



## THE NEW ELEMENTS OF REFORMATION: A STUDY OF SAID NURSI'S APPROACH

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**Abstract:** The concept of *Tajdid* (Renewal) and *Islah* (Reform) have strong evidences in Islam based on the Qur'an and *Sunnah* of the Prophet (SAAS). Islamic history has witnessed a number of reformers and reformative movements whose ultimate purpose was to bring the existing realities and social changes in line with the inspirational and universal standard of the Qur'an and the *Sunnah* through a process of restoration and reform to reinterpret and reopened the popular notions of Islam. During the modern age the idea of *Tajdid* and *Islah* are the most commonly mentioned terms applied in the process of reshaping the identities and in the cultural confrontation with the Western thought and ideology.

**Badiuzzaman Said Nursi was one among the great leaders, preachers, thinkers reformer and preachers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who used his efforts to educate people to bring them back to the real tenets of faith and played a great role for the transformation of the Turkish Muslim society in particular and whole Muslim community in general. Having deep insight on the changing circumstances he realized that the decline of the *Shari'ah* leads to the establishment of dictatorial and tyrannical regimes. He was a visionary educationist who developed a new educational curriculum based on the combination of religious sciences with modern sciences. So this paper aims to analyze the elements of reformation in the *Dawah* of Badiuzzaman Said Nursi.**

**Key Words:** Islam, Reform, Nursi, Westernization.

### Introduction:

Revival (*Tajdid*) and Reform (*Islah*) have always gained a distinctive place in Islamic history. Islamic reform is a part of Islamic tradition opposite to the western ideologies and notions. It continuously involves inclusion of the interpretations, debates, opinions and thoughts to guide the believers in their specific day and age. The movements associated with the reformation and resurgence of Islam have their deep roots in the history, while having despite some local features they have always stood with common goals seeking for comprehensive reform by making faith as their central point. These reformist movements were aimed to rescue the Muslim societies from their downward spiral and demonstrating the compatibility of Islam with other parallel thoughts, ideologies and values.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the history of Islam witnesses' great personalities whose appearance is regarded as a blessing from Allah. Such reformists always countered the emerging challenges imposed on Islam by other civilizations, or challenges emerged

by the incompetency of Muslims themselves whether it was in the field of religious sciences, modern sciences, or politics.

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century begun Muslim world faced the final blow after the destruction of Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad by the hands of Mongols, by losing its remaining platform of caliphate in Turkey, there by placing the whole Muslim world face to face with western secular notions. It was the period of emergence of new major crisis in the era of Islamic history when the new identities were precipitating by the advent of colonialism, and the beginning of modernization under the influence of west. The objectives of caliphate and sultanate were replaced by western legal codes.<sup>2</sup>

Namik Kamal, who is regarded as the key figure in the Turkish modernist movement, endeavored for the reconciliation between parliamentary democracy and the Islamic *Shari'ah*, and to establish a modern secular state.<sup>3</sup> Similar influences were witnessed in other parts of the Muslim World where a new process and trend had begun towards the separation of religion from the state and the endeavors for the promotion of European legal codes on secular basis to restrict the Islamic law for personal status. Another important aspect that had stagnated and restrained the intellectual scenario and the progress of Muslims in the fields of science and technology was the division in Muslim society between modern and conservative, the new and the old, the empirical and the traditional.<sup>4</sup> Muslims had almost lost their political, social, educational and judicial representations, which had itself created a chaos, and had caused an emergency for Muslims to maintain their position. During this period, a number of movements had emerged in a continuous chain within Muslim World in order to counter the rivals and to establish the Islamic order. In response to the evil notions of of the notorious regime of Kamal Ataturk in Turkey who forcefully introduced his western notion of governance; though not a philosopher Badiuzzaman Nursi emerged as the saviour of Islam and a blessing for the Turkish Muslim society to counter the cultural, social and educational challenges emerged within society. It was a time when materialism had gained much prestige and modern sciences and philosophical theories were used as a tool to deviate the young Turkish generation from the religion.<sup>5</sup> He not only devoted himself for the cause of the Qur'an in response to the policies of westerners against Muslims who were in action to remove the spirit of the Qur'an from the hearts of Muslims, but also worked hard by peaceful means in literary, educational and other fields of endeavour to bring about an Islamic Renaissance.

### **Early Life and Genesis of Said Nursi's Thought:**

Badiuzzaman Said Nursi, a great scholar, thinker, and reformer of 20<sup>th</sup> century was born in 1876 C.E.<sup>6</sup> in a village called Nurs in the city of Bitlis located in southeastern Anatolia a predominantly Kurdish area. Having extraordinary talent, he received his education around the districts considered periphery to the Ottoman Empire.<sup>7</sup> He began his early education when he was nine years old. During his early life, contrary to the rest of his family who were the followers of *Naqshbani Sufi Order*, he devoted his concentration towards maintaining the unity of the Ottoman Empire and supported the Young Turks in their struggle for constitutional reform. These reforms were emerged to rein the challenges exerted by European modern social and educational system. He never admitted himself towards Sufism nor became affiliated with any Sufi order which he thought inappropriate in modern age. He was hugely influenced by the thoughts of renowned Sufi and great reform Abdul Qadir Jilani and Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi whom he called the Highest Saints as his spiritual guides.<sup>8</sup> He had a great memory power and an ability of intelligence to memorize the huge religious texts and was conferred with the title of Badiuzzaman (Wonder of the Age) by one of his teacher Mulla Fathullah.<sup>9</sup> Nursi got an invitation to Van from the governor of Bitlis which he accepted where he remained for fifteen years and remained involved in teaching and encouraged himself towards the modern sciences.<sup>10</sup>

His emergence as a religious scholar with a broad vision having wide knowledge of modern sciences and many areas of modern life and learning; he could foresee his mission to safeguard the Islamic religious and cultural underpinnings of Turkish identity.<sup>11</sup> Nursi was monitoring the deadly effects of communism, capitalism, and other major aristocratic ideologies like atheism, materialism and anarchism that were engulfing the identity of Muslim world and was veiling their intellectual prosperity. He described all these **isms** the real enemies of the modern age of science, reason, and civilization.<sup>12</sup> Having a well framed desire of unity among Muslims he used to give a part of his food to ants. When questioned about this act he replied “*this is my tribute to the democratic spirit and the wonderful organization of these small creatures*”.<sup>13</sup> As an aspiring person of unity, he used to say that “Unity cannot occur through ignorance. Unity is the fusion of ideas, and the fusion of ideas occurs through the electric rays of knowledge.”<sup>14</sup>

Said Nursi had dissatisfaction with the Curricula of *Madrasa-i Khalidi* which determined his thought to unite Muslims and revitalise Muslim civilization through the medium of constitutionalism and reformation in *Madrasah* education by updating religious sciences and introduction of modern sciences. In 1892 Nursi visited Mardin where he got inspired by pan-Islamic policies propounded by Jamaluddin Afghani and policies of Sanusi order.<sup>15</sup> During the second constitutional period when Sultan Abdul Hamid II was overthrown by the Young Turks in 1908 C.E., due to the emergence of external influences Nursi’s thinking was much influenced and he thought that educational reform is the only way forward to halt the expansion of materialistic ideologies Nursi organised a rival party under the name of *Ittihad-i Muhammadi*; a week before the military rebellion in Istanbul which had acquired a notoriety in Turkish history, on the basis of Islamic objectives, policies and ideology to counter the emerging challenges of a political organisation, ‘Committee of Union’ that on its initial stage advertised itself as a religious organisation but in reality was under the control of Freemasons. Nursi also became a member of ‘*Talebe-i Ulum Jamiyeti*’ (Society for students of the sciences) where he used to deliver speeches on unity in diversity and endeavored to revitalize religious life amongst Turkish people and to expand it to non-Muslim world.<sup>16</sup> He also became a strong supporter of the independence movements in Anatolia known as ‘*Kuvayi Milliye*’, where from he published a pamphlet entitled *Khutuvat-i Sitte* against British occupation aiming to inform people of its dangers not only in regard to Ottoman provinces, but also towards the unity of Islam.<sup>17</sup>

Nursi never deviated himself from his mission and vision; rather he endeavored continuously to spell out what he thought to be beneficial for the *Ummah*. He witnessed the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate and the birth of secular republic of Turkey. He emerged in the most significant period of history when the world had faced two great world wars. While introducing his reformist thought, Nursi faced toughest challenges as were earlier faced by Mujadid Alf Thani rather more difficult than him. Said Nursi changed the religious and political scenario of Turkish Muslim society based on non-violence approach that was never seen before in Islamic history after the era of noble Caliphate period.<sup>18</sup> He believed firmly that there is no contradiction between science and religion; rather, their combination supports the truths of belief, and would help to deracinate superstitions and forged assumptions and to encourage debate and reduce the probability of scholastic despotism.<sup>19</sup> **In addition, Nursi stressed on the teaching and preaching of the message of the Qur’an to acclimatize Islam to contemporary circumstances and for this purpose he believed that the response and approach of educated Muslims would be more influential than the traditional *Ulama* who claim of having possessed a monopoly over the understanding, explanation and interpretation of religious texts. According to him such *Ulama* could not convene the challenges of a modern time in which a new critical attitude towards the acquaintance of knowledge has emerged.** Nursi ended up as a courageous ascetic preacher who wanted to combine religion with Western Science and Technology, and led an active, brave life, enduring hardships; striving to make Islam a way of life for himself and for everyone. His realization of giving too much importance to human philosophy, the period of his self-examination and questioning of

his own intentions and mistakes, and his realization that the Quran is the only source of guidance were the main three stages of his transformation.

### Approach towards Reformation:

Badiuzzaman Nursi's reformist approach that was completely based on patience and ingenuity resulted in a new beginning of Turkey after the abolition of Caliphate rule. His literary contribution in the form of his magnum opus *Risala-i Nur* written over a period of six decades and Qur'anic commentary worked as a living tool and a peaceful weapon for the reformation of Turkish society. Said Nursi came forward as a representative of true Islam when there were unfavourable conditions everywhere, and answered the objections and arguments of the opponents and elucidated them the importance of Islam. His mission was to wage a 'war of the pen' based on the account of Qur'anic values rather than any kind of armed resistance.<sup>20</sup> He engaged himself to unite the Arabs and Turks, and was totally against the racism and nationalism.<sup>21</sup> He believed that the major causes of internal and external conflict and disunity were the absolutist government and despotism, and Shariah is the only way to achieve the progress and freedom.<sup>22</sup>

In the *Risala-i Nur*, he made attempts to respond to the challenges of modernity by offering a new understanding of Divine revelation, and at the same time, he emphasized above all, the peace, harmony and synchronization of masses. The main aim of the *Risala-i Nur* was to contemplate on the truths of belief, and to encourage his countrymen to read the 'book of the universe' to comprehend the meaning and purpose of creation. He made a comparison between European literature and the Qur'an and believed that the separation from true faith caused the destruction of Western civilization; and led them to inequality, dissipation and immorality, and the formation of a distressed and corrupted society. **While arguing knowledge and supplication based on faith as the main tool for the perfection of the creation of the humanity; he believed that Islam is the real source, guide, and master of the all other sources of knowledge.**<sup>23</sup> He further opined that the science brought from Europe and America in real sense belong to Islam with the light of oneness; originated from the Qur'an and developed by Muslim scientists and scholars, and should be molded back according to the spirit of Islamic sources of knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

During Ataturk's dictatorial regime, the Islamic rituals, religious practices and culture were not only denied and eliminated, but the foundation of the new state of the people of Turkey was also to be set on the basis of national will and national sovereignty. His positivist ideas led him to believe that science is the only way to development, and religion is nothing but a barrier between development and progress.<sup>25</sup> The implementation of a series of secular reforms by Mustafa Kamal progressively created a state characterized by the institutional separation of religion from politics. Similarly, the higher religious offices including traditional Islamic educational system were terminated and their revenues were sharply curtailed. Shari'ah law was abolished and was replaced by civil or man-made law that were based on Swiss and Italian legal system. In such circumstances Said Nursi emerged as a saviour and as an emancipator for the Turkish Muslim society, worked for the moral and social development of Turkish youth who were much influenced by western ideology and culture. "Nursi favored the reestablishment of an Islamic state based upon the Shariah and guided by the *ulama*."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, "His approach was not based on philosophy or innovate rather he was a traditional Muslim Scholar who represented the certainty and the basic notions of Islamic teachings about mankind. He worked for the betterment of Turkish society and elucidated them the actuality of Islam".<sup>27</sup>

In the light of Nursi's reformist thought, he has divided the West into two categories i.e. multiculturalism and globalization. The former is compassionate, decent, virtuous and just while the later is unjust, decadent and

exploitative. Nursi never supported the means of oppression and persecution, neither he wanted to draw his sword against his Muslim brothers; rather he argued that the struggle organized to achieve the desired goals while killing innocent Muslims would be in fact fruitless and destructive for the whole human race particularly for the Turks and Kurds who belong to the same soul and soil. For him Kurds and Turks are brothers and their unity as united Turkish nation has acted as the standard-bearer of Islam for centuries; produced millions of saints and given millions of martyrs.<sup>28</sup>

Nursi worked hard by peaceful means in literary, educational and *Dawah* fields of endeavour to bring about an Islamic Renaissance. He used to explain the literal meaning, deeper significance and implications of the Qur'anic message and stressed upon the spiritual, physical and mental implications. So after moving to Istanbul, he made arrangements to establish the University of Zuhra on the Model of al-Azhar in Cairo. Same attempts he tried at Damascus but unfortunately this dream never materialized because of the interruptions of World War I.<sup>29</sup> During his participation in the World War I while joining Turkish army, he used to deliver lectures on the various aspects of the Qur'an. The main purpose of his project was the reconciliation of religious sciences and secular knowledge.

Said Nursi never swerved for the worldly desires, rather gave priorities to the Islamic beliefs and was legibly describing his policies. He always used to exhort the people not to abandon the path ordained by the Qur'an and warned them that the alternative to the Qur'anic way of life would be the acceptance of the western culture and ideology. In such case they would remain as Turks by name only. When invited by Ataturk to attend the celebrations of Independence of Ankara after the successful culmination of the Turkish revolution, he rejected his invitation after finding no traces of faith or practices in Mustafa Kamal Ataturk and his inclinations towards westernisation; Nursi sent a statement containing ten points to the parliament which commenced as follows:

*"Oh ye members of Parliament! Remember the day when you must present yourselves before Allah, the Lord of the day of Judgement! Do not ruin the good gained by your defeat of the foreign powers from without by wickedness from within. If you prefer to imitate the Europeans and un-Islamic ways, the peoples of the Muslim World will look to others for help."*<sup>30</sup>

Said Nursi believed that the lack of enthusiasm among the leaders for Islamic values was a silent consent for the Ataturk's Secularization and westernization programme. Similarly he never found any solution in establishing an Islamic state through political means as advocated by his contemporaries, but through the means of revitalization of faith or belief (Iman). He criticized scholars, emphasized and encouraged them not only to focus on the literary works but also to focus on its significance to the applications and experiments in education. He therefore rejected the instructive approach based on memorization; instead he emphasized the introduction of an educational system that would give importance to realistic thoughts and development of inquisitive thinking in the minds of the learners. The gravest danger that Nursi identified to the edifice of Islam was the decay of its intellectual underpinning, which had been diluted over the centuries by currents of foreign thoughts, and was then facing transformed threats in the form of materialism and modernity. Hence in Nursi's view, the restatement of the basic tenets of the Islamic religion, and the reforming and intensification of certainty through new methods, were of supreme magnitude, and took primacy over every other form of resistance aimed at renewal.<sup>31</sup>

Said Nursi by his faith based movement inspired the Turkish nation towards a reformation whereby modern sciences and logic become compatible with religious sciences. Having instinctive discontentment with the prevalent education system, **he advocated for the promotion of teaching religious sciences in modern schools and modern sciences in religious schools. He envisioned an integrated curriculum which combines reason and revelation, secular and sacred, modern and traditional to make the whole Muslim world masters of all forms of knowledge, which he opines, is the need of the hour.**

## Conclusion:

Badiuzzaman Said Nursi, a great religious master, reformer, thinker, and intellectual of 20<sup>th</sup> century played an important role in the transformation of Turkish society. He was one of the great Mujadid who waged the war of words to preserve the Islamic values.<sup>32</sup> Like other contemporaries and Muslim thinkers, Nursi was too not in favor of and contented with the alternatives brought forward by both the new secularist western visionaries, new secular intellectuals, and the traditionalists who failed to comprehend the nature of change in all its dimensions. During his stay at Istanbul he was appointed as the member of *Darul Hikmat-i Islami* an academic institution of higher Islamic Studies that was established to counter the problems and respond the foreign attacks in scholarly way and to emphasize upon the Turkish nation through publications about their religious duties, and to uphold Islamic morality.

Nursi criticized the existing institutions and mentalities for not providing an authentic Islamic and modern approach to meet the challenges of the times; rather he developed his ideas on educational reform and created his own method of teaching, combining the religious sciences with modern sciences. He emphasized on essentials of belief rather on political and social events and developments. Nursi no longer envisioned politics as the means to revive Islam and society. He, in his work, offers a different solicitude through which unwelcomed globalization is compensated by a union of faith and science, welcoming a universal approach not only to humanity but rather to both entities, seen and unseen, of our universe. He rejects neo-liberal, neo-colonial Globalization and replaces it with a spiritual and scientific model. The efforts initiated by Nursi against the modernization and the secularization process that took place in Turkey in his times were worthy of consideration. He was of the firm belief that these satanic policies are on rise to take away the faith of Muslim society; which prompted many Muslims to fight and show resistance against all satanic processes. It was the declared aim of Mustafa Kamal, the real master mind of modernization and westernization in Turkey, to achieve an unconditional transformation to western civilization, and to build a modern secularized nation-state. To achieve this goal and make this process easy Kamal brought a radically reformed national education system, the function of which was to inculcate universal, humanist, secular, positivist principles. His intention was to eliminate all existing religious identities, and create a uniform secular, nationalist identity. In its response Said Nursi acknowledged an intellectual and spiritual struggle against all these dangerous propagandas by trying effectively to restructure the educational settings through faith and religious values. The fruits of his, sincere hard work, perseverance and foresightedness are before the modern world in form of a reformed modern Turkey as a potential candidate to lead the “Renaissance of Modern Islamic Caliphate”.

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