

PANEL

I

THE IDEAS OF BEDIUZZAMAN SAID NURSI IN THE THIRTIETH YEAR SINCE HIS DEATH AND THEIR PLACE IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT

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Contents

Foreword to the Turkish Edition	7
SAFÂ MÜRSEL	13
Opening Address	14
ŞERİF MARDİN	23
Bediuzzaman's Understanding of <i>Jihad</i> is Not Armed Struggle	24
MİM KEMAL ÖKE	29
Said Nursi and Britain's Psychological Warfare Against Ottoman Turkey, 1909-1922	30
İBRAHİM CÂNAN	45
Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's View of Civilization	47
ÂDEM TATLI	87
Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, the Representative of Contemporary Islamic Thinkers - His Approach to the Questions of Science and Technology	88
AHMET AKGÜNDÜZ	129
The Genius They Tried to Misrepresent	130
COLIN TURNER	147
The Risale-i Nur: A Revolution of Belief	148
M. SALİM ABDULLAH	161
My Meeting in the Spirit with Said Nursi	162
ŞÜKRAN VAHİDE	167
The Importance of the Risale-i Nur for the West	168
URSULA SPULER, Message to the Panel	179

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Professor Akgündüz was born in 1955 in Malkaya, where he attended the primary school. His father taught him Ottoman Turkish at this time. And while attending Gaziantep High School, he also learnt Arabic. Following his graduation from the Law Faculty in Istanbul University in 1982, he entered the Department of Civil Law in Dicle University Law Faculty as a research assistant and the same year began his post-graduate studies. Beginning his doctorate in November 1983 on 'Pious Foundations in Islamic Law and Ottoman Practice' under the supervision of Professor Halil Cin, in early 1985 he won a scholarship to go to Kuwait. He obtained his doctorate in August 1986 and was appointed to the Department of the History of Law in the Law Faculty in Selçuk University as a under assistant-professor. In the academic years 1984-5 and '85-6, Professor Akgündüz ran the History of Turkish Law and General Law History courses in Dicle University Law Faculty, and since 1986-7, in Selçuk Law Faculty. In the November 1986 term he passed the Assistant-Professorship language examinations in Arabic, and in the April 1987 term, those in English. On 3 November 1987 he became an Assistant-Professor and was appointed to the same faculty. Between 1986 and '88, Professor Akgündüz did research on Osmanlı Kanunnâmeleri (Ottoman Codes of Law) in the Ottoman Archives of the Prime Minister's Office, and has published ten books and numerous articles, pieces, and translations. In 1993 he was appointed Professor in the Law Faculty at Bilecik University. He knows English, Arabic, and Persian, and is married with two children.

A GENIUS THEY TRIED TO MISREPRESENT

Born in the village of Nurs in the sub-district of Hizan in the province of Bitlis in 1293 according to the Rumi calendar and 1877 according to the Christian era, Bediuzzaman died on 23 March 1960 in Urfa after a full life of eighty years. You should not therefore expect us to describe a genius and a regenerator of religion such as him satisfactorily in the short time allotted. But according to the rule, "Even if something is not obtained entirely, it should not be altogether abandoned," I would like to say a few words which resemble a few drops from the ocean. I shall summarize what I am going to say with the main headings.

I. The generations born under the Republic have been ill-informed about Bediuzzaman.

History shows us that the world of humanity has not appreciated the great, that is, foremost the prophets and their true heirs, scholars of religion, in their lifetimes. And after this, both their contemporaries and their descendents have paid the penalty for this lack of recognition. Just as almost all the prophets can be cited as examples of this claim of ours, so too Muslims scholars like Imam-ı A'zam and Ahmed ibn Hanbel are examples corroborating it. The best example in our own

century of those who have not been properly understood in their times is Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, the subject of this paper. There is someone who, although his profound knowledge of the Islamic sciences, and in particular his brilliant explanations of the truths of belief appropriate to this century's understanding, and his endeavours and struggles for the sake of Allah, religion and the Islamic nation which continued for eighty years in the way of truth are known about and appreciated throughout the Islamic world, he is still known wrongly or is wanted by others to be known wrongly in his own country; and that person is Bediuzzaman Said Nursi. Turkish scholars and enlightened researchers must put an end to this shameful situation as soon as possible, otherwise history will judge very unfavourably these who close their eyes and make the daytime into night for themselves.

The generations of the Republic are ill-informed about Bediuzzaman, or more correctly, using all its resources and chameleon-like intellectuals, the state has for years tried to misrepresent Bediuzzaman. As a result of the indoctrination, each generation born under the Republic, educated or uneducated, who does not know of his struggle, has not read his works or seen his students, on hearing the words, Bediuzzaman, Said Nursi, or the Risale-i Nur, has been sort of forced to imagine a Kurdish activist, a reactionary, and enemy of the state. If you read or study the Intelligence Organizations' reports concerned with Bediuzzaman and his works, and the relevant sections of works describing divisive activities distributed to the armed forces, and the relevant parts of the book about the divisive organizations which was distributed to all universities by YÖK [the Higher Education Council] after the 12 September 1980 take-over and the discussions of the scholars whose ideas were developed under the influence of these, you would suppose it to be a national duty and form of worship not to like Bediuzzaman. And it's true, I don't at all like the Bediuzzaman who is

described in these works. Whereas, just as for years they portrayed our forefathers to us as barbarians and bloody sultans, although they took justice to the world, in the same way the enemies of Islam described Bediuzzaman and his works, of which they were frightened, wrongly and as someone bad. Only they forgot that you can't plaster over the sun. It is a bitter fact that until ten years ago, our security forces remained under the effect of this negative propaganda. They considered this great genius who spent all his life for his country to be a traitor.

So as not to prolong the matter, I shall dwell on only one of these negative descriptions. I refer the rest of them to your own perception. Whenever you speak of Bediuzzaman and his works, whether you are Turk, or Arab, or a member of the Ottoman dynasty, you are accused of Kurdish nationalism. Whereas just as there are two no more different words in the world than Kurdish nationalism and the *Risale-i Nur*, so too there is definitely no better remedy for divisive Kurdish nationalism in Turkey than the *Risale-i Nur*. We can take the matter a bit further and give some particular examples:

The First Example:

Putting forward the fact that in the years preceeding the Republic Bediuzzaman used the name Said-i Kurdi, some researchers claim that he was a member of the Society for the Advancement of Kurdistan, which was founded in 1918 with the aim of setting up a Kurdish state in the East, and that he took part in divisive activities. In order to support these claims and with an extraordinary piece of demagoguery, they make a pretext the fact that Bediuzzaman was also among the founders of the Society for the Propagation of Education among Kurds, which they claim worked together with the above-mentioned society.¹ A little bit of investigation shows immediately that these claims are completely baseless.

First of all the Ottoman State was established on a religious

base, not on the base of peoples and race. For this reason, leaving aside the past twenty to thirty years, since no importance was attached to racial [*millet*] difference so long a person was Muslim, certain regions in the east being called the Province of Kurdistan or *Bilad-i Ekrad*, and government officials or scholars from that region being called Kurdi, was merely an official form of address making known the person in question. The name Said-i Kurdi was used in this way, and when the Republic was founded and it began to be misunderstood, Bediuzzaman himself changed it into Said-i Nursi. And he did not stop at this; he changed the names of Kurdistan or *Bilad-i Ekrad* in his former works also, to the Eastern Provinces, as his published works prove.

Secondly, there was no organic tie between the Society for the Advancement of Kurdistan and the Society for the Propagation of Education among Kurds, and their aims were not the same. Although Tarik Zafer Tunaya gives the date of the founding of this society as 1919, he did not note the date and source of the document he published. He only presented the document in such a way that those who study it would suppose that Bediuzzaman was a member of the Society for the Advancement of Kurdistan. Whereas there was no connection between the two at all. It is certainly known that subsequent to his going to Istanbul in 1907, Bediuzzaman defended the opening of a university in the East. He even obtained a sum of money from Sultan Reşad for this purpose.² Even if it is not certain when, for what purpose, and by whom the Society for the Propagation of Education among Kurds was founded, even if it was clear and Bediuzzaman was among the founders, there is nothing strange about this.³ For Bediuzzaman had displayed great enterprise from the beginning for the development of education in the East and for the opening of a university. This society was similar to either the Erzurum or Bayburt Culture and Education

Trust.

Thirdly, the following reply to the proposal of Seyyid Abdülkadir, the president of the Society for the Advancement of Kurdistan, solves the matter completely:

"God Almighty says in the Holy Qur'an: God shall produce a people whom He will love as they will love Him. I pondered over this Divine declaration and I understood that this people is the Turkish nation, which for a thousand years acted as the standard-bearer of the Islamic world. I shall not follow a few brainless racialists (Kurdish nationalists) rather than serving this heroic nation, in place of four hundred and fifty million true Muslim brothers."⁴

The Second Example:

Another of the false assertions and conclusions about Bediuzzaman is confusing him with Shaykh Said or at least spreading it around that he gave his support to the Shaykh Said Revolt. Although this assertion has no connection close or distant with the truth, it is unfortunately written in security reports, and has been set in the minds of patriotic scholars. It is true that Shaykh Said wanted have a genius like Bediuzzaman on his side, but the great scholar's response to this proposal has been deliberately misrepresented. Let's read Bediuzzaman's reply to Shaykh Said together:

"The Turkish nation has acted as the standard-bearer of Islam for centuries. It has produced many saints and given many martyrs. The sword may not be drawn against the sons of such a nation. We are Muslims, we are their brothers, we may not make brother fight brother. It is not permissible according to the Shari'a. The sword is to be drawn against external enemies, it may not be used internally. Our only salvation at this time is to offer illumination and guidance through the truths of the Qur'an and

belief; it is to get rid of our greatest enemy, ignorance. Give up this attempt of yours, for it will be fruitless. Thousands of innocent men and women may perish on account of a few bandits."⁵

II. Bediuzzaman was a great Islamic scholar and the Regenerator of Religion this century

Although Bediuzzaman as a scholar is appreciated fully in the Islamic world and throughout the world outside Turkey, he is not well-known in Turkey particularly among scholars. This is largely the result of negative propaganda. At one time for teaching members of the Theology faculties to be promoted to *doçent* or professor, the condition was put of their producing an article or giving a lecture against Bediuzzaman and his 6,000 page work, the *Risale-i Nur*. This is related by our teachers who experienced it. It is certainly distressing that a genius, most of whose works have been translated into foremost Arabic and English, and ten languages including German and Urdu, and about whom doctoral theses have been written in Europe and the Islamic world, should remain a stranger to Turkish scholarly circles.

Friend and foe alike agree that Bediuzzaman was a renewer (*mujaddid*) in the field of theology, a Qur'anic commentator (*mufasssir*) eminent among his contemporaries, a scholar of Hadith (*muhaddith*) who knew hundreds of Hadiths together with their chains of authorities, in short an Islamic scholar superior to all his peers. Among aspects of his scholarship that are well-known are that he memorized ninety various works which form the basis of the Islamic sciences, like the *Mirqat*, an analytical work on the principles of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), an exceptional work on theology (*qalam*) by Adududdin called the *Mavâfiq*, and a summary of the science of logic (*mantiq*) called *Sullem*. Each of these he repeated to himself by heart once every three months as though they were supplications. In addi-

tion, he memorized one of the best Arabic lexicons, the *Qamus-u Okyanus*, as far as the letter, *Sin*. On adding to this acquired knowledge his powers of reasoning, intelligence and other innate gifts, which were God-given, no reason remained why he should not have been known as Bediuzzaman by his contemporaries, which means 'Wonder of the Age.'

What distinguishes Bediuzzaman most from other Islamic scholars is his expounding matters of belief which for centuries had been the cause of dispute among Islamic scholars, matters for which no method had been found for solving suitable to the understanding of people of the present century. If you add to this certain philosophical questions of this century, which is the age of science and technology, you will appreciate better the need for a Qur'anic commentary like the *Risale-i Nur* and a scholar like Bediuzzaman.

I would like to state something here. I have studied the work called *Hak Dini Kur'an Dili* by one of this century's distinguished scholars and Qur'anic commentators. In spite of all the scholarly knowledge and intellectual insight of that great scholar, I saw that in twenty-one matters he could not give the final word and if he did, they could only be understood by those who had reached a certain level in the study of the Islamic sciences. I will make do here with only recalling that these questions were the nature and proof of man's spirit, the question of Divine Determining or fate, the proof of the resurrection of the dead, and the question of whether the Prophet's Ascension was with the spirit or with the body, the proof of God's existence, and other matters concerned with belief.

Bediuzzaman, however, expounded and proved the question of resurrection after death in the work he called the Tenth Word in such a way that, in spite of a genius like Ibn-i Sina saying of it, "Resurrection is not a matter that can be believed according to rational criteria; we believe in it as it is taught us," he declared

in order to relate the bounty: "Study this work of mine closely and perceptively, and if you do not understand the question of resurrection as clearly as twice two makes four, come and stick your finger in my eye!" - with the proviso that the reader's conscience was not corrupted.⁶

And among his important achievements which should be mentioned is his expounding the matter of Divine Determining, sometimes known as fate or destiny, and free will, which only the greatest of former scholars of *qalam* had tried to solve, and addressing particular persons and in independent works, and which for example Sa'deddin Taftazani expounded in forty or so pages under the title of *Telvihat*. Bediuzzaman explained it in five to ten pages and in a way everyone can understand.⁷ Even, the one-time Pakistan Education Minister, Ali Akbar Shah, published in an article which appeared in the Egyptian newspaper, *Jumhuriya*, where he went after visiting Turkey, that Bediuzzaman solved during a forty-minute conversation with him a matter concerning Divine Determining for which he had been unable to find the solution in forty years of travelling the Islamic world.

Other examples that should be mentioned are his expounding in extraordinary fashion Qur'anic verses about the Divine existence and Unity and in a way appropriate to the understanding of the present century, particularly in the face of the atheistic movements whose sole aim was materialism, and his proving Allah's existence to every reasonable person with the exception of those whose consciences are corrupted. Bediuzzaman overturned the mentality which attributes the existence of the universe to Nature and causes; in the Thirtieth Word; he silenced the philosophy opposed to religion, and in the Twenty-Second Word he elucidated in all their clarity the bases of true belief in Divine Unity. Recently the pitiful situation of our scholars who persist in not taking advantage of a Qur'anic commentary like

the Risale-i Nur was brought to life before my eyes when I saw that in a section on 'Allah' in a certain encyclopaedia one of these scholars, as though unaware of Bediuzzaman's brilliant explanations, had written the section on 'Allah' from other scholars who were addressing believers of the 5th century of the Hijra. A university student showed me this, and said: "Couldn't belief in Allah have been written with modern man in view in an encyclopaedia such as this?" I hope that Bediuzzaman will not remain as a stranger to the present generation.

You can add to the three matters we have mentioned here as examples, the nature and proofs of the Prophet's Ascension, the true and rational meanings of Islamic terms like *arsh-i a'zam*, and *kavs-i kavseyn*, the proofs that the Qur'an is a miracle, the proofs of the angels and the spirit world, and in short, every sort of explanation about the truths of belief and Islam which have been points of discussion or objection this century. And if you want to prove the things said here, you can study the 6,000 page Risale-i Nur yourself!

III. He expounded Islam's high principles concerning social and political life.

Bediuzzaman was not only a speculative thinker, he at the same time actively put his ideas into practice in the three periods through which he lived, that is, those of Absolutism, Constitutionalism, and the Republic. Just as he absolutely never neglected his personal worship, so too he was a rare man with a cause who evaluated in accordance with Islam all the major social and political events that occurred foremost in the Ottoman State and then in Turkey, and in the Islamic world, and even the world. Time always proved him to be right and embarrassed those who held opposing views. I shall now give you two examples of his assertions:

The First:

Bediuzzaman was one of those rare people who upheld acting positively in the service of Islam, not only in the Ottoman State and in Turkey, but in the whole Islamic world. According to him, Turkey is part of the 'Abode of Islam' (*Daru'l-Islam*) and service to belief and Islam in a region which is the 'Abode of Islam' is only possible through acting positively, and without upsetting in any way internal security and public order, on the contrary through strengthening it. These words in the final letter he wrote are indeed interesting. (In summary):

"Our duty is to act positively. It isn't to act negatively. Thinking of God's pleasure, it is solely to serve belief. It is not to interfere in Allah's duty. We are charged with meeting with patience and thanks every difficulty we encounter in the positive service of belief, which preserves public order... There is strength in our way, but this strength is for preserving public security. According to a principle set by the Qur'an, 'A criminal's brother, relations and family cannot be held responsible for [his crime].' It is because of this that all my life I have worked with all my strength for the preservation of public security. This strength can only be used against foreign aggression, not internally. And the most important condition of 'non-material' (*manevi*) *ji*had is not to interfere in Allah's duty. That is, that our duty is service; the result concerns Almighty God; we are obliged and charged to carry out our duty. External aggression may be met with force, for the enemy's property and dependants become like booty. But internally it is not like that. Action internally is to act positively in accordance with the meaning of moral and spiritual sincerity in the face of moral and spiritual destruction."⁸

Those who accused Bediuzzaman of passivity were as a result compelled to commend him. Although for twenty-eight

years he was sent from prison to prison and time and again was tried on baseless charges by judges specially appointed by the central authorities, let alone opposing the state, he did not even speak ill of the public prosecutor who was seeking his execution with baseless charges. As is known, there are two sorts of action: one resembles the action of the wind; it makes a lot of noise, but it does not have any positive and beneficial results. The second, however, is the sun's action, which even though it comes silently, its fruits and benefits are infinite. Thus, since Bediuzzaman represented Islam, which is like a sun, he chose the second form of action. He even tried to instruct in belief the policeman who came to fasten handcuffs on his wrists by telling him that there was art in the handcuffs. The results are now plain for all to see. Because the back of unbelief is broken in the face of belief.

The Second:

Bediuzzaman expounded with extraordinary skill Islam's high principles which will bind the whole world together. These are the principles of sincerity and brotherhood, which secure the unity between Muslim individuals and communities. Bediuzzaman likened the believers' various groups and communities to the different divisions and regiments in an army, or the various shops in a market, or the flowers and fruit-bearing trees planted in the garden of the Qur'an, and he strove throughout his life to preserve this state of brotherhood. I would like to recall to you some of these principles from which he never ever deviated throughout his long life of eighty years:

He recalled this fact in order to explain how two believers had fallen out, whether they were two Muslims, two on the right path, or even two saints: According to the rule that 'No one knows the Unseen other than Allah,' if saints are not informed of hidden things, they do not know them. Since even the greatest saint does not know the true state of his enemy, the

war between the Companions known as 'the ten who had been promised Paradise' shows their fighting to be wrong. That means that with denying one another, two saints or two people of truth, do not fall from their positions... According to this,

"...it necessitates following the magnanimous rule in the verse: *Those who suppress their anger and forgive people....*, preserving and not shaking the belief of ordinary people by undermining their good opinions of their Shaykhs, saving from the just but damaging anger of believers in the face of unjust accusations, and strenuously avoiding the enemies of religion rebutting one rightful group with the weapons and objections of another by taking advantage of the enmity between them, and refuting the second with the evidences of the first and then casting them both to the ground and rebutting them... In short, this century, the people of faith, everyone, considers themselves excused, and dispute arises from this. And the people of truth suffer harm from the disputes of Muslims, and the people of misguidance take advantage of it."⁹

He states this under the name of the principles of brotherhood:

"When you know that your way and ideas are right, you have the right to say, 'My way is right or better,' but you do not have the right to say, 'It is only my way that is right and good.'

"Everything you say should be true, but you do not have the right to say everything that is true. Everything you say must be true, but it is not right to say everything that is true."¹⁰

IV. Time and events proved his assertions and views concerning the future to be right.

Bediuzzaman was not only a scholar of religion, at the same time he as a thinker and genius. It may be said that the truths he

took directly from the Qur'an and presented to those in need in his works called the Risale-i Nur have not only illuminated the past and present, but will also illuminate the future. The twentieth century's inauspicious attitude towards Islam did not turn his hopes into despair. Even in the blackest days when everyone was in despair, he increased and continued that hope. Proclaiming, "Have hope! The loudest and most powerful voice in the upheavals and changes of the future will be the voice of Islam!", he always spoke optimistically concerning Islam. Even if the state had made vital and bitter mistakes, he considered it a national and religious duty to warn those in the highest positions of authority. Thus, I shall conclude this paper by giving two examples to illustrate this:

The First:

Although thinkers, and politicians too, concerned with such things and relying on American scientific data, did not even mention the possibility of Russia's downfall and the collapse of communism, Bediuzzaman told the Russian policeman when he went to Tiflis in 1910 that communism would collapse and Russia, which was based on it, would fall apart as a result. Bediuzzaman had climbed a hill known as Shaykh San'an Tepe near Tiflis and was gazing at the surrounding countryside when he was approached by a Russian policeman who asked:

"Why are you studying the land with such attention?"

Bediuzzaman: "I am planning my medrese." (He even later told his student Mustafa Sungur that he would lay the foundations of the medrese.)

The Russian policeman: "Where are you from?"

Bediuzzaman: "I'm from Bitlis."

Policeman: "But this is Tiflis!"

Bediuzzaman: "Bitlis is one of Tiflis' brothers." (And in fact

in 1990 they were proclaimed twin towns.)

Policeman: "What do you mean?"

Bediuzzaman: "Three lights are beginning to be revealed one after the other in Asia and the world of Islam. While with you three layers of darkness will start to fold back one after the other. This veil of despotism shall be rent; it will shrink back, and I shall come and build my medrese here." (And in fact the unfolding of the first darkness was the collapse of Czarist Russia, the advent of communism the second, and the collapse of communism and falling apart of the Russia, the unfolding of the third.)

Policeman: "I'm sorry for you. I'm astonished that you should entertain such a hope."

Bediuzzaman: "And I'm astonished at your not understanding! Do you think it possible that this winter will continue? Every winter is followed by spring, and every night by day."

Russian Policeman: "But the Islamic world is all broken up and fragmented."

Bediuzzaman: "They have gone to study. It is like this: India is an able son of Islam; it is studying in the high school of the British. Egypt is a clever son of Islam; it is taking lessons in the British school for civil servants. Caucasia and Turkistan are two valiant sons of Islam; they are training in the Russian war academy. (It is stated clearly here that they will gain their independence by force of arms, if only to a small degree.) You see, after these noble sons of Islam have received their diplomas, each will lead a continent..."¹¹ And indeed, those days have now come and a dozen Muslim Turki states will be born in Russia.

The Second:

Concerning the East and South-East [of Turkey], he stated

insistently to those governing the country, both in the speech he gave in the Assembly after the foundation of the Republic, and in 1955 in the letter he sent Adnan Menderes and President Celâl Bayar, that the solution had to be sought in history, and what had bound this region to the Ottoman State for centuries was Islamic brotherhood, and it was because the Turks had acted as the standard-bearers of Islam that they had been held in respect by the other nations of Islam. By saying:

"I have paid allegiance to Sultan [Yavuz] Selim and accepted his idea of Islamic Unity. Because he warned the Eastern Provinces, and they offered him their allegiance. The people of the East today are the same as those then,"¹²

he tried to state that the whole East had submitted to the Ottoman State through their own wish and desire through Idris-i Bitlisi, and that this submission continued for 341 years without rebellion. And as, in the words of Cemal Kutay, this century's Idris-i Bitlisi, he instructed some of the tribal leaders in the East who had revolted after the Proclamation of the Second Constitution:

"Let's make a gift of our strength and courage to our glorious Turkish fathers, who for six hundred years have waved the banner of Divine Unity before the whole world. In return we shall benefit from their minds and learning, and we shall demonstrate our nobility. In short, the Turks are our minds and we are their strength; together we made a fine human being."¹³

And in a petition dated 28/4/1955, he warned clearly as though seeing the events of today in the East, that if precautions were not taken, the state should await great dangers, and that the only solution to prevent them was to embrace Islamic brotherhood and to make the people of this region into the volunteer sections they were for centuries in the Ottoman armies, and to

raise to life the spirit which made them consider submission to the Ottoman State a form of Divine worship.¹⁴

To conclude: what distinguishes similar trees is their fruits. The fruits of the tree of Bediuzzaman who died thirty years ago after a long and full life of some eighty years, twenty-eight years of which were spent in captivity, are plain for all to see. In the words of the late Osman Yüksel, "In Turkey today, there stands before all organizations, before everyone who loves his country, a force that they should consider with respect: Said Nursi and his students."¹⁵

Footnotes

1. Tunaya, Tarık Zafer, *Türkiye'de Siyasal Partiler*, Istanbul 1986, ii, 186 ff.
2. Şahiner, Necmeddin, *Bilinmeyen Taraflarıyla Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, Istanbul 1990, 154.
3. Tunaya, ii, 214-5.
4. Şahiner, 228-9; *Mülakat*, 38.
5. Şahiner, 268, ff.
6. Nursi, Bediüzzaman Said, *Sözler*, 44-107.
7. *Ibid.*, 432-448.
8. Nursi, Bediüzzaman Said, *Emirdağ Lahikası*, ii, 213-4.
9. —, *Kastamonu Lahikası*, 144.
10. —, *Mektûbat*, Yirmi İkinci Mektup, 242-256.
11. *Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, Tarihçe-i Hayat*, 72-3.
12. *Ibid.*, 64-5.
13. —, *Nutuk* (Ottoman edn.), 20.
14. Başbakanlık Cumhuriyet Arşivi, No: 030-63-43-339-6.
15. *Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, Tarihçe-i Hayat*, 618.

* * *