

Sa'īd Nursī and the Reawakening of Islam in Turkey

Dr Abdol Rauh Yacob¹

Abstract

This article aims to introduce the life and contribution of Sa'īd Nursī in reviving the belief and practice of Islam among Muslim society in Turkey. Throughout his life, Sa'īd Nursī encountered a number of challenges, notably ignorance, misconception and negligence about Islam as a result of secularism which became apparent in modern society in Turkey in particular and accordingly they were inclined towards a worldly life. These challenges forced him to form his unique outlook, thought and method of understanding Islam in the context of contemporary Muslim society and along with his strong commitment to Islam he waged a war against the current of disbelief, skeptic and doubt about Islam as well as irreligious and atheistic thoughts prevailing in modern Turkey and the Muslim world. The biography of Bediuzzaman, his thought, struggle and contribution has now been written in many languages. His enormous work, *Risale-i Nur* has also been translated into many languages. This article attempts to represent a vast and massive literature available on Bediuzzaman's life, struggle and works offered to the Muslim world with the aims at describing his contribution to reawaken Islam and Muslim in modern Turkey.

Keywords: Nursi, Islam, Turkey, modern

Sa'īd Nursī: early life and education

Sa'īd was born in 1239H/1876M in the village of Nurs in the province of Bitlis, East of Anatolia, the place that remains part of his name, Sa'īd Nursī. He was also known as Bediuzzaman, wonder of the age. Sa'īd Nursī was prepared to be equipped with Islamic religious knowledge including Arabic at his early age, and also to adhere to the practical aspects of Islam. He was born in a normal Kurdish family but strictly observed the teaching of Islam. His father, Mirza, was a peasant, and he was reported to have tied the mouth of his cattle avoiding them from eating other's plant while passing through neighbour's land on the way to and from his field. This superb commitment of his parent to the practical aspect of Islam which bestowed Allah's blessing upon the child, together with the exceptional ability of his intellect opened up for acquiring knowledge.

He first learned Arabic from his brother Mulla Abdullah then he moved from one village and town to another to learn Islamic religious knowledge from the local '*ulamā'*'. He was quite genius and the example of his exceptional ability when he learned by heart *Jam' al-Jawāmi'* on *usūl al-fiqh* in one week. He also memorized *al-Qamūs al-Mubīn* by al-Firuzabadi up to chapter *sīn*. Besides, there was a story behind this and undoubtedly inspired him most to acquire further knowledge. At the age of fourteen or less he had a dream about hereafter. He thought there was a chance to meet personally the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and he decided to wait for him at the beginning of the bridge (*sirāt*). By doing that, not only did he meet the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) but also all of the Prophets and the Messengers of Allah before him. When he met the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) he asked him for knowledge and the Prophet replied that he would be given the knowledge of the Qur'an if he would not ask anyone. (Nursi, 1419H/1998: p.45)

¹ Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University, (UNISSA), Jalan Pasar Baharu, Bandar Sri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam. e-mail: rauh@unissa.edu.bn

Subsequently he began to study all the primary books (*ummahāt al-kutub*) which were normally taught at the madrasah in the Eastern Turkey including *Jam' al-Jawāmi'* in *usūl al-fiqh* by al-Subki, *Sharh al-Mawāqif fī 'ilm al-kalām*, *Sharh minhaj al-talibin* of al-Nawawi by Ibn Hajar al-Haythami and other books and as a result of his excellent and quick learning, he was recognized and called *Mulla Sa'īd* by Sheikh Muhammad al-Jalālī, his teacher at Bayazid *madrasah* as an admiration for his success. During his study at the *madrasah*, he normally completed reading and learning almost two hundred pages of different books in a day. This unique ability and quick mastery of knowledge helped him enormously whenever he required it throughout his life. Sa'īd Nursī continued to search for more knowledge and at the age of fifteen he was already known as Sa'īd *Mashbūr* and began to dominate in a number of discussions and debates held with some senior '*ulamā'*'. Furthermore at this age he was able to teach and answer all the questions in the mosque at Mardin in 1892. Nevertheless his inquiry for more knowledge continued. Unexpectedly at the residence of Umar Pasha, the governor of Bitlis, Sa'īd Nursī allowed himself to stay for two years merely to spend all his time to study most of the books available in the governor's library. In 1894 he then continued to Van where he stayed at another governor's residence, Hasan Pasha and Tahir Pasha respectively. Here he was first encountered with modern science and began to learn and study by himself and in a short time he mastered all those modern sciences including history, geography, mathematics, physics, chemistry, astronomy, modern philosophy, biology and geology. He was then recognized as Bediuzzaman (*Badi' al-ḡamān*), wonder of the age, and remained part of his name.

Sa'īd Nursī early contribution

In the early days of his life, Sa'īd Nursī's thought represented a young energetic and determined intellectual, intolerable with irreligious practices of the officials but at the same time he portrayed himself as matured educational philosopher. He initiated a method of teaching traditional religious subjects along with modern sciences. He believed even at this stage that religious knowledge was to purify the heart while modern science was to brighten the mind and the blend of both sciences would lead to the truth. This comprehensive method of leaning he first taught at his *madrasah khur khur*. The idea was further developed and promoted to the government in a plan to establish a university located in the East of Turkey. This was initially prompted by the news came from Britain that Gladstone, colonial secretary, while holding the Qur'an, addressed in the House of Common reminding the assemblymen that so long as the Muslims hold the Quran they would never be colonized. There will be no alternative for the colonial British but to remove the existence of the Quran or to cut it off from the Muslims. The news struck him severely and he was reported saying to the people around him that he would prove to the world that al-Qur'an is a spiritual sun that its flash would never become gloomy or its light would be vanished. Throughout his life he committed himself on this principle and therefore proceeded to prove what he believed and amazingly in a testimony few years before his death he admitted that what he had written in the *Risale-i Nur* was merely to serve for the Qur'an. He further admitted that all his works could only considered as a few seeds to serve for the Qur'an as spiritual guide for mankind. (Nursī, 1419H/1998: pp. 10-12.)

Sa'īd Nursī was already well known as a great scholar (*'ālim*) when he went to Istanbul to see the Sultan and proceeded with his comprehensive educational plan i.e. to establish an Islamic University called *madrasah al-Zabrā'* in the Eastern Anatolia. In his second visit to Istanbul in 1907 for the same purpose, he was met by a group of scholars and students either to know him closely or to test his ability particularly when they noticed a note on his door stating that "here all questions would be answered and no one would be asked". A number of accounts, which were recorded by those who came to see him not only they satisfied with the answers he provided but also regarded him as the most outstanding '*ālim*' at all times. One bright student, called Hasan Fahmi, prepared the most difficult question on '*aqīdah*' and beyond his expectation the answer was given to him as if they were together yesterday reading from the reference and he was convinced that the knowledge he procured must be *ladunī* (given knowledge) and not *kasbī* (acquired knowledge).

Not only Sa'īd Nursī's plan to set up a comprehensive university was declined, instead he was charged and sent for trial and sentenced to mental hospital for inspection following his firmness and determination before the Sultan. He was eventually found normal. In a report released it was stated that if a small particle of insane occurred in the brain of Bediuzzaman, there would be no one in this world that is normal. Sa'īd Nursī's thought appeared to be persuasive, full of wisdom and above all compatible to the principle of *sharī'ah*. Though he was very determined and courageous, he was actually very cautious in cooperating with new development in the empire. When the Young Turks decreed the slogan of western constitution based on freedom, brotherhood and equality, Sa'īd Nursī on the contrary, emphasized on fundamental components of Islamic constitution, notably consultation and justice.

But when he found out that the Young Turks' cause was not based on the *shari'ah*, he left Salonika, the stronghold of the movement. He pursued on his own explaining the principle of *shari'ah* arguing that freedom, justice and equality practiced by the Prophet and the *sahābah* as a living proof that the *shari'ah* is capable of uniting all bonds of equality, justice and freedom in the society and the causes for decay and backward in the society due to the negligence of the *shari'ah*. (Nursi, 1416H/1995. p. 465) In the midst of these political conflicts that emerged after the declaration of constitution in 1908, Sa'īd Nursī again was very cautious in cooperating with any party notably that of pro-western. Nevertheless he took part in propagating Islamic constitution. Although Sa'īd Nursī cooperated with the party of *Ittihad Muhammadi* which was established in 1909, he was free even to criticise the founder of the party, Darwish Wehdati, stressing on the Islamic code for writing. The political situation, however, grew worst even after the election was held notably after the party of *Ittihad wa Taraqqi* was in power.

The political conflict intensified. The opponent parties, especially the party of *Ittihad Muhammadi*, took the opportunity to launch an attack on the government in the name of the *shari'ah*. With the support of the Sufis *tariqat* and the public, a mass demonstration took place calling for the *shari'ah*. The gathering was finally crushed and a military law was immediately imposed. Subsequently opponent parties were abolished and all the newspapers were banned. On April 27, 1909, Sultan Abdul Hamid was removed; Darwish Wehdati and his followers were sentenced to death. Sa'īd Nursī was accused cooperating with the movement and he was sent for trial in the military court. The trial, however, provided him a good platform when he was able to explain his stand for the *shari'ah* and the position of Islamic law in the society and his perception and involvement in the *Ittihad Muhammadi*. (Nursi, 1419H/1998M: pp. 95-6) His statement was published and distributed nationwide. The trial he received from the military court did not stop him from pursuing his call for the Islamic law. He was later released. During his visit in Damascus in 1911, Sa'īd Nursī was invited to deliver a speech at the Umayyad mosque. His speech is well known as *al-khutbah al-shāmiyah*. In the speech he called for the return to the Qur'an as a remedy for all the diseases fell on the Muslims. (Nursi, 1416H/1995: pp.491-515)

In the following years the Ottoman Government was at war with the Italians in Libya then in 1914 the First World War broke out. During these years Sa'īd Nursī portrayed a very courageous Muslim warrior in the battlefield as well as in the enemy's prison where he was miraculously released from death sentence. (Nursī, *Sirah*, 1419H/1998M: pp.136-37)

After the war, the atmosphere in the empire dwindled in every aspect of life notably when the society was divided and the government was under European pressure. Sa'īd Nursī, however, stood firmly toward these challenges. He was initially in favour of neutrality and against the European war, and when the decision was made to enter the European war he fought strongly for the government. But at the aftermath of the war, the situation changed considerably. The Sultan and *Shaykh al-Islām* were under European dictation. Sa'īd Nursī decided not to abide by the Sultan's decree against the national movement who challenged the presence of the colonial powers in the country. He pointed out that those types of orders were null and void and no one should adhere to any order came from the government or from *Shaykh al-Islām* that was under British colonization and suppression. Those who fought against the colonial were therefore not rebels. Thus the fatwa should be inverted. (Nursī, 1419M/1998M: pp.136-37) Sa'īd Nursī's stand was pleasantly accepted by the national movement resisting against the invasion of foreign powers in the country. Accordingly he was cordially invited to Ankara, the stronghold of the movement for the purpose of strengthening the struggle. At Ankara he noticed that religion was neglected and many representatives did not attend prayers. He decided to propose ten significant items for them including Islamic brotherhood and adherence to prayer. His stand and proposal was not appreciated by Mustafa Kamal and this was the end of his cooperation with the national movement. Consequently he left Ankara for Van and this journey marked the end of old Said and a new Said began.

Nursi's contribution in reviving Islam

Sa'īd Nursī's new journey began in 1923 when he returned to Van where he devoted most of his time in seclusion and devotion. Here he was even very determined that al-Qur'an should be studied in order to save the faith of the society. He concentrated most of his three years stay in Van to teach the public according to the guidance of the Qur'an. But the Kurdish revolt of 1925 led by Sheikh Said opened a new page in his biography.

He was detained accusing for his cooperation with the rebels although he rejected the idea of rebellion against Muslim ruler and initially taken to Trabzon and Istanbul and from there to Antalya, Burdur, Isbarta and finally Barla where he was confined in a small two bedroom-house for eight and half years. During these years Turkey saw a rapid change of identity from Islamic empire into a new and secular republic. As being restricted in Barla where his relation with the outside world had been cut off he amazingly filled it with the invaluable works by putting his idea and thought into writing. Here he completed one third of the *Risale-i Nur*. In order to avoid pressure and arrest from the authority, *Risale-i Nur* was secretly circulated among his students. The secret movement developed more and more and the authority could not bear the consequence and finally in 1934 he was arrested and sent to Isbarta. On April 25, 1935, Nursi and one hundred and twenty of his students were arrested and were sent to Eskisehir prison.

Sa'īd Nursī's struggle continued and in prison not only he was able to teach Islam to the prisoners but also he was able to write a number of topics under al-Lama'āt and al-Shu'ā'āt. Here he was accused to have set up a secret movement to fight and overthrow the government. If he were found guilty he and his followers would be sentenced to death. After a long trial, the court found no concrete evidence to convict him but he and a number of his followers were, however, sent to prison for eleven months and six years respectively due to the circulation of the *Risale-i Nur*. (Nursī, 1419H/1998M: pp. 252-277)

Surprisingly after his release from prison he was again sent to Kastamonu, a city in the North of Turkey, to remain in a house for another eight years, located in front of a police station. His struggle continued notably on writing and circulating the *Risale-i Nur*. Consequently on September 18, 1943, he was again arrested and two days later he was sent to Ankara where he was under investigation. He was again sent to Dinizli in 1944 and he and his student were again accused for attempting to overthrow the government. At Dinizli he stood for trial. Again after nine months of trial and investigation he was found not guilty. (Nursī, *Sirah Zatiyyah*. 1419H/1998M: pp. 335-346). Technically he was detained in the Hotel Serir for two months and he was finally sent to Emirdag where he stayed for three and half years under the watchful attention of the authority.

In 1948, Nursi was already an old man, reaching seventy-five of age and spent most of his time in jail or under strict supervision. His influence was however, increased and even stronger. Accordingly the authority had no alternative but to take a final step to crush down the movement. Mass arrest was made including most of his followers and they were sent to Afyun for trial. He was sentenced twenty months in prison and some of his followers were either freed or jailed. He was later released when an appeal was made at the High Court after he was found not guilty. Immediately after his release he was detained in a house and on November 20, 1949 he was sent to Emirdag for two years. Here uncertain trial on the *Risale* continued based on the differences of sentence convicted by the courts of Afyun and Dinizli. During the trial, Democratic Party won the election and on July 14, 1950, a general pardon was declared and Sa'īd Nursī trial was accordingly discharged.

The freedom of Sa'īd Nursī and the circulation of *Risale* gave further strength to the Islamic movement. Partly fearing that Islamic movement would challenge the secular government, Sa'īd Nursī was accordingly called to Istanbul for trial on an accusation against the authority. He again had good opportunity to express his idea and thought openly and directly to the court and to the higher authority and he was found not guilty. (Nursī, 1419H/1998M: pp. 446-9) Finally in 1956 a special committee decided to allow *Risale-i Nur* to be printed. This final triumph occurred when Nursī was nearly eighty years old but even at the age of eighty-two he was still under the watchful eye of the authority as he was ordered not to leave Emirdag until he died at Urfa on Ramadan 25, 1379H/ March 23, 1960.

Risale-i Nur has now been accepted and circulated throughout Muslim world and a number of conferences were held not only in Istanbul, but also in the Middle East, North Africa and the Malay world in order to find out new remedy to cure the present dilemma of Muslim society living in the modern world. The *Risale-i Nur* has now become main reference on Islam by new generation of Muslim society in Turkey in particular and Muslim world in general. The secret of this achievement is most probably dependent on the new presentation of *Risale-i Nur* in guiding Muslim to believe and practice Islam in the context of modern society based on the contemporary interpretation of the Quran. The following are examples of his writings on vital issues facing the Muslims in modern time. He begins his view by pointing to the inner part of the contemporary Muslims as their biggest enemy. He says that:

"My suffering, my only suffering, is from the danger which Islam is facing. To resist these dangers was easy in the past, for they were coming from outside, but today they are inside. Since the rottenness has crept into the body, it has become difficult to struggle against them.

I am afraid that the structure of the body will be unable endure by misreading the enemy and assuming the most dangerous enemy to be a friend. The stronghold of faith will be in danger if the society lacks foresight to such extent. This is what makes me suffer". (Anis Ahmad. 1995: p.364)

Departing from within, Sa'īd Nursī like others gives greatly concerned with the purity of faith on the basis of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. He committed himself to this principle by saying: "My unique goal now is to fight against the atheistic group: in this way I call on all Muslims to come to the path of the Faith, and that is what I am striving for even I breathe my last in the fight against them." (Anis Ahmad, 1995: p.365). While stressing the importance of faith he realizes the need to defend the *shari'ah* of Islam against the attacks and doubts with the accusations of its rigidity, deficiency and backwardness. He points out that the *shari'ah* derived from the Qur'an while "the Quran preserves it freshness and youth as though new revealed every century... The works and laws of man grow old like man. They change and make way for others. But the Quran's rulings and laws are so firm and well-established that they increase in strength as the centuries past". (Muhammad Rushdi 'Ubayd. 1995).

Based on the necessity to establish the firmness in faith and the need to defend the *shari'ah* from doubts, he proceeds to reconstruct an individual Muslim personality as a member of the Muslim society to save them from contemporary intellectual danger threatening their belief and community. This is no doubt that Sa'īd Nursī's effort has succeeded in reviving the position of Islam in the Muslim society in Turkey in particular and the Muslim world in general.

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