

Bediüzzaman SAID NURSI (1877–1960): *Spiritual Jihad*

– from the keyboard of Ghurayb [1st Ramadan 1432]

Few Muslims of the twentieth century have made as great an impact on their countrymen and upon Islamic renewal than the Ottoman intellectual and spiritual activist ‘Mulla Said’ known as Bediüzzaman ‘*Wonder of the Age*’ for his penetrating intelligence. The preservation of contemporary Turkish Muslim identity owes its validity largely to Nursi’s untiring labors and model non-violent activity. His collected letters *Risale-i Nur /Epistle of Light* seek to demonstrate through clearly reasoned arguments and easily understood stories and comparisons, that Islamic revelation offers a rational explanation of existence and how the universe functions, while the truth of religion corroborates and reinforces modern scientific discoveries. Some Muslims view him as the saintly ‘Renewer’ for the 14th /20th century.

SAID NURSI was born in 1877 in the Kurdish hamlet of Nurs, in Bitlis province of eastern Turkey. Few details are known of the early period of his life, though a Sufi aura is evident – he claimed to receive guidance from Shaykh ‘Abdul Qādir al-Jilānī (d.561 H/ 1166), and felt affinity for Naqshbandi masters. Nursi was a child prodigy of great intuitive attainments with a prodigious memory and far reaching vision. He resided in regional centres of Bitlis and Van where he knew the leading scholars of eastern Anatolia. Although rustic in manner and dress – he sported a dagger at his waist and was a skilled horseman and courageous fighter – at heart he loved nature and preferred solitude. Noted for a personal life of extreme frugality and service Nursi was a model of utter sincerity, great intelligence and faith.

Bediüzzaman was self-taught and became deeply learned in the traditional Islamic religious and intellectual sciences, and he also mastered Western sciences acquiring proficiency in mathematics, physics, chemistry and astronomy before the age of twenty. In Van he opened his own *madrasah* where he developed his own teaching method combining methods of the positive sciences with classical religious disciplines. He recalled his practice at that time in Van of memorizing books:

I used to repeat by heart the eighty to ninety books I had memorized. They were the steps by which to ascend to the truths of the Qur’an. Some time

later, I ascended to those truths, and I saw that each verse of the Qur'an encompasses the universe. No need then remained for anything else, the Qur'an alone was sufficient for me.

From those early years Nursi conceived a project of founding a university in eastern Anatolia where modern sciences could be taught alongside of the religious sciences. He anticipated that educational reform could reverse ignorance and backwardness, and contribute to solving the social and political problems of that region.

OTTOMAN INTELLECTUAL & MUHAJAHID. After 1907 he moved to the Ottoman capital Istanbul where Nursi swiftly advanced into the heart of political and intellectual events during the eventful final years of the Ottoman empire. Nursi's involvement in national affairs intensified with his participation in the Committee of Union and Progress, active association with the Constitutional movement and in the Society for Muslim Unity. In 1914–1916 he helped organize and led the resistance to the Tzarist Russian and Armenian invasion of his homeland around Van. He was captured by the Russians and endured captivity in Kosturma (North Russia) from 1916–1918, but made an unusual escape by crossing the Volga, returning *via* Berlin to Istanbul where he was greeted as a hero.

Nursi then served for four years in the the learned body *Darul'-Hikmeti'l-Islamiye* intended to promote Islamic principles in the new emerging political order. He remained actively involved in several leading national organizations throughout the war of liberation at the close of the First World War (1920–1922), the demise of the Ottoman sultanate, and consolidation of an independent state of modern Turkey led by the Grand National Assembly dominated by the general Mustafa Kemal 'Atatürk'. At Ankara in 1923 Mustafa Kemal and Nursi had a serious falling out over opposing ideas on the role Islam might play in the emerging new Republic. Mustafa Kemal recognized in Nursi one of the chief obstacles who must be silenced or removed in order to enforce the secularization of society which he deemed necessary for Turkey's modernity. Upon departing back to Van to further his educational goals, Nursi realized that his true opponent was this newly ascendant mentality bent on uprooting Islam and eradicating its practice among the Turkish people in the name of progress, power and science.

KEMALIST REFORMS. The Republic's founder Atatürk quickly placed the Republic upon a secular-nationalist basis. In 1928 Islam was dis-established as the state religion; in 1937 the principle of laicism (state-imposed secularism) was made an integral part of the Constitution, reiterated in the Constitution of 1982. Religion was something to be

modernized and reformed, being relegated to the private sphere by restricting it to a question of individual conscience. The cultural renewal initiated by these reforms aimed at transforming lifestyles and clothing habits, and at first targeted males. The ‘hat laws’ of 1925 banned the turban and ubiquitous conical felt *fez* (or *tarbūsh*), while in 1934 the *kisve* (a head & shoulder covering worn by members of certain Sufi orders) was forbidden outside religious ceremonies. Seventy men were hanged because of opposition to these ‘hat laws’. Nursi always adamantly refused to change his traditional fez and turban for the new obligatory shallow flat cap or *kasketleri* – Atatürk’s innovation for national headgear whose pointed front mitigated against prostration in prayer. Nursi was one of the few males who continued to wear the Ottoman-style turban, despite the best efforts of the authorities to remove it from him.

NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE. Bediüzzaman conceived, organized and directed a remarkable *non-violent campaign* to renew and fortify Islamic Faith and to refresh the centrality of Qur’an for religious life. His campaign was sparked by Nursi’s refusal to support an uprising for Kurdish independence against Mustafa Kemal’s government in the Şeyh Said Revolt of Feb. 1925, which was crushed by the Ankara regime. This was led by the Naqshbandi Shaykh of Palu, who had solicited Nursi’s support in a letter. His reply is extant: for Muslims to kill Muslims is against the *shari‘ah*; Muslims are brothers (Turk and Kurd); and fighting is only permitted against external enemies for defense. Nevertheless, Nursi was suspected by the Republican regime of involvement, and this led to his internal exile or confinement as part of its anti-religious policies: first in the town of Burdur; then in Barla near Lake Eşiridir; then in Kastamonu south of the Black Sea; finally to Emirdağ.

During 1925–1956 Bediüzzaman endured about thirty-five years of internal exile watched by the police and security forces, with periods of extremely inhumane imprisonment, many attempted poisonings, constant harassment and psychological torment from the RPP (Kemalist) regime. His persecution by secularist Turkish state authorities included four dramatic public trials (Eskişehir 1935, Denizli 1944, Afyon 1949, Istanbul 1952), as well as numerous court proceedings, vicious public defamations and slander, and unceasing banalities. His public trials were occasions which Nursi actually used to promote his non-violent campaign, being finally acquitted in each case. During his extended periods of imprisonment Nursi subsisted mostly on olives and bread, while a number of inexplicable events were witnessed by his jailers and tormenters.

Nursi taught the necessity for ‘Positive Action’ in order to counter the attacks of those inimical to Islam and to counter the widespread perception that Islam (as traditionally taught and practised) was contradicted by reason and modern science. His non-violent campaign of *çihad-i mânavî* ‘moral·spiritual Jihād’ for renewing faith and refreshing the centrality of the Qur’an for the religious life of modern Turks was manifested through the literary device of his non-stop stream of essays, epistles, letters, and treatises over the period of 1925–1945. These were written in literary Ottoman Turkish using Arabic script (after 1928, the Kemalist regime had enforced the Latin script), helping to preserve and nurture a precious link with the great Islamic legacy of Ottoman times, and became known collectively as *Risale-i Nur /Epistle of Light*.

Nursi’s *Risale-i Nur* campaign consisted of hand-copying and privately distributing through informal networks thousands of copies of his writings. A large number of pieces were written out by children, women and the elderly; and copies would be smuggled to him for his review and corrections. Nursi placed great stress on this self-sacrificing service of copying and disseminating, well aware of the risks involved. His followers were continuously watched by state authorities and their homes searched for any traces of his writings, possession of which brought imprisonment. Around 1947 two duplicating machines were acquired for reproducing his writings, and some of the pieces were put into the Latin alphabet of modern Turkish. Istanbul and Ankara became major centres of distribution among university students and young professionals, including army officers and bureaucrats. In 1956 the courts finally lifted legal restrictions on its publication; and in 1957 the *Risale* was finally printed on modern presses in Latin script.

Moral·spiritual Jihād. Nursi’s view of Positive Action meant the patient, silent struggle to strengthen faith stressing mutual consultation, cooperation and consensus, brotherhood of faith, and cultivating the collective personality of the faithful with shared aims of self-sacrifice and service. He grounded his understanding of peaceable *Jihād* upon essential Qur’anic teachings. The unique function of the method of his letter-writing campaign was to solidify the renewal of belief and revitalization of Islam. This method had few counterparts in the Islamic world, where attempts to serve and promote Islam were often by direct, violent or political methods. (It is interesting that Nursi’s nonviolent campaign took place roughly at the same time that Abdul Ghaffar Khan pursued his ‘Servants of God’ campaign against British occupation in NW India.)

Nursi stressed: “the conscience is illuminated by the religious sciences, and the mind is illuminated by the sciences of civilization. ...The religious sciences are the light of the conscience, and the modern sciences are the light of the reason. The truth becomes manifest through the combining of the two.” Throughout the *Epistle* evidence for the reasoned proofs for truths of Faith are taken from the scientific understanding of the functioning of the universe, for Science & reason conform and confirm Faith & religion.

Nursi described his path in these terms: “*the fundamental way of the Risale-i Nur is true sincerity*”—namely complete *ikhhlāṣ* and selfless service, deep *taqwā* ‘God-mindfulness’, and a positive service of belief which preserves public order and stability. This is actually the essence of nonviolent action, understood at a deep level as the purest method for Islamic persuasion and reform. As Nursi stated in his last instructions given on 30th December 1959 in Ankara:¹

The essential matter at this time is *cihad-i mânavî /the spiritual-moral jihad*. It is to form a barrier against moral and spiritual destruction, and to assist internal order and security with all our strength. ...The most important condition of *the spiritual-moral jihad* is not interfering in God’s concerns; that is: ‘Our duty is to serve, its results are Almighty God’s concern. We are charged with carrying out our duty, and are obliged to do so.’ ...It is not material or physical service that is needed, but non-physical and moral. For this reason we do not interfere with politicians, nor have politicians any right to busy themselves with us!

Bediüzzaman’s life was marked by great perseverance and self-sacrifice, flowing from a remarkable individual of tremendous inner resources. In his last years around 80 years of age, despite his rapidly increasing recognition and influence, Nursi curtailed the number of persons he met with, primarily receiving only those concerned with the publication of his *Risale-i Nur*. This was due to his severe discomfiture arising from the excessive respect and veneration shown him by visitors, and from his innate need to maintain absolute sincerity. On one of his last visits to Konya in December 1959 Nursi prayed at the tomb of Jalaluddin Rumi, surrounded by police charged with monitoring him at all times and restricting his contact with people. On emerging, he told the police:²

¹ *Bediüzzaman Said Nursi’s Interpretation of Jihad in the Modern Age: ‘Jihad of the Word’ and ‘Positive Action’* (Istanbul, Sozler Publications, n.d.).

² Şukran Vahide, *Author of the Risale-i Nur* p. 367.

Thank you! It is torment for me to have my hands kissed, and you prevented it. For twenty-eight years I have served this country's peace and security with imprisonment, torture, detention, and oppression. You serve its order and security physically, while I serve it in a non-material way. We have served it as much as a thousand public prosecutors and police chiefs, so look upon us as fellow-officials, not in any other way. And tell this to your fellow police.

Nursi's message of non-violent peaceful resistance, self-sacrifice and service left an indelible legacy working itself out within the current social and political life of that country. The preservation of Islamic awareness and faith-practice in Republican Turkey was largely due to this singular campaign. Arabic, Urdu and English translations of his writings continue to exercise a quiet ripple effect within many Muslim circles worldwide; while the F. GÜLEN organization with its educational and cultural global mission is a direct offshoot of Nursi's life-work.

IN his will Nursi had wished for an unknown grave. He died in Urfa (NE Turkey) on 23rd March 1960 / 25th Ramadan 1379, and was interred by the population of this ancient town in its most sacred shrine – beside the grave of Abraham. An official record states that his total possessions at death were: 551 Turkish liras & 50 kuruş, a watch, gown, shawl, prayer mat, tea pot and glasses. However, 3½ months later in July 1960, the newly installed military government moved his body under secrecy at night from Urfa to an unknown site. His brother Abdülmecid was brought by the military from Konya to assist in identifying the corpse; at that time he confirmed that Nursi was in a perfect state of incorruptibility: his face smiling with a sweet odor emanating from the body. Physical immunity from decay is taken in many cultures to indicate great sanctity, and has been documented for certain advanced spiritual initiates across the centuries.



Works by Nursi Said : •*Risale-i Nur* or *Lem'alar /The Flashes*. : Go to <http://saidnur.com/>
•*The Supreme Sign*, trans. Hamid Algar (Berkeley CA, 1979). / •an unfinished tafsir in Arabic:
Işârâtü l-I'caz fi Mazânni' l-Icaz /Signs of Miraculousness (Istanbul: Sözleryayınevi, 1978).

Necmeddin Şahiner, *Said Nursî ve Nurculuk Hakkında Aydınlar Konuşuyor*, 2nd ed. (Istanbul, 1979).

Şukran Vahide, *The Author of the Risale-i Nur: Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Istanbul, Szler Publications, 1992). & her *Islam in modern Turkey: an intellectual biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press Press, 2005).

Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1989).