be seen as analogous with that aim. He leads his readers to the profound spiritual and intellectual resources of Islam while clarifying debate and diversity within the tradition. Nursi's aim was to cultivate the 'culture of belief'. He devoted his entire life in strengthening the *ummah's* belief in God. He writes, "There are many who enter Paradise without belonging to a Sufi order, but none who enter it without belief. It is therefore the time to work for belief" (Qtd. in Vahide 240). He advocated a strictly belief – based discourse of society. There are deliberate practices of upholding Islam against science which creates several new 'gods'. Muhammad Ubayd says in this connection:

And certainly many philosophers have worshipped gods in some form... Hegel thought the absolute spirit was god, while Marx recognized dialectic materialism as god... sexuality, which Freud deified, the individual, which Sartre made into a false god. All these are nothing other than names given to acts and events pertaining to society, life, man, and the universe, which God has created. (Ubayd 250)

Darwin's contradiction of the Holy Scriptures and Sigmund Freud's consideration of sex as the prime of the personality are the indicators of the basic problems of the humanity. Socialism and especially Marxism, have stressed the necessity for social and economic changes and neglected the necessity of the inner change in human beings, without which economic change can never lead to the "good society" (Fromm 272). It should be

remembered that Nursi lived in an era when religious belief was under the threat from ideas based on positivist or materialist philosophy. Nursi says, “The revival of religion is the revival of the nation. The life of religion is the light of life” (“Seeds of Reality” 548). He also says in *Risale*:

If misguidance arises from ignorance, it is easy to dispel whereas if it proceeds from science and learning, it is difficult to eliminate. In former times, the latter were one in a thousand, and of these only one in a thousand could come to the way through guidance. For such people fancy themselves. And they do not know, but they suppose that they do know. I think that Almighty God has bestowed the Words at this time, which are flashes of the Qur'an's miraculousness, as an antidote to this atheistic misguidance. (*The Letters* 40)

Nursi was a great advocator of *iman* rather than Islam. He was seeking to “*iman-ise*” society, rather than ‘Islamise’ society. Voll says “In terms of Qur’anic commentary, Said Nursi argues that the verses of the Qur’an reflect the vastness of God’s message and depths of meanings.” He also says,

As the Qur'an of Miraculous Exposition expresses truths through its explicit, clear meanings and senses, so it expresses many allusive meanings through its styles and forms. Each of its verses contains numerous levels of meanings. Since the Qur'an proceeds from all encompassing knowledge, all its meanings may be intended. It cannot be restricted to one or two meanings like man's speech, the product of his limited mind and individual will. It is because of this that innumerable truths contained in the Qur'an's verses have been expounded by Qur'anic commentators, and there are many more which have not been expounded by them. (Voll 255-56)

Nursi in *Risale-I-Nur* collection did not mention any book other than the Qur'an. For Nursi there were three steps – philosophy, mysticism and finally the Qur'an to seeking the truth. When Nursi was beguiled from within and without, he wrote: “The spiritual darkness arising from the sciences of philosophy plunged my spirit into the universe, suffocating it. Whichever way I looked seeking light, I could find no light in those matters, I could not breathe...” (Vahide 165).

For Nursi, if only science and reason are used, there are doubts, skepticism and denial, and where religion is dominant there are bigotry and ignorance. Nursi was influenced by the writings of al-Jilani, al-Ghazali and Imam Rabbani(Sirhindi) who were his spiritual masters . Nursi was neither a Sufi nor an opposer . For the sickness of Islamic *ummah*, his heart delved deep in to the verses of the Qur'an and his *Risale-I-Nur* has been categorized as a subjective interpretation. He writes about Qur'an,

All six sides of this luminous proof are transparent and clear: there is the seal of manifest miraculousness on it, beneath it are logic and evidence; to its right side is the testimony of conscience. Before it is good or happiness in both worlds and it is founded on pure Revelation. (*Epitomes of Light (Mathnawi Al-Nuriye): The Essentials of the Risale-i Noor 448*)

From 1925, Nursi took only the Qur'an as his sole master for interpretations and did not refer to any other book. The Qur'an's centrality in Nursi's writings is apparent wherever he discusses issues related to faith, and to strengthening of belief, proof of the Single Maker (the aim of Divine unity); proof of Muhammad's prophet-hood (the aim of Divine messengership); proof of the possibility of the resurrection of the dead (the aim of resurrection and the requital of the Day of Judgement); and proof of Divine justice in this world and the next (the aim of absolute justice). He argues that there are four main themes in the Qur'an: *tawhid* (affirmation of Divine Unity), prophet-hood,

resurrection, and justice and worship of God. Nursi says that, “Since the Qur'an is both a book of invocation, and a book of prayer, and a book of summons, the repetition in it is desirable, indeed, it is essential and most eloquent. The mark of invocation is illumination through repetition... The mark of prayer is strengthening through repetition. The mark of command and summons in the Qur'an is confirmation through repetition” (Mermer 250).

The All-Wise Qur'an is wise. It affords everything a position in relation to its value. Thus, one thousand three hundred years ago, the Qur'an saw concealed in the darkness of the future, man's hidden fruits and progress, and showed them in a form better than we see and shall see. That means the Qur'an is the Word of One Who sees at the same instant all time and all within it. (Mermer 274)

In *Risale-i-Nur*, he appeared as a defender of belief :

Since the *Risale-i Nur* has taken from the Qur'an of miraculous exposition weapons that are swift, accurate, and powerful enough to rout the enemy, it does not apply to the shops of those holy, blessed persons. For the Qur'an, their source, reference, and master, is the *Risale-i Nur's* master in the full meaning. And because time is short and we are few, we cannot find the time to profit from those luminous works. (Sulayman 84)

About the existence of God, Nursi showed four indicators: cosmology, the conscience, the *Insan-i-kamil*, the Prophet and the Qur'an. Nursi describes the cosmos as a vast book (macroanthropos) showing the oneness of God. He uses many metaphors when discussing the universe, such as “an exhibition”, “an arable field”, “a guest-house”, and “a palace”, but the metaphor of “a book”, that is, something “to be read”, is among them. In the *Risale-i Noor*, Nursi says:

...All attainments and perfections, all learning, all progress, and all sciences, each have an elevated reality which is based on one of

the Divine Names. On being based on the Name, which is concealed under numerous veils and has various manifestations and different spheres, the sciences and arts and attainments find their perfection and become reality. It is not some incomplete and deficient shadow. (*The Words* 270)

The cosmos is replete with signs (*ayat*) which point to its Creator. The universe speaks to man as God's revelation. Al-Arabi opined, "The universe which, like a mirror, reflects the divined attributes and names in a multiplicity of forms, manifests them separately or analytically."¹⁴ About man's conscience *Qur'an* says: "We did indeed offer the Trust to the heavens, and the earth, and the mountains; but they refused to undertake it being afraid thereof. But man assumed it; indeed, he is most unjust, most foolish" (Qur'an 33: 72).

According to Nursi God is known to man through prophecy and truth that brought through "messengership" contains the testimony of the greatest consensus and most comprehensive agreement of all the prophets, and Islam bears the spirit of the Divinely-Revealed religions and their confirmation based on Revelation. About Qur'an Nursi says:

It is both a book of wisdom and law, and a book of prayer and worship, and a book of command and summons, and a book of invocation and Divine knowledge - it is book for all spiritual needs; and it is a sacred library offering books appropriate to the ways of all the saints and veracious, the purified and the scholars, whose ways and paths are all different. (*The Words* 250)

According to Nursi, a connection between man, universe and God is necessary. Without it, the mystery of the creation cannot be solved. Nursi believed that it is unbelief that make people anarchists and make society a battle ground of terror. While Nursi opined that society evolves from individuals, his contemporaries in Turkey were busy in revolutionizing the masses. Nursi put the individual at the center of his discourse. He questioned

the universe as an individual man and observes it as a traveller. This is a common theme in *Risale-i-Nur*. Nursi held man as an individual and attempted to educate him. According to Nursi, the chief concern of Islam was the strengthening of the individual's belief, leading him to seek belief - based solutions to every question relating to life. Nursi said "collective personality"¹ (*The Words* 179) would create good society. This is what he felt to be necessary in the modern age, that the students of the *Risale-i Nur* should renounce all the demands of the ego and transform their 'I's into 'We' - that is, give up egotism and work for the collective personality:

This time is not the time for egotism and the personality for those who follow the path of reality (ehl-i hakikat); it is the time of the community (cemaat). A collective personality emerging from the community rules, and may persist. In order to have a large pool, the ego and personality, which are like blocks of ice, have to be cast into the pool and melted ... (Vahide 263)

It is important that Nursi's pluralistic approach is the key to social change. He argues that the phrases of the Qur'an are not restricted to a single meaning; rather its phrases are like universals which consist meanings for whole. Reinterpretation and re-thought of the holy Qur'an is the need of the hour.

The present Muslim world is confronting unprecedented internal and external challenges. With enormous cultural dilemmas, Muslim social order relentlessly interrogates the 'in-betweenness' of existence. Nursi locates the problem of the Muslim world in a complex socio-cultural matrix and comes

¹ Nursi clarifies this as "consider the plane-tree in front of my room here, a mighty word of the mouth of Barla and the tongue of this mountain: see how many hundreds of tongues of smaller branches there are on the three heads of the three main branches of its trunk. Study carefully how many hundreds of words of well-ordered and balanced fruits it has, and how many hundreds of letters of well-proportioned winged seeds; just as you hear and see how eloquently it praises and glorifies the All-Glorious Maker, the Owner of the command of "Be! " and it is, so too the angel appointed to it represents its glorification with numerous tongues in the World of Meaning. Wisdom necessitates that it is so.

with a hegemonic control that expresses itself in the form of internalization of the discourses of *Risale*. His commentary propounds the need to abandon the 'politics of blame' and formulate a trans-cultural, non-coercive identity based on respect for difference, in order that human beings may survive in a world, increasingly fractured by the belligerent assertion of essential identities. If a Muslim shunned Islam, he would fall prey to anarchism. Throughout his life, Nursi advocated a middle way – the voice of reasonableness and pluralism in the modern world. In his approach he was rather evolutionary to revolutionary to bring peace and happiness in society.

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