

A BRIEF LOOK AT BEDIUZZAMAN SAID NURSI'S LIFE AND THE RISALE-I NUR

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi was born in 1877 in eastern Turkey and died in 1960 in Urfa in Turkey. Readers may refer to his biography for details of his long and exemplary life, which spanned the last decades of the Ottoman Empire, its collapse after the First World War and the setting up of the Republic, then the twenty-five years of Republican Peoples' Party rule, well-known for the measures taken against Islam, followed by the ten years of Democrat rule, when conditions eased a little for Bediuzzaman.

Bediuzzaman displayed an extraordinary intelligence and ability to learn from an early age, completing the normal course of medrese (religious school) education at the early age of fourteen, when he obtained his diploma. He became famous for both his prodigious memory and his unbeaten record in debating with other religious scholars. Another characteristic Bediuzzaman displayed from an early age was an instinctive dissatisfaction with the existing education system, which when older he formulated into comprehensive proposals for its reform. The heart of these proposals was the bringing together and joint teaching of the traditional religious sciences and the modern sciences, together with the founding of a university in the Eastern Provinces of the Empire, the Medresetü'z- Zehra, where this and his other proposals would be put into practice. In 1907 his endeavours in this field took him to Istanbul and an audience with Sultan Abdulhamid. Although subsequently he twice received funds for the construction of his university, and its foundations were laid in 1913, it was never completed due to war and the vicissitudes of the times.

Contrary to the practice of religious scholars at that time, Bediuzzaman himself studied and mastered almost all the physical and mathematical sciences, and later studied philosophy, for he believed that it was only in this way that Islamic theology (kalâm) could be renewed and successfully answer the attacks to which the Qur'an and Islam were then subject.

In the course of time, the physical sciences had been dropped from medrese education, which had contributed directly to the Ottoman decline relative to the advance of the West. Now, in the 19th and early 20th

centuries, Europe had gained dominance over the Islamic world, and in efforts to extend its dominance, was attacking the Qur'an and Islam in the name of science and progress in particular, falsely claiming them to be incompatible.

Within the Empire too was a small minority which favoured adopting Western philosophy and civilization. Thus, all Bediuzzaman's endeavour was to prove and demonstrate the falseness of these accusations, and that far from being incompatible with science and progress, the Qur'an was the source of true progress and civilization, and in addition, since this was the case, Islam would dominate the future, despite its relative decline and regression at that time.

The years up to the end of the First World War were the final decades of the Ottoman Empire and were, in the words of Bediuzzaman, the period of the 'Old Said'. In additions to his endeavours in the field of learning, he served the cause of the Empire and Islam through active involvement in social life and the public domain. In the War, he commanded the militia forces on the Caucasian Front against the invading Russians, for which he as later awarded a War Medal. To maintain the morale of his men he himself disdained to enter the trenches inspite of the constant shelling, and it was while withstanding the overwhelming assaults of the enemy that he wrote his celebrated Qur'anic commentary, Signs of Miraculousness, dictating to a scribe while on horseback. Stating that the Qur'an encompasses the sciences which make known the physical world, the commentary is an

original and important work which in Bediuzzaman's words, forms a sort model for commentaries he hoped would be written in the future, which would bring together the religious and modern sciences in the way he proposed. Bediuzzaman was taken prisoner in March 1916 and held in Russia for two years before escaping in early 1918, and returning to Istanbul via Warsaw, Berlin, and Vienna.

The defeat of the Ottomans saw the end of the Empire and its dismemberment, and the occupation of Istanbul and parts of Turkey by foreign forces. These bitter years saw also the transformation of the Old

Said into the New Said, the second main period of Bediuzzaman's life. Despite the acclaim he received and services he performed as a member of the Darü'l-Hikmeti'l-Islamiye, a learned body attached to the Shaykhu'l-Islam's Office, and combatting the British, Bediuzzaman underwent a profound mental and spiritual change in the process of which he turned his back on the world. Realizing the inadequacy of the 'human' science and philosophy he had studied as a means of reaching the truth, he took the revealed Qur'an as his 'sole guide.' In recognition of his services to the Independence Struggle, Bediuzzaman was invited to Ankara by Mustafa Kemal, but on arrival there, found that at the very time of the victory of the Turks and Islam, atheistic ideas were being propagated among the Deputies and officials, and many were lax in performing their religious duties. He published various works which successfully countered this.

Remaining some eight months in Ankara, Bediuzzaman understood the way Mustafa Kemal and the new leaders were going to take, and on the one hand that he could not work alongside them, and on the other that they were not to be combatted in the realm of politics. When offered various posts and benefits by Mustafa Kemal, he declined them and left Ankara for Van, where he withdrew into a life of worship and contemplation; he was seeking the best way to proceed.

Within a short time, Bediuzzaman's fears about the new regime began to be realized: the first steps were taken towards secularization and reducing the power of Islam within the state, and even its eradication from Turkish life. In early 1925 there was a rebellion in the east in which Bediuzzaman played no part, but as a consequence of which was sent into exile in western Anatolia along with many hundreds of others. Thus unjustly began twenty-five years of exile, imprisonment, and unlawful oppression for Bediuzzaman. He was sent to Barla, a tiny village in the mountains of Isparta Province. However, the attempt to entirely isolate and silence him had the reverse effect, for Bediuzzaman was both prepared and uniquely qualified to face the new challenge: these years saw the writing of the Risale-i Nur, which silently spread and took root, combatting in the most constructive way the attempt to uproot Islam, and the unbelief and materialist philosophy it was hoped to instil in the Muslim people of Turkey.

The Risale-i Nur

As the New Said, Bediuzzaman had immersed himself in the Qur'an, searching for a way to relate its truths to modern man. In Barla in his isolation he began to write treatises explaining and proving these truths, for now the Qur'an itself and its truths were under direct attack. The first of these was on the Resurrection of the Dead, which in a unique style, proves bodily Resurrection rationally, where even the greatest scholars previously had confessed their impotence. He described the method employed in this as consisting of three stages: first God's existence is proved, and His Names and attributes, then the Resurrection of the Dead is 'constructed' on these and proved.

With these writings, Bediuzzaman opened up a new, direct way to reality (haqiqat) and knowledge of God which he described as the highway of the Qur'an and way of the Companions of the Prophet

(PBUH) through the 'legacy of Prophethood,' which gains for those who follow it 'true and certain belief.' He did not ascribe the writings to himself, but said they proceeded from the Qur'an itself, were 'rays shining out of from [its] truths.'

Thus, rather than being a Qur'anic commentary which expounds all its verses giving the immediate reasons for their revelation and the apparent meanings of the words and sentences, the Risale-i Nur is what is known as a mânevî tefsir, or commentary which expounds the meaning of the Qur'anic truths. For there are various sorts of commentaries. The verses mostly expounded in the Risale-i Nur are those concerned with the truths of belief, such as the Divine Names and attributes and the Divine activity in the universe, the Divine existence and Unity, resurrection, prophethood, Divine Determining or destiny, and man's duties of worship. Bediuzzaman explains how the Qur'an addresses all men in every age in accordance with the degree of their understanding and development; it has a face that looks to each age. The Risale-i Nur, then, explains that face of the Qur'an which looks to this age. We shall now look at further aspects of the Risale-i Nur related to this point.

In numerous of its verses, the Holy Qur'an invites man to observe the

universe and reflect on the Divine activity within it; following just this method, Bediuzzaman provides proofs and explanations for the truths of belief. He likens the universe to a book, and looking at it in the way shown by the Qur'an, that is, 'reading' it for its meaning, learns of the Divine Names and attributes and other truths of belief. The book's purpose is to describe its Author and Maker; beings become evidences and signs to their Creator. Thus, an important element in the way of the Risale-i Nur is reflection or contemplation (tefekür), 'reading' the Book of the Universe in order to increase in knowledge of God and to obtain 'true and certain belief' in all the truths of belief.

Bediuzzaman demonstrates that the irrefutable truths, such as Divine Unity, arrived at in this way are the only rational and logical explanation of the universe, and making comparisons with Naturalist and Materialist philosophy which have used science's findings about the universe to deny those truths, show the concepts on which they are based, such as causality and Nature, to be irrational and logically absurd.

Indeed, far from contradicting them, in uncovering the order and working of the universe, science broadens and deepens knowledge of the truths of belief. In the Risale-i Nur many descriptions of the Divine activity in the universe are looked at through the eyes of science, and reflect Bediuzzaman's knowledge of it. The Risale-i Nur shows that there is no contradiction or conflict between religion and science.

In addition, all these matters discussed in the Risale-i Nur are set out as reasoned arguments and proved according to logic. All the most important of the truths of belief are proved so clearly that even unbelievers can see their necessity. And so too, inspired by the Qur'an, even the most profound and inaccessible truths are made accessible by means of comparisons, which bring them close to the understanding like telescopes, so that they are readily understandable by ordinary people and those with no previous knowledge of these questions.

Another aspect of the Risale-i Nur related to the face of the Qur'an which looks to this age, is that it explains everything from the point of view of wisdom; that is, as is mentioned again below, it explains the purpose of

everything. It considers things from the point of view of the Divine Name of All-Wise.

Also, following this method, in the *Risale-i Nur* Bediuzzaman solved many mysteries of religion, such as bodily resurrection and Divine Determining and man's will, and the riddle of the constant activity in the universe and the motion of particles, before which man relying on his own intellect and philosophy had been impotent.

While in Barla, Bediuzzaman put the treatise on Resurrection and the pieces that followed it together in the form of a collection and gave it the name of *Sozler* (The Words). The Words was followed by *Mektûbat* (Letters), a collection of thirty-three letters of varying lengths from Bediuzzaman to his students. And this was followed by *Lem'alar* (The Flashes Collection), and *Sualar* (The Rays), which was completed in 1949. Together with these are the three collections of Additional Letters, for each of Bediuzzaman's main places of exile, Barla Lahikasi, Kastamonu Lahikasi, and Emirdag Lahikasi.

The way the *Risale-i Nur* was written and disseminated was unique, like the work itself. Bediuzzaman would dictate at speed to a scribe, who would write down the piece in question with equal speed; the actual writing was very quick. Bediuzzaman had no books for reference and the writing of religious works was of course forbidden. They were all written therefore in the mountains and out in the countryside. Handwritten copies were then made, these were secretly copied out in the houses of the *Risale-i Nur* 'students,' as they were called, and passed from village to village, and then from town to town, till they spread throughout Turkey. Only in 1946 were *Risale-i Nur* students able to obtain duplicating machines, while it was not till 1956 that various parts were printed on modern presses in the new, Latin, script. The figure given for hand-written copies is 600,000.

It may be seen from the above figure how the *Risale-i Nur* movement spread within Turkey, despite all efforts to stop it. After 1950, the period of what Bediuzzaman called 'the Third Said,' there was a great increase in the number of students, particularly among the young and those who had been through the secular education system of the Republic. At the same

time the number of students outside Turkey increased.

Besides these powerful writings themselves, a major factor in the success of the movement may be attributed to the very method Bediuzzaman had chosen, which may be summarized with two phrases: ‘mânevî jihad,’ that is, ‘jihad of the word’ or ‘non-physical jihad’, and ‘positive action.’ For Bediuzzaman considered the true enemies in this age of science, reason, and civilization to be materialism and atheism, and their source, materialist philosophy. Thus just as he combatted and ‘utterly defeated’ these with the reasoned proofs of the Risale-i Nur, so through strengthening the belief of Muslims and raising it to the level of ‘true, verified belief,’ the Risale-i Nur was the most effective barrier against the corruption of society caused by these enemies. In order to be able to pursue this ‘jihad of the word,’ Bediuzzaman insisted that his students avoided any use of force and disruptive action. Through ‘positive action,’ and the maintenance of public order and security, the damage caused by the forces of unbelief could be ‘repaired’ by the healing truths of the Qur’an. And this is the way they have adhered to.