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

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Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Experience of Serving Islam by Means of Politics

Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

*All praise be to God through Whose grace good works find completion,
and blessings and peace be upon our master Muḥammad, and on all his
family and Companions.*

In this paper I shall discuss the following points:

1. What were the factors that caused the great Islamic propagandist Bediuzzaman to embark on political activity and struggle in the first period of his life?
2. What then prompted him at a later period to give up politics and adopt a stance above politics?
3. Since his second stand was more healthy and beneficial, does it mean that as a system and method of government Islam has no connection with politics? What sort of lessons can we extract for today from the experience of this great caller to Islam?

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Prof. al-Buti was born in Jizra and migrated together with his family to Syria when four years old. He graduated from the college *al-Tawjih al-Islami*, having studied under the famous scholar and teacher Shaykh Hasan Habannaka al-Maydani. In 1955 he received his first degree from the Shari'a Faculty of al-Azhar University, and in 1958 his teaching certificate from the Faculty of Arabic Language and Literature in the same university. From 1958 to 1960 he taught in Syrian schools, and in 1960 was appointed assistant in the Shari'a Faculty of the University of Damascus. He returned to that Faculty as a lecturer after having received his doctorate in the principles of the Shari'a from al-Azhar University. He was subsequently appointed to Assistant Dean of the Faculty, and finally as Dean. He is at present Head of the Department of the History of Religion in the same faculty.

Prof. al-Buti is a member of the Jordanian Research Centre for Islamic Civilization. He has published around forty works on *fiqh*, *'uqū'id*, philosophy, and literature. He has taken part in numerous international symposia and panels, and his works have been translated into Turkish, French, and English.

My discussion in this paper will follow the above lines, in the hope that I shall reach some important and beneficial conclusions. These conclusions will be adopted as principles in their endeavours by those who call others to God's way sincerely.

1.

We shall not prolong discussion of a fact that everyone knows who has studied Bediuzzaman's life, which is that from the age of twenty Bediuzzaman was to a great extent involved with politics and favoured this method of calling people to God's way, expending great effort to teach the truths of Islam to various classes and groups.

However, leaving aside this fact that everyone knows who knows anything about Bediuzzaman, we pass on to another point, which is to investigate the factors behind his favouring politics in the very early period of his Islamic endeavours and *da'wa* activities.

I have considered this question and pondered over an answer which would describe the true factors that prompted him to it. I finally formed the firm conviction that the underlying reason, in summary, was as follows:

Ustad Bediuzzaman's high aspirations and self-esteem were born together the moment he started to study Islam; they were like twins. These two senses appeared together very early on in his life. It was for this reason that he passed the greater part of his youth dwelling on the problems of Muslims and of the Islamic cause. While doing this, he looked on matters through the window of his spirit that was coloured with his self-esteem and high aspirations. Bediuzzaman alluded to this in various places in his work *Enirdağ Lahikası*. He stressed it particularly when explaining a number of matters in the piece entitled: "The objections of an important saint (*veli*) and the answers."

It is true that never either in his youth, nor when older —not even for one day— did he exploit his mission to gratify his appetites or realize any personal objectives. But his character, which made itself felt from the earliest years of his youth, drove him to rely on a number of persons of rank who appreciated his virtually incomparable qualities, superior personality, and profound knowledge. Two examples of these are Mustafa Paşa, the head of the Miran tribe, and the Governor of Bitlis, who formed a firm friendship with Ustad. The Governor had the greatest admiration for his rare intelligence and learning. Ustad, too, leaned a little towards the Governor, on account of the favours and standing he was awarded. There is no doubt that at that period this was a source of pleasure for him, due to the elevated self-esteem that was in his character.

The relations between Bediuzzaman and persons of this sort who admired him were formed in circumstances and an atmosphere in which politics were dominant. During that period, when the members of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) were pursuing their activities with zealous planning, and plots against the sick Caliphate were rife, the factors underlying all the different and even opposed movements were political. Bediuzzaman was right in the centre of

this struggle. For this reason, he had to employ the same means while endeavouring to protect Islam against the designs against it, and realize his aims in the same atmosphere, by which for the reasons described above he was quite simply enveloped.

It was this that drove him to struggle against the CUP with the same weapons and tactics that they employed, and to divert them from their destructive goals. Bediuzzaman used the same slogans as the CUP, those of freedom, brotherhood, and equality, but he insistently pointed out their points of conformity with the Shari'a and beliefs of Islam. He later began to give fiery speeches and publish articles stressing these points. He proclaimed his political stance as follows:

"If we do not take refuge in the freedom that Islam defines, we shall be afflicted by despotism and reduced to slavery. People will open their arms to dissension in the name of liberty, and swiftly be sacrificed to it."

This political method was the most effective way of warning people against the dangers that lay in the CUP's ideas. Moreover, the CUP could not punish him on any pretext, since he was using exactly the same watchwords as they were.

Thus, Bediuzzaman found himself hemmed in by the political environment. This also arose from the friendship he had with numerous politically minded people. He pursued these due both to self-esteem and to the support for this these friendships gave. As a sincere propagandist and fiery defender of God's religion, he was compelled to pursue his Islamic activities in this atmosphere, and use the same politics as a shield to counter the political stratagems and designs against religion and religious dominance.

2.

This interpretation seems to express the reasons Ustad Bediuzzaman followed the way of politics as he did. It was extremely logical and reasonable that Bediuzzaman, who was extremely intelligent and far-sighted, should have raced with the CUP and taken up watchwords that were meaningful and popular before they did, and tried to give them an Islamic guise before they used them for their own destructive and tyrannical purposes.

What was it, then, that later drove him to give up this way and its above-mentioned beneficial aspects? What method did he then turn to as an alternative?

Doubtless, what prompted him to abandon this method was the sincerity and purity of intention that was growing ever stronger in his heart. When feelings of sincerity gain strength and everything a person does is solely for God's sake, they can accept nothing defective or doubtful that will harm or taint their sincere turning to God. The reason then was this, if we want to express it succinctly! But to explain it further, we may list as follows the reasons Bediuzzaman withdrew from political activity.

The First: Bediuzzaman, who himself had the experience of both embarking on political activity and then withdrawing from it, stressed that it was not in keeping with the mission he had undertaken to become involved in political

currents, and to rely on them or indeed to give himself over to them completely, and try to serve Islam, and through them to endeavour to oppose negative currents. In fact, most of the time it had not conformed with the political role he did play and his goals. For it was impossible to both be involved in political activities and remain apart from all the currents that were struggling against each other. This was one of the most irreconcilable contradictions.

It is very difficult to reconcile acting with sincerity solely for God's sake and making some arrangement with a professional political group and supporting it. For such support demands not objecting to the many deviations and sins that are committed by the group. Similarly, for the good of Islam, the group will have amicable relations with him and come to terms with him to a large extent since it claims that he is a trustworthy guardian of Islam and sincere caller to God's way. Also, showing feigned approval for such a group will give rise to true friendship with the members that make it up. And this will leave traces on his heart, and harden it. It will make him neglect his private worship which is the means of drawing close to God and of which man has great need.

We may now listen to what Bediuzzaman said while explaining his motives:

"The most important reason for this lack of interest and avoidance: sincerity, the most important principle of our way, prevents me. For at this time of heedlessness, the person with partisan ideals in particular exploits everything for his own way, even making his religious movement which looks to the hereafter a sort of tool for his worldly way. Whereas the truths of belief and the sacred service of the Risale-i Nur can be the tool of nothing in the universe; they can have no aim other than Divine pleasure. But it has become difficult at this time of partisan conflict between the [political] currents to preserve the true meaning of sincerity and not exploit religion for the world. The best solution is to rely on Divine grace and assistance, rather than the strength of [political] currents."¹

In the above, Bediuzzaman describes the theoretical approach, while in another place he gives an actual example, based on his own practical experience:

"Since the Risale-i Nur's greatest strength in the face of so many opponents is sincerity, it can neither be the tool of anything in the world, nor can it have any connection with currents based on feelings of partisanship, and particularly with those involved in politics. Because the veil of partisanship destroys sincerity and distorts the truth. In fact, the reason I have given up politics these last thirty years is that because of his feelings of bias towards the [political] current he supported, a revered scholar of religion insulted another prominent sound scholar to the extent of calling him a depraved sinner because he held opposing views, while at the same time he praised and applauded a famous and aggressive dissembler who agreed with his ideas. It caused me to shudder to the very depths of my being."²

The Second: As is known, according to the political method, those who are unconnected are usually held responsible for errors or faults that arise either from the mistakes of individuals or from the breakdown of the social or political system. This is done in order to achieve particular ends. According to the criteria

1. Nursî, Bediuzzaman Said, *Emirdağ Lahikası*, Istanbul, Sinan Matbaası 1959, i, 38.

2. Ibid., 266.

of this political method, the only condition necessary to legitimize this holding others responsible are the political ends as those in power see them. In most cases, the ends are justified and legitimized by political expedients. This is sometimes for a limited period, which is specified by a group holding particular political ideas.

When those calling to the way of God become involved in political movements, they have to accept that this understanding is predominant and therefore have to close their eyes to a series of evils, and even to draw up plans for them. They have to condone injustices that the innocent and immune will be exposed to. The political method mentioned above is also one of the things demanded by working together with the political movement with which the caller to God's way has made the agreement.

This, however, most definitely conflicts with the elevated principles of Islam. Such a method is contrary to the following verse, for example:

*No bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another.*³

And it conflicts with the principle, "The repulsion of corruption takes precedence over the attraction of benefits." This principle is also a summary of the verse:

*There is the type of man whose speech about this world's life may dazzle you, and he calls God to witness about what is in his heart; yet he is the most contentious of enemies; * When he turns his back, his aim everywhere is to spread mischief through the earth and destroy crops and cattle; but God loves not mischief.*⁴

Another principle this method conflicts with is the verse,

*On that account, We ordained for the Children of Israel that if anyone slew a person —unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land— it would be as if he had slew the whole people; and if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people.*⁵

The political method receives its power to solve matters from the masses. For this reason too, it always makes grandiose promises concerning the realization of personal interests that are sometimes fundamentally wrong. The Islamic method, however, which is distilled from God's Book and the Sunna of God's Messenger (PBUH), receives its strength from God's mercy and favour to all His servants. For this reason, it prefers the building of a society made up of innocent people and the nurturing of the seeds of righteousness in that society, to punishing corrupt and evil-doing individuals. For to scare the innocent and destroy the seeds of goodness causes more corruption, evil, and dissension in society than abstaining from punishing minor wrongdoing, deviation, and evil-doing. This point is expressed by the following Hadith, which is narrated by Aisha from the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), as said by both the Prophet and some of his Companions:

3. Qur'an, 6:164.

4. Qur'an, 2:204-5.

5. Qur'an, 5:32.

"As far as you are able, abstain from applying the penalties of the Shari'a where there is doubt. For it is preferable for a judge to err in forgiveness than to err in punishing."

While answering a question connected with this matter, Bediüzzaman described with great clarity the second reason he had given up the method of utilizing politics, despite having previously used it to a large degree while calling to Islam:

"I understood with complete certitude that all the ghastly crimes mankind has perpetrated up to the present have arisen from the abuses of the most basic 'fundamental law' of human politics: 'individuals may be sacrificed for the good of the nation. Persons may be sacrificed for the well-being of the community. Everything may be sacrificed for the country.' Having no specified limit, this man-made fundamental law has opened the way to numerous abuses. The two World Wars resulted from the abuse of this tyrannical fundamental law and overturned a thousand years of human progress; so too it issued the *fatwa* for the annihilation of ninety innocents on account of ten criminals. In the guise of some common good, personal hatred destroyed a town because of a single criminal. Since the *Risale-i Nur* has proved this truth in some of its collections and defence speeches, I refer [readers] to them.

"In the face of this tyrannical fundamental law of politics, I found the following fundamental law of the Qur'an of Miraculous Exposition, which comes from the Supreme Throne. It is expressed by the verse,

No bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another.

"That is, these two verses teach that no one can be responsible for another's crimes. And no innocent can be sacrificed without his consent, even for the whole of humanity. If he sacrifices himself through his own will and consent, his self-sacrifice is a sort of martyrdom, and is another matter. [The verses] establish true justice for man."⁶

And in *Şualar*, he says this:

"Also, no one who enters politics amid the powerful currents that are now dominant can preserve his independence and sincerity. One of the currents is bound to exploit what he does for its own ends and for worldly purposes. It would defile the sacredness of his service. Also, due to the excessive tyranny and despotism which is the rule of this age, he would be certain in the material struggle—due to one person's mistake—to crush numerous of its innocent supporters. He would otherwise be defeated. Also, the sacred truths of the Qur'an, which can be made the tool of nothing, would be imagined by those who for worldly aims exploit religion or who have given it up, to be a means of political propaganda. Moreover, all the classes of people, whether supporters or opponents, officials or ordinary people, have a share of those truths and are in need of them. In order to remain unbiased, the *Risale-i Nur* students have to give up politics and the material struggle completely and have no involvement whatsoever."⁷

The Third: The most important matter in propagating God's religion and calling others to it, is to address all people equally, whatever their different groups,

6. *Emirdağ Lahikası*, ii, 97.

7. Nursi, Bediüzzaman Said, *Şualar*, İstanbul, Çeltut Matbaası 1960, 303.

ways, and social levels. The lights of the call should be turned to all of them with complete objectivity. No group should be neglected while attention is showered on another, none should be abandoned while close relations are had with another. What this means is that the one who calls to God's way must be known to be completely unbiased. His relations with everyone should be those of a judge and his claimants. For he addresses ordinary people and the masses the same as he does leaders and rulers. There are poor and deprived among them, as well as the rich and powerful. That is, he has to show the same concern for all of them and treat them all as equals as regards their future. Certainly the manner he addresses them will differ according to differences in their cultural and educational levels, and the differences in their doubts. This is another subject. The person who calls to God's way has anyway to be distinguished by such wisdom. But he has to be turned towards all people to the same extent and to have the same feelings and concern for them, and the same compassion and love. This was true for the prophets and messengers, and for the scholars and *da'is* who came after them. Is it possible for those carried away by political currents, who take up their places beside co-supporters and strive against opponents, to show the same compassion and love to everyone and to feel the same concern for everyone? Is there any possibility of their winning everyone's confidence concerning the questions they are calling them to and speaking of?

The answer to this question is quite clear: having become involved in political activity and joined political currents that compete with, and even struggle against, one another, such a person would be in a position of competing or conflicting with everyone outside the group of which he was a part for one reason or another, or with which he had good relations or had made an agreement. Would it then be easy or at all possible to come to a mutual understanding with those other groups, be reconciled with them, and set up bridges and so call them to God's way?

It is thus seen that calling to God's way and propagating His religion is a human duty which is above all political rivalry and tussling. This cause shows its effect through the rays of sincerity and compassion towards all people. In this way, it spreads to all men, reaches out to all minds and hearts. It was due to this position of his, which was untainted by any sort of ambiguity, that Bediuzzaman was able to offer advice and instruction to everyone from Ataturk, the members of the National Assembly and other rulers and leaders, to all the people; he allowed nothing to taint the purity of his aims, and took up no position in any of the mentioned groups or communities.

3.

We have here to answer a question. This question concerns the fact that when the dangers of combining service to Islam and political activity are spoken of, and the harm this causes various Islamic activities, it upsets many people, especially those who incline towards political activity.

Some such people think in the following way about the things we have

described above or about Bediuzzaman's attitude, that we are calling on people to think of Islam as merely an abstract relation between man and his Maker, comprising various acts of worship. According to such a view, Islam has no connection with government and political matters; it should not be regarded as religion and state, but as a religion confined to the mosque and places of worship, apart from society and social systems. But we have insisted on the opposite of this, and continue to do so.

Besides being in error, such a view stems from misunderstanding Islam and not knowing the difference between the way that takes people to Islam and the essence that constitutes Islam. Even though the ignorant or ordinary Muslims may suffer such heedlessness, it is inappropriate for those employed in calling to Islam and those who engage in Islamic activities to labour under such delusions.

We should understand that there is a great difference between the way that should be taken in conveying God's religion and introducing it to people with the intention of bringing society to an Islamic 'plateau' and colouring it with God's commands and injunctions, and Islam and the principles that make up its laws. A way that will lead to the spread of Islam and the expansion of its power and rule should remain aloof from the intrigues of politics and political currents, as Bediuzzaman always stressed. Bediuzzaman repeatedly stated and emphasized the reasons for this.

The essence of Islam, which we try to persuade people to believe and then practise, consists of all the principles and rulings laid down by God's Book and His Prophet's Sunna. These principles and injunctions are characterized by ordering both the personal life of people and their relations with their fellow men; supervising the law and order of the family; setting up Islamic society as a whole; ordering the laws within it; establishing sound human relations between rulers and ruled; and setting up the bases of consultation between governors and governed within the harmony of the revealed injunctions to support good and restrain from evil. As a whole, the Islamic principles also order the relations between Muslims and other countries, whether in time of war or peace. And so on.

The extensive sources of Islamic law (*fiqh*) have performed the function of expounding the details of all the rulings in the widest framework and in the best way. Since this is the case, can there be any doubt that Islam, which God, the Sustainer of All the Worlds, commands us to comply with, comprises all these principles and rulings? Is it therefore possible for any aspect of politics, internal or external, to be outside of what this religion comprises and its jurisdiction?

The striking point about the conclusions Bediuzzaman reached through his experience of political activity and the political games around him was this: the comprehensive establishment of the edifice of Islam and the performance of sincere *da'wa*, are tied to making known God's religion in its full meaning, and making people love it truly, and for this reason not getting carried away by the attractions of politics or getting involved in it or joining some groups to the exclusion of others.

Finally, the only possibility of founding a broad, firm Islamic structure which embraces the benefits of both this world and the hereafter and meets all needs, individual, social, and political, is by taking the above-mentioned way and applying that method.

Without any doubt, those who do not observe this, and being precipitate, taint the way leading to this broad Islamic structure with political activity, and for this end borrow the methods and intrigues of politicians, entering into agreements with certain sectors and pushing aside other individuals, deprive both themselves and their peoples of achieving that Islamic structure, which in every respect is the most ideal for human life. They do not even leave it at that, they do not even allow Islam its instructive, social, and political sovereignty over the lives of Muslims. How apt is the following wise proverb: "He who is precipitate does not achieve his end."

* * *

Just how reliable, effective, and correct were Bediuzzaman's admonitions, which he concluded after much experience and suffering much tribulation, and which he repeatedly stressed and emphasized, may be seen from the political life of both the Arab countries and other Islamic countries.

The great majority of Islamic communities and movements have fallen into the abysses that Ustād Bediuzzaman warned against. They found it more agreeable to follow parties and organizations which were not concerned with serving Islam, but whose sole aim was politics, and for whom politics was their way and the means to their goals, and other parties who made politics both the end and the means.

Most of these groups started to imitate the professional politicians. They could not see the awesome differences between the two obligations as they are in essence and the two ways and their methods. As a result, what Bediuzzaman warned about occurred.

They neglected to communicate God's religion and to teach people about Islam and its cause, and in order to come to power, began to compete and struggle against administrators and the politically motivated. It was because they chose such a way that they were compelled to sign agreements with certain sectors and nourish hatred for others. So what was the result?

The result was this: the duty of calling to God's way and teaching His religion was neglected. And the great shame is that this vacuum began to be filled by missionaries and people with destructive, evil aims. Secondly, the Islamists in question united with the professional politicians, both in ways and means, as a result of which, in the questions of leadership and political power, the ranks of the Islamists were infiltrated by many people whose aims were political and purposes, self-interest. Such people used Islam to screen their persons and their aims. The method and style shared by the two sides facilitated this. After this, it became simple to assume an Islamic guise and aim. The pages were all mixed up, integrity and deception came side by side, the people could not discern the truth, the broad masses lost the ability to distinguish between truth and falsehood.

A third result was this: the Islamists in question began to consider it legitimate, so that the political parties and organizations could achieve their aims, for themselves to cause corruption throughout the earth, damage the good of the majority, intimidate the innocent, and murder the guiltless, all of which they frequently had recourse to. However, as Bediuzzaman stressed, according to the law of God's religion "*No bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another*,"⁸ and its principle, "the repulsion of harm takes precedence over the attraction of benefits," such methods are all objectionable and aggressive.

All these results gave rise to the following conclusion, that the road leading to the establishment of the Islamic society was closed to these people. In fact, the abyss gradually widened between them and these ambitions of theirs; the obstacles increased. As a result, neither were the ignorant and bewildered saved from their ignorance and bewilderment so that they would feel sympathy for Islam and become attached to it, nor did the rulers and leaders trust the authenticity of the Islamic aims of the Islamists' in question, and their genuine love of Islam. On the contrary, the rulers formed the opinion that the Islamists, who were from among them, were a group addicted to politics and greedy for power, however deceptive the new methods they invented. For these Islamists themselves had neither been able to preserve their sincere attachment to God's religion, nor maintain constancy in the *mihrab* of worship and servitude of God. For it is impossible that causing corruption in the earth, causing harm to people and what is beneficial to them, and disregarding the inalienable right to life of innocents should leave even a glimmer of the light of sincerity in the heart. It is also impossible that someone who carried out such activities should worship in the Divine presence and preserve the pleasure of someone who has dedicated himself to the worship of God.

Then as the result of all these, they attributed to Islam things from which it is utterly exempt and distant. For example, they claimed that terrorism had a place in it, that it encouraged anarchist activities, and that it was legitimate to cause harm to people and sacrifice the innocent masses for personal interests. A number of countries and circles who pursue hatred and corruption seized this as a golden opportunity. They blew up these accusations to extraordinary proportions; they spread them about with propaganda, and mobilized all the media, visual and audial.

Thus, the plots against Islam began to be framed. Excessive harm was caused by these, one after the other. Numerous people were corrupted, and most lost their purity of heart. Islam's image was tarnished; it was discredited in the eyes of its own ignorant and bewildered members, and in the eyes of numerous non-Muslims, who wanted to learn about it and had great hopes concerning its principles and what it teaches.

All these evils sprang from the errors of the so-called Islamists which they perpetrated in the name of Islamic activities. Then, due to enemies seizing the opportunity and exploiting the continuous effects of these errors, they continued

8. Qur'an, 6:164.

in a chain reaction. These enemies exploited them to the very fullest in order to realize their plans against Islam and the Muslims.

This spring of errors is still boiling and frothing. And those who perpetrated them still persist in them. In this way, the fury of errors has started to spread everywhere irresistibly. The opportunist enemies of religion observe the calamity, and exploiting it, seek to defame Islam because of the mistakes of Muslims.

Will these brothers see the waves of this divisive storm? Will they heed the advice and admonitions of those who have experienced it previously, and having given up such things, published their experiences and proclaimed their admonitions to those who came after them?

I believe it is not possible to give any definite answer to this question. Only the future, which we beseech God will bring us the good news of a return to the truth and the giving up of this harmful stance, will answer it definitely. For these bitter experiences take those who follow them only to impassable ways.

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