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THE RECONSTRUCTION OF
ISLAMIC THOUGHT IN THE
TWENTIETH CENTURY
AND

Bediuzzaman
Said Nursi

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Professor ABDULVEDUD CHELEBI

(al-Azhar University - EGYPT)

Professor Chelebi studied first in al-Azhar University, then did post-graduate work in Cambridge, and the Oriental and Punjab Universities. He played an active role in liberating Egypt from British occupation. He was arrested and ill-treated by the British, and was among those who suffered under the tyranny of Jamal Abd al-Nasir during the years he served in the ranks of the *Ikhwan al-Muslimîn*. Professor Chelebi has undertaken important duties in Egypt and other Muslim countries. He acted as Director of the Islamic Centre in Sydney, Australia, and as General Secretary of the High Council of Islamic Da'va in al-Azhar, and is also a member of organizations like the Egyptian Writers' Union, the Pakistan High Council for Islamic Da'va, and the Sudan Society for Islamic Da'va. He is also a founder member of the scholarly international council which researches into points of closeness between the schools of law. Professor Chelebi, who is a fine speaker, has participated in more than seventy conferences in Asia, Africa, Europe, and Australia on the subject of communicating the message of Islam (*tebligh*). He has published more than fifteen works in English and Arabic.

BEDIUZZAMAN'S METHOD OF RENEWAL AND REFORM

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi is a name not much heard in the Arab world. The members of a religion whose first command was "Read!", have not read and we have been enveloped in ignorance. Can you imagine a professor who was a specialist in the field of education and culture not knowing where the Prophet Muhammed (PBUH) was born and where he died? Especially if the professor supposes that he is buried in the Ka'ba.... If the ignorance about the person the world recognizes as the most important and greatest human being has reached these dimensions, think of the degree the ignorance and lack of concern has reached of scholars who are not Arab!

While I was General Secretary of the High Council for Islamic Da'va in al-Azhar, I bought hundreds of Ihsan Qasim al-Salihî's biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi. Whereupon I was overwhelmed with a shower of questions from many people: "Why have you bought this book? Who is Said Nursi? Which country did he live in? Was he a poet or a writer? Or an Islamic scholar, or a philosopher? Was he Indian, or was he an Arab?" These questions are nothing other than an indication of the disastrous proportions of ignorance and the reasons for our decline, which threaten our existence and very nature.

I chose the following title for this Symposium:

'Bediuzzaman's method of renewal and reform.' To put it another way, 'A reformist in whose cause all renewal and reform movements were encapsulated.' I have tried summarize my research in four matters:

1. A general view of the age in which Bediuzzaman lived.
2. The reform movements which were widespread in the century Bediuzzaman lived.
3. Bediuzzaman's method of communicating the message of Islam (*tebliğ*).
4. The duty which Bediuzzaman undertook.

The 19th century was the most terrible century in the history of Islam, the darkest period of the Turks and of all Muslims. The collapse began in that

period. The tyranny and despotism of kings and their ineptitude and dissoluteness; the treachery of statesmen and their deceiving their nations; the people's addiction to comfort and easy living; the spread at full speed of calamities like ignorance and superstition. Muslims' ties with the basic sciences were broken; the numbers of those who learnt sciences like jurisprudence, languages, literature, and mathematics decreased, and many of them even considered sciences like physics, chemistry, and mathematics to be either unbelief or magic. Minds were coloured with superstition. Salvation was sought at the wrong door. Those who showed the way were the object of suspicion. Dajjals and revolutionaries seized the reins. Students from east to west who had had an Islamic education were discussing meaningless things like, is it permissible to touch a match? Is it lawful to use them to ignite things and for cooking? Is it a sin to touch the abrasive paper made with sulphur?

The disaster was terrible, the calamity, great. The war declared on Islam and Muslims was severe. As the historian, Jabartî said:

"There were great wars, terrible events, natural disasters and successive calamities during those years. The balance of time was broken, characters changed, values were overturned. Clashes between the generations occurred. Everything was destroyed, smashed....'Allah will not wrongfully cause a land to perish whose people are righteous.'¹

Following this of course the reaction started. The attitude of the colonialists and bigotry of the crusaders brought the Muslims to action; it kindled the spirit of endeavor and striving. A religious consciousness stirred into life in the Muslim societies and in the leaders of communities. In those days religion formed a motive force on its own. Scholars were like a living organ in the body of the Islamic world. The sword and the pen were brandished together. Thus, Shaykh Shamil, the hero of the Caucasus, and the Mehdi's who appeared in Somalia and the Sudan were a few of these rare individuals in recent Islamic history who brought the sword and the pen together.²

Three Movements in Islamic History

In Islamic history three Islamic movements emerged which resemble one another, rather are the same. Each of these movements has played a large role in preserving the beliefs of Muslims.

The first of these: the movement of Imam-i Rabbani (Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi), the mujahid, ascetic, and Renewer, the Indian Regenerator of the Second Millenium.

The second: the movement of Abdulhamid ibn Bâdis in Algeria.

The third: the movement of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi in Turkey.

Ibn Bâdis' Movement

He was against the French colonization of Algeria, which tried to change and destroy everything pertaining to Islam and the Arabs. For the French Cardinal L. Figri said: "Algeria does not represent Islam any more, it has become a cradle of Christianity. The sound of bells has to rise from every mosque and every corner in place of the call to prayer."

Like milk which flows forth from between blood and excrement, morning too is born from the breast of darkness and night. Thus, in this dark time, all the people of Algeria awoke at the voice of Abdulhamid ibn Bâdis giving the good news of morning:

The people of Algeria are Muslim and Arab.

Whoever says that they have broken off from their roots is a liar.

Let those who attempt to destroy them know that they have been carried away by the passion of seeking the impossible.

Ibn Bâdis gave importance to education, teaching, preaching, guidance, community activities, and the publication of books and newspapers.

Ibn Bâdis was a contemporary of Bediuzzaman's. Bediuzzaman was born in 1293(5) Hijri and died in 1379. And Ibn Bâdis was born in 1308 and died in 1359.

Imam-i Rabbâni's Movement

If we compare Imam-i Rabbâni's movement with that of Bediuzzaman, we see that they correspond to each exactly. Imam-i Rabbani lived at the time of India's most dissolute ruler, Akbar Shah. Akbar Shah wanted to do away with Islam entirely. He attempted to stealthily corrupt Islam. He was carried away by the desire to found a new religion which included idol-worship. As though with this movement, he would protect his rule, appear favourable to the Hindus, and win a place in their hearts. Finally he began to apply a broad programme, which included the following:

1. He would take as wives the daughters of the Hindu emîrs. These girls would continue to practise their religion, and would live in the palace according to their beliefs as they wished.
2. Their dress followed their own customs and traditions.
3. He created hatred and enmity towards Islam, which reached such a pitch that he gave names like Ahmad and Muhammed to his servants in order to insult the Prophet Muhammed (PBUH).
4. He substituted the Hijri calendar with the 'Divine calendar', which began from his accession to the throne.

In addition to these, he made lawful alcoholic drink, gambling, and every

sort of forbidden thing. Akbar Shah was not alone in enacting these changes, unfortunately, his greatest supporters were religious scholars who had trampled the honour of learning in the dust. These scholars presented a proclamation in which Akbar Shah was given the name of Sijil, which they declared meant 'free of sin'. Furthermore, in this proclamation, they issued a fatwa saying that he could pass any law he wished, proclaim any decree he wanted, and do anything he desired.

In short, all these things were the preparations to create a new religion in place of Islam. For according to him and those around him, Islam did not meet the needs of the age. Therefore a new 'religion' was needed. Finally they proclaimed their new religion, which they called the 'Divine Religion'. Their slogan was 'Allahu Akbar', but, God forbid, they meant Akbar Shah.

This period was one of calamity for Muslims. The conflagration enveloped every part of the country. Everyone had a share of torture, prison, exile. But the most grievous thing, that caused the most tears, was that these calamities which were visited on the people reached the greatest religious scholars of the age as well. Very few scholars were able to stand firm in the face of this dissension. Most of them bowed to the king.

In those dreadful days, someone appeared on whom was God's grace. He stood firm before the king and unfurled the banner of *jihad*. This was the leader of the Second millenium of the Hijra, Imam-i Rabbani. Through his *jihad*, he buried the king's dissension in history.³

Bediuzzaman's Moderation

Since Islam in the religion of Divine Unity, it is the religion of unity.

*And be not among those who join gods with God, * Those who split up their religion, and become sects - each party rejoicing in that which is with itself.*⁴

Just as Islam did away with associating partners with God, it also forbade conflict and division, which are the result of associating partners with God. The Prophet of God (PBUH) said the following on this matter:

"After me, do not turn to the unbelievers who strike one another's necks."⁵

Ignorance, one of the reasons for conflict between Muslims, has not disappeared today. Among today's Muslims, there are still those who accuse scholars like Ibn Taymiye and Ibn Kayyum al-Jawzî of misguidance. There are those who call Sufism and the *tariqats* superstition. There are those who consider Muhyiddin Ibn al-Arabî to be an unbeliever and an apostate. And today there are still many people who accuse the Imamî Shi'a of unbelief and heresy.

Bediuzzaman appeared before all these conflicts with the title of a just judge; he weighed up on the sensitive scales of justice the differences in view born of ignorance and bigotry.

As Ihsan Qasim al-Salihî said:

"While passing judgement on individuals and communities, the *Risale-i Nur* calls on people to set up in this world the likes of the Divine scales of justice that will be set on the Plain of Resurrection. While putting the criteria for reconciling two parties which have fallen into dispute, Bediuzzaman neither abandons one side and only takes into account the other, nor closes his eyes to the rights of one, and sees the other as right. He passes judgement taking into account the good points and bad points of both sides, and the reasons for their actions and the external factors. The way the *Risale-i Nur* follows on the subject of the historical differences among Islamic scholars and communities is this."

The fine and realistic explanations in the *Risale-i Nur* may also be understood to a degree from the following:

"The largest group in the World of Islam, the people of truth and moderation, called *Ahl-i Sunna wa Jama'at*, have preserved the truths of the Qur'an and belief by following to the letter of the noble Sunna of the Prophet within the bounds of moderation. The great majority of the saints have arisen within that sphere. Others of the saints have appeared outside some of the principles of the *Ahl-i Sunna wa Jama'at*, and on a path opposed to their rules. Thus, those who have regarded this group of saints have divided into two groups:

"One group have denied their sainthood because they are opposed to the principles of the *Ahl-i Sunna*. They have even gone as far as declaring some of them to be unbelievers.

"The other group are those that follow them. Since they accept their sainthood, they say that 'The truth is not restricted to the way of the *Ahl-i Sunna wa Jama'at*.' They have formed a group of the innovators, and have even gone as far as misguidance. They did not know that: *Every person who is rightly guided cannot be a guide*. Their shaykhs are to be excused from their mistakes, because they were in ecstasy, but their followers cannot be excused.

"As for the middle group, they did not deny the sainthood of the saints, but did not accept their ways and paths. They said: 'Their words which are opposed to the principles [of religion] were either metaphorical utterances of which the meaning is not known, or they [the saints] were in error, being overcome by their mental state.'

"Unfortunately, the first group, and especially externalist scholars, have denied saints of great importance with the intention of protecting the way of the *Ahl-i Sunna*, and have even been compelled to accuse them of misguidance. And their supporters, which form the second group, have left the right path because of their excessive good will towards shaykhs of that sort, and have fallen into innovation, and even misguidance."⁶

What is the view of the *Risale-i Nur* concerning Shaykhu'l-Islam Ibn Taymiye and his loyal student Ibn Kayyum al-Jawzî?

In a letter Bediuzzaman sent to a student of his in the years he was in Emirdağ, he described Ibn Taymiye and Ibn Kayyum al-Jawzî and their works as "the famous fearsome geniuses", and "the most strange and attractive works", as follows:

"With the most strange and attractive works of Ibn Taymiye and Ibn Kayyum al-Jawzî, from among the famous, fearsome geniuses, long since getting into the hands of the *hojas*..."⁷

As for Muhyiddin al-Arabî, we include two paragraphs from two different treatises. One is about himself and the other about his way:

"The time is not convenient for me to compare the ideas of Mustafa Sabri and Musa Bekuf. I shall only say this much: Muhyiddin himself was rightly guided and acceptable, but in all his books cannot be the guide and preceptor. Since he very often proceeded in the realities in an unbalanced way, he opposed the rules of the *Ahl-i Sunna*, and some of his words apparently express misguidance. But he himself was free of misguidance. Sometimes some words may appear to be unbelief, but the person who spoke them was not an unbeliever."

Continuing, he draws attention to the following matter concerning his books:

"Yes, at this time, it is harmful to read Muhyiddin's books, and especially the matters about the 'unity of being'."⁸

Bediuzzaman's attitude towards these differences and contradictions was like that of Imam Ghazzali towards the conflicts and contradictions which were widespread at his time. Imam Ghazzali was a unique figure in regard to his ideas and learning. His views were different to his predecessors and even to the scholars of the school of law to which he belonged.

Just as in some questions of theology Imam Ghazzali held different views to Ash'arî, so too his ideas on certain matters to do with jurisprudence were different to those of Imam Shafi'î, the founder of the Shafi'î school of law to which he belonged. For example, in the discussion on water in *Ihyau'l-'Ulumi'l-Din*, he writes: "I sincerely wish that like the school of Imam

Malik, that of Imam Shafi'î had said that 'however small the amount, water does not become unclean so long as one of its three properties does not change.'" And then he supported Imam Malik with seven proofs.⁹

His opposition to Imam Ash'arî offended Ash'arî in some respects; he even accused him of having strayed from the right path, and of unbelief. Saying: "There is opposition in some of Ghazzali's works to the school of the Companions of the Prophet and the scholars of theology. Whereas, to deviate from Ash'arî's school is unbelief. To contradict his views is misguidance, perdition," these people attacked him.¹⁰

Bediuzzaman and Contemporary Thinkers

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi attached no importance to politics in its daily sense. His interest in politics was only that of a Muslim's interest who suffers with the pains of the Islamic world. In the meaning in which it has been used this century, politics is to do the opposite of what is said. Whereas politics in Islam is to remain bound to religious beliefs and to the moral values that these beliefs ensure. Bediuzzaman Said Nursi was striving to make this belief live, and its moral values. The question revolved around this Hadith of the Prophet (PBUH):

"Whoever does not concern himself with the business of Muslims is not one of us."

This Hadith makes it imperative to speak the truth to all Muslim men and women, and to endeavour to exalt the name of God throughout the world, and to serve Islam using all lawful means.

Like Jamal al-Din al-Afghânî, Bediuzzaman spoke the truth openly in this matter. He spoke out to the face of tyrants: "Put an end to the wrong you are doing to the nation!" Nevertheless, Bediuzzaman's style is not political, it is more concerned with thought and education. He resembles Shaykh Muhammed Abduh in this respect. Muhammed Abduh said the following famous words on this subject: "In the past, now, and in the future, may God curse politics and everything that springs from it..."

In the view of Shaykh Muhammed Abduh, the most important means of preserving and strengthening belief were Qur'anic commentaries. Abduh would read a verse and if it was about belief, expound it to a degree benefiting from other verses. If it was a verse concerning morality, he would explain the effect in reforming the nation of the moral principles in the verse, and the aspects of it that were illuminating. And if the verse discussed the principles of social life, he would expound it taking into account the importance of these principles in the life of the nation.¹¹

In his *Tafsiru'l-Manâr*, Muhammed Abduh chose this method. Seyyid Quth chose this method in *Fî Zilâli'l-Qur'an*. One of the shaykhs of al-

Azhar, Mahmud Sheltut chose this method. And later numerous scholars in the Islamic world chose it. As for the method Bediuzzaman Said Nursi preferred in his commentary, the *Risale-i Nur*, he defined it like this:

"The *Risale-i Nur* is directly a clear proof of the Qur'an, and a powerful commentary on it, a brilliant flash of its miraculousness. It is a drop from that ocean, and a ray of that sun, and it is inspired by that mine of the knowledge of reality, and is a translation of its meaning proceeding from its effulgence."¹²

"The *Risale-i Nur* is not like other works, which are written taking advantage of various learned and scientific sources. Ustad Bediuzzaman wrote the *Risale-i Nur* without referring to any other book and having no other book with him while he was writing it."¹³

"There are two sorts of Qur'anic commentary: one expounds its phrases and words, the other explains and proves the meanings and truths of the verses. It is established through the testimony and confirmation of thousands of exact and punctilious scholars that the *Risale-i Nur* is the most powerful and most valuable, and the most brilliant and most perfect of the second sort of commentary."¹⁴

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi was born around the same time as Muhammed Iqbal. Both were born in the 1870's, but Bediuzzaman lived longer. These two important scholars had the same attitude towards Western civilization. Neither attached importance to the West's deceptive, glittering exterior; penetrating to the spirit of Western civilization, they displayed its inner face.

They were in no way opposed to science and progress. And both searched for ways to be saved from tyranny. In any event all these are a part of our belief. For the religion of Islam is the only religion which makes the acquiring of knowledge obligatory. Bediuzzaman's view of Europe's second face, the Western civilization which has not made peace with the Qur'an, is this:

"O you unhappy spirit which spreads and disseminates unbelief and ingratitude! Can a man who is suffering torments and is afflicted with ghastly calamities in both his spirit and his conscience and his mind and his heart be happy through his body being in a superficial, deceptive glitter and wealth? Can it be said that he is happy? Do you not see that through feeling despair at some minor matter and his hope being extinguished concerning some imaginary hope and his being disillusioned at some insignificant business, such a person's sweet imaginings become bitter for him, what is pleasant torments him, and the world constricts him and becomes a prison for him? But what happiness can you ensure for that wretched person who through your inauspiciousness has suffered the blows of misguidance in the deepest

corners of his heart and to the very foundations of his spirit, and because of this whose hopes have all been extinguished and whose pains all arise from it? Can it be said of someone whose body is in a false and fleeting paradise and whose heart and spirit are suffering the torments of Hell that he is happy? See, you have led astray wretched mankind in this way. You make them suffer the torments of Hell in a false heaven."¹⁵

Like Muhammed Iqbal predicted, Europe, whose spirit is gasping its last through lack of sustenance, is committing suicide within a deceptive mirage which appears as civilization. Even if not today, it will certainly do so tomorrow. For the foundation stones of this civilization have slipped, and it cannot endure even the slightest blow. This is true for communism as much as it is for capitalism. Both are opposed to man's true nature, whom God Almighty created as His vicegerent on earth.¹⁶ Half of the prediction was realized with the collapse of communism. And the realization of the second is not distant.

Indeed, we are not confronted with some ordinary man. As Abbas al-Aqqad said of 'Umar (May God be pleased with him):

"He possessed extraordinarily superior virtues; he was a faultless man; he was an exceptional individual in regard to the Caliphate. Only a few such individuals are to be found in one slice of time. Yes, without doubt he was a strong person. For the great are always strong. It is not easy to truly know such people, for there are few to resemble them in history. It sometimes happens that from the point of view of the fineness of their morals and character such great individuals take their places in history like a way or a school."

Bediuzzaman's Courage and Striving

Thus, Said Nursi was an individual who reached the highest levels of such a greatness and strength.

The strength of belief in the face of denial.

The strength of truth in the face of futility.

The strength of knowledge in the face of superstition.

The strength of heroism in the face of death and threats...

The story of Bediuzzaman and the Russian general Nicola Nicolayevich is a living example of this courage and strength.

Bediuzzaman's attitude when sent before the court martial on the pretext that he had joined a movement which wanted to apply the Shari'a is another living example of this strength. That day to be seen from the court windows were the bodies of fifteen of its victims, hanging on the gallows. The chief

judge of the court asked: "Did you call for the Shari'a as well? Those that called for the Shari'a are hung like that." Bediuzzaman's reply was this:

"I am ready to sacrifice a hundred lives if I had them for a single truth of the Shari'a.... I have stopped at the gate to the Intermediate Realm (the grave), which is known as a prison, and I am waiting at the station, known as the gallows, for the train going to the Hereafter.... At the time of absolutism, the government was hostile to reason. Now it is hostile to life. If the government is thus, long live insanity! Long live death! For tyrants, long live Hell!"¹⁷

"If scholars are righteous, the world is righteous." Yes, if scholars are righteous, rulers are righteous, and if rulers are righteous, their acts will be just. The Prophet (PBUH) said:

"There are two classes in my *umma* which when righteous, the people are righteous, and when they are corrupted, the people are corrupted also. These are the scholars and the rulers."

Firstly the scholars. For it is they who are responsible for speaking the truth. The rulers come next, for they take decisions on the advice of the scholars, apply them. Muhammed ibn Salih said:

"I went to visit Hammad ibn Salama. In his house was a rush mat, a Qur'an, a book-stand, and a ewer. While sitting with him, there was a knock on the door. We opened the door and looked; it was Muhammed ibn Suleyman. He asked permission and entered, and sat down. Then he asked: 'On seeing you, I was filled with awe. What was the reason for this?' Hammad replied:

"The Prophet of God (PBUH) said: 'If the intention of a scholar is to win God's pleasure with his learning, everything fears him. But if his intention is to gain the world with his learning, then he fears everything.'"¹⁸

Yes, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi will live in the conscience of the Islamic world. So long as a single Muslim remains in the world, his works and service will continue. His fame and striving did not come to an end with his death, and they will not come to an end. No one's power is sufficient to extinguish the Light of Muhammed that he spread. For what is it that brought us from Egypt, the land of al-Azhar, as far as here? Islam recognizes no differences of race or tongue. Even if, as the greatest evil, tyrants try to turn the Muslim Umma into ignorant, racist societies.

The sun of Islam began to shine in the person of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi. And such a sun that it passes beyond the limits of time, place, the present and the future. Such a sun that it raises to new life from the minarets of Istanbul the spirit of hope in hearts blackened by despair. Now Istanbul

is returning to its former state. And Islam's sons of every colour, from every race, are celebrating this return...

NOTES:

1. al-Jabartî, *Ajibu'l-Athâr*. Cairo, Daru'l-Sha'b.
2. *al-Mahdi al-Sudânî*, Cairo, Daru'l-Ma'arif.
3. Mas'ud al-Nedevî, *Nadhratun Ijmaliye ila Intishari'l-Da'vati'l-Islamiye fi'l-Hind*, 20.
4. Qur'an, 30:31-2.
5. Bukhârî, *Ilim*, 471.
6. Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, *Mektûbat*, 318.
7. _____, *Emirdağ Lahikası*, i, 201.
8. _____, *Lem'alar*, 262.
9. *Ihya'u'l-'Ulumi'l-Din*, Vol. i, Bk. 3, Chap. I.
10. Yusuf al-Kardavî, *al-Imamu'l-Ghazzalî*, 67-8.
11. Rashid Rida, *Tarikhu'l-Imam*; Akkad, *Muhammed Abduh*, 5th edn., 329.
12. Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, *Şualar*, 576-7.
13. _____, *Tarihçe-i Hayat*, 144.
14. *Ibid.*, 143.
15. _____, *Lem'alar*, 111-2.
16. Allama Abû'l-Hasan al-Nedevî, *Revâiu'l-Iqbal*.
17. Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, *Divan-ı Harb-i Örfî*, 10-11.
18. (Narrated in Bukhârî, *Adab*; Muslim, *Arba'a*.)

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