

Humanity and Brotherhood: A Brief Study of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and his *Risale-i-Nur*

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Abstract: The whole humanity that is currently in deep crisis shall not attain peace and happiness until and unless it is truly united from within. That is only promising if the teachings of Islam at large especially those related to the concept of brotherhood are followed in their real spirit. Negation of these values leads to chaos and confusion in the whole society; and that is what the human beings are witnessing at the moment. This bond on the one hand solves the worldly problems and on the other hand is the cause of Allah's pleasure to Whom social status, national superman-ship and racial origin are irrelevant. He created all human beings as equal from a single parenthood. Allah has put responsibilities on the Muslims not only to recognize and protect the rights of other Muslims but of non-Muslims as well. It is for this reason that Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1877-1960) describes 'brotherhood' as the vital component of Islam to cure the grievous sicknesses besetting the humanity in general and the Muslim community in particular. Focusing on these values, the paper is an attempt to study and highlight the ties and relationships as established by Allah in the context of *Risale-i-Nur* of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi.

Key words: Islam • Faith • Said Nursi • *Risale-i-Nur* • Humanity • Brotherhood • Unity

INTRODUCTION

Life and Works of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: a Brief Survey

Old Said: The current political landscape of the world in general and of Turkey in particular is entirely different from what it was in the 19th century. Said Nursi witnessed a diverse political changes coupled with varied philosophies like Secularism, Socialism, Capitalism and Communism. In the last two centuries, Nursi visited three eras distinctive from one another-Ottoman Empire and its decline; era of Constitutionalism; and the establishment of modern Republic of Turkey [1]. He not only witnessed these major transformations, but himself participated in many of such events that had a huge impact on the world. In short, throughout his life, he encountered various cultures, ideologies and treatments that in turn in one way or the other had a profound bearing on his thought as well [2].

Famous as Bediuzzaman, Wonder of the Age, Said Nursi was born on 1876 in a village called Nurs, in the city of Bitlis located in eastern Anatolia. However, there is a difference regarding his date of birth as some of the

biographers have mentioned his date of birth as 1873 and 1878 [3, 2]. Molla Fatah Allah of Siirt presented him the title Bediüzzaman because of his exceptional ability and the speed with which he mastered different sciences. He was called Nursi in relation to his birth place-Nurs. His father's name was Mirza and mother's Nure [4, 2]. From the very outbreak Said Nursi's personality reflected extraordinary intelligence, unusual memory and tremendous talent toward learning.

He received his early education in nearby provinces and when aged ten, he for the first time left his home in pursuit of *madrasah* education. Said Nursi received his education from the leading *madâris* and adorned his scholarship by studying under the gambit of different '*Ulamâ*'. His level of intelligence and the speed with which he retained knowledge can be depicted from the fact that he at the very young age came to be counted among the renowned scholars. He caught the attention of one and all because of his colossal memory and extraordinary debating skills [5]. As the time passed Nursi's fame spread far and wide, with the result more and more people became attracted toward him. At the same time he also attracted the attention of government officials

as well who now began to invite him to their own residences. In the same vein, governor Hasan Pasha invited him in 1897 to Van where he resided for a long period of about ten years. Out of these ten years, he spent one year with Hasan Pasha and the remaining nine years with the newly appointed governor Tahir Pasha. Making full use of Tahir Pasha's rich library, Said Nursi mastered all the physical and mathematical sciences there [2].

Said Nursi manifested a total discontent with the prevailing *maktab* and *madrakah* education system of the country. The former was concerned with the modern sciences and the later with religious sciences. For him religious education was the 'light of conscience' and modern education the 'light of mind' and by combining the two 'truth' becomes apparent and if separated then the former gives rise to 'skepticism' and latter to 'fanaticism' [4]. Said Nursi vehemently endeavored to hook up and catenulate the two systems. It is in this regard that he came out with a proposal of establishing university in eastern Anatolia, where both religious and modern education would go hand and glove. He named the university *Madresatü'z Zehrâ* and modeled it to that of Al-Azhar University of Cairo. Although the university's foundation was laid in 1913, but due to the vicissitudes of the times (World War I) the dream seen was never accomplished.

In early 1911, Said Nursi went to Damascus which at that time was recognized as the hub of intellectual activities and the center of well-known Islamic scholars. Here, Said Nursi gave a sermon at the Umayyad Mosque before a huge gathering that included about one hundred Islamic scholars as well. In the sermon, he concentrated on some of basic problems the Muslim *Ummah* was confronted with and presented remedies for them. This historical sermon was, later on, published under the title *The Damascus Sermon* [6].

When the World War I broke out, Said Nursi voluntarily participated in it and commanded the militia forces against the invaders—Russians. For the protection of his land, he formulated a team composed of his students and volunteers. In the ongoing battle, he never feared rather led from the front and scorned to enter the trenches. It was during this period that Said Nursi began writing the commentary of the *Qur'ân* titled *Ishârat al-I'jâz* (Signs of Miraculousness) [2]. Said Nursi after being wounded in Bitlis was caught by the Russians who imprisoned him in the camp of Kostroma for about two years. But he somehow managed to flee from the camp and returned to Istanbul in 1918 through Poland, Germany and Bulgaria.

On his return to Istanbul, he was given a warm welcome and was received with the highest honor by the officials. The government appointed him as the member of *Dâr al-ikmah al-Islâmiyyah* (Islamic House of Wisdom). It was an academy established with a purpose of finding the solutions to the growing problems of the *Ummah*. In the new environment Said Nursi not only completed his already taken endeavor *Ishârat al-I'jâz* but also produced some other works like *Lemât*, *Sünûhât*, *Münâzarât*, *Tûlûât* etc [2].

On the other side, during the same period, the country witnessed varied developments—the end of Ottoman Empire, occupation of Istanbul and other parts by the British and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. These developments had a profound bearing on the life and thought of Said Nursi. The period from his birth up to 1920 was the period of Old Said (*Eski Said*) that afterwards was followed by the emergence of what is called as New Said (*Yeni Said*). These couple of years proved vital in total transformation of the ideology and thought of Said Nursi—the second chief period of his life.

Transition: Old Said to New Said: Notwithstanding the British occupation, Said Nursi himself supported the independence movements with full vigor and came out with many write-ups regarding the dangers of the occupation. Recognizing the services he had rendered to the independence movements; the newly established parliament invited him to Ankara. Said Nursi at the beginning supported the newly established regime but after spending a good chunk of time with the officials like Mustafa Kemal, he became disappointed seeing the fashioning of the new government on the lines of Western ideals. Declining all the offers and benefits from the government, he left Ankara for Van in 1923 and preferred to live a life of thought, contemplation and prayer [4].

In the year 1925, a rebellion broke out against the government in the eastern provinces. Although Said Nursi had been never involved in it, still the authorities exiled him to western Anatolia. The newly established state feared day in and day out because of his growing popularity and charismatic persona and with the result they began to isolate him from the masses. The authorities sensing threat to their own power and to their westernized and secularized mentality started to restrain his activities. [7, 2]. He lived the rest of his life's long 35 years in exile, suppression and imprisonment. Thus in this way a new chapter was unraveled in the life of Said Nursi.

At first, Said Nursi was deported to Barla—a small village in Isparta province—and was banned from interacting with the masses of that place. This period in his life was the period of transition and its reflection had started very earlier at the time when he had escaped from the clutches of Russians and returned to Istanbul. The transition from Old Said to New Said was according to Markham and Pirim “a passage from the restlessness of rivers to the stillness of oceans” [2]. Here in Barla the New Said embarked on his *magnum opus* work *Risale-i-Nur* (The Treatises of Light). It is the collection of the writings of New Said. The work is presented in his four major books *Sozler* (The Words); *Mektûbat* (The Letters); *Lem’alar* (The Flashes); and *Sualar* (The Rays). He spent almost nine years in Barla and in the same place composed major portion of his work. The whole endeavor had entirely a reverse impact on the government’s ill designs. In this regard Vahide mentions:

Contrarily to what the government had intended, the remoteness of Barla and Nursi’s isolation did not cause him to sink into obscurity, but provided him with an environment conducive to thought and writing [4].

In Barla Nursi was kept under tight vigilance and was also cut off from the people of the region, still he managed to receive help from the locals’ *vis-à-vis* transcribing *Risale-i-Nur* and later on multiplying it by hand. With slow degrees took place the dissemination of his treatises among the masses and the demand of the hand written copies increased manifolds with the advancement of time [2]. Copying and thereof their multiplication was done in a clandestine way that too in remote areas in the hundreds of houses behind curtains. Thus in this way a new movement emerged that aimed in the words of Vahide “to save and renew the religious belief of large numbers of people” [4].

The authorities after smelling danger imprisoned Said Nursi in 1935 on the charges of forming a subversive organization. In the following year he was exiled to Kastamonu where he spent about next seven or eight years of his life. The persecution at the hands of the authorities, designed to bring an end to his activities, rather helped him to remain dedicated and steadfast toward his mission. It was this place where Said Nursi produced one more significant work titled *The Supreme Sign*.

In 1943, Said Nursi was again imprisoned along with his students for a year in Denizli. The court in Denizli discovered nothing subversive in the *Risale-i-Nur* after examining it minutely and thus, gave the verdict in favor of Said Nursi, his students and 130 pieces of the *Risale-i-Nur* [2].

In spite of the court’s verdict nothing changed on the ground level as Said Nursi was again exiled to Afyon wherein, in the year 1948, the court of Afyon reversed the decision of the court of Denizli and sentenced Said Nursi for an imprisonment of 20 months. The prison conditions in Afyon were worst as Said Nursi recalls this period as the toughest of experiences in his life.

In the year 1950, the country’s political setting changed dramatically. Elections were held in which Democrat Party won comprehensively. After establishing the power, the new government at the earliest granted a general amnesty to Said Nursi and others. Finally, he was freed not fully but to a certain degree from a rigorous and relentless period of oppression. Easing off from the period of persecution helped Said Nursi to spread-out his activities in the remaining ten years (1950-60) of his life. He spent final days of his life in Urfa a city in south eastern Turkey. The world witnessed a great tragedy when Said Nursi breathed his last on 23 March 1960 [2].

Humanity, Universal Brotherhood and *Risale-i-Nur*:

Mankind, currently in deep crisis, is continuously in search of eternal peace. The modern world fulfilled the human needs and desires. But the same world that focused on materialism, scientific advancement and technological know-how failed to provide even a single ray of light to satisfy his spiritual needs. It failed not because of advancement and progress in science and technology but because of moral perversion and absence of mutual cooperation. The anomie has given rise to individualism that in turn has led to the repudiation of social responsibilities altogether. This volatile situation heads toward the disintegration of ‘social system’ and ‘family structure’. Consequently, the fragmentation of humanity on the basis of nationality, color, language, or caste closes the doors of social relations on one side and denigrates the concept of universal brotherhood of Islam on the other. Islam never divides humanity on the grounds of these hollow slogans, rather it perfectly safeguards humanity from fragmentation and discord through its as:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا

O Mankind! We have created you from a male and a female and have made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another [7].

The *Qur'an* clearly and patently proclaims that the single pair heralded the beginning of humanity and all the human beings who came in the past or who persist this time sprung from this pair. This is the message of universal brotherhood and it fundamentally rests on: a) all human beings are the servants of Allah; b) all are created from a single pair. After declaring equality of human beings, the very principle of universal brotherhood wipes out altogether hatred and discord that subsists among them. Rejecting groupings on the basis of color, caste or nationality, Islam reckons such a distinction the outcome of sheer ignorance.

Said Nursi discarded fragmentation of humanity on the levels as mentioned above and fought relentlessly to enlighten the whole society with the pearls of harmony, tranquility and peace. He time and again invoked the Muslims to “save humanity of the world from corruption, deviation from the right path and absolute infidelity” [8]. From his teachings one can clearly understand that he never believed in these false views; rather desired to bring the whole humanity toward concordance. It is further clarified from the point that he views non-Muslims as the potential allies of the Muslims in spreading peace and justice in the society and acknowledges the positive qualities of the human beings irrespective of their affiliations [6]. His own life coupled with his teachings signifies that he aimed at a better and prosperous society for one and all. It is in this direction that Said Nursi calls for Muslim-Christian dialogue and a combine effort to eliminate atheism, materialism and other vices that corrupt the society. He believes that they should identify the evil forces present in the society who not only spread hatred and tyranny but also destroy the very basic virtues and values [9].

The dream for a wealthy and prosperous society or for the establishment of universal brotherhood according to Said Nursi rests on the fundamental principles of Islam that primarily need to be followed in their real spirit. He opposes and discredits the society based on materialistic principles, tendencies and values. He points out that such a philosophy would certainly lead toward dispute, discord, obstinance and conflict and finally the

ultimate destruction of humanity. He called the entire humanity to realize the dream of establishing the ‘just society’ by adhering and pursuing the values of universal brotherhood in the same way as enshrined in Islam [9]. If someone calls the mankind to adopt the values that contradict the very Islamic one then as per Said Nursi:

... he cannot be successful in beneficial works and in progress. All his acts come to serve the interests of evil and destruction. ... I am a person against despotism ... [and] support total justice with all my strength and oppose tyranny, oppression, arbitrary power and despotism [10].

Condemning the bonds based on ‘racialism’ and ‘nationalism’ he holds that such ideologies obliterate the peace and happiness of mankind and act as a mark of differentiation. On the other hand for him Islam is a source that not only urges man to the human perfections but also acts as a mark of ‘brotherhood’ and ‘attraction’ [11].

Said Nursi in his *Risale-i-Nur* has touched at length the values held by the West. He very much acknowledges some of its values viz the scientific progress and industrial development meant for the common goodness and service of humanity, but on the other side he also criticizes vehemently its corrupt values that has driven mankind to vice and misguidance. Addressing the West Said Nursi says:

... I said to Europe’s collective personality, which apart from beneficial science and the virtues of civilization, holds in its hand meaningless, harmful philosophy ... You hold a diseased and misguided philosophy in your right hand and a harmful and corrupt civilization in your left and claim, “Mankind’s happiness is with these two!” [10].

In short, Said Nursi rejects the differentiation and fragmentation of the humanity on the false and brickle grounds and holds that man’s superiority is concealed in his ‘elevated qualities’ ‘comprehensive abilities’ and ‘universal worship.’

Brotherhood among Believers, Unity and *Risale-i-Nur*: Brotherhood between believers is entirely different from that what has been discussed in the preceding pages. It is the bond based strictly on the acceptance of *Faith* (Islam) and it is none other than Allah Who has established this relation between the believers. In this connection the *Qur'ân* explicitly states:

إِنَّمَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ إِخْوَةٌ

The believers are nothing else than brothers [12]

For Said Nursi this brotherhood is a divine tie and the prerequisite for the establishment of such a bond is to become a 'believer' which connotes to believe in the Oneness of Allah, in the Messengership of Muhammad (peace be upon him) and in the *Qur'ân* as the revealed book of Allah. Nursi has expressed his deep concern over the current situation of *Ummah* as he verbalized that it still stands on the threshold of Middle Ages. According to him 'love of enmity' and 'ignorance of luminous or divine bonds' [13] which bind faithful together are the two basic sicknesses, among six others, responsible for the current affairs be it social, political, or economic of the Muslims. While highlighting the significance of these luminous bonds, he presents the *Ayat* "*The believers are nothing else than brothers*" and the *Hadith* of Muhammad (peace be upon him) "*None of you believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself*" [14]. He further says that how it is possible to abandon these two ordains. Moreover the *Qur'ân* lionizes repeatedly the issue of brotherhood and unity. For example in the below *Ayat*:

إِنَّ هَذِهِ أُمَّتُكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَأَنَا رَبُّكُمْ فَاعْبُدُونِ

Truly, this, your Ummah [Sharī'ah or religion (Islāmic Monotheism)] is one religion and I am your Lord, therefore worship Me (Alone) [15].

The whole scheme of the things is further illustrated and highlighted at one more place in the *Qur'ân* as:

وَأَعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا وَاذْكُرُوا نِعْمَةَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ كُنْتُمْ أَعْدَاءً فَأَلَّفَ بَيْنَ قُلُوبِكُمْ فَأَصْبَحْتُمْ بِنِعْمَتِهِ إِخْوَانًا وَكُنْتُمْ عَلَى شَفَا حُفْرَةٍ مِنَ النَّارِ فَأَنْقَذَكُمْ مِنْهَا كَذَلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ آيَاتِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ

And hold fast, all of you together, to the rope of Allah (i.e. this Qur'ân) and be not divided among yourselves and remember Allah's Favour on you, for you were enemies to one another but He joined your hearts together, so that, by His Grace, you became brethren (in Islamic Faith) and you were on the brink of a pit of Fire and He saved you from it. Thus Allah makes His Ayât (proofs, evidences, verses, lessons, signs, revelations, etc.,) clear to you, that you may be guided [16].

The message in these *Ayât* is crystal clear connoting that the relations, ties and bonds established by Allah are critical in every respect than those fashioned by the human beings themselves. It also presages that the establishment of brotherhood amounts to the establishment of unity. The aforementioned *Ayât* commands Muslims to be in congregation and prohibits them from dispute. Therefore the *Qur'ānic* injunctions time and again urge Muslims to build unity, cooperation and concordance and heavily interdict them from disunity and discord. This brotherhood between the Muslims serves two major purposes: a) to know responsibilities of one another; b) to

establish unity. In fact the very basic idea of Islamic pillars is to foster unity among the believers and thereof develop in them the sense of assisting their fellow believers.

Said Nursi dedicated his whole life for establishing the unity among the Muslims as envisaged in the *Qur'ân*. The same becomes apparent by quoting excerpts of the defense speech he delivered in the Court of Afyon in which he said:

Yes, we are a society . . . which every century has had . . . Every day through the five obligatory prayers, its members demonstrate with complete

... veneration their attachment to the principles of that sacred society. Through the sacred programme of *The believers are but a single brotherhood*, they hasten to assist one another with their prayers and spiritual gains. We are members of that sacred, vast society and our particular duty is to teach the believers in certain, verified fashion the Qur'anic truths of belief and save them and ourselves from eternal extinction and everlasting solitary confinement in the Intermediate Realm [17].

In the above verbatim by giving reference of the prayers Said Nursi's points out the underpinning wisdom brotherhood and unity behind offering *allah*. It can be put forward that the activities enjoined by Islam are meant to vitalize the mutual relations between the Muslims and thus strengthen the unity. While lionizing the essence brotherhood, mutual concordance and unity, he puts forth the example of another fundamental pillar of Islam *haji* and says:

... neglecting the Pilgrimage and its wisdom has brought, not calamity, but the Divine Wrath and Power (Qahr) over them. And its penalty did not expiate sins, but rather made our sins excessive. It is neglecting the sublime politics of Islam and the extensive social benefits of the Pilgrimage, which includes and assures especially the unity of opinions, the consensus, through knowing each other as brethren and cooperation through mutual assistance ... [8].

The realization of the *Ummah* is possible only if brotherhood is established thoroughly and meticulously. In fact, there is no doubt that this sacred and noble bond will help the Muslims to build in the terminology of the *Qur'an bunyânum marû* (solid cemented structure). According to Said Nursi the connection between the Muslims is in fact a luminous chain and "the groups of Islam are bound and connected to one another through Islamic brotherhood. They assist one another morally and, if necessary, materially. It is as if all the groups of Islam are bound to each other with a luminous chain" [13]. Brotherhood, unity and Islamic society are the three entities indispensable to one another. Said Nursi compares the Islamic society with a huge army divided into different groups. Illustrating further the point he opines:

Its groups' Creator is one and the same, their Provider is one and the same, their Prophet is one and the same, their *qibla* is one and the same, their Book is one and the same, their country is one and the same; all [all] the same, a thousand things are one and the same. Thus, this many things being one and the same requires brotherhood, love and unity [18].

Actually from this description, what Said Nursi tries to point out is that in an Islamic society presence of different entities is inevitable in the same way as is in the huge army but they should not be meant for division and disintegration or to spread hostility and acrimony rather should act as a spring to know and assist one another.

For Said Nursi, the strengthening of the ties between the believers is divinely ordained duty that is to be carried out submissively and dutifully and all the attempts and endeavors aimed at dividing the believers are strictly ruled out by Allah. He substantiates his opinion by mentioning that Allah says: "*And hold fast, all of you together, to the rope of Allah and be not divided among yourselves*" [19].

He highlights the disease of the Muslim world on one side and the outcome of neglecting the divine prohibition on the other side. He says that what is required if we have to get rid of this lethal infection the disease of being at variance is to reflect on "*do not dispute lest you lose courage and your strength departs*" [20] and obey His orders to "*Help one another in virtue, righteousness and piety*" [21]. He goes on to say that: "then to know how much damage is caused to Islam and to Muslims by dispute and how this dispute makes the people of misguidance surpass the people of the right and then to join the convoy of faith that seeks the truth [17]."

The issue at stake, discord and disunity, compelled Said Nursi to make earnest efforts so as to establish and strengthen brotherhood and unity between the Muslims. For him the task was the most obligatory one on the shoulders of the Muslims. His sermon made in Damascus particularly emphasized the vitality of brotherhood and unity. To give maturity to the point made above it will be appropriate and fitting to quote few lines of the sermon below:

The obligatory act of greatest importance at the present time is Islamic Unity. While the aim and goal of Unity [or the Muhammadan Union] is to stir into life the long, many-branched, far-reaching luminous chain which binds together the centres of Islam and

their places of worship, to arouse those bound to it and through the wishes and promptings of their consciences drive them to the way of progress. The way of this Union is love; its enmity is only for ignorance, poverty and strife [13].

In short Said Nursi views that the ties between the believers (brotherhood) are an unvarying and constant link not only within a specific group present in Anatolia or Istanbul but within the entire Muslim Nation. For him the contract of brotherhood established by Allah is not restricted to the particulars but for all those who firmly believe in Islam.

CONCLUSION

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi—the Turkish religio-spiritual reformer—flourished in a time when the world witnessed a heavy onslaught of corrupt and mischievous philosophies of west like materialism, atheism, nationalism and hedonism. Said Nursi launched a vehement literary campaign (especially through his *Risale-i-Nur*) against these doctrines to check their impact on the Muslim populace, thereby building a strong fortification against the attacks to unbelief and moral decadence. He contributed multifariously to the Muslim society and yearned for the overall development of Muslims (particularly of his native land, Turkey) while keeping strict to their faith. Despite spending thirty five years in prison and exile, he remained steadfast in his mission of enlightening the Muslim world while checking the ingression of the corrupt and false theories regarding the Creator and purpose of the creation. Highlighting the importance of faith (*Îmân*), brotherhood and unity, Said Nursi demanded the pragmatic appearance of these aspects at collective as well as individual levels. In the contemporary times, Said Nursi's teachings and literary works apart from being highly esteemed and admired, receive a vast arena of readers not only within the spheres of Muslim world but beyond it as well.

The existing state affairs persistent in the highly modernized and technologically sound world, demands the Muslims to rise to the occasion and advocate the truths of the *Qur'ân* as being universal in nature, save the mankind from the corruptions of atheism, infidelity and disbelief and establish the Islamic brotherhood in its real sense and spirit. Need of the hour is to embark on the revivifications of

Said Nursi (put forth in light of the *Qur'ân*) on pragmatic basis at individual as well as collective level. The relevance and viability of the approach upheld by Said Nursi toward understanding the problems of the world in general and the Muslim Nation in particular and their solutions from the *Qur'ânic weltanschauung* create an appealing environment for every stratum of the society to understand it with greater depth and consciousness.

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