

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Methodology for the Revival of Muslim Society with Reference to his Damascus Sermon

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Allah Almighty has blessed mankind with a final and perfect religion as declared in the Holy Quran:

“This day have I perfected your religion for you and completed My favor unto you and have chosen for you as religion Al Islam”(1)

Since Islam is the final and universal religion, it was exactly natural that its followers had to withstand with various nations and highly variable conditions. Therefore in order to capacitate the believers, Allah has made a few arrangements accordingly .On one hand, He has bestowed this *Ummah* with the teachings of the Prophet Mohammad (SAW) which have the potential to confront all sorts of changes and circumstances, moreover they do have the capacity to suggest an apt solution to the problems of all times. On the other, it is the divine rule which has also been proven by history, that whenever “ignorance” prevails, a person is sent to encounter all the factors of that ignorance. Abul Hassan Ali Nadvi, an eminent Islamic thinker, has entitled this blessing of Allah upon His *Ummah* as “Divine Arrangements for the Existence of Islam”.(2)

He further comments:

“This religion has been endowed with a peculiar capacity and vitality to produce such men of incomparably high character and behavior, as are not to be found in other nations. This is not merely fortuitous, but, in truth and reality, a fulfillment of the preordained arrangement made by God Almighty; for, the *Ummah* always did get a man of the same type and stature that it needed in a particular age.” (3)

Such people are given the title of Mujaddid. History is witness to the fact that whenever there came a time when Islamic Faith and values were distorted or been made suspicious, a Mujaddid necessarily emerged for defending the Islamic values in such a way that the original form of Islam came in front. This is what has been referred to by the prophet Mohammad (WAW):

“Allah will raise, at the head of each century such people for this *Ummah* who will revive its religion for it” (4)

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Although few scholars of hadith are dubious about the transmitters of this tradition. However, there are many other sayings of Prophet whose validity is questionable but experience has confirmed their accuracy.(5) This is also the same case since history of Islam bears the testimony. A suspicion is necessary here to be resolved; it is generally considered that mujaddid is someone who verily appears at the beginning or at the end of the century, moreover only one mujaddid appears in each century. Maulana Maududi has given a very detailed explanation of this tradition in resolving the suspicion. He elaborates: "As a matter of fact, neither the word 'head' in the tradition means an end, nor the pronoun used signifies one single individual. 'Raising a person or a number of persons at the head of a century' clearly means to suggest that he or they will exercise a dominating influence on the various branches of knowledge and trends of thought and life prevalent in their age. The pronoun *mun* in Arabic is used both for singular and plural numbers, and therefore, may imply a single person, a group of persons or even organizations of people."(6) Thus he states "It is, therefore, not necessary that the mujaddid of a particular century be just one man: in fact, this task may be accomplished by a number of persons or groups of persons in the same century. Nor is it specified anywhere that the same one mujaddid will suffice for the whole world of Islam. There may arise a number of persons in a number of countries contemporaneously and undertake the work of Islamic Revival".(7)

The people assigned on the revivalist services in the history included Imam Ahmad ibn e Hanbal, Abul Hasan Ashari, Imam Ghazali, Ibn e Taimiya, Mujaddad Alf Thani, Shah Wali Ullah and many other scholars like these. They generated their efforts under the specific conditions and demands of their respective ages and consequently the renewal and reformation of Islamic beliefs was done. This progression is still current ather the need of *tajdid* in the present age has become as much significant as it had never been in the history of Muslims.

Significance of Revival in the Present age:

After the political decline of Muslim Ummah in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the effects of the Western Civilization have raised a serious 'tumult' among the Muslims of all the countries and regions. This tumult is different from that of the past in a way that it is not confined to a single Muslim country but it has grasped the whole Islamic world into its grip. Moreover previously objections and assaults on Islam were raised in an age when Muslims had not collapsed politically and culturally. On the contrary, now Islamic world has to confront this situation in a condition, when Western nations have superseded the Muslims in political, material, cultural and intellectual fields thus Muslims have fallen

into an inferiority complex.(8) Consequently, the assaults of anti Islamic forces have become worse. In this condition the Muslim scholars in every country have been fulfilling their duties according to their respective capacities to defend the Islamic faith. The names of Maulana Maududi and his fellows (Pakistan and India), Hassan-ul-Banna and Sayed Qutab Shaheed (Arab World) and many other leaders are quite prominent in this successful defense. The person who discharged this duty in Turkey in the previous century is Bediuzzaman Said Nursi. The way Islam got revived in Turkey as a result of his efforts is really unique perhaps in the whole Islamic history.

Turkey in Historical Context:

After the period of Tanzimat (9) the dominance of Western thoughts had already made the utility of religion doubtful among a class of the masses in Turkey. Furthermore during the World War, the behavior of Arabs and their anti Turkish attitude arose the passion of antagonism with religion among the fanatic Turk fundamentalists. Resultantly they grew hostile not only towards Arabs but their religion as well. After the establishment of Democracy in Turkey, unluckily, these people rose to authority. Hence they generated such a revolution in Turkey against the religion as was not different from the anti-religious policies of the Socialist countries. As a result, in Turkey, which had itself been a fighter country for Islam through ages, the survival of Islam became endangered. It is the real dignity of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi that he became the torch bearer of Islam in such gruesome and unfavourable conditions and after an incessant struggle of 25 years, through which he had to face so many problems of imprisonment, banishment, trials and turmoils, he succeeded in changing the status of his country 'Turkey' from an anti-religious state into once again a follower of Islam.(10)

Distinctions of Said Nursi:

The most important feature of Said Nursi which distinguishes him among his contemporaries is to endeavour for Muslim Revival without the means of politics or the establishment of Islamic state. Maryam Jamila(11) has comprehended his mission absolutely. In her letter to monthly magazine "Nur", America, which was published in the magazine in October 1975, she describes the distinctions of Said Nursi among his contemporaries:

"The basis of Badiuzzaman Nursi's strength lies in the fact that he had grasped his own difficulties and pitfalls and he had realistically evaluated the conditions which Muslims were suffering from. Unlike other Muslim revivalists, he did not prepare splendid plans for the Islamic universal political, social and economic systems which cannot be put into practice in the near future." (12)

She further illustrates:

“When the majority of Muslim youngsters have shunned acting on Islam and they have been accepting the impact of the West blindly and tastefully then it is meaningless to talk about a united Islamic World, Muslim Block and Muslim-unity. Bediuzzaman with his visionary insight had comprehended it fully that it would be meaningless to participate in practical politics in such conditions. He knew that it was not possible to revive Islam only through getting the political strength.[...] Therefore he quite wisely, refrained himself from establishing a rigid and inflexible organization because such an organization could easily be banned by some dictator [...] unlike this, Said Nursi strengthened the roots of faith in the hearts of millions of Turks through his preaching and his writings. This was such a revolution as could not be banned and even a despotic dictator could not constraint its teachings.”(13)

Said Nursi as Reconstructionist:

Maulana Maududi describes the qualities of revivalist as follows: (14)

- 1: Diagnosis of the current ailments: to examine thoroughly how and to what extent Ignorance crept in.
- 2: Scheme for reformation: to determine exactly where to strike the blow.
- 3: Intellectual revolution: to shape the ideas, beliefs and moral viewpoints of the people into the Islamic mould.

We can observe all the above qualities in the personality of Said Nursi. He diagnosed the current ailment as the “weakness of Faith along with the unprecedented attacks by materialist and atheists in the name of science and development, which was the major reason of the decline of Islamic world”(15) Thus He gave all his attention on the revitalization of Islamic Faith and the scheme he adapted for the reconstruction of Muslim society is “non-physical jihad or jihad of the word.”(16) He wrote a commentary of the Quran *Risal i Nur* in which “he explains the basic tenets of belief, the truths of the Qur’an, to modern man. His method was to analyse both belief and unbelief and to demonstrate through clearly reasoned arguments that not only is it possible, by following the method of the Qur’an, to prove rationally all the truths of belief, such as God’s existence and unity, prophethood, and bodily resurrection, but also that these truths are the only rational explanation of existence, man and the Universe.”(17)He proved that “science’s breathtaking discoveries of the universe’s functioning corroborate and reinforce the truths of religion”.(18)

The difference of renewal and reconstruction is necessary to be mentioned here. Renewal is basically an attempt of regaining the previous

golden period of Islam in which Muslims were the leaders of mankind and which once made them the pride of human civilization "the time of Khilafat e Rashida." Whereas Reconstruction is the search for the solutions of the problems of Muslim community in the light of Islam in terms of contemporary settings, so that they could develop some conformity with modern ideas. "In which the irreversible world culture of science and technology could not be ignored."(19) Said Nursi revived the basic tenets of Islam and reconciled these creeds with innovative ideas keeping in view the contemporary settings of the world. "Hence in Nursi's view, the restatement of the basic tenets of the Islamic religion, and "the renewing and strengthening of belief" through new methods, were of paramount importance and took precedence over every other form of struggle aimed at reconstruction."(20)

Damascus Sermon and Methodology of Said Nursi:

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi delivered a Friday sermon on the occasion of his visit to Damascus in 1911. In the sermon, he pointed out the reasons of the decline of Muslim community in the form of six terrible sicknesses and also prescribed the remedies accordingly through the pharmacy of the Quran. The sermon was attended by 10,000 people including 100 religious scholars, moreover the printed copy of sermon was published twice in one week, (21) these are the evidences which prove significance and effectiveness of the sermon.

As far as the methodology of Said Nursi is concerned, he identifies the problem first then gives logical as well as scientific analysis (where needed) respectively, in accordance with the mentality of modern age man. Hence he gives solutions as per current requirements which are quite applicable. This methodology can be observed at the beginning of sermon where he identifies the major problem of the time, facing by Muslim Ummah, he demonstrates:

"I have realized that what has allowed foreigners, Europeans, to fly towards the future on progress while it arrested us and kept us, in respect of material development, in the Middle Ages, are six dire sicknesses"(22)

After wards he enumerates those sicknesses as 1: Despair, 2: Death of truthfulness, 3: Love of enmity, 4:Unawareness of the bond that bind believers to one another, 5:Despotism, 6:Restricting endeavor to what is personally beneficial.(23) After the identification of problem, he suggests the remedy in the form of six words and elaborates each with logical reasoning, which are Hope, Honesty, Love and brotherhood, Islamic unity (awareness of the luminous bonds uniting the believers) and mutual consultation.

Logical Reasoning as method of Said Nursi:

Said Nursi takes the method of logical reasoning to support his arguments, which is actually the methodology of the Quran as it invites human reason to explore the realities. According to Said Nursi:

“We Muslims, who are students of the Qur’an, follow proof; we approach the truths of belief through reason, thought, and our hearts. We do not abandon proof in favour of blind obedience and imitation of the clergy like some adherents of other religions. Therefore, in the future when reason, science and technology prevail, of a certainty that will be the time the Qur’an will gain ascendancy, which relies on rational proofs and invites the reason to confirm its pronounce-ments.” (24)

We can get the idea of this methodology of Said Nursi in the following example:

He claims that Islam is the future of mankind and will definitely prevail. To prove this logically he mentions that “eight serious obstacles prevented the truths of Islam completely over whelming the past”(25) which have now “begun to disperse”. These obstacles included 1st Europeans’ Ignorance, 2nd their barbarity at that time, and 3rd their bigotry. Nursi says “these three obstacles have been removed by the virtues of knowledge and civilization”. While 4th and 5th obstacles were “domination of clergy” and “Europeans blind obedience towards them” which also have started to disappear due to “idea of freedom” and “the desire to search for truth”. 6th and 7th obstacles, which related to Muslims, are “despotism” and “degeneracy that arose from opposing the Shari’a”. According to Nursi’s reasoning “the separate despotic power residing in a single individual is now declining, indicates that the fearful despotism of larger groups in society and of committees will also decline”, “And the great upsurge in Islamic zeal, together with the fact that the ugly results of immorality are becoming apparent, shows that these two obstacles are about to decline”. Whereas the 8th obstacle is the contradiction between science and outer meaning of Islam which according to Nursi is also being destroyed because the basic factor of this contradiction was the unawareness of the inner meanings of Quranic verses. He proves it through several examples in Risal i Nur that when one understands the inner meanings of Quranic verses, one is surprised to see that both corroborate each other; rather there are certain other truths to which science has yet not reached.

Thus according to Said Nursi, all the obstacles will be vanished with the help of science, knowledge and by the virtues of civilization. Furthermore Nursi proves the supremacy of Islam with the logic “that the most indisputable virtue is that which even its enemies testify to and

affirm".(26) And he gives examples of two eminent European Philosophers Carlyle and Prince Bismarck who accepted the supremacy of Islam.

Psychological nature of Said Nursi's method:

The method adapted by Said Nursi is psychological in nature which invokes human intellect. He talks about human needs and problems on one side, on the other; he addresses all the relevant matters which inspire a human for right living. Hence he takes psychological way to overcome the problems and to improve the society.

We can observe the element of optimism in his methodology which is a very attractive tool for human psychology. He never let his reader or listener get disappointed. When he gave Damascus sermon Muslims were in a very critical situation. They were facing terrible consequences of political, economical and social decline. Despite this critical situation Nursi's approach was quite optimistic he was giving the news of victory.

"O congregation of Muslims! I give you this good news: the first signs of the true dawn of Arab happiness are just appearing. This happiness will occur through the kindling of the worldly happiness of all Muslims, in particular that of the Ottomans, and especially through the progress of Islam. The emergence of the sun of happiness has drawn close. In order to rub despair's nose in the dust, I say what is my firm conviction so that the world will hear: *The future shall be Islam's and Islam's alone. And its ruler shall be the truths of the Qur'an and belief.*"(27)

It creates hope for the Muslims and causes high morale which is one of the prerequisites for the revival of society.

In Damascus sermon Said Nursi mentions about the non-material and material progress of the Muslims,(28) which is one of the basic instincts of human psychology. He provides comprehensive analysis and conclusions in this regard. For spiritual growth his main focus is on developing the basic belief in eternity and true religion. He says:

"Man has begun to understand that with his wonderful comprehensive abilities and disposition, he was not created only for this brief and troublesome worldly life, but that he is a candidate for eternity, for there are within him desires that extend that far. Everybody has begun to realize that this narrow and transient world is not sufficient and cannot meet their boundless hopes and desires."(29)

From the above he very effectively makes the listeners realize that man's objective of life is far ahead than this worldly life and for his mental calm and true happiness there is a need for true religion. He states:

“In the face of the sentence of death, before anything else man is searching for a truth, contained only in true religion, so that he may save himself.”(30)

For the material growth he mentions five strengths of Islam. Here once again his intention is to awake the Muslims and to bring them out of hopelessness, showing them the brighter future by lifting them up psychologically with reasoned arguments. He identifies five unbreakable strengths of Islam which involves unity, need for civilization and industry, competition for exalted things, fearlessness and belief in God as prerequisite to true civilization. He was of the view that by virtue of civilization having no iniquities and other evils, the society will flourish materially.(31)

Inductive Methodology:

It is a distinction of Said Nursi among other Muslim scholars that he adapted inductive reasoning along with deductive methodology which is more acceptable for the contemporary cognitive mind set. This methodology of Said Nursi may be observed in his following statement:

“Inductive reasoning and general experience demonstrate that evil, ugliness, defect, badness and futility are minor in the creation of the universe. They are not the aim; they are dependent and secondary. That is to say, ugliness has not entered the universe for the sake of ugliness, but as a unit of measurement in order to transform a single truth of beauty into numerous truths.” (32)

He further states:

“Thus, according to inductive reasoning, the true aim and result of creation prove that good, beauty and being perfected are fundamental in the universe and that they are the true aim. So since men have filthied and disordered the face of the earth to this degree with their wicked godlessness and depart this world without receiving their deserts and without reflecting the true aim present in the universe, they certainly shall not escape to non-existence. They shall rather be despatched to the dungeons of Hell.” (33)

At another place in Damascus Sermon Said Nursi elaborates:

“It is established by inductive reasoning and the investigations of the sciences that man is the most exalted among animals and the most important. For he discovers with his reason the steps between the apparent causes and effects existent in the universe, and the relationships of causes, which follow on after each other in succession. And, in order to imitate Divine art and orderly and wise dominical creation with his own insignificant art, and in order to understand Divine actions and Divine art through his partial knowledge and his own arts, he has been given the faculty of will as a scale and measure. Thus, the fact that man knows the universal, all-embracing actions and

attributes of the All-Glorious Creator through the materials he works through the exercise of his will proves that he is the most honoured and exalted creature in the universe.” (34)

Allegorical methodology:

One of Said Nursi's methodologies is that he conveys his message through examples of surroundings, comparisons, easily understandable stories and symbolic elements. For instance to make his listeners realize about the luminous bond which binds the believers with one another he puts the following example:

“I imagine Islamic society at this time in the form of a factory containing many machines. Should any components of the machines fall behind or encroach on another, which is its fellow, the machines cease to function”(35)

While provoking Muslims toward hope and courage in the face of decline he gives following example:

“Time does not run in a straight line so that its beginning and end draw apart from one another; it moves in a circle, like the motion of the globe of the earth. Sometimes it displays the seasons of spring and summer as progress, and sometimes the seasons of storms and winter as decline. Just as every winter is followed by spring and every night by morning, mankind also shall have a morning and a spring, God willing.

You may expect from Divine mercy to see true civilization within universal peace brought about through the sun of the truth of Islam”(36)

He predicts that the Europe and America will definitely become Islamic states in future and declares it in the following allegory: “Europe and America are pregnant with Islam; one day they will give birth to an Islamic state. Just as the Ottomans were pregnant with Europe and gave birth to a European state.” (37)

Conclusion:

For the revival and especially for the reconstruction of a society paradigm shift is imperative. Paradigm shift means to the change the vision, the spectacles, the mind set of an individual or of a society. Said Nursi's teachings are unique in nature which strike the human intellect and are thought provoking as well. Said Nursi, with his logical and analytical ability, opens new horizons for Muslims by shifting paradigm. He convincingly changes the mind set of people from disbelief to belief, from despair to hope, from lying to truthfulness, from love for enmity to love for brotherhood and from personal interests to mutual interests. He provides us a system which is equipped with religious, scientific and logical arguments. He guides people to perceive, think and most importantly to act in the right

direction, the direction which is more practical in nature and appeals human mind, especially a man of modern age.

As the methodology of Said Nursi is based on the principle of paradigm shift it is quite suitable for the people who are compelled to live under the system of coerciveness, which now has become the fate of Muslim countries. Unlike other Islamic movements of different countries, this movement has proven its capacity of growing up (faster), even in hostile environment because of the unique methodology which Said Nursi adapted. The following statement of Maryam Jamila is the evidential proof:

“It is no exaggeration to claim that whatever Islamic faith remains in Turkey is due to the tireless efforts of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi. He realized it very well that the most essential need of the modern age man is to inculcate the ethical and spiritual awareness in him. Moreover youth needs it most that their materialistic approach should be diverted towards spiritualism, the Risal e Nur is devoted to this very cause.”(38)

References

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- 1 Al Quran, 5:3
- 2 Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, *Saviors of Islamic Spirit*, vol 1, trans. Mohiuddin Ahmad (India: Academy of Islamic Research and Publications, 1976), 2.
- 3 Ibid., 2, 3.
- 4 Abu Dawood, *Sunan Abu Dawood*, Kitab al Malahim, Hadith No. 4291.
- 5 Maulana Abdul Bari Nadvi, *Jaame al Mujaddidin* (Lahore: Almaqtaba tul Ashrafiya, n.d.), 22.
- 6 Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi, *A Short History of the Revivalist Movement*, trans. Al-Ash'ari (Lahore: Islamic Publications Pvt Limited, 2004), 24.
- 7 Ibid., 24.
- 8 See for details Sarwat Saulat, *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi Shakhsiyat aur Tehrik* (Karachi: Idara e Marif e Islami, 1977), 12.
- 9 (Turkish: "Reorganization"), series of reforms promulgated in the Ottoman Empire between 1839 and 1876 under the reigns of the sultans Abdülmeçid 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."
- 10 See Saulat, *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, 13.
- 11 A convert Muslim female and author of numerous books on the topic of Islam and west, her real name was Margaret Marcus, she belonged to a Jewish American family, embraced Islam in 1961 and afterward permanently settled in Pakistan.
- 12 Saulat, *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, 15.
- 13 Ibid., 16.
- 14 Maududi, *Revivalist Movement*, 24.
- 15 *Who was Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and what is Risal i Nur* (Turkey: Sozler Publications, 2010), 6.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid., 7.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Shaukat Ali, *Islam and the Challenges of Modernity* (Pakistan: National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, 2004), 360.
- 20 See for details Sukran Vahide, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Approach to Religious Renewal and its Impact on Aspects of Contemporary Turkish Society" in *The Black Well Companion to Contemporary Islamic Thought*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi (USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 55.
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- 23 Ibid., 26, 27.

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- 24 Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, 32.
25 Ibid., 32-35.
26 Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, 34, 35.
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28 See details Ibid., 28-39.
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31 Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, 36-38.
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34 Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, 41.
35 Ibid., 54.
36 Ibid., 39.
37 Ibid., 35.
38 Saulat, *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, 16.