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

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by Şükran Vahide

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For information, address:

Sözler Neşriyat A.Ş., Nuruosmaniye Cad., Sorkun Han No: 28/2,
Cağaloğlu, İstanbul, Turkey.

Tel: 0212 - 527 76 07

Fax: 0212 - 520 82 31

E Mail: sozler@ihlas.net.tr

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Bediuzzaman and His Cause

Abu'l-Hasan 'Ali al-Hasani al-Nadwi

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

Praise be to God, the Sustainer of all the worlds, and His blessings and peace be on the Lord of the Prophets, and on his Family and Companions, and on all those who follow in their way till the end of time.

I have previously written about the struggle between Islamic thought and Western thought. In one of the pieces, I wrote as follows concerning the circumstances in which the Ottoman Turks found themselves, despite their being masters of an empire that in the middle of the 19th century stretched over broad lands:

With the passing of the centuries, they had lost the spirit of self-reliance. They had forgotten who they were. Little remained of their zeal and heroism, their powerful belief and unshakeable trust in God, of earlier times. Because, before everything, the scholars and religious leaders had failed to guide society and the

ABU'L-HASAN 'ALĪ AL-HASANĪ AL-NADWĪ

Abu'l-Hasan al-Nadwi was born in 1911 in Raybereli in India, the son of the eminent scholar 'Abd al-Hayy Hasani. He pursued his Islamic studies firstly in the Islamic institute called the *Nadwat al-'Ulamā'*, then in centres of learning such as Lahore and Deoband under various leading scholars. He wrote his work, *Idhā Habbat Rih al-Imān*, when only seventeen years of age. In later years he taught Arabic and Qur'anic exegesis in the *Nadwat al-'Ulamā'*. Abu'l-Hasan al-Nadwi has been the editor of the learned journal *al-Nadwa*, and given addresses in various universities worldwide. Many of his Arabic works have been used as school text-books, the most famous of which are *Mukhtārāt Min Adab al-'Arab*, *Qisās al-Nabiyyin li'l-Afāl*, and *al-Qirā'at al-Rāshida*. In 1957 he founded the *al-Majma' al-Islāmī al-'Ilmī*, which gave valuable support to the movements for *da'wa* and reform in India. In 1959 he was appointed Director of the *Nadwat al-'Ulamā'*, and has had administrative posts various Islamic organizations such as the *al-Majma' al-Islāmī al-'Arabī*, the Islamic World League, and the Islamic University of Medina. Abu'l-Hasan has published more than seventy books in Arabic and Urdu and is at present President of the Islamic Literary Union.

country in science and learning. Furthermore, with certain exceptions whom God preserved, the Sultans had used religion and the Caliphate for their own ends and to achieve their personal ambitions. As if that was not enough, at that time, Western civilization was displaying a new spirit and fresh energy, and with great courage and hope was every day taking new strides forward. It found representatives in Turkey in the intellectual and practical fields with people like Ziya Gökalp and Mustafa Kemal. The former was one of the foremost west-oriented intellectuals. In 1900 he said that the Ottoman Empire would collapse and suffer great difficulties. While as soon as Mustafa Kemal came to power, he abolished the Caliphate and proclaimed the country to be secular. The matter reached the point where Turkey lost its Islamic character, which for centuries had been its true identity and by which it had been nurtured.

However, it is a Divine law in this world and an historical fact, and anyone who studies Islamic history in depth will see, that never has there been any hiatus in the matter of reform and renewal. So too there has been no period in which, with God's permission, someone has not emerged to combat the deviant movements, halt the corruption which threatens to engulf all sides, upheld the voice of right, challenged the tyrants and oppressors, and opened up new horizons in thought. It was always such in Islam. Yes, just as Islam is founded on unshakeable eternal truths and fundamentals of belief, so too it is abounding in life and energy. This vitality recalls a never-ending spring, an inexhaustible mine. It answers the needs of all times and all places, of every stage mankind passes through, all the generations that have passed, and all the communities that have succeeded each other down history, and the needs too of contemporary society. It bears such characteristics, it is backward in no age.

One of the persons charged with the above duty was born in the distant regions of Turkey in the second half of the 19th century and was called Bediuzzaman Said Nursi. He lived in a difficult transitional period in Turkey's history. He was a person of fine perceptions and high intelligence and was quick of understanding. He foresaw the danger that would beset his country. He was profoundly affected by the sicknesses of ignorance, laziness, and illiteracy that afflicted every part of society, and more importantly, by the fact that the religious zeal and burning faith that had filled the spirit of Muslim Turkey for centuries had begun to be extinguished. He expended great effort to eliminate the ignorance and spread the religious sciences. With this aim in view, he began to study the Qur'an in great depth, which is a spring of energy and life, solves problems and riddles, and answers the needs of all times and places. In addition to the religious sciences, he acquired profound knowledge of modern sciences like history, philosophy, geometry, astronomy, and others. In other words, he gained knowledge of both the traditional and modern sciences.

He became very famous and was held in the greatest respect by the other scholars of the time. He devoted himself to teaching and guiding others. He came out of his solitude in the face of the country's situation during that period of transition and stormy winds of change, when the flood of Western civilization

was pitilessly and unceasingly overrunning the country, and called out to the politicians and administrators with his writings and speeches. He drew their attention to the cunning plans the stealthy enemy were executing in having the new laws introduced in the Ottoman Empire. He explained the true meaning of liberty, and sought of the Ottoman rulers that they apply the Shari'a in the country.

He himself participated in the First World War. He fought with great valour against the Russians on the Caucasian Front. He was finally taken prisoner, and was held in Russia for two years. He then escaped, returning, despite the difficulties, to his country.

Politicians marvelled at his heroism and self-sacrifice. In 1922, Mustafa Kemal insistently invited him to Ankara. He was met with a large ceremony at Ankara station. But before long, he realized that Kemal Atatürk wanted to make revolutionary changes which would force atheism and irreligion on the Turkish nation. Whereupon he prepared a manifesto and presented it to the members of the Assembly. He urged them to adhere to the commands of the Shari'a and tried to set light to the sparks of faith concealed in their spirits. Influenced by this, sixty of them began to perform the obligatory prayers. In his *Treatise On Nature*, Bediüzzaman mentions this journey he made to Ankara, and describes as follows his sorrow at what he saw there:

"When I went to Ankara in 1922, the morale of the people of belief was extremely high as a result of the victory of the army of Islam over the Greeks. But I saw that an abominable current of atheism was treacherously trying to subvert, poison and destroy their minds. 'O God!' I said, 'this monster is going to harm the fundamentals of belief.' At that point, since the verse, *Is there any doubt about God, Creator of the heavens and earth?*¹ makes self-evidently plain the Divine existence and Unity, I sought assistance from it and wrote a treatise in Arabic consisting of a proof taken from the All-Wise Qur'an that was powerful enough to disperse and destroy that atheistic current."²

Bediüzzaman saw these things with his own eyes. He was held under fire and played an active role to change this state of affairs. But he differed from his peers in respect of the following two points:

The First: His jihad, which he pursued for years; his profound knowledge of the Qur'anic sciences; his serving these sciences and endeavouring to spread them; his rich ideas concerning the situation which had overtaken Turkey; his penetrating and accurate view of events.

He studied events and conditions down to the finest details, discovering their weak points. He knew well the fissures through which the hot, stormy winds would blow, which would parch the fertile garden of Islam; like fire devours crops, it was scorching the green leaves, turning them to ashes. So he went to the heart of the problems. Doubtless, he saw as the chief weak point the false idea and destructive movement that was being spread under the name of nationalism.

1. Qur'an, 14:10.

2. Nursi, Bediüzzaman Said, *Lem'alar*, İstanbul, Sözlür Yayınevi 1976, 167 / *The Flashes Collection* [Eng. trans: Şükran Vahide], Sözlür Publications 1995, 233.

For in the Islamic world, all nationalist movements have adopted some philosophy by which to order themselves, and in time these have become articles of faith. Quite simply, they have challenged Islam and tried to take over the place in human life that it previously held. These nationalist movements tried to include alternatives for all the things the revealed religions possessed; beliefs, morality, and emotions like love and hatred, friendship and enmity, zeal and patriotism. For this reason all movements which comprised these things and made such claims were met with distrust by members of the final revealed religion and its believing, conscious callers to religion, and were even considered to be dangerous. Since Muslims saw them to be rivals to their religion, they began to combat them. The spread of such movements cause hostility towards religion and deviance, finally destroying Islamic Unity. The prevention and combatting of such movements is therefore is the prime duty of believers.

The nationalist and regional movements in places like Turkey, Iran, Kurdistan and Afghanistan are some of these. Those with religious zeal, possessors of true knowledge, and sincere lovers of religion have striven against movements of this sort in these places. Their aim is to smash the idol of racialism and regionalism and to proclaim the Divine truth:

*Verily, this community of yours is a single community, and I am your Sustainer; therefore serve me [and no other].*³

Ustad Bediuzzaman struggled with all his might against this nationalist movement. With powerful words and decisive proofs, he warned those afflicted with this sickness. He recalled as follows to a Turkish brother who had fallen into its clutches that his nationality was identical with Islam:

"O my Turkish brother! You watch out in particular! Your nationhood has fused with Islam and may not be separated from it. If you do separate them, you will be finished! All your glorious deeds of the past are recorded in the book of Islam's deeds. Since these glorious deeds cannot be effaced from the face of the earth by any power, don't you efface them from your heart due to the evil suggestions and devices of Satan!"⁴

"What enabled this Islamic state, while only numbering twenty or thirty million, to preserve its life and existence in the face of all the large states of Europe was the following idea, which arose from the light of the Qur'an [reflected] in this country's army: 'If I die, I shall be a martyr; and if I kill, I shall be a *ghāzī*.' They met death with complete eagerness and longing, laughing in its face. They always made Europe tremble. What in the world can be shown that will give rise to such elevated self-sacrifice in the spirit of a simple-hearted soldier? What patriotism can be instilled in its place? What can make him willingly sacrifice his life and all his world?"⁵

Ustad knew that this movement was based on no principle that could in any way benefit any country or society. He knew very well it was a crime against the Muslim Umma surpassing all others in history. In fact, it was more destructive

3. Qur'an, 21:92.

4. Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Mektûbat*, Sözlür Yayınevi 1981, 367 / *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi—Letters 1928-1932* [Eng. trans: Şükran Vahide], Sözlür Publications 1994, 382.

5. *Mektûbat*, 370 / *Letters*, 385.

than any other known destructive movement in world history. It was an inauspicious death-trap set to eliminate the nation and drive the society to suicide. Without doubt, racialism is no different to an old holed boat with split sides which will unavoidably sink into the waves. Since it is thus, it cannot be right for Muslims to take refuge in it. In any case, before them is the majestic ship of Islam, which can hold all humanity and disembark them on the shore of salvation.

Ustad's second distinctive characteristic was his choosing a new method of calling to Islam suitable to the conditions in Turkey. When the Shaykh Said revolt was suppressed, and patriotic Muslims had suffered serious losses, he was taken from his place of retreat and sent into exile. He expended all effort to work out an effective strategy and open up new horizons in calling the people to Islam. Before the uprising, he had advised Shaykh Said not to take the way of revolt, for in such situations those who suffer harm are only zealous lovers of religion. Nevertheless, he was sent into exile, and continued to be sent from one place to another until his death. But he was not deterred. He strove with all his power to convey Islamic thought to those who had lost themselves, bewitched by Western civilization; to revive the spirit of religion; to re-establish confidence in the universal prophethood of Muhammad (PBUH); and to renew once again belief in Islam's pure Shari'a, which is for all times and all places. With this in view, he wrote treatises which were each a part of him and would cause the torch of belief and religious zeal to flare up. He strove to convey his writings to every group and individual in Turkey. It was as though, in this method, he was inspired by Shaykh Ahmad b. 'Abd al-Ahad al-Sirhindi. He too chose this effective method of service and was finally successful, changing the course of history, diverting the country from swiftly taking the path of apostasy to practising the injunctions of the Shari'a of Muhammad (PBUH) and religion.

His writings show clearly that in those conditions, the Islamic world and particularly the Turkish nation had need of great scholars who would win back for them their confidence in the eternal prophethood of Muhammad (PBUH) and Shari'a of Islam. Ustad saw their plight and suffered great distress. So he saved them from apostasy and degeneration in ideas, belief, and culture, which had begun to spread throughout Turkey, and from being held under the sway of a powerful and tyrannical person like Kemal Ataturk. This decline and intellectual turn about was more deeply wounding and more dangerous than the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and political decline.

Those who appreciated himself and the Risale-i Nur disseminated its treatises through all the towns and villages, despite all the dangers that could have come from the government. They played a key role in winning back confidence in the religion of Islam, in its keeping up with the caravan of humanity, and even proving that it is capable of leading it.

May God reward Ustad in the best way in the name of Islam and the Muslims, and grant him Paradise.