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

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Horizons of Knowledge in the Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi

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To start with, it will a good thing if we understand that the concept of 'knowledge' (*ma'rifa*) carries the meaning of "understanding a being by means of reflective thought (*tafakkur*) and study." Many specialist scholars understand its meaning to be as follows:

Ma'rifa is to know all the things connected with a thing itself and the things connected with it through its characteristics.

Ma'rifa is used for knowledge which mostly cannot be held by the heart after it has been perceived. When a person perceives that thing, or when he ascribes to it the attributes which subsist within it, it may be said he possesses *ma'rifa*. On seeing that the thing is qualified with these attributes and when he knows this, it is said that he possesses *ma'rifa* of the thing.

Ma'rifa expresses distinguishing known things from other things.

Ma'rifa is knowledge which designates a thing together with all its qualities as something different from everything outside it.

In the view of investigative scholars, *ma'rifa* is knowing a thing through the things that necessitate it. They do not call merely possessing knowledge (*'ilm*), *ma'rifa*. One who does not know God and the ways leading to Him may not be

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classified as possessing *ma'rifa*. Someone possessing this characteristic feels himself together with God, and beholds Him through *ma'rifa*. In their view, an *'arif* is a person who knows God through His Names, attributes, and acts; who through all his actions confirms God; who turns to Him with all his faults and desires; who divests himself of all bad morals and sins; and is purified from all their dirt, stains, and errors.

The term *ma'rifa* has very close ties with other concepts in this field like 'certain knowledge' (*yaqīn*), recollection (*tadhakkur*), proof (*ithbāt*), and certain evidence (*qat'i dalil*), and is used in a way that encompasses all the problems of knowledge.

It is a fact well-known by experts that the creeds and schools of philosophy arose from different methods of knowledge. If we were to study Western thought in depth and extensively, we would find ourselves face to face with not just one theory of *ma'rifa*, but many, and with dozens of schools which have arisen from use of the reason and the senses, which are considered to be the two fundamental sources of the way of *ma'rifa*.

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi appeared at a time of great difficulties, when severe need was felt for a leader who would secure the strength to develop the means of understanding life, and would provide all the means to advance man. In that situation, Bediuzzaman understood that Islam holds a place all its own in the world of existence, and its life too holds a position different to that perceived by the West.

Western thought insists that there are numerous theories and understandings that the European mind, that is, the human mind, has produced. Some of these have taken the form of pragmatism, romanticism, marxism, positivism, secularism, socialism, liberalism, and democracy. Another point that we should be aware of is that these theories and ideas emerged as a result of the Western mind endeavouring to adopt a way of life removed from religion.

Conception (*taṣawwur*) dominates the theory of knowledge in Western thought, and is founded on a knowledge the sources of which are the reason or the senses, or both. This form of conception was not born of the modern age, but is the product of the ancient idol-worship and denial which dates from before Christ. It is based on two basic theories: the theory of reason and sense in Hellenistic Greek thought, and the Illuminist (*Ishrāq*) theory in Ghunusi thought.

Western thought still prides itself on its beliefs and thought springing from ancient Greek and Roman thought. A realist empiricist philosophy emerged later in Western thought. The empiricists deemed non-existent knowledge obtained by means of the senses; they accepted as real, things perceived by the mind and by sight. John Locke said: "Rational ideas are not proof of existence, for they are abstract forms of existence." As for the 'practical' pragmatists, they saw *ma'rifa* as a means to action. They stated that all our thoughts consist of abstract plans directed towards actions. As experts have stated, the situation went as far as the empiricists and realists and pragmatists denying the role of reason and nurturing

enmity towards metaphysical topics, and their attributing great importance to empirical knowledge as a means to *ma'rifa*. Refuting the realist empiricists, the rationalists accepted nothing outside the realm of the reason, stating that the source of *ma'rifa* was directly the reason.

Thus, it was observed that rationalist tendencies increased to such a degree that they encompassed the field of nature, the manifest world, the supranatural realm, the world of the Unseen, and the area of morality and values. Likewise, in practical life, the inclination was towards materialism, and the aim in working became pleasure and personal interest. A person studying this therefore has to note in particular that Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's understanding of *ma'rifa* is not a theory like those of Farabi, Ibn Sina and other defenders of rational thought, but a basic matter affecting man's conduct in life. In his work called *Sözler*, Bediuzzaman writes:

"This strange world must have someone to regulate it, and this orderly country must have a lord, and this fine town, an owner, and this finely made palace, a master builder. We must try to know him, for it is understood that the one who brought us here was he. If we do not recognize him, who will help us?"¹

In Bediuzzaman's thought, *ma'rifa* is one of the fruits of belief (*imān*), and is considered to be one of the results of being on the straight path in religion. While *ma'rifatullāh* (knowledge of God) leads to purity of heart and struggling with the soul, so that a level of purification is attained that the senses and reason could not attain on their own.

Doubtless, belief in God can only become certain and true by being founded on knowledge of the True Object of Worship. It is clear that the servant's level is directly proportionate to such knowledge. Belief is an affirmation whereby the servant's heart achieves stability and certainty. It neither falls into doubt, nor feels the need to wander in order to find its Sustainer. When the heart feels this assurance and attains stability in Divine Unity (*tawhīd*), and admits that He is man's Sustainer and man is His servant and that there is no god other than He, then the servant will worship none other than Him. In this relation is submission to the Sustainer through worship.

The start of the way of *ma'rifa* in Bediuzzaman's thought is as follows:

"...The true affirmation of Divine Unity which, through seeing the stamp of His power, the seal of His dominicality, and the inscriptions of His pen on everything, is to open a window directly onto His light from everything and to confirm and believe with almost the certainty of seeing it that everything emerges from the hand of His power and that in no way has He any partner or assistant in His Godhead or in His dominicality or in His sovereignty, and thus to attain to a sort of perpetual awareness of the Divine presence."²

"And the foundation, source, light, and spirit of all true knowledge is knowledge of God, and its essence and basis is belief in God."³

1. Nursi, Bediuzzaman Said, *Sözler*, İstanbul, Sözler Yayınevi 1980, 260 / *The Words* [Eng. trans: Şükran Vahide], Sözler Publications 1992, 287.

2. *Sözler*, 272 / *The Words*, 300.

3. *Sözler*, 294 / *The Words*, 324.

Thus, the *ma'rifa* in Bediuzzaman's thought emerges from Islam. Since it is thus, we may say that his sources have three dimensions, the 'revelation' revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the 'reason' bestowed on man by God, and the 'experience' based on the data of science.

In Sura al-Nahl, God Almighty says:

"And God brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers when you knew nothing; and He gave you hearing and sight and intelligence and affection: that you might give thanks." (16:78)

If we examine this verse carefully, we see that the Qur'an describes stages which open the eyes and take man to *ma'rifa*. Thus, man first uses his faculty of hearing, then he turns to sight and observation, and then he reaches the heart and mind.

The '*ulamā*' have stated about this that there are two basic stages in man's perception connected with *ma'rifa*: The first stage is the stage of the senses. This is bound to the objective world, from which man benefits through his senses in order to convey to the mind those things he has seen and observed. The second stage is the stage of the mind or reason. With this he sets in order the things he has perceived and differentiates them and reaches conclusions from them.

It is clear that Bediuzzaman Said Nursi considered that we possess all the implements necessary for *ma'rifa*, and that we should use them for this purpose. In the Twenty-Sixth Word he writes:

*"If you want knowledge of reality and true wisdom, gain knowledge of God. For the true realities of all beings are the rays of the Divine Name of Truth and the manifestation of His Names and attributes."*⁴

While in the Twentieth Letter he writes:

*"Be certain of this, that the highest aim of creation and its most important result are belief in God. And the most exalted rank in humanity and its highest degree are the knowledge of God contained within belief in God..."*⁵

If we study Bediuzzaman's words carefully, we shall grasp his conception of using the mind, senses, and heart, and that this way may easily convey a believer to knowledge of God.

It is to be observed that the efforts of numerous Islamic thinkers to expound the question of *ma'rifa* has been within the framework of this conception. The majority of them have been united in the view that *ma'rifa* is based on the senses, the mind, sight, and revelation. For example, Kindi speaks of *ma'rifa* of the senses, reason, and sight, stating that that based on sight is the highest degree of *ma'rifa*.

In Farabi's view, the reason or intellect is man's distinguishing faculty, so he affords strength to *ma'rifa* by basing it on the reason. He moves gradually from the things perceived through the senses to those grasped by the intellect, and

4. Sözlür, 442 / *The Words*, 488-9.

5. Nursi, Bediuzzaman Said, *Mektûbat*, İstanbul, Sözlür Yayınevi 1981, 204 / *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, Letters 1928-1932* (Eng. trans: Şükran Vahide), Sözlür Publications 1994, 265.

reaches the active reason. This active intellect is different to other intellects, which are tied to the self and the body. *Ma'rifa* may only be achieved by means of the active intellect, which has the say in the outside world.

Ibn Sina's view of *ma'rifa* is based on innate being, the *ma'rifa* of ideas, and certain *ma'rifa*. The highest degree of *ma'rifa* is the latter.

In Ibn Rushd's view, the reason or intellect holds a prominent place. But he assigned a different role to the senses in perceiving bodies, which comprise matter and form. The reason perceives the nature of things and their abstract aspects.

Ghazzali was of the view that neither the senses nor the reason could convey us to true *ma'rifa*; this could be attained only by way of the heart.

Abu'l-Hasan al-Ash'ari announced clearly that the reason should be put in its true place; the source of *ma'rifa* was revelation and prophethood.

In his work, *Dar Ta'aruz al-'Aql wa'l-Naql*, Ibn Taymiyya concentrates on sound *ma'rifa* of the intellect, stating that this is not outside the bounds of the *ma'rifa* that Islam summons to.

To come to Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, the *ma'rifa* in his writings is based on man's senses, reason, and sight, and on the truths of revelation that come from God. This *ma'rifa* does not emerge from the depths of man's own being, it displays itself through the efforts represented in "Recite!", the first word of heavenly revelation God's Messenger (PBUH) heard. Man cannot enter upon this endeavour independently; it is bestowed by God together with its sources, means, and aims. Neither can he reach it by means of nature. Nor does it proceed from effulgence, the first cause. God creates it Himself, assisting human endeavour, which is extremely weak and needy of assistance.

A person studying the question of *ma'rifa* in Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's thought will see it is insistently based on knowledge of God. For it is one of the necessities of life and there is no happiness without it. In the Tenth Note of the Seventeenth Flash, Bediuzzaman says this:

"Attaining to the light of knowledge of God and looking on it, and seeing its manifestations in the mirrors of signs and witnesses, and beholding its proofs and evidences, necessitates your not examining it with the fingers of criticism. Do not examine critically every light that passes over you or occurs to your heart or appears to your mind, nor criticize it with the hand of hesitation. Do not stretch out your hand to catch hold of a light that appears to you. Rather, withdraw from the things that cause heedlessness, be turned to the light, and wait. For I have observed that the witnesses and proofs of knowledge of God are of three sorts:

"*One Sort* is like water. It is visible and palpable, but cannot be held with the fingers. For this sort, one has to detach oneself from illusions and submerge oneself in it as a whole. ...

"*The Second Sort* is like air. It may be perceived, but it is neither visible, nor may be held. You should turn towards it with your face, your mouth, your spirit, and hold yourself before that breeze of mercy. But do not stretch out the hand of criticism towards it, for you will be unable to hold it.

"As for *The Third Sort*, it is like light. It is visible, but is neither palpable nor may it be held. So you should hold yourself before it with the heart's eye and spirit's vision; you should direct your gaze towards it and wait. Perhaps it will come of its own accord. For light cannot be held in the hand nor hunted with the fingers; it can be hunted only with the light of insight and intuition..."⁶

A person who studies these truths that Bediuzzaman mentions will understand that man on his own cannot acquire *ma'rifa*; he may only do so on God's bestowing it. Thus, God gives to man clear facts or a seed in the field of the necessary sciences. On this seed growing, it will accompany man's endeavour—the necessary condition for seeking assistance from God.

Scholars who have exerted themselves in the study of the Qur'an and *Sunna* know that true *ma'rifa* is found on this way. At the same time, they recognize God through His works of art and seeing the traces of His power. Observing the reality of His origination, they understand His tremendousness. Moreover, due to their subtle *ma'rifa* and correct knowledge, they fear Him in the true meaning of the word. Thus, this is the way leading to true knowledge ('ilm) and real *ma'rifa*. The means of *ma'rifa*, which God created and has given to man as a trust, have to be used within the bounds of the Shari'a. The Shari'a is a source and support for *ma'rifa*. It is not possible to omit any command or prohibition from the Qur'an, or to add to any, or to change any, or to extend any, or to delay the application of any, or to obstruct any.

The *ma'rifa* in Bediuzzaman's thought is not founded on any theoretical basis that requires lengthy study. On the contrary, it is on a basis which sustains the balance between quality and quantity, matter and spirit, aims and causes, and this world and the hereafter. It avoids excess and negligence in a way conforming to the verse in Sura al-An'am: "Verily this is My way leading straight: follow it; follow not [other] paths; they will scatter you about from His [great] path." (6:153) Bediuzzaman calls on people to establish a tie between the subtle senses, and the enquiring, orderly mind, and the clean conscience.

Unlike other philosophers and scholars of *kalām* (theology), Bediuzzaman did not restrict knowledge of God, which is considered to be the primary aim. He dwelt rather on its visible results in the life of man and humanity. He wrote in *Sözler*:

"This means that man came to this world to be perfected by means of knowledge and supplication. In regard to his nature and abilities everything is tied to knowledge. And the foundation, source, light, and spirit of all true knowledge is knowledge of God, and its essence and basis is belief in God."⁷

While in the Twentieth Letter, he wrote:

"And the most exalted rank in humanity and its highest degree are the knowledge of God contained within belief in God. And the most radiant happiness and sweetest bounty for jinn and human beings are the love of God contained within the

6. Nursî, Bediüzzaman Said, *Lem'alar*, Sözler Yayınevi 1986, 123 / *The Flashes Collection* [Eng. trans: Şükran Vahide], Sözler Publications 1995, 175-6).

7. *Sözler*, 294 / *The Words*, 324.

knowledge of God. And the purest joy for the human spirit and the sheerest delight for man's heart are the rapture of the spirit contained within the love of God. Indeed, all true happiness, pure joy, sweet bounties, and untroubled pleasure lie in knowledge of God and love of God; they cannot exist without them."⁸

The above shows also who it is that has undertaken this Divine method which has continued down the centuries, and have bound themselves to Divine revelation with certain belief, which results in vast and brilliant works. Belief in God can only be certain when founded on knowledge of God. *Ma'rifa* arises from actions a servant of God performs due to his relationship with Him, and through them attains a rank pleasing to his Sustainer.

Doubtless, turning to God's religion will ensure facility for such people in respect of relations, wisdom, stability, certainty, constancy, success, correctness, and rectitude. They will find all these things reflected in their own conduct, morals, and in every stage of their lives through their obvious effects and reliable results.

Throughout the centuries, those who have attained to knowledge of God have experienced the brilliant results and works of the way they have traversed. God has rewarded them in both this world and the next.

For man, there is nothing more beneficial for his present and future than his belief in God and his knowledge of Him, and there is nothing more reliable for the Umma in its worldly business and the matters of religion. For this way directs man to truth, good, and right. It turns him to winning his Sustainer's pleasure and contentment. Tranquillity and serenity envelop him. It surrounds his conscience with walls of steadfastness so that storms will never affect him. The fragrance of constancy will enfold him, conveying him to God's help, conquest, support, mercy, forgiveness, and pleasure.

Belief plays a very important part in acquiring *ma'rifa*. It is quite clear that knowledge of God is based on means that will take man to the heart of his true nature, and to turning to God through a complete method comprising worship and obedience — means that will enable him to strive continuously for Him.

It is known that psychologically man acquires knowledge (*'irfān*) only on coming face to face with the truth. Essential virtues can only emerge and develop through practice. Bediuzzaman Said Nursi said:

"The principles of the ascent in knowledge of the Maker (*ma'rifat al-Ṣāni*), the throne of perfections, are four:

"*The First* is the way of the sufi authorities (*muḥaqqiqīn*), which is based on purification and illumination.

"*The Second* is the way of the scholars of *kalām*—theology (*mutakallimīn*) which is based on contingency and createdness. These two have branched out from the Qur'an, but since the human mind has poured them into a different form, they have become lengthy and difficult.

"*The Third* is the way of the philosophers (*ḥukamā'*). These three are not free of the assaults of doubts.

8. *Mektûbat*, 204-5 / *Letters*, 265.

"*The Fourth* is the ascent of the Qur'an, which proclaims the elevated degree of Qur'anic eloquence, and is the shortest way due to its directness, and the most comprehensive, encompassing all mankind with its clarity."⁹

Bediuzzaman took the Qur'an's miraculousness as his guide in the face of those Islamic thinkers who set out from the reason and made Greek thought the basis of their ideas. The method of Qur'anic *ma'rifa* in his thought, is both a foundation on which the Muslim mind may be based and formed, and possesses an active strength.

Western civilization with its philosophy and schools of thought, separated religion and reason, expelling the reason and the sciences born of it from the sciences of religion. Through the Qur'anic ascent, however, Bediuzzaman made the reason bow to the commands of religion, showing their correspondence and leading to intellectual development.

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9. Nursi, Bediuzzaman Said, *Muhâkemat*, Sözlür Yayınevi 1977, 107.