

Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said

Nursi

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Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1876-1960), one of the most important Muslim thinkers, who aimed at revitalization of the Empire, Islamic thought and Muslim world and strived to reconcile modern sciences and revelation. He lived at a crucial juncture of the Muslim history; witnessed dynamic changes such as the last decades of the Ottoman Empire leading to the establishment of the Secular Republic, colonization of Muslim lands, two world wars, divisions in Muslim world and unity, emergence of major ideologies like Communism, Capitalism, Materialism, and other political changes like French revolution etc in general affected the globe and the Muslim world in particular. Nursi reflected in his thought the enormous changes that took place in the last phase of the Ottoman Empire and challenged intellectually the secularist and nationalist system of Kemal Ataturk.

Two major forces which prompted him to respond was the inability of Muslim intelligentsia to deal with Modernity and success of Westernization. The most striking aspect of his thought is that he gave the concept of *M'anevī Jihād* 'Positive action' to combat materialist western philosophy. He wanted to keep alive the Islamic Religion in Turkey- the laboratory of westernization in the Muslim world, according to Nursi (p. 34), and to become an inspiration to millions throughout the Muslim world. Nursi wanted to conquer the civilized through 'persuasion' (p. 110). The book under review comprises of 20 chapters written by 19 different authors, arranged thematically; it begins with the editor's Introduction, A Chronology of Said Nursi's Life, supported by Bibliography, a note on contributors and an Index.

It spotlights the diverse areas of Nursi's life like intellectual biography, thought, writings, and important aspects like *Jihād*, *Nūr* Movement, Environment and Contemporary Islamic Thought. Şukran Vahide in his chapter, "Toward an Intellectual Biography of Said Nursi" describes Nursi as an original thinker whose contribution to contemporary Muslim intellectualism is now being recognized in the Muslim world. This chapter mentions some of the factors and scholars influencing Nursi's thought like Shaykh

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Aḥmad Sirhindī (1563-1624) and Western thought in addition outlines its main features in each period as reflected in his *Magnum Opus* (Risāle-I Nūr) and the development of his ideas which marked his transition from Old Said (1876-1920) to New Said (1920-1950) up to the culmination of his thought.

Nursi had a firm grounding in classical Islamic scholarship, argues Vahide. Şerif Mardin, another scholar in his chapter, “Reflections on Said Nursi’s Life and Thought” discusses and explores Nursi’s words that point to the difference between outer appearance and ‘the essence’. Mardin portrays Nursi from the sociological perspective and how his ideas formed against the backdrop of the economic, social and political conditions of his time. Nursi saw the Islamic sciences as a true vehicle for human advancement, observes Mardin. Nursi saw himself as a Muslim scholar devoted to the preservation of Islam in an age of increasing secularization, says Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi in his “How to Read Said Nursi’s Risāle-I Nūr”.

He discusses the stand of Nursi regarding Kurdish Nationalism, Ottomanism and discusses how modernity is an aid to the Risāle-I Nūr. He looks at Nursi from the perspective of Sufism and elaborates *Tarīqa* and *Ḥaqīqa* – the stages of Sufism. Similarly, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad examines the experiences and reflections of Nursi as a paradigm for Muslim existence in the context of adversity and alienation in the modern world. He says, Muslim world witnessed transformation due to modernity, therefore puts forth the Muslim thinkers as Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) and Said Nursi and their approaches to respond to the challenges posed by the West. On the other hand, Oliver Leaman maintains that Nursi witnessed Western thought, Western rationalism, and materialism to be the dangerous forces (p. 256).

The writings and biography of Nursi as offered by other scholars apart from the scholars mentioned above provide a fascinating and rich perspective for understanding religion in the modern world and for understanding how ideas can transcend their immediate historical and social contexts. This book is to assist the reader in understanding Nursi’s work as a modern Muslim Theological text that grapples with both historical and philosophical problems and that attempts to construct a Muslim identity in the modern period that meets the challenges of radical pluralism.

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