

Revivification of Educational System: A Life Long Struggle of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi

Shumaila Majeed*

Ishtiaq Ahmad Gondal **

Education is such a crucial element of a society that plays a vital role in building characters, behavior and ideology of a nation. The failure to develop this element rightly and according to indispensable requirements of time may result in the decline or ultimately the collapse of a society. Accordingly, every great scholar and intellectual in human history for instance Plato, Confucius, John Locke, Rousseau,¹ as well Muslim scholars i.e. Al-Ghazali, Farabi and Ibne Khaldun etc. has given special attention to this building block of society. Bediuzzaman Said Nursi also expended all his efforts for the reforming of education system during his whole life. Having considered educational backwardness the main cause of Ottoman Muslim's decline, Nursi got the opinion of making necessary reforms in this area. His biography indicates that due to his remarkable foresight he understood the problem of education system of his time at a very early age, while kept on moving from one *madrassah* to the other restlessly.² The reason of his unrest in early five years, that he could not stay longer in any *madrassah*, was his discontent with education system. Moreover his three months stay in Sheikh Jalali's *madrassah* in Dogubayazit³ in the city of Agri in Turkey, his study through self-selection of particular texts from course books, and his reply to his amazed teacher, "The treasures (of learning) you control are in a strongbox. You have its key. What I need is a clue to its contents. I will choose whatever I find appropriate"⁴ all illustrates his dissatisfaction with the education system of his day.

Serif Mardin expresses his amazement on "remarkably modern perception of such a peasant" i.e village boy.⁵ He states: "We get a clue as to the reasons for his inability to settle in any *medrese*.... He was finding the entire long-drawn curriculum too cumbersome." Vahide also connects this statement of Nursi with his intention "to point out the need for reform in medrese education and to prevent time being wasted through the inclusion of so many commentaries, annotations and expositions."⁽⁶⁾

*PhD Scholar, Sheikh Zayed Islamic Center, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

**Assistant Prof., Sheikh Zayed Islamic Center, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

Although he foresighted the need for educational reforms in his young age, nevertheless it was strengthened while his interaction with the government officials in Van in 1980. Here he not only realized the harms of “Westernization and secularization of the Tanzimat reforms”⁷, but also it “prompted him to take the unusual step of learning the modern sciences.”⁸ Vahide explains the harms of Tanzimat reforms in the following words

“Westernization and secularization of the Tanzimat had affected the thinking and views of the Ottoman educated classes, giving rise to many doubts about Islam. Influenced by Europeans, some had even come to believe that Islam was responsible for the empire’s backwardness. This had brought home to Nursi the urgent necessity of reforming *medrese* education and updating the Islamic sciences in the light of modern advances in knowledge. Until the beginning of the First World War, it was with these issues that he was chiefly concerned.”⁽⁹⁾

Thus with the intention to present his proposal to the consideration of Sultan for the reviving of education system, he decided to visit Istanbul. Before moving towards his ideas of educational reforms, it’s better to take a brief glimpse of educational system of Ottoman Empire during his time.

Conditions of education system in Nursi’s time:

In Nursi’s time three different systems of education were working simultaneously in the Empire. First of those were traditional religious schools or *madrassah*, second were modern schools or *maktab* and third was suffi lodges called *tekke* or *zawiya*.¹⁰ As far as the first system of education is concerned the curriculum being followed there was “virtually unchanged since the fifteenth century.”¹¹ Although religious and theological sciences were included in the syllabi, but the modern physical sciences current at that time were completely neglected.¹² These institutes were producing such students who were not only unfamiliar to modern advances of knowledge but also were unable to combat the current threats of materialism and atheism. Worse condition of buildings and lack of facilities to students is also something which indicates that these institutes were purposely being ignored by the government and statesmen. The purpose was to lessen the influence of religious scholars and this neglecting attitude increased particularly in the time of Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II.¹³ Although other Ottoman Muslim scholars also realized and expressed this problem occasionally for instance Ali Suavi and Hoja Muhyiddin “but their ideas had not been applied.”¹⁴ The situation of *madrassah* in Eastern Anatolia, the region where Said Nursi grew up and acquired his education, was to some extent better due to the influence of

Nakshbandi and its successor Khalidi order.¹⁵ But here also the focus was only on religious sciences.

The other system was maktab which was established as a result of Tanzimat reforms¹⁶ and a process continued by Abdulhamid⁽¹⁷⁾ respectively. The focus of this educational system was reverse to the classical madrassah, and it was particularly on physical and modern sciences. Religion studies were not taken into consideration rather the attitude towards religion was to an extent hostile. The reason of establishing the modern schools throughout the Ottoman regions was to fill the gap of scientific knowledge between the East and West. And for this purpose students were also sent to Europe especially to France to pursue their studies.¹⁸ Original or translated works of European philosophers and scientists such as “Ludwig Buchner, Ernst Heackel, J. William Draper, and Auguste Comte” were also been included in the curriculum of “newly established Western style schools, and especially in the famous Medical School (Mekteb-i Tibbiye).” Due to this whole process “a tiny, but effective, pro-Western Turkish elite emerged in the Ottoman Empire, an elite that was deeply impressed by biological-materialist and Darwinist science, and was occupied with popular materialist literature.” Resultantly students of such schools began to believe that life is “merely a materialistic event”. More over a mindset developed “to import European civilization with both its roses and thorns” in order to walk with modern age, “since there was no second civilization.”⁽¹⁹⁾

Third structure of educational system was that of sufi *tareeqa* or suffi establishments called *tekke*. However it was an oral mode of education but was very influential.

Under these circumstances Nursi felt the necessity for educational reforms, because he was of the view “If the Ottomans had been unable to achieve advances in science it was due to the existence of three divergent streams of education in Turkey: the *medrese*, the *tekke* (the "lodge" of the Sufi orders) and the secular school... The only way to bring back creativity was to reintroduce religious studies in the secular schools, to add the study of science to the program of the *medrese* and to bring competent *'ulema* into the *tekke*.”²⁰ Hence this was the only solution to him to save “students of secular schools from becoming atheists and students of *medreses* from becoming fanatics.”²¹ Nursi reveals his experience when he came to Istanbul in the following words “I saw and understood that Islam was behind, far behind the civilization of our times . . . There were three culprits of this decline: the Doctors of Islamic law, those who had not understood Europe and the members of mystic orders (*tekke*).”⁽²²⁾

In 1908 Said Nursi presented a proposal to the court of Sultan Abdulhamid, in which he requested to establish a university in different areas of Eastern Provinces of Ottoman Empire. This petition was later printed in a news paper named “*Sark ve Kürdistan Gazetesi (East and Kurdistan Gazette)*”²³ Nursi’s proposal was not resulted with positive consequences this time rather he was arrested and then sent to hospital.⁽²⁴⁾ There his conversation with doctor provides us detailed information of his educational thoughts and which types of changes he wanted to brought in education system. His ideas can be divided into four main categories.

1. Establishment of Medresetu’z-Zehra university
2. Restructuring of the education system of Madrassah and Maktab
3. Advice for preachers
4. Recommendations for students

1: Medresetu’z-Zehra

Nursi’s first and most significant suggestion was to establish a University in three different areas of Eastern Provinces of Ottoman Empire, Van, Bitlis and Siirt.²⁵ He named this university Medresetu’z-Zehra. The chief purpose of establishing this university was to make an embodiment of education where religious and modern sciences would be taught side by side. It was also aimed to establish a centre where three different structures of education (Madrassah, Maktab and Tekke) would also be reconciled.⁽²⁶⁾

In the petition Nursi first acknowledged the efforts of Government on opening the schools in Eastern provinces, in order to support local people to be in harmony with the “age of progress and competition.” But he also criticized that the teachers appointed there were not familiar with the local language i.e. Kurdish. Therefore local people, who could not understand Turkish language, they were unable to take advantage of these modern schools so they have to depend on *madaris*.²⁷ And due to blind imitation they were becoming “prey to doubts and suspicions.” This discrimination was also creating an “internal factional strife among the tribes”²⁸ So he drew the attention of government towards an expected danger which may result in “a ghastly blow for the Kurds in the future.”⁽²⁹⁾

To avoid these consequences and to secure “the future of Kurdistan and unity of Empire”, Said Nursi proposed to establish three branches of University in different areas of eastern provinces which were the centers of different tribes. “Each should have at least fifty students, and their means of subsistence should be provided by the illustrious government.” And gradually “as a result of its unique value for the Islamic world, it would in time gain financial independence by reason of the donations and pious bequests it would receive.”⁽³⁰⁾

Nursi paid special attention on the language of Medresetu'z-Zehra as well and recommended that it should be trilingual. Where Arabic should be compulsory, Kurdish should be permissible and Turkish should be necessary. He also suggested for the selection of teachers that Kurdish scholars should be preferred as they knew local language. Because due to him "it was necessary to take into account the capacity and cultural level of the community they were to serve." He proposed that such Kurdish scholars should be selected "who know both religious and modern sciences" as well as who are trusted by Kurds and Turks both. ⁽³¹⁾

A further recommendation for proposed university comprises "to establish branches of specialization in addition to joint teaching." More over to found "the fields of employment for those graduating, and they should have equal rights and opportunities with those graduating from other state universities." And "the teacher training schools should be centered for a certain period in this *medrese* so that the order and progress of the one should pass to the other, and the virtue and religion of the other pass to the first." ⁽³²⁾

Why he wished to establish university in eastern provinces:

Nursi proposed to establish this university in eastern provinces because of its geographical location "since they were a center of eastern Islamic world" ⁽³³⁾ he states:

"Al-Azhar University is a universal *medrese* in Africa, however much larger Asia is than Africa, Asia should have a place of learning, an Islamic university which is that much bigger, so that negative racialism should not corrupt the Muslim peoples, for example, the nations of Arabia, India, Caucasia, Iran, Turkistan, and Kurdistan. And so that it may be the means to a total unfolding of Islamic nationhood, which is true, positive, and sacred nationhood, and of the fundamental rule of the Qur'an: Indeed the believers are brothers." ⁽³⁴⁾

Nursi's Life time struggle for Medresetu'z-Zehra:

Nursi continued his struggle for the establishment of this university till the end of his life. As previously noted his first effort was not positively taken by Sultan Abdulhamid and he was sent to hospital. Nevertheless he was discharged from hospital with the positive report by doctor. His proposal was taken with positive response by Sultan Resad (1909-1918) and he was also given financial support of thousand gold Liras. The construction was started on the shores of Lake Van but could never be accomplished because of the outbreak of First World War. ³⁵ In 1923, a bill proposing the founding of Medresetu'z-Zehra was signed by 167 deputies, Mustafa Kamal was also one of those. 150,000 Liras were assigned "to the project in that year's budget." But "Once again the building of the Medresetu'z-Zehra was

overtaken by events.” “Finally, two years later, on November 29, 1925, it was rejected by the committee and sent back to the assembly. By then the law for the unification of education and closing of the medreses had been passed (March 1924), and Nursi had been sent into exile in western Anatolia.”³⁶ After wards due to the course of events and circumstances, Said Nursi could not get chance to pursue this project. But in his third Said period when Democratic Party came into reign, Adnan Menderes (1950-1960) became the Prime Minister, Said Nursi once again tried to struggle for *Medresetü’z-Zehra* in 1951. “The plan was pursued by Nursi as late as 1951, when he is reputed to have sought the aid of Adnan Menderes.”³⁷ But his effort could not bear fruit this time as well. Nursi mentions his life time effort for the University *Medresetü’z-Zehra* in these words:

“As I have worked for the reality of the *Risale-i Nur*, so too have I worked for a full fifty-five years for a university in the centre of the Eastern Provinces, which lie between India, Arabia, Iran, Caucasia, and Turkestan, which would be both a university, and a modern school, and a *medrese*, in the style of al-Azhar University and bear the meaning of the *Medresetü’z-Zehra*...”⁽³⁸⁾

2: Restructuring of *Madrassah* education system

Said Nursi was much concerned for the restructuring of *Madrassah* education system. Although the matter was already under debate in Ottoman Empire whether to upgrade “existing religious educational establishments” or to replace them “by the type of secular school introduced by the *Tanzimat*.”³⁹ Nursi supported the first option because as mentioned earlier, a majority of masses was to depend upon *madrassah* for their education. Nursi’s major concern for the revitalization of existing *madaris* was to include modern sciences in the curriculum along with religious and theological sciences. Because the unchanged *madrassah* curriculum, and unawareness of the “modern developments in science” resulted into the emergence of such scholars “who believed, together with the Europeans, that there was a clash and contradiction between certain “externals” of Islam and certain matters of science.”⁴⁰ For instance the matter regarding the spherical shape of the Earth. At that time Muslim scholars believed that to accept the scientific fact of Earth being round shaped opposed “many truths of the religion”. Eventually this concept had created hopelessness on one hand and on the other abandoned “the progress of Muslim peoples.” Nursi disapproved this conflict between Islam and modern findings of science about the shape of Earth. Moreover he held *madrassah* education system been responsible for this external conflict. He stated: “this can no longer be so, and religious schools truly need to be revitalized.”⁽⁴¹⁾

Another suggestion of Nursi for reviving the *madrassah* is to apply “the law of division of labor” in its education system.⁴² According to this concept a system of “Multi faculty” should be introduced in education system instead of “Single Faculty”.⁴³ Which means teaching of a particular subject should be undertaken by one who is expert of that subject. When a number of experts of different sciences would come together under one institute, this “diversification” and “democratization of the *medrese* system” would produce a quality education.⁴⁴ Moreover Nursi believes in harmony between “the principle of division of labor” and the divine law of creation. He relates the abandoning of this law as one of the reasons of *madrassah*'s decline.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Nursi considers one of the reasons of decline of *madrassah*, to give more preference to “instrumental sciences” instead of “primary and exalted sciences.” He includes logic, linguistics, and philology in instrumental sciences whereas Jurisprudence, Qur’anic interpretation, and study of Hadith in primary sciences. Nursi states “The grammatical analysis of Arabic texts has conquered minds, with the result that the study and knowledge of the primary or basic sciences have been considerably neglected.”⁽⁴⁶⁾

3: Suggestions for preachers

Nursi does not ignore the role of preachers and teachers in his suggestions for the revival of education system. He indicates towards few deficiencies in the methodology of Muslim teachers and recommends certain effective ways to cover this flaw. He feels if a teacher wants his claim to be accepted, he has to convince his audience with strong proofs. Otherwise simply asserting a truth cannot make his audience satisfied due to “increased skepticism”. In this age blind imitation of scholars no longer exists because the desire of investigation has been provoked among people.⁴⁷ More over while speaking they should keep in mind “the demand of situation and necessities of the time which is the requirement of eloquence”⁴⁸ otherwise their claim will be weight less. Preachers should not treat people and their students in the frame of former times. Rather the requirement of the modern settings is to speak “in tune with [changing] conditions and time”⁽⁴⁹⁾ Nursi states: “I want preachers to be both searching scholars, so that they can prove what they claim, and subtle philosophers so that they do not spoil the balance of the Shari'a, and to be eloquent and convincing. It is essential that they are thus.”⁽⁵⁰⁾

Nursi indicates towards another weak point of teachers in the following words: “by deterring from one thing and encouraging another, they reduce the value of something else more important. For example, they say that to perform two *rak'ats* of prayers at night is like circumambulating

the Ka'ba, or that if someone indulges in backbiting, it is as though he has committed fornication.”⁽⁵¹⁾

In order to fulfil the needs of modern age Nursi seems to be in great favor of “debate and exchange of ideas” among teachers and students. In his views this is the only way to get rid of blind imitation of scholars. He is of the view that “it was scholastic despotism, an offspring of political despotism, that has opened the way to blind imitation (*taklid*), and barred the way to searching for the truth.” Nursi believes that this problem could be removed if scholars would begin taking special care of “public opinion.” Therefore In order to fulfill the needs of modern age Nursi supports “constitutionalism among the ulama”⁽⁵²⁾

4: Recommendations for students

Nursi wants students to actively participate in lively debates, thus he stressed “the need for lively debate and the role of competition in revitalizing the *medreses*.” He “had aroused opposition through his practice of debating with the ulama” because “by doing so he wanted to offer a practical example for a solution to the stagnation in the *medreses*.” As Nursi suggests teachers to take care of public opinion, he suggests same to students. He says “in the same way, among the students, public opinion or the prevalent ideas emerging from debate and the exchange of ideas between students of varying disciplines should be taken as master. Nursi predicted that this would provide a strong stimulation and incentive for progress. Thus, Just as public opinion predominates in the state, so too should the prevailing opinions of the ulama be mufti, and the prevailing opinions of the students be master and teacher.”⁽⁵³⁾

Moreover Nursi strongly recommends for *madrassah* students “to choose a specialization for themselves in the non-religious sciences”⁵⁴ Vahide further elaborates it in these words “Bediuzzaman stresses the need for students to specialize in a subject for which they have an aptitude, and in addition only study subjects that complement it.” Furthermore “It was through taking one science as a basis and only studying further subjects insofar as they would complement the main subject, that the students could study in sufficient depth and penetrate the subject as required.”⁵⁵ “Bediuzzaman did not believe in partial knowledge, considering it to be the result of a defective human reason. We may say that if a Muslim scholar acquires knowledge of one science or very limited learning, or becomes absorbed in only one of the Divine mysteries, doubtless he will be unable to attain a comprehensive knowledge or grasp the laws which bind the universe.”⁽⁵⁶⁾

It is also established that the purpose of Nursi’s involvement in the Teachers' Association (*Jami-yet-e Mudarriseen*) was ‘to produce students

of the *'ulama* profession who would be thoroughly informed of the Islamic sciences and have knowledge of the modern sciences sufficient for the needs of the times.' His primary focus since then was to solve the current problems and deep crises of his transforming society."⁽⁵⁷⁾

Conclusion:

Nursi's educational thought is a comprehensive set of reforms comprises all the aspects which are crucial for the revitalization of education system of any Muslim society. Nursi proposed a model institute where students graduated from would be fully equipped with religious knowledge as well as fully aware of the Modern age sciences and developments. In addition his education system has the capability of training human heart, mind and conscience simultaneously. Therefore his proposed Medresetu'z-Zehra is highly concerned with the training of all three by representing "the most superior *mekteb* by the reason, the very best *medrese* by the heart, and the most sacred *zawiye* by the conscience." He proves *madrassah*, *maktab* and *zawiya* (sufi tareeka) as "three divisions of army of Islamic education" thus envisages that each would compensate the "deficiencies of the other." 58 Moreover this system could produce multiple benefits. On regional level this education system would secure future of Kurdistan and unity of Empire. Whereas on wider level, geographically being the center of eastern Islamic world, this institute would secure Islamic nationhood.

Although Nursi could not succeed in physical construction of *Madrassa tu Zahra* due to different course of events or circumstances, but he practiced these principles while teaching to his students. The different streams of education system towards which Nursi indicated still exist in Muslim world. And the problems Nursi identified in the behavior of Muslim Scholars and students can also be observed in this time as well. Therefore Nursi proposal for educational reform is still as much important for implementation as it was in his time.

References

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- 2 For details see Sukran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 6-10.
- 3 When he commenced his studies with serious effort and got diploma in just 3 months at the h of Sheikh Jelali, here the method he adopted for learning was not thorough study of whole works; rather he selected certain texts and took a general study of all. And when his teacher asked him the reason of doing so, he replied in this way.
- 4 Serif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 68.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 68-9.
- 6 Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 10.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 33.
- 8 Sukran Vahide, "Toward an Intellectual Biography of Said Nursi," in *Islam at the Crossroads on the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 3.
- 9 Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 33.
- 10 Sukran Vahide, *The Author of The Risael-I Nur Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Istanbul: Sozler Nesriyat, 2010), 57.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 44.
- 12 Ali Mermer, "Aspects of Religious identity: The Nurcu Movement in Turkey Today" (PhD diss., University of Durham, 1985), 488.
- 13 Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 110-13; Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 44.
- 14 Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 44.
- 15 For details see Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 4-5,44; Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 54-60; Serif Mardin, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1873-1960): The Shaping of a Vocation," in *Religious Organization* ed. J. Davis (1982), 72-3.
- 16 Tanzimat (Turkish: "Reorganization"), series of reforms promulgated in the Ottoman Empire between 1839 and 1876 under the reigns of the sultans Abdülmecid I and Abdülaziz. These reforms, heavily influenced by European ideas, were intended to effectuate a fundamental change of the empire from the old system based on theocratic principles to that of a modern state. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. "Tanzimat."
- 17 See for details Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 34-5.
- 18 Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 34, M. Sait Ozervarli, "Said Nursi's Project of Revitalizing Contemporary Islamic Thought," in *Islam at the Crossroads on the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed.

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- Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 317.
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- 20 Mardin, Religion and Social Change, 81.
- 21 Mermer, "Aspects of Religious identity." 488.
- 22 Mardin, Religion and Social Change, 82.
- 23 Vahide, Islam in Modern Turkey, 42. Mardin, Religion and Social Change, 79.
- 24 Due to his bold and courageous way of conversation in front of sultan, it might have perceived that he was mentally deranged. For details see Vahide, Islam in Modern Turkey, 43-4. Mardin, Religion and Social Change, 80-1.
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- 26 Vahide, Author of Risael-I Nur, 57.
- 27 Vahide, Islam in Modern Turkey, 43.
- 28 Mardin, Religion and Social Change, 80.
- 29 Vahide, Islam in Modern Turkey, 43
- 30 Ibid., 43,45-46.
- 31 Ibid., 45, Adem Tatli, "Bediuzzaman's Education Method," in International Symposium The Reconstruction of Islamic Thought in the Twentieth century and Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 1993), 107.
- 32 Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, Munazarat, 124-9 as quoted by Tatli, "Bediuzzaman's Education Method," 107.
- 33 Vahide, Islam in Modern Turkey, 172.
- 34 Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, Emirdag Lahikas, ii, 195 as quoted by Tatli, "Bediuzzaman's Education Method," 107.
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- 36 Vahide, Islam in Modern Turkey, 172.
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- 38 Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, Emirdag Lahikas, ii, 196 as quoted by Tatli, "Bediuzzaman's Education Method," 108.
- 39 Mardin, Religion and Social Change, 80.
- 40 Vahide, Author of Risael-I Nur, 58.
- 41 Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, The Reasonings A Key to Understanding the Qur'an's Eloquence, trans. Huseyin Akarsu (USA: Tughra Books, 2008),

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46. Nursi proves that in previous centuries Muslim scholars have proved the spherical shape of Earth for details see *The Reasonings*, 50-53.
- 42 Nursi, *The Reasoning*, 27-8. Nursi seems to be in favor of Adam Smith (1776) who introduced this rule first time in the science of economics. For details see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Division_of_labour#Adam_Smith
- 43 Vahide, Author of *Risael-I Nur*, 59.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 57.
- 45 Nursi, *The Reasonings*, 27.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 48.
- 47 Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 81. Vahide, Author of *Risael-I Nur*, 57.
- 48 Vahide, Author of *Risael-I Nur*, 62.
- 49 Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 82.
- 50 Vahide, Author of *Risael-I Nur*, 62.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 52.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 59-60.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 59-61.
- 54 Mardin, *Religion and Social Change*, 90
- 55 Vahide, Author of *Risael-I Nur*, 59,61.
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- 58 Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 46.