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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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Jihad in Bediuzzaman's Thought

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Calling to God's way and striving on it (*jihad*) are incumbent on all Muslims, male and female. Everyone has to carry out this duty as far as their power and means allow. God Almighty commanded His Noble Messenger (PBUH): "*Call to your Sustainer's way with wisdom and sound advice and strive against them in the best way.*" Doubtless, since God's Messenger (PBUH) is the leader of the Umma and an example for all Muslims to follow, the above command should be complied with by all Muslims. God's Messenger (PBUH) described how this *jihad* should be as follows: "If any of you sees unlawful acts, he should try to change them by force; if his power is insufficient, he should try to correct them verbally; and if his power is insufficient for that too, he should oppose them in his heart. And that is the weakest of belief." There are therefore three factors limiting the nature and contents of *jihad*:

i). *The existence of unlawful acts*: some of the most grievous of acts of this sort are the enemies of Islam attempting to tear the Muslims away from their roots, defeat them, making widespread things that are forbidden and to prevent their worship.

ii). *Muslim individuals possessing the strength*: God Almighty created all beings differently as regards their physique, intelligence, knowledge, and endu-

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rance of hardship. The Muslim should know the limits of his own strength. If he can correct an unlawful act by force, it is incumbent on him that he does so. If he cannot, he should oppose it verbally. The weakest of belief, however, is a person striving against his own soul, opposing unlawful acts in his heart when he sees them, while refraining from actively countering them.

iii). *The way of jihad*: this has been defined both by the above-mentioned verse, and other verses, and by the words and practices of the Prophet (PBUH). For his life was the living interpretation of the Qur'an, and a practical commentary on it.

The overwhelming calamities and disasters visited on the Umma have resulted in the emergence of great *mujahids*, who have been distinguished by exceptional abilities.

a. The great *mujahids* understood perfectly the conditions and introduced new methods of jihad.

b. Without being carried away by fear and anxiety, they had sufficient consciousness for their activities to produce permanent, practical results for the benefit of Islam and Muslims.

c. They defined principles of jihad that would be most effective in the conditions of the time.

d. They possessed the belief and fortitude to unfurl the banner to revive the lost hopes of ordinary people, crushed under hardship, for the triumph of this religion over its enemies.

e. They possessed knowledge of the Qur'an and Sunna of the Prophet (PBUH). They directed all their activities in the light of the Qur'an and under the guidance of the Sunna of the Prophet (PBUH).

f. The jihad they pursued throughout their lives was in the form of calling all the younger generations to adhere to the way of God's Messenger (PBUH) and to stand firm on the words "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Messenger."

One of the most prominent of those who have waged jihad to preserve the values of this religion was Bediuzzaman Said Nursi. He was born in the village of Nurs in the province of Bitlis in eastern Anatolia in 1298/1873. And he died in Urfa on 25 Ramadan 1389/23 March 1960. If we discount his childhood years, we may divide his life of 87 years into four main periods.

1. The Young Said; 1892-1907.
2. The Old Said; 1907-1926.
3. The New Said; 1926-1949.
4. The Third Said; 1949-1960.

We may now consider these stages in order:

1. The Young Said (1892-1907)

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi was born in 1298/1873 of two pious Muslim parents, Sofi Mirza and Nuriye Hanım in the village of Nurs, of the sub-district of Hizan in the province of Bitlis. He studied first in the village of Tağ, in Pirmis, close to Nurs. In 1888, when he was 15, he joined first the medrese (religious school) of Shaykh Emin Efendi in Bitlis, then that of Mir Hasan Veli in Müküs. He went on to the medrese of Shaykh Muhammad Jalali in Doğu Beyazid near Ağrı (Ararat), where he began his main religious studies. Following this, he had the opportunity to meet the most prominent scholars of the area. He joined the classes of Shaykh Muhammad Emin in Bitlis, those of his elder brother Molla 'Abdullah in Shirvan, and later, of Shaykh Fethullah Efendi in Siirt. All these shaykhs were astounded at Said Nursi's intelligence and power of memory.

In 1892, when just 19 years of age, the Young Said had long since completed his education, formed his personality, and reached the level to teach all Muslims, both the ordinary people and the elite, about their religion. Also at that time, he grasped the importance of combatting with the light of belief the ignorance spreading among Muslims at that time. He went to Mardin and started to instruct the people in a central mosque. In a short time, he attracted large numbers of the people, but some of the authorities intervened, not wanting the people to be enlightened in this way and their own interests damaged; Bediuzzaman was expelled from the town by the Governor, and sent to Bitlis. However, the Governor of Bitlis met him with great respect, even having him to stay as a guest in his residence for a while. Molla Said studied the best-known works in Bitlis, and under the scholars of the town. The most important of these was Shaykh Muhammad al-Kufrawi.

On the specific invitation of the Governor of Van, Molla Said moved to that town in 1894, where he taught geography, physics, chemistry, and other sciences. He was given the name 'Bediuzzaman' (Wonder of the Age) because of his brilliant intelligence.

Bediuzzaman read a news item in Van which shook his whole being, causing his jihad to move on to another stage. The news concerned the British Secretary for the Colonies, Gladstone; he had taken a Qur'an in his hand in the parliament and said: "So long as the Muslims have this, we shall be unable to completely dominate them; we must either take it from them or make them lose their love of it."

At that moment, Bediuzzaman decided that jihad would be realized primarily through expounding the Qur'an's miraculousness, by the Muslims adhering to it, and its being made an inseparable part of life. He developed the idea that it was necessary to found an Islamic university in eastern Anatolia which he gave the name of the *Medresetü'z-Zehra*. For this purpose he went to Istanbul, and remaining a year and a half tried to persuade the authorities of its necessity. However, he was not successful, and returned to Van, where he continued to teach.

2. The Old Said (1907-1926)

Bediuzzaman returned to Istanbul in 1907 and settled in the Şekerci Han in the Fatih district. Here he answered all questions put to him and solved all problems on religious questions. He soon became a focus of interest among the people generally as well as among scholars and students of the religious sciences. Thus began a new stage in his jihad, which he himself called the "Old Said." At this stage, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi pursued a jihad by offering advice and guidance by word and deed to those in power, and particularly to Sultan Abdulhamid, and being involved in political life for the purpose of battling against currents inimical to Islam. He did this mostly by means of newspaper articles and meetings.

Bediuzzaman first met with the Sultan in Yıldız Saray. He told the Sultan of the obligations he was under from the Islamic point of view, but the Sultan deemed this disrespectful and handed him over to the military court. The court sent him to a lunatic asylum. Being unable to break his resistance with these torments, they tried to soften him up with offers of money and position. But he declined to sell his conscience for the goods of this world. As a result, the government had no option other than leaving him free.

Bediuzzaman went to Salonica, where he met with the leaders of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), offering them advice. He enjoined what is commanded by religion, and restrained from what is forbidden. On seeing that they were opposed to Islam and ignored what he said, he realized there was no benefit in addressing them, and he returned to Istanbul.

He continued his jihad in Istanbul, especially after the proclamation of the Constitution in 1908 by the Ottoman State. By means of addresses and articles, he advised all classes of people on the Islamic understanding of freedom and constitutionalism. He wanted the Shari'a to be enforced. He expressed similar views in 1909 on the founding of the *İttihad-i Muhammedî* (Society for Muslim Unity).

In April of 1909, the CUP sent a regiment of soldiers from Salonica to protect the constitutional regime against a revolt demanding the reinstatement of the Shari'a. They immediately suppressed the revolt. Sultan Abdulhamid was dethroned, and a military administration was proclaimed. Court martials were set up to try those who had instigated the revolt. Among those sent before the court was Said Nursi. God preserved him from the execution for which he was being tried, and despite conducting his own defence in a most bold and fearless manner against all the serious charges, he was acquitted.

Bediuzzaman decided to return to eastern Anatolia after this. In 1910 he settled in Van, which became the centre of his activities of guidance and calling to God's religion in the neighbouring towns and villages. He also composed various works, one of which was *Münâzarat* (The Debates), which was published in Istanbul in 1913.

In 1911 he visited Damascus, where he gave a sermon in the Umayyad Mosque. In his sermon, he described the reasons for the Umma's decline, saying

there were six chief reasons. These were despair, lying, conflict, the weakening of the bonds between Muslims, despotism, and personal interests taking precedence over the public good. From there he moved on to Beirut, from where he returned to Istanbul.

In Istanbul he had an audience with Sultan Muhammad Reshad, and tried to persuade him of the importance of the Medresetü'z-Zehra. Sultan Reshad responded favourably and promised support for its construction. However, the outbreak of the First World War put a stop to the plan before it could be fulfilled.

With the outbreak of war, Bediuzzaman's political jihad, which he had carried out verbally and with his pen, turned into armed jihad against the enemy, which took priority.

In 1912, Bediuzzaman was appointed as commander of the Muslim militia forces in eastern Anatolia. Immediately before the outbreak of war in 1914, he joined the *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* (Special —Intelligence— Organization), which had been founded by the Sultan to fight the enemies and maintain the unity of the Empire. Bediuzzaman and a number of other Islamic scholars who were attached to the Organization published a 'jihad fatwa' or proclamation of jihad. Although Bediuzzaman opposed the Ottoman entry into the First World War, when it occurred, he carried out the duties that fell to him with the very greatest courage, enterprise, and belief.

Returning to Van, Bediuzzaman formed a jihad force from among his students. He trained them to use arms, and they performed important services in protecting the Muslims in the area from the Armenian revolutionaries, who were trying to drive them out. Bediuzzaman led his students particularly in Erzurum against the Russian invasion. At the same time he was writing in Arabic the work he called *Ishārāt al-I'jāz fī Maẓānn al-Ījāz*.

Bediuzzaman and his students fought valiantly in the defence of Bitlis when the Russians occupied the town. He was wounded during the fighting and taken prisoner. He was later sent to Russia. Bediuzzaman spent two years four months in captivity. He passed this period relying on God, and preserving his dignity and honour to the degree that he would sacrificed his life had it been necessary. He escaped following the Bolshevik Revolution, and God facilitated his way. He reached Warsaw, from where he returned to Istanbul by way of Vienna. After many adventures, with Divine assistance he completed the long and arduous journey.

In Istanbul, Bediuzzaman found himself a member of the *Darü'l-Hikmeti'l-İslâmiye*, a learned academy in which the government had gathered together prominent scholars. He used the salary he received here to print his books and any remaining, he distributed among the poor.

The years had accumulated many problems, the six-hundred-year empire crumbled, its bitterest enemies surrounded it, and in 1920, the British forces occupied Istanbul.

Bediuzzaman once again undertook his 'jihad of the pen,' writing a work called *Hutuvât-ı Sitte* (The Six Steps). He had it distributed secretly among the Muslims by his close friends and students. Bediuzzaman fiercely attacks the British enemy in this book, trying to boost the morale of the Muslims and answer some of the doubts about Islam the enemy has sown among them. Generally speaking, he was combatting the despair that had settled in them and striving to stir them into action. Bediuzzaman resisted nationalist demands that were being spread among Muslims, and vehemently rejected the setting up of a Kurdish state on the remains of the Ottoman Empire. He joined the religious scholars who issued a *fatwa* urging the Muslims to actively resist the occupation, even though this was a rebuttal of a *fatwa* issued by the Shaykhu'l-Islam under the constraint of the occupying forces, which opposed resistance.

Bediuzzaman became famous for his self-sacrifice for his country and resistance against the occupying forces, and was repeatedly invited to Ankara by Mustafa Kemal. He went there in 1922. But he suffered a great disappointment when he arrived there and saw that the great majority of the deputies did not perform the obligatory five daily prayers. He wrote a manifesto which he delivered to the deputies on 19th January 1923. In it he admonished the deputies, reminding them that if they did not return to God, they would pay for it terribly on the Last Day. Most of them responded. Only those who, following their own ideas, had specified another path they thought the country should take, were exceedingly angry at this. They accused Bediuzzaman of trying to sow discord among them. He realized there would be little use in him remaining in there, and decided to return to Van.

Bediuzzaman had chosen to wage jihad by means of writing works and publishing them. First he published *Isharat al-I'jaz*, then in 1922 he wrote *Kızıl İcâz*, and in 1923 *Sunûhat*. In order to combat the disbelief, atheism, and apostasy which was prevailing over the Islamic lands, in all these treatises he concentrated on the tenet of belief 'There is no god but God and Muhammad is His Messenger.'

The revolt led by the leader of the Piran, one of the largest Kurdish tribes in eastern Anatolia, Shaykh Said, erupted at this time. It was aimed at the rulers, who were attempting to sever the newly founded state and its people from Islam and its marks. Because he feared it would lead to Muslim blood being spilt, Bediuzzaman did not support the revolt. He nevertheless could not save himself from the ire of the government and in 1925 was arrested and sent first to Istanbul, and from there to Burdur and finally to Isparta. He was taken from there to the village of Barla in Isparta province, where he was compelled to reside, in a small house assigned to him.

These days of 1926 were the worst the Muslim Turks had seen. For open hostility towards Islam and the Muslims was becoming more widespread. A painful new stage was commencing in Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's life, which would be reflected in the new stage in his jihad.

3. The New Said (1926-1949)

Ustad Bediuzzaman Said Nursi called this new stage in his life that of the "New Said." At this stage, political jihad became impossible due to the oppression inflicted on Muslims by their enemies. Bediuzzaman felt the need to repeatedly say: "I seek refuge with God from Satan and politics." In this situation, he concentrated his jihad on saving the belief of the younger generations. He was imprisoned on many occasions as a result, but he called prison "the school of Joseph" (*Medrese-i Yusufiye*). For the tyranny and injustice of his imprisonment was still the means to his jihad. The writing of the *Risale-i Nur* was carried out in difficult conditions such as that. Mostly explained in its treatises were the questions of belief.

For around eight years Bediuzzaman lived his life of exile in the village of Barla in Isparta Province, removed from the people, in unhealthy conditions, and continuously under surveillance. Despite this, his will never weakened. He continued his jihad of the pen. Bediuzzaman had one student from among the villagers. He dispelled the fear they felt, and was a bridge between him and them. Bediuzzaman spent all his time writing the *Risale-i Nur*. The treatises he wrote were copied out by his students, despite all the dangers and persecution, until they reached the farthest corners of Turkey. Bediuzzaman would dictate to one of his students, copies would be made of the original, which were then taken to Bediuzzaman, who would correct them. When writing, Bediuzzaman would dictate directly, without referring to any books, and what he said was written down immediately.

Bediuzzaman insisted that the proscribed Arabic script was used, rather than [the newly introduced] Latin alphabet. It was forbidden to print any books in the Arabic script, and even to use it for personal matters. When the government realized that the *Risale-i Nur* was spreading to all the towns and villages, they started to treat Bediuzzaman and his students as criminals. They raided their houses and carried out searches, but were unable to intimidate them or keep them from continuing.

In 1932 the Arabic *ezan* [call to prayer] was banned by the government. Bediuzzaman however persisted in reciting it in the small mosque in Barla where he prayed. The authorities were angry at this, imprisoned some of the villagers, and finally, in 1934, decided to move Bediuzzaman away from there. They took him to Isparta, where he continued to write the *Risale-i Nur*. The police then raided his house, and he was arrested. 120 of his students were arrested at the same time, and put in prison. They were then all sent to Eskişehir Prison, escorted by police. They were charged with "setting up a secret society" opposed to the state system. Bediuzzaman was held in solitary confinement and they did all they could to break his morale. But they were unable to shake him, or to scare him. He continued to write in the prison. The charges against Bediuzzaman and his students were not proven, but they were held in prison for eleven months on the pretext of "The Treatise On Islamic Dress."

The authorities did not leave Bediuzzaman in peace when he was released

from Eskişehir Prison. In 1936 he was exiled to Kastamonu, where he was compelled to reside. After being held for three months in the police station, he was moved to a small house opposite it. He lived seven years of exile here, continuing to write the *Risale-i Nur* and correspond secretly with his students. The treatises continued to spread everywhere, even to all the villages. Hundreds of thousands of copies were written out by hand. Bediuzzaman suffered oppression by the Kastamonu authorities particularly due the turban he wore, which had been prohibited by the Dress Laws of 1925.

In the summer of 1943 they poisoned Bediuzzaman. Through Divine grace, he was saved from death and recovered from the serious illness he suffered as a result. But they did not leave it at that, they raided and searched his house on numerous occasions. He was later taken to Ankara, handcuffed, together with 126 of his students. They had been rounded up from various parts of Turkey. They were again tried for "setting up a secret society." Bediuzzaman was sent from Ankara to Isparta, and from there to Denizli, where he was imprisoned for nine months, during which time he wrote *Meyve Risalesi* (Fruits of Belief). He used to write it on scraps of paper which he put in match boxes and threw down from his window to his students below. They would then copy them out and distribute them.

Another noteworthy point is that Bediuzzaman was held in prison, although he had previously been acquitted on the charge. Having completed the term, it was decided in 1944 to send him to Emirdağ. His enforced residence continued here with a guard posted at his door and under twenty-four hour surveillance. Another attempt to poison him was made here. But after a week of severe illness he again recovered.

On completion of the term of his enforced residence, he was not left free. In 1948, his house was raided together with those of 15 of his students, and they were sent to Afyon Prison on a number of false, trumped-up charges. At the same time, 54 *Risale-i Nur* students were arrested in neighbouring provinces, rounded up, and sent to the same prison. The charges were again the same: setting up a secret society. In completely arbitrary fashion, the court sentenced Bediuzzaman to twenty months' imprisonment. The sentence was quashed by the Appeal Court, but he still was not released until the original term had been completed. Bediuzzaman continued his 'jihad of the pen' in the prison. Almighty God brought numerous people to guidance through his hand. He was finally released on 20th September 1949.

A new stage unfolded in Bediuzzaman's cause after his release as a result of a number of fundamental changes that were occurring in Turkey at the time.

4. The Third Said (1949-1960)

Bediuzzaman called this period of his life that of the Third Said. It differed from the previous period in so far as the multiparty system was introduced. The Republican People's Party had in theory supported the participation of the people in government, but in practice they had perpetrated great wrongdoing for they had adopted a hostile attitude towards Islam and Muslims, and seeking the life of this

world over that of the hereafter, the country's leaders had persecuted religious figures —and the greatest of these in regard to belief and jihad, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi— and had exiled and oppressed some of them, and even killed some. As a result, the Democrat Party, which opposed them in the elections, won them. Having come to power, the Democrat Party returned the freedoms which had been to a very large extent restricted under the previous regime. In response to these developments, Bediuzzaman embarked on a new, active form of jihad. This comprised collective readings of the *Risale-i Nur*, offering advice and guidance to politicians and members of government, and inviting them to the way of Islam.

On being released from prison, Bediuzzaman was obliged to remain two months in the town of Afyon. Some of his students remained with him, looking after his needs. He then moved to Emirdağ with his students. For the first time in twenty-five years he was free to act as he pleased. He stayed here two years. In 1951 he moved to Eskişehir together with some of his students. Bediuzzaman moved on from here to Isparta, where he stayed for some ten weeks. All this time he was ceaselessly occupied with writing.

Around this time, some of his students had *Gençlik Rehberi* (A Guide For Youth) printed in the new, Latin, alphabet. Whereupon some of the authorities instigated a court case against Bediuzzaman on charges of intending to found a state based on religious principles. He was summoned to appear in court in 1952. He arrived accompanied by hundreds of his students. The courtroom was packed to overflowing. After three sessions, it was decided to acquit him.

Bediuzzaman returned to Emirdağ. But around this time, the mistaken activities of a number of individuals who had been deceived by powers inimical to Islam were made the pretext, and the decision taken to close all Islamic papers and magazines and arrest those involved in them. Among these were a number of *Risale-i Nur* students. Their trial was in Samsun, and they were finally acquitted. However, further charges were made against Bediuzzaman himself in Samsun due to an article entitled *Burhan-ı Ekber* (The Greatest Proof), which had appeared in the magazine *Jihad-ı Ekber*. This case also finally ended in acquittal.

Bediuzzaman spent three months in Istanbul at this time, then returned to Emirdağ. He moved on from here to Eskişehir, and from there to Isparta. He also revisited Barla at this time, where he had spent some of his years of exile.

Bediuzzaman then settled in Isparta with a number of his students. Here he continued in his striving both verbally and with his pen, as a teacher, instructor, preacher, and admonisher. From time to time he visited Barla and Emirdağ. Because of his increasing years he often could not rise from his bed. He was very saddened when some of his students were arrested in 1958 in Ankara, Istanbul, and Isparta.

In the final year of his life, Bediuzzaman visited Ankara, Emirdağ, Konya, Istanbul, and Isparta. It was as though he was bidding his students farewell. Some hostile newspapers used these journeys as a pretext and started a campaign of slander against him. He was very ill by this time. In spite of the seriousness of

his condition, he wanted his students to take him to Urfa. The authorities wanted him to remain where he was, but he succeeded in reaching there. God Almighty wished to raise his station. They wanted to drive him away, even on his death-bed, but he won a difficult test, and on 25th Ramadan 1379 returned to his Maker. May God grant him His greatest mercy, and unite him with His Messenger, Muhammad (PBUH), the prophets and righteous. May He reward him in the very best way for his jihad in upholding the Word of God.

Bediuzzaman was buried in the graveyard of the Ulu Mosque in Urfa. Even after his death, the enemies of God did not want him to rest in peace, and after a few months opened his grave and removed his remains to some unknown spot, where they reburied them. They perhaps thought they could scatter his followers in this way. But how were those dark-souled people to know that through his writings and works, that Supreme *Mujahid* would live in the hearts of his students and those who loved him. His pure spirit had been released from the prison of this world and attained to freedom in the hereafter. That great striver in God's way! How happy those who follow him!

Conclusion

We have seen in this paper that Ustad Bediuzzaman's life comprised jihads of varying sorts. Although conditions and events changed, he continued his jihad, but its form changed with the change of conditions. However, his principal aim was always to enjoin the good and restrain from evil, and to serve this religion by calling others to believe in God. Bediuzzaman's greatness is understood from his always adhering to the way of jihad, never being deterred. He never lagged behind on this way, or weakened or fell into doubt. He always insisted that Islam is the truth and its enemies followed falsehood. Every step he took, he took in accordance with particular principles. He strove to follow the way that fitted best the conditions in which he found himself. He never complained about the difficulties God set him as a test, and overcame them all, trusting in God. He knew well that this world is fleeting, and therefore throughout his life allowed no love in his heart save love for God.

Another aspect of Bediuzzaman's greatness was that in his striving, he always followed the Sunna of God's Messenger (PBUH). It was in this way that he came to be loved by all the Umma, and those who oppressed and persecuted him could not deter him from his way. He always prayed for the good and guidance of those who oppressed him, and hoped they would come to the straight path. May God grant him His most extensive mercy and reward him in the best way. He did not live to see the results of his jihad, but his pure spirit is now in bliss in Paradise. For the great services of his works in taking people to God's way of guidance continuously earn him vast reward. He left behind him a treasury of knowledge that is all the time profited from, and as God's Messenger (PBUH) said in a Hadith, it will continue his duty till the end of time.