

**THIRD INTERNATIONAL
SYMPOSIUM ON
BEDIUZZAMAN
SAID NURSI**

**THE RECONSTRUCTION OF ISLAMIC
THOUGHT IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY
AND BEDIUZZAMAN SAID NURSI**

**24th-26th September, 1995
Istanbul**

Translated from the Turkish
by Şükran Vahide

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Printed at: Sözler Ofset A.Ş., İstanbul, 1997.

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: The Thinker of the Age

Cacilia Meryem Demir

Ladies and Gentlemen, My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Islam.

I was born into a Catholic family in Germany. Now whoever I speak with, whether my fellow Germans, or Muslims, they ask either immediately or later: "How long have you been a Muslim?" When I reply that I have always been a Muslim, both Muslims and non-Muslims are amazed. Of course they expected an answer of so many years. But the question contains much. After a minute's thought Muslims agree, and when non-Muslims learn the meaning of "Muslims from birth," their response to the answer changes.

Muslim is an Arabic word and means a member of the religion of Islam, a believer; someone who submits to Allah. I could have the same attitude as a Christian, that is, I could believe in God and submit to Him. And all Muslims know that all children come into the world as Muslims with the innate capacity to believe.

Basic, firmly held convictions are concealed behind such questions. People want to place those they address in particular schemes or stereotypes. They have formed these in their own minds from their own experiences or from what they have learnt from their environments, societies, and themselves. In this way, people over-simplify the matter, and fall into the danger of placing others in simple stereotypes. There is a Hadith about this in which the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) asked: "Or have you seen his inner heart?"

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Meryem Demir was born in Edingen in Germany in 1962, and is a graduate of the Higher College of Engineering and Technology. Between 1982 and the present she has published in various magazine the results of research into Islam in Germany, and two books, (in German) *A Biography of Said Nursi*; *The Life of Our Prophet*. She has been active in efforts to have Islam and Islamic associations officially recognized in Germany.

In my opinion, the question addresses particularly our attitude towards tolerance, which is part of our belief. In numerous verses of the Qur'an, tolerance and forbearance are advised as our stance towards others. They are stressed more than anything in Islam, like the qualities of honesty and compassion, and are incumbent on Muslims.

Nevertheless, the Western world claims that in accordance with Christian culture, it is themselves that are philanthropic, compassionate, and the symbols of peace, while the others, that is Muslims, are bigotted and intolerant towards other religions. The West accuses Islam of being a conservative and Muslims of being narrow-minded, and asserts that there is no religious freedom in Islam and that generally accepted human rights have no place in it.

Yes, we Muslims are subject to such fierce accusations in the outside world. Are Muslims really so egotistical? Are they really so preoccupied with themselves that they cannot consider universal problems and seek solutions for them? Is it a question of lack of education and lack of resources?

The first thing I learnt about Islam was to use my brain to investigate the reality behind events. I learnt to be curious about the questions of religion. For belief is not only with the heart, it is also related to logic. The Qur'an does not demand blind faith. It wants us to realize our responsibility, to ponder over creation, and to understand that beyond it there is someone who created it. Questions that everyone tries to find the answers to, like the meaning of life, why we are here in the world, and why there are things like illness, hopelessness, and calamities — so long as they are not suppressed, of course.

I found many answers to these questions in Islam, which enlarged my ideas, expanded my consciousness, and opened up my horizons. I found a rich treasury of knowledge about the One God, Who is the Creator and Inscraper of the book of the universe, and makes known His existence, Names, and self through that book. In this religion, science, and particularly the natural sciences, and religion complement each other, forming a unity, and all the branches of science about the universe, take a person to that Single Being. From the beginning, I had the good fortune to learn about Islam and its world view, and the Creator and creation as they are in reality. It is as though I have always known these thousands of truths, and have now only learnt the best definitions of them.

Lectures are given in Germany about Islam, with titles like "Islam, a foreign country." The aim is to destroy prejudice about Muslims and gain a better mutual understanding. I want to say here that it was Bediuzzaman Said Nursi who showed me the way in the world of belief. I shall mention his works later.

Then, when I met with other Muslims, in seminars or women's groups, coming together with the intention of learning something about Islam, something attracted my attention. The things discussed were always superficial, outward things; discussions never went to the heart of the matter. It struck me forcefully that the subjects discussed always revolved around the rules; for example, cleanliness, the length of skirts, modes of dress, food additives, whether or not these

contained pork fat. I did not believe these would satisfy the hunger of my spirit. Of course it is important to learn the things that are commanded and prohibited, but they have to be carefully understood and applied according to the situation; the underlying purpose of the rules and their fundamental importance should not escape notice. Here again, there is the danger of unnecessarily causing doubts and scruples of the conscience and causing differences and conflict.

I can give an example: I believe it is necessary to differentiate between the prohibitions people have imposed on themselves, for instance, there being gelatine in yoghurt, because of the Qur'anic prohibition on eating pork. The Qur'an says in Sura 7 verse 199, "*Hold to forgiveness; command what is right; but turn away from the ignorant.*" But on the other hand, as far as I have been able to see, however much a *hoja* sticks to the rules, however much he insists on religious injunctions and prohibitions, to that degree he appears to be devout. But it should be just the opposite.

Becoming preoccupied with the details and outer appearance leads to the danger of a person getting caught up on the details and ignoring the essence of religion. Of course, sometimes giving up yoghurt that contains gelatine may be easier for a person than struggling with his own soul, developing his character, being honest, loving his brothers, and bringing up his children, and fulfilling other such responsibilities.

Another thing I have noticed is our children growing up in a spiritual vacuum. Many parents are not at a level to communicate conscious belief to their children. Those valuable years when children learn things so easily pass without their learning anything. Many parents know nothing about their religion except a few formal rules and some customary practices. Nevertheless, since they want to teach their children about religion and for them to be religious, in authoritarian and conservative fashion, they expect them to abide by those rules blindly. Only in Germany, this attitude leaves them open to the criticism of teachers, educationalists, and others; it is also opposed to the Qur'anic method.

The Qur'anic method is not "You have to this, you can't do that." It repeatedly addresses the reason, and recommends in this way: "Would it not be better to do it in this way?" It invites us to think, logically. We have to realize our responsibilities and understand them. We can perform our duties much better in this way. And then we may offer thanks for all God's commands and those minor rules of the Shari'a. Applying them blindly will not gain us individual personalities. It brings restrictions, and does not allow a person to be free. Whereas religion and belief bring freedom with them. Conscious behaviour based on logic and reason protects a person from excesses in religious matters, and gains for him the awareness to be able to preserve the balance and distinguish the important from the unimportant. I have witnessed numerous people drowning in such details and falling into a vacuum due to the multiplicity of secondary matters. If we get caught up on these, arguing over them, we expend both our time and our energy for nothing. The fundamental problems remain unsolved.

Numerous religious scholars and men of religion are fixed in their ideas and

not flexible; they cannot endure any criticism. The way of thinking of most of them is very simple. There is only a choice of yes or no, you may or you may not. We are not accustomed to considering a matter from all points of view, and weighing up its pros and cons. But as I attempted to explain at the start in the question of being Muslim from birth, the questions are not always that simple, and the answers are not simple either. Our problem is not not being Muslim, Muslims are the most numerous religious group after Christians. But a person saying he is Muslim does not necessarily mean he is a good person and a good Muslim.

Moreover, most Muslims are not particularly sensitive about their religion and are not sufficiently knowledgeable to analyze events from a religious point of view. As a result, most of them cannot distinguish the important points and find the way Islam specifies. As I said, our problem is immoderateness and getting caught up on the details and secondary matters of religion. When logic, reason, and knowledge are left aside, it leaves the door open to fanaticism. Any sort of fanaticism is incompatible with religion and is completely opposed to belief.

There is a Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) on this subject: "Those who go to extremes and are excessive in their words and actions take themselves to perdition."¹

We could make an extremely long list of the sicknesses afflicting Muslim societies. Providing answers taken directly from the Qur'an, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi tells clearly how we should approach these matters. He redirects attention to the heart of the matter, to the true aim, and the primary purpose of religion. Yes, many people do not know what religion is in reality. It is not a political ideology, it is something which gives direction to the conscience, it is a question of conscience concerning everyone and their selves. As Bediuzzaman said, religion is a sacred trust pertaining to everyone. It should therefore not be exploited in any way, in no area.

Bediuzzaman's ideas are of great assistance to us Muslims living in Europe in setting up dialogue with others and with the society in which we live. The views of Christians and others have changed.

At a time Christians in particular are working on religions to develop a world moral order, we should not confront them with stereotyped views; that is, we don't want to give the impression that we are ignorant by speaking of things like the trinity, Jesus being God's son, or original sin for example, which have been handed down from previous generations. If we can effectively demolish the prejudices and ignorance about Islam, only then may we successfully answer contemporary problems constructively together with Christians.

Thanks to the Qur'an, we have at our disposal everything necessary for true civilization, and among these the most important principles are honesty and compassion. Bediuzzaman Said Nursi solved the Qur'an for us this age, and showed us through the *Risale-i Nur* the way to the future defined by the Qur'an. Through the *Risale-i Nur*, he revived the true values of Islam, like belief in One

1. *Muslim*, 'Ilm, 7; *Abū Dā'ūd*, *Sunna*, 5.

God, Divine mercy, worship, the resurrection of the dead and the hereafter, individual responsibility, sincerity and brotherhood, following the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), performing obligatory worship, and avoiding serious sins.

We are obliged to be able to explain our religion to those we meet in our dialogue with society, and we should take the society and its problems into account. The fundamentals of religion and essential points should be concentrated on in meetings with our brothers with whom we have dialogue, in order to be able to correct their view of Islam, which is a caricature and is based on prejudice, and is superficial, outward, and comprises details. And we should first of all correct ourselves! If those whom we meet are affected by this exchange of ideas which strengthens brotherhood, it may be said that we have achieved a lot.

I frequently ask myself how we could have achieved any dialogue if it had not been for the *Risale-i Nur*, and if we could have had any exchange of ideas with a particular aim in mind. For with its new style of questions, the *Risale-i Nur* brings a new dimension to the matter, even for Islamic scholars who have spent their lives studying the finest details of their religion. For example, we have made a list, taken from the *Risale-i Nur*'s discussion on sincerity, of the principles to be adopted in co-operating with people of different beliefs and views. These principles have formed the first topic of discussion in meetings with people holding different beliefs, church representatives, and those interested in this dialogue. I want now to give the list:

Principles for those concerned with co-operation between believers:

1. To act positively, that is, out of love for one's own outlook, avoiding enmity for other outlooks, not criticizing them, or interfering in their beliefs.
2. To unite, irrespective of particular outlook, remembering those numerous ties of unity that evoke love, brotherhood and concord.
3. To adopt the rule of conduct that the follower of any right outlook has the right to say, "My outlook is true, or the best," but not that "My outlook alone is true," or that "My outlook alone is good," thus implying the falsity or repugnance of all other outlooks.
4. To consider union with the people of truth is a cause of Divine succour and the high dignity of religion.
5. To defend the truth against falsehood.
6. If there is nothing supporting the opposite, to always think favourably of others.
7. To abandon the self and its egoism.
8. To give up pride and arrogance.
9. To avoid thinking ill of people, which knowingly or unknowingly arouses negative feelings.
10. Not to wound the feelings of others, provoke them, or permit dispute and hypocrisy.
11. To do good, and be loving and forgiving.

We should always remember that the Qur'an addresses all those who believe, whether Jew, Christian, or Muslim, or of any religion, and enjoins them to compete in good works. For we all will return to God. Those who compete in good works, for the sake of truth and justice, will lose nothing, either in this world or in the hereafter.

When one meets with Christians and becomes friendly with them, I cannot but recount an Hadith which Said Nursi expounded. I want to quote it here:

"At the end of time, the truly pious followers of Jesus will unite with the people of the Qur'an and together resist their common enemy, irreligion. At this time too, the people of religion and truth need to unite sincerely not only with their own brothers and fellow believers, but also with the truly pious and spiritual ones among the Christians, temporarily refraining from discussion and debate of points of difference in order to combat their joint enemy—aggressive atheism."

From the point of view of our own dialogue, this provided us with the means of guiding others in Baden Württemberg in Germany. The church representatives there told us not to be hasty for they themselves had not yet reached such a position.

If we Muslims had greater consciousness and in this way devoted ourselves to these questions, society and the churches would be compelled to change their own views. For the prejudices I mentioned above are still powerful: Islam is intolerant, it oppresses women, and so on.

What is needed is an increase in the numbers of Muslims who are conscious, and live their beliefs and religion. It is especially important that they are aware and conscious. In Turkey there are certainly very gratifying developments and organization. Innumerable magazines, radio and television programmes publish debate of questions related to religion.

Unfortunately, Bediuzzaman's works, which open the door to Islam, the Qur'an, and belief, have still not reached everyone. People still cannot find time to exercise their minds over his works. For they are of a high level, both linguistically and in content. Books should be published in other languages which are summaries of what they contain.

The numbers of Muslims should increase who benefit spiritually from the *Risale-i Nur* so that the spiritual nucleus and potential develops more speedily and for a better future, they may escape from being 'outsiders.'

Knowing Bediuzzaman's life, that is, his thought, is not only knowing this towering person, before everything, through him and his principles, we learn Islam and belief.

In this connection, I set to work with my husband and we prepared a short biography of Said Nursi. Through him I learnt about Islam and enriched my belief. And everyone who has read it, has found the same thing and responded enthusiastically.

Finally, I want to give this message to my brothers: we should not at any time

forget that in Islam the principles of compassion and justice are superior to everything, and we do not have the right to wound others either with our attitudes, or what we say.

In conclusion, I want to quote this summary of the Risale-i Nur:

"If there was no Allah, there would be no belief.

"If there was no belief, there would be no religion.

"And if there was no religion, the riddles of creation would never be solved."

(Ali Demir)

May God guide all of us to the straight path and grant us guidance.

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