

Nursi's School of Brilliance - *Madrassah al-Zahrā*

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Abstract

With the onset of modernization and industrialization, the whole world was set into the pace of inventions and discoveries. It has been a great challenge to integrate the revealed and modern sciences. Muslim scholars addressed and tried to create a possibility to enhance human intellectualism in their respective ages/ societies. Myriad of Muslim scholars and thinkers rejuvenated the process of amalgamation of sciences taking into consideration the need of time, and they came to the conclusion that without integration of revealed and modern sciences, human progress, and development is not possible. These scholars who proposed and professed the integration of revealed and modern sciences became subject to face the reaction from the traditional scholars. One such scholar was Bediuzzamān Said Nursi (1876-1960), identifying the lacunas in the education system, proposed a Madrassah in 1896, which was about to give this process a practical shape in the form of Madrassah al-Zahra, where revealed and modern sciences would be taught side by side, and to play the role of Al-Azhar (Egypt) in Asia. His aim was to provide Muslim Ummah a guide to confront, and respond to, the contemporary challenges faced by them, besides reforming exclusively Madrassah education with modern approach. In this direction, keeping in view the significance of the subject, this paper will attempt to make analysis and assessment of Said Nursi's proposed project vis-à-vis debate of integration of knowledge.

Introduction

Knowledge (*'Ilm*) has always been a fundamental concept for Muslim scholars throughout the course of history. Different scholars have diversely explained the meaning and nature of knowledge in their times. According to Plato, a famous Greek philosopher, the knowledge is of the world of forms or ideas which exist in the mind of a person (Muslehuddin, 1989, p. 24).

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According to the idealists, knowledge is acquired through rational thinking. It is certain that these philosophers have no idea of revealed knowledge. Knowledge is the basis of Islam which connotes that man should be obedient and should submit his will to Almighty Allah, which is possible only if man is knowledgeable in real terms (Gilani, 2002, p. 4). The Islamic theory of knowledge encompassed spiritual, moral, and conceptual development of the Muslims during the period of the Prophet (SAW) and the golden period of Muslims. Moreover, they made remarkable advancement in every field of knowledge, including religious, as well as secular knowledge i.e., social sciences, technology and natural sciences, when the European world was in dark period. So, Islam made no distinction between the worldly knowledge and Islamic knowledge, and Muslims made excellence in every field of knowledge throughout the history. With the *Qur'ānic* revelation, Muslims brought a revolution in human history and developed their own civilization. According to Syed Abū A'lā Maudūdī: Education is the sum total of knowledge gained. A man who does not make use of these faculties falls behind others, whereas he who makes use of them excels. Similarly, a nation assumes leadership when it devotes itself unsparingly to the pursuit of knowledge handed down to it from the past as well as present (Maududi, 1993, p. 55).

Said Nursi (1876-1960): A Brief Biographical Account

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi was born in a hamlet (Nurs) attached to Hezan in the province of Bitlis in eastern Turkey. He received his early education within the fringe of the Ottoman Empire (Colin Turner, Hasan Horkuc, p. 5). His education started at the age of 9. After some years, he left his village to pursue higher studies and several centers of learning. He mastered the Quran, Islamic jurisprudence, oratory, philosophy, history and geography in a short time. He had a photographic memory as a result he memorized the Quran by heart and the most important Arabic dictionaries and several treatises on Islamic law. He studied science, mathematics and gained proficiency in some foreign languages (Jameelah, 1997, p. 188-9). Said Nursi visited a number of Madrassahs but his thirst was not quenched by any of the teachers or Madrassahs (Vahide, 2005, p. 6).

Nursi was not satisfied with the then Madrassah system as; he found it incompatible with the requirements of the modern age. He realized that the traditional form of Islamic theology was inadequate for answering the doubts concerning Islam (Horkuc, p. 105). In order to reform that existing education system, he wanted to establish a university in the form of *Madrassah al-Zahra*, with locations in eastern and southeastern Turkey (Seritoprak, 2008, p. 397). He believed that educational reform could invalidate ignorance and backwardness and contribute to solve the social and political problems.

At the age of 18 he came to be known among the celebrated scholars of the country. Before the age of 20 he mastered several sciences and gained proficiency in mathematics, physics, chemistry and astronomy. As his eminence was increasing, so were his difficulties. He had to come across the antagonism on the part of local scholars who were covetous of Nursi's name and esteem (Colin Turner, Hasan Horkuc, p. 8-9). Due to his fame he was invited by the governor of Van to reside with him. Nursi took full advantage of the governor's library and keenly studied various sciences. In 1907 and 1908 in Istanbul and Salonica, he advocated the establishment of a university in Eastern Anatolia (*Madrassah al-Zahra*) where physical sciences would be taught alongside religious sciences. Through his writings (*Risale-I Nūr*), Said Nursi argued that religion reflects the social and human environment and that Islam could be interpreted according to the current needs of society. His *Risale-i Nūr* (The Epistles of Light), a commentary on the Quran, explains and expounds the "truth" in the Quran, besides covering numerous subjects such as concepts of belief and God, purpose of life and creation, life after death, human responsibility and accountability, justice and worship (Markham, Brinci, 2011, p.18-19).

Madrassah al-Zahrā

To provide holistic view of knowledge and all round development and to maintain decorum and balance, Nursi saw it as a hard challenge to integrate the two branches of learning. Nursi was not satisfied with the prevailing system of education, he, therefore, formulated his ideas on educational reform based on his own studies and teaching experiences, sensing it a need of time (Vahide, 2005, p. 29). He was extremely discontented with the method of curriculum employed by *Madrassah* of his times. Nursi wanted *Madrassahs* to abandon the traditional style (memorization) of studying and instead start new ways and content. The plinth of his method was to amalgamate the religious and modern sciences in order to validate and tone the truths of religion (*Ibid.*, p. 29).

The system of education that prevailed during the period of Nursi was composed of *Madrassahs*, *Maktab*s and *Tekkes* and disseminated knowledge according to their own values. Nursi wanted to reconcile the entire trio and make his *al-Zahra* as the embodiment of these three systems (*Ibid.*, p. 45). *Al-Zahra* was to represent, "the most superior [*Maktab*] by the reason, the very best [*Madrassah*] by the heart and the most sacred *Zawiya* by the conscience" (*Ibid.*, p. 46). Nursi aimed at complete restructuring of the *Madrassah* education as he foresaw it as pivotal in securing the future of Kurdistan and unity of the empire (*Ibid.*, p. 45) and to play the part of *al-Azhar* in the center of the eastern Islamic world and to release the region from the dungeons of ignorance and poverty (*Ibid.*, p. 29).

Madrassah al-Zahra would gain financial independence by receiving donations and gifts from across the globe for being of a unique value in the Islamic world (*Ibid.*, p. 46).

Ensuring the future of ‘Ulamā in the eastern provinces, it was to release Islam from bigotry, superstitions and false beliefs. To combat the suspicions of ‘Ulamā, regarding modern sciences, it was, thus, aimed to introduce modern sciences in Madrassahs (*Ibid.*, p. 46). Nursi wished that Islam should function like a consultative council of Madrassahs, Maktabs and Tekkes so that each would complete the deficiencies of the other. Moreover, it was also supposed that the medium of instruction would be Arabic, Turkish and Kurdish (*Ibid.*, p. 46).

Nursi laid the foundation of al-Zahra on the shores of Lake Van, and the foundation was celebrated with a feast and ceremony with speeches (*Ibid.*, p. 107). With the outbreak of the Great War-I, the construction was halted and never resumed thereafter (*Ibid.*, p. 102). Moreover, due to some political circumstances this innovative dream of Nursi was not realized. Nursi planned and sought funds for this project till 1951 (Michel, 2014, p. 66). He aimed to combat the three enemies of humankind i.e., ignorance, poverty and disunity in this single project (*Ibid.*, p. 67). He also found much in modern sciences which was not contradictory to the religious belief and adds that Quran does not prohibit Muslims from having “admiration for the civilization and the progress” or from borrowing what is good from other civilization (*Ibid.*, p. 67). This proposal was to make reconciliation between the science of philosophy and those of religion and make peace between European civilization and the truths of Islam (Vahide, *Op.Cit.*, p. 326). At the same time he was against the blind imitation of the West as he thought it causing disunity in the Muslim world. This proposal aimed to sift the sciences (for development of which whole humanity has contributed) and observe them through the lens of Qur’ān to see their compatibility with Islam.

Endeavors of Said Nursi to Envision the Dream

In November 1907 Nursi set off for Istanbul with the intention of obtaining official support and backing for his Islamic university, the *Madrassah al- Zahrā*. He was now around thirty years of age. From his humble beginnings in the village of Nurs, he had established his reputation among the ‘Ulamā of Kurdistan and was a figure well known not only for his unbeaten record in debate, extensive learning, and extraordinary abilities, but also for his pursuit of justice and defense of right, and his absolute fearlessness before anyone save his Maker. Said Nursi set off for Istanbul via Beirut and Izmir, to realize his dream of founding the *Madrassah al- Zahrā*, or Eastern University, in eastern Anatolia.

This time he almost succeeded, When Sultan Mehmed Reshad set out on his famous Rumelia journey, Nursi was invited as the representative of the Eastern Provinces of the Ottoman Empire. During this journey he was granted 19,000 gold liras to establish the University. On his return to Van, he personally selected a site for the university, but soon afterwards, the project was abandoned owing to the Balkan War (Vahide, *Op.cit.*, p. 33).

Using the knowledge he had acquired to prove the truths of Quran, he would demonstrate it to be the source of true knowledge and progress, so defending it against the deliberate efforts to discredit it and corrupt the Muslim community. In a letter he wrote in 1955, Nursi stated that he found two means of doing this: one was the *Madrassah al-Zahrā*, which took him to Istanbul and even to Sultan Abdul Hamīd's court, and the second was the *Risale-i Nūr* (Vahide, *Op.Cit.*, p. 31).

Bediuzzamān was of the opinion that the day was close when the different worlds of knowledge would meet and combine to form a single world of knowledge, which with its light would demolish the walls between the universe, life, and man. And so, after this century, which has been called "the age of European enlightenment," in the abandoned dwelling of the believers' spirits, weary and suffering doubts, they would be reunited with science. They would leave the journey they have been pursuing ignorantly and beset by doubts through the world from minute particles to the galaxies; deepening their belief and in profound awe and humility, they would affirm the sacred truth of the verse "those of His servants who fear God most are those with knowledge" (Debbagh, 1995, p.12).

Conclusion

During Nursi's missionary life, there were many situations demonstrating his deep faith in and high responsibility and great concern with the affairs of the Muslims and their teaching and taking them out of the fold of ignorance they suffered especially in this period and in the eastern Anatolia. While he was roaming in the eastern areas of Anatolia, he observed with his own eyes the extent of poverty and ignorance the eastern lands had gone into. They were living out of date. He insisted upon educating these regions and disseminating knowledge all round these areas and schools, particularly when he felt that the traditional sciences were no longer capable of eradicating the doubts that prevailed against Islam. Consequently, he decided to establish modern Islamic University in eastern Anatolia to follow the model of al-Azhar.

Although it is different in that it will teach modern sciences besides the traditional ones in the light of his famous dictum, “the light of the heart is the religious sciences and the light of mind is the modern cosmic sciences, when they are mixed together truths shine, while as by separation the doubts and skepticism is generated”. The aim was to eradicate ignorance, poverty and backwardness that these areas suffered and also to enable those who do not understand the realities of faith except with the language of natural sciences to make them understand. Nursi’s aim was to amalgamate the two systems of education; modern/scientific and religious/traditional. Fully aware of the domination of science in the modern age, Nursi in his magnanimous work reflects on theoretical as well as methodological aspects of integration of knowledge.

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