

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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THE RISALE-I NUR: A REVOLUTION OF BELIEF

As someone born and raised in Britain, I am often asked what we as Muslims have to offer to the West. But before I answer, I should like to ask a question myself: Are we Muslims because we believe in Allah, or do we believe in Allah because we are Muslims?

The question occurred to me during a march through the streets of London, over a decade ago, to protest against the Russian occupation of Afghanistan. I'd made a formal conversion to Islam several years prior to this, and it wasn't my first demonstration. There were banners and placards and much shouting and chanting. And in between "Russians out," "Death to Breshnev," and "Muslims of Afghanistan rise up," we shouted our own Islamic slogans: *Allahu akbar* and *La ilaha illa Allah*.

Towards the end of the demonstration I was approached by a young man who introduced himself as someone interested in Islam. "Excuse me," he said, "but what is the meaning of *La ilaha illa Allah*?"

Without a moment's hesitation I answered, "There is no god

but Allah."

"I'm not asking you to translate it," he said, "I'm asking you to tell me what it really means." There was a long awkward silence as it dawned on me that I was unable to answer him.

You are no doubt thinking, "What kind of Muslim is it that does not know the real meaning of *La ilaha illa Allah*?" To this I would have to say: a typical one. That evening I pondered my ignorance; being in the majority didn't help, it simply made me more depressed.

So how did I become a Muslim? You've no doubt heard the anecdote about Nasreddin Hoja. A friend of his called on him one day and found Hoja sitting in front of a large basket of chillies. His eyes were red and swollen, blood dripped from his gums and tears from his eyes. Yet he carried on eating. Why are you torturing yourself, his friend asked. Because, said Nasreddin Hoja, biting into another pepper, I'm hoping one of them will be sweet.

I had been in the same position myself. No ideology or alternative life-style that I tried could satisfy the inner need for something more, something worth existing for, that elusive something that is always just around the corner but never seems to appear. Disenchanted with every aspect of my life, I left Britain and somehow drifted towards the Middle East. It was not a conscious choice. And it was there that I found the sweet chilli pepper.

Islam simply made sense, in a way that nothing else ever had. It had rules of government, it had an economic system, it had regulations covering every facet of day-to-day existence. It was egalitarian and addressed to all races, and it was clear and easy to understand. Oh, and it has a God, One God, in whom I had always vaguely believed. That was that. I said *La ilaha illa Allah* and I was part of the community. For the first time in my

life I belonged.

New converts are invariably enthusiastic to know as much as possible about their religion in the shortest possible time. In the few years that followed, my library grew rapidly. There was so much to learn, and so many books ready to teach. Books on the history of Islam, the economic system of Islam, the concept of government in Islam; countless manuals of Islamic jurisprudence, and, best of all, books on Islam and revolution, on how Muslims were to rise up and establish Islamic governments, Islamic republics. When I returned to Britain in early '79 to begin a University course, I was ready to introduce Islam to the West.

It was to these books that I turned for an answer to the question "What is the meaning of *La ilaha illa Allah*?" Again I was disappointed. The books were about Islam, not about Allah. They covered every subject you could possibly imagine except for the one which really mattered. I put the question to the imam at the University mosque. He made an excuse and left. Then a brother who had overheard my impertinent question to the imam came over and said: "I have a *tafsir* of *La ilaha illa Allah*. If you like we could read it together." I imagined that it would be ten or twenty pages at the most. It turned out to have over 5000 pages, in several books. It was, as I'm sure you're aware, the *Risale-i Nur* by Ustad Bediuzzaman Said Nursi.

Initially, I dismissed the *Risale-i Nur* as mysticism. My brother pointed out that this was the reaction of a closed mind. Without the intellectual crutches provided by my old books, I felt ignorant and lost. It was a completely new language, a totally new vision. My brother sensed my unease. He said: "Don't worry. The books you have read before all have their place. They are the skin. But this," he said, tapping a copy of *The Supreme Sign*, "this is the fruit." So we began to read, this time in the name of Allah, and slowly things began to fall into

place.

Each of us is born in total ignorance; the desire to know ourselves and our world is an innate one. Thus "Who am I? Where did I come from? What is this place in which I find myself? What is my duty here? Who is responsible for bringing me into existence?" — these are questions which each of us answers in his own way, either through direct observation or through blind acceptance of the answers suggested by others. And how one lives one's life, the criterion by which one acts in this world, depends totally on the nature of those answers. The Supreme Sign is no less than a guided tour of the cosmos, and the traveler is one who is seeking answers to these questions.

The Supreme Sign does not presuppose belief in God; rather it travels from the created to the Creator. And it affirms that anyone who sincerely wishes to answer the questions, and who looks upon the created world as it is, and not as he wishes or imagines it to be, must inevitably come to the conclusion *La ilaha illa Allah*. For he will see order and harmony, beauty and equilibrium, justice and mercy, dominicality and munificence; and at the same time he will realise that those attributes are pointing not to the created beings themselves but to a Reality in which all of these attributes exist in perfection and absoluteness. He will see that the created world is thus a book of names, an index, which seek to tell about its Owner.

In Nature, Cause or Effect?, Bediuzzaman takes the interpretation of *La ilaha illa Allah* even further. The notion that he examines is that of causality, the cornerstone of materialism and the pillar upon which modern science has been constructed. Belief in causality gives rise to statements such as: It is natural; Nature created it; it happened by chance, and so on. With reasoned arguments, Bediuzzaman explodes the myth of causality and demonstrates that those who adhere to this belief are looking at the cosmos not as it actually is, or how it appears to be,

but how they would like to think it is.

In *Tabiat Risalesi* [Nature, Cause or Effect?], Bediuzzaman demonstrates that all beings, on all levels, are interrelated, interconnected and interdependent, like concentric or intersecting circles. He shows that beings come into existence as though from nowhere, and, during their brief lives, each with its own particular purpose, goal and mission, act as mirrors in which various attributes, and countless configurations of names, are displayed. Their createdness, transience, impotence and contingency, their total dependence on factors other than themselves prove beyond doubt that they cannot be the owners of that which they appear to possess, let alone bestow attributes of perfection on beings that are similar to or greater than themselves.

The materialists, however, see things differently — they do not see different things. They ask us to believe that this cosmos, whose innate order and harmony they do not deny, is ultimately the work of chance. Of chaos and disorder, of sheer accident. They then ask us to believe that this cosmos is sustained by the mechanistic interplay of causes — whatever they may be, and not even the materialists know for sure — causes which are themselves created, impotent, ignorant, transient and purposeless, but which somehow contrive, through laws which appeared out of nowhere, to produce the orderly works of art of symphonies of harmony and equilibrium that we see and hear around us.

Like Abraham in the house of idols, Bediuzzaman destroys these myths and superstitions. Given that all things are interconnected, he reiterates, whatever it is that brings existence to the seed of a flower must also be responsible for the flower itself; and given their interdependence, whatever brings into existence the flower must also be responsible for the tree; and given the fact that they are interrelated, whatever brings into

existence the tree must also be responsible for the forest, and so on. Thus to be able to create a single atom, one must also be able to create the whole cosmos. That is surely a tall order for a cause which is blind, impotent, transient, dependent and devoid of knowledge of our purpose.

More and more scientists are beginning to realize that the mechanistic theories of old are simply no longer sustainable. Faced with beauty, awesomeness, order, harmony, symmetry and purpose, attempts to explain away creation by evoking the idea of chance and causality are becoming increasingly untenable. Many are so outraged at the imminent collapse of their old gods that they lapse into hysteria:

One celebrated biologist — and biology is still the most rigidly mechanistic of disciplines — is on record as having said “Funnily, the more beauty and harmony I discover in the cosmos, the more convinced I become of its meaninglessness.” The poor man seems not to have understood that if everything is meaningless, his own effect to that is equally so. Another famous — or should I say infamous — scientist, also a biologist, asserts that the existence of beings, and in particular the phenomenon of form, can in no way be attributed to the random motions of blind, unknowing and impotent causes. He is not alone in his thinking, but he is the first eminent Western biologist to state such beliefs openly. Interestingly enough, he likens the state of the Western scientific fraternity to Russia under Breshnev.

The mechanistic theory is the rigid, all-powerful orthodoxy to which all scientists — biologists in particular — must bow down if they are to retain their credibility — and their jobs. And so they are forced to live a fearful charade, shouting their loyalty in public but whispering their real thoughts in private. When the book in which he attacks causality was published, the magazine *The New Scientist* described it as a “candidate for burning.”

Since then, the author of this book has become an outcast, the Salman Rushdie of Western science.

Such widely differing opinions as to the viability of the causal hypothesis show that the attribution of creative power to Nature or natural laws is by no means the inevitable corollary of objective, scientific investigation. It is no more than a personal opinion. Similarly, denial of the Creator of the cosmos, who has placed apparent causes there as veils to cover His hand of power, is not an act of reason but an act of will. In short, causality is a crude and cunning device with which man distributes the property of the Creator among the created in order that he might set himself up as absolute owner and ruler of all that he has, and all that he is.

My aim was not to summarize the Risale-i Nur, but to show how far removed my previous conceptions about Allah were before reading this work. I thought that by saying *La ilaha illa Allah*, I had said all there was to be said about Allah. Thanks to the Risale-i Nur, I was now able to see that previously, God had been something that I had brought in to complete the occasion, an unknown factor placed almost arbitrarily at the beginning of creation to avoid the impossibility of infinite regression. He had been the 'First Cause,' the 'Prime Mover,' a veritable 'God of the gaps.' He had been rather a constitutional monarch of the English variety, who must be treated with the utmost respect but not allowed to interfere in the affairs of everyday life.

Inspired by the verse *La ilaha illa Allah*, the Risale-i Nur shows that the signs of God, these mirrors of His Names and attributes, are revealed to us constantly in new and ever-changing forms and configurations, eliciting acknowledgement, acceptance, submission, love and worship. The Risale-i Nur showed that there is a distinct process involved in becoming Muslim in the true sense of the word: contemplation to know-

ledge, knowledge to affirmation, affirmation to belief or conviction, and from conviction to submission. And since each new moment, each new day, sees the revelation of fresh aspects of Divine truth, this process is a continuous one. The external practices of Islam, the formal acts of worship, are thus in a sense static. Belief, however, is subject to increase or decrease, depending on the continuance of the process I have just mentioned. Thus it is the reality of belief that deserves most of our attention; from there the realities of Islam will follow on inevitably.

Thus I can say that I had been a Muslim but not a believer; that which I had assumed was belief was in reality nothing more than the inability to deny. Bediuzzaman was not responsible for introducing me to Islam — which anyone could have done — but for introducing me to belief. Belief through investigation, not through imitation.

Let's return now to the question: What do we, as Muslims, have to offer to the West. The answer is: everything and nothing. We have belief and Islam, which is everything; and we have our understanding and interpretation of Islam, which in most cases amounts nothing much at all.

As is evident from the books which introduced me to Islam, almost everything that has been written with the West in mind has been done more or less on the level of some benign cultural exchange. Almost invariably the central question of belief has been glossed over or ignored completely.

In the Qur'an, the word 'Allah' appears more than 2500 times, the word 'Islam' less than ten. In a good deal of modern Muslim writing, the ratio is roughly reversed. In the Qur'an, the ratio between *iman* and *islam* is 5:1 in favour of *iman*. In Arabic book titles until the end of the 19th century, *islam* slightly outnumbers *iman* in a ratio of 3:2. By the Sixties, this has had

jumped to 13:1, and today it is undoubtedly higher. Inevitably, then, the approach to the West has centred on Islam as a system, as an alternative 'ideology', presented almost totally without reference to the realities of belief.

Another reason why our approach to the West has made little headway is that we have misunderstood the West. The West is not only a geopolitical entity, it is also a metaphor. Geographically, the West was the first place to witness a mass revolt against the Divine. Modern Western civilization is the first of which we have knowledge that does not have some formal structure of religious belief at its heart. The West is thus a metaphor for the setting of the sun of religious belief; a metaphor for the eclipse of God. And since this eclipse is no longer confined to the geopolitical West, one may say that wherever the truths of belief have been discarded, there is the West. Thus the West should be seen as a state of mind, a disease, an aberration. The root cause of this, as Bediuzzaman Said Nursi points out, is the disease of self-worship, of 'ENE' (*Ana*, the 'I' or ego).

From the beginning of the Renaissance, man in the West has been his own point of reference, the centre of his own universe, the sole criterion by which he lives out his pathetic life. He has stolen the clothes of the Divine Names and has dressed himself in them and paraded as God. The problem is that they do not fit, and cannot fit.

Unwilling to accept that his duty is merely to reflect the Divine attributes in the name of the Creator and according to His Will, he claims them as his own property and spends a lifetime trying to add to his imaginary possessions. Seeking the infinite from the finite drags him into a fierce and often murderous competition with his fellow beings. Man's endless desires are heightened by the fact that he is limited, impotent and dependent, and bound one day to give up all that he imagined

was his and face annihilation. His limitations and deficiencies, which should serve to remind him of his absolute dependence and impotence, he contrives to conceal. Western man flees from ill thoughts of his ultimate destiny, smothers his innate ability to know and love the Creator, to recognize that man is nothing and can have nothing of his own.

The secular, self-absorbed society of the West is designed on all levels to blind and stupefy. To mask the fact that the religion of the self has failed to live up to its promises; that the secular trinity of 'unlimited progress, absolute freedom and unrestricted happiness' is as meaningless as the Christian Trinity discarded centuries ago. To cover up the fact that economic and scientific progress which has secular humanism as its underlying ethos, has turned the West into a spiritual wasteland and ravaged generation after generation. Yet there are those who are beginning to awake, to realize the illusion under which they have been living. It is to these that the disease of ENE must be pointed out. It is no use telling one who is afflicted with this disease that the Islamic economic or judicial system is the most egalitarian or most just. You cannot cure a man suffering from cancer by giving him a new coat. What is needed is a correct diagnosis, radical surgery and constant back-up treatment. The Risale-i Nur provides all of these.

You will recall that I dismissed the Risale-i Nur initially as mysticism, and I have also heard others describe it thus. The truth is otherwise, for there is nothing esoteric about the stark choice Said Nursi puts before us: belief or unbelief, eternal felicity or eternal wretchedness, salvation or perdition, heaven or hell — in this world and the next.

I have also heard the Risale-i Nur described as revolutionary, and with this I agree. But I am not talking about revolution in the political sense of the word. There is no mention of this in the Risale-i Nur, although I am sure that had Bediuzzaman ad-

vocated the violent overthrow of all secular governments, the Risale-i Nur would be required reading in every Western university, and Bediuzzaman would be a household name in the West.

After all, the West has a soft spot for extremism, especially when flavoured with religion. What can be better, more beautiful, more delicious in the eyes of the Western media than the sight of thousands of angry Muslims in some far-off, violent city screaming "Death to America!" and demanding revolution and the re-introduction of the Shari'a? The West no longer has to go to the trouble of misrepresenting Islam: we do it for them, and they simply film it for their own consumption. I remember watching such a demonstration over a decade ago, in a place where America is known as the great Satan. What struck me at the time was the fact that maybe 70% of the crowd were dressed in Levis, and that every cigarette smoked as the demonstration dispersed was either a Marlborough or a Winston. As one hand cuts — or claims to cut — the ties that bind us to the West, the other hand fastens them even tighter.

Yet still we claim that it is time for action, that we have spoken enough. I've actually heard this said in reference to the Risale-i Nur. It is all talk, someone said, and no action. But we have not talked, we have merely moaned and wailed. And because we have not talked, not conversed, brother to brother, believer to believer, Muslim to Muslim, in the name of Allah, in the language of the Qur'an and in the language of the book of creation, then when we act we set incorrectly, without authority, without discipline, without a true criterion and frame of reference. And ultimately without any lasting result. The West understands this perfectly.

No, the kind of revolution clamoured for on the streets of Tehran, Cairo or Algiers is not the kind of revolution that

Bediuzzaman advocates. The kind of revolution envisaged by the Risale-i Nur is a revolution of the mind, of the heart, of the soul and the spirit. It is not an Islamic revolution but a revolution of belief. As such it works on two levels: it is designed to lead Muslims from belief by imitation to belief through investigation, and to lead unbelievers from worship of the self to worship of Allah. And that is why, in the eyes of those who control the West, a work such as the Risale-i Nur is deadly.

Finally, I would say this: After many years of searching and comparing, I can say that the Risale-i Nur is the only self-contained, comprehensive Islamic work that sees the cosmos as it actually is, presents the reality of belief as it truly is, interprets the Qur'an as our Prophet intended, diagnoses the real and very dangerous diseases that afflict modern man, and offers a cure. A work such as the Risale-i Nur, which reflects the light of the Qur'an and illuminates the cosmos, cannot be ignored. For only Islam stands between modern man and catastrophe, and I believe that the future of Islam depends on the Risale-i Nur and on those who follow and are inspired by its teachings.

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