

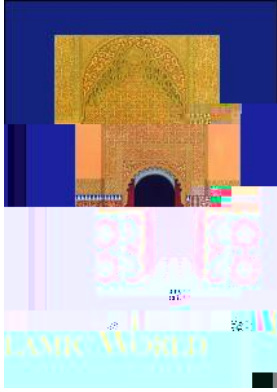
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## **The Islamic World**

Andrew Rippin

### **Bediüzzaman Said Nursi**

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## BEDIÜZZAMAN SAID NURSI



*Zeki Saritoprak*

Bediüzzaman Said Nursi was born in 1876 in the small village of Nurs in the province of Bitlis in Eastern Anatolia (modern-day Turkey). Although we are not sure of the exact day of his birth, he died on March 23, 1960, in the city of Urfa in Southeastern Turkey, a city believed to be the birthplace of Abraham. His life, particularly since the days of his adolescence, is very well known and recorded. He himself divided his life into two periods: Old Said (*Eski Said*), from 1876 to 1920; and New Said (*Yeni Said*), from 1920 to 1949. Some of his biographers consider the period of 1949 until his death as a third period in his life, due to his limited involvement in politics, at least at the level of voting.

Nursi lived through three remarkable periods during the last two centuries. He lived in the era of the Ottoman empire and witnessed its collapse. He also witnessed the era of constitutionalism, a reform in the Ottoman empire which gave more space to democracy and the parliamentary system. Finally, he lived in the era of republicanism, and observed the establishment of the modern Turkish secular state. His lifetime spanned an era of immense reform in the Islamic world.

From his youth, Nursi manifested an extraordinary talent and questioned everything around him. In his early life he was called Molla Said (*Master Said*). Sometimes he was called Said-i Kurdi in reference to his ethnicity. It was not unusual in the Ottoman era to name people by their regions, of which Nursi's was mainly Kurdish. Later, he used as his last name "Nursi" in reference to his village to avoid being associated with Kurdish nationalism, although his opponents insisted on calling him by the more divisive term "Kurdi."

He received his education in local Ottoman institutions called *madradas*, or religious seminaries. After learning the Qur'ān and some basic Islamic knowledge in his family environment, Nursi went to the local *madrassa* in pursuit of knowledge. He studied for only three months in the *madrassa* system. He attended several of these institutions and met with the teachers there asking them to teach him the summaries of their syllabi. These three months of learning became the basis of his future scholarship. As a self-taught scholar, Nursi would later say that, "in thirty years of learning in my life, I learned only four phrases. One is, 'I am not the owner of myself.' Second, 'Death is real.' Third, 'My Lord is One.' And, fourth, 'the self (*ana*) is a criterion to understand the attributes of God' " (Nursi 1996b: II, 1297, *Mesnevi-Nuriye*).

During this period, Nursi spent time in some Naqshabandī Şūfī lodges. One of these Şūfī masters, Abdurrahman Tağī, found great capacity in young Said, hinting at Nursi's importance and asking elder students to take care of him. Despite his

Naqshabandī environment, he felt more intimacy with the great Şūfī master Shaykh ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jilānī (d. 1166), after whom the Qādirī order is named.

Nursi was blessed with a photographic memory. On one occasion, Nursi read an entire page of a book from his memory after only a glance. Upon witnessing this, his teacher was amazed to find such a memory as well as capacity for analysis in the same person. It was from episodes like this that Nursi gained his name, Bediüzzaman, which means the “wonder of the age.”

In this early period of his life, in 1892, Nursi met with various personalities including some students of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897), who prompted the pan-Islamic policy of the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II; and a member of *Sanusi Tariqah* who struggled against colonization in Africa. Later, he would say that he was awakened politically after these meetings. Also, he became aware of some Turkish intellectuals, such as Namik Kemal, whose idea of freedom stirred a passion in Nursi which resulted in his famous statement: “I can live without bread, but I cannot live without freedom.” Nursi named Ali Suavi (d. 1878), Hoca Tahsin (d. 1881), Namik Kemal (d. 1888), Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905) as his predecessors in the idea of the unity of Muslims.

Nursi was not satisfied with the situation of the *madrassa* system. He found it very old and incompatible with the requirements of the modern age. In one of his analyses of this system, he said, “It has replaced *Ulum-i ʿaliya* [high sciences] with *ulum-i ʿaliya* [basic grammar rules]” (Nursi 1996b: II, 2000, *Muhakemat*). He sought educational reform and re-organization of the *madrassa* system, but was also very aware of the positive general public opinion of these institutions. Therefore, he wanted to establish a university under the name of *Medreset ʿuz-zehra* (c. 1902), with locations in Eastern and Southeastern Turkey. This was to be a full university which would serve the world of Islam. He considered this project the most important endeavor of his life. As al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, met the educational needs of the African continent, he envisioned a similar, but larger, university to meet those needs of Muslims on the Asian continent. Nursi believed that modern science did not contradict Islam. He attempted to reconcile religion and science. He said, “The light of conscience is [the result of] the sciences of religion, and the light of the mind is [the result of] the natural sciences. By bringing these together, the truth will come out as a result. The lack of the modern sciences causes fanaticism, while the lack of religious sciences causes skepticism” (Nursi 1996a: 127)

He found three main enemies in the Islamic world: ignorance, poverty, and division. He believed that these enemies could be defeated by the “weapons” of knowledge, art, and unity. He envisioned that this university would play an important role in combating these enemies. To establish this university, he went to the capital of the Ottoman empire, Istanbul, and met with Sultan Abdülhamid II (d. 1909) to propose his idea. The Sultan was interested in this project, but his associates did not see it as important. Nursi, however, did not give up. He proposed the idea to the next Sultan, Sultan Reşad (d. 1918), who accepted his proposal and financially supported the project. However, the project ultimately failed because of World War I, in which Nursi himself needed to participate to protect his homeland from the Russian invasion.

Before participating in the war as a volunteer lieutenant colonel, he spent some time between 1893 and 1907 in the palaces of the governors of Bitlis and Van. The palaces

housed libraries with numerous volumes of Islamic references and Western classics, and also contemporary printed media. While staying with the governors, Nursi memorized more than 80 of these works, which later became essential references for him in exile where he had no books whatsoever. He also came across a newspaper article that quoted William Gladstone (d. 1898), the British colonial secretary at the time, as saying, “So long as the Muslims have the Qur’ān we shall be unable to dominate them. We must either take it from them or make them lose their love of it.” In response to this, Nursi said, “I shall prove and demonstrate to the world that the Qur’ān is an undying and inextinguishable sun” (Nursi 1996b: II, 2131, *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi [Biography]*).

Also prior to the World War, in 1912, Nursi visited Damascus and gave a remarkable sermon in Arabic to a large group of people, including hundreds of scholars, at the Umayyad Mosque, in which he talked about the problems of the Islamic world and the importance of Muslim–Christian dialogue. The sermon was later revised and translated into Turkish by Nursi.

After the outbreak of the war, Nursi fought and was wounded. He was taken to the Russian city Kostroma as a prisoner of war, where he spent two years and three months. After his successful escape at the end of the war from a Russian camp in the Spring of 1918, Nursi overcame all obstacles and made his way across Europe back to Istanbul. After arriving in the capital, Nursi was appointed as a member of the *Dār al-Ḥikma al-Islāmiyya* (Islamic House of Wisdom). This was the highest religious institution in the Ottoman empire. In this institution Nursi’s specific duty was to answer questions posed by foreigners.

Nursi’s homeland in this era was undergoing an interesting development. The Ottoman empire came to an end and a new modern state was established with the formation of a new parliament in 1920. While the new government was working to establish a new Turkish Republic, the largest city in the country, Istanbul, was occupied by British forces. Nursi, living in this city, defended it by distributing his anti-occupation writings. The new government of Ankara invited Nursi to come there several times to show their appreciation for his actions against the British occupation. Nursi finally accepted the invitation to go to Ankara. Here, he gave his famous speech to the parliament in which Nursi disagreed with the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (d. 1938) on the role of religion in Turkish society. In this speech, Nursi spoke about the importance of prayer and one’s relationship with God. He wanted the administrators to be respectful of the religious rights of people. Nursi’s speech did not please the leaders of the new government. In exchange for his cooperation with the new government, Nursi was offered a good salary, a palace, and a seat in parliament. However, Nursi rejected all of these preferring to lead an ascetic lifestyle in Eastern Anatolia.

In 1925, the Shaykh Said Piran (d. 1925) uprising occurred in the Eastern part of Turkey against the Ankara government. Although Nursi was not involved in this uprising and rejected the invitation of Shaykh Said to join it, as a precaution the government sent Nursi into exile in Western Anatolia. Nursi spent the next 35 years of his life in exile, writing his works. In order to have purity of mind and body, he abandoned the reading of newspapers (of which he used to read eight daily), as well as smoking cigarettes.

Nursi’s writings, like his life, can be divided into two eras, the Old Said and New

Said. In the Old Said era, Nursi wrote several books, most of which are still available in many languages, including Turkish, Arabic, and English.

One of these books is called *Muhakamat* (“Analyses”), which was intended to be an introduction to Nursi’s *tafsīr* (commentary on the Qur’ān), which he planned to be 60 volumes. He wrote the only part of this *tafsīr* while at the front in World War I and it is called *Iṣaratu’l-ʿIcaz* (“The Signs of Miraculousness”). This is the interpretation of the first chapter of the Qur’ān as well as the first 16 verses of the second chapter.

Another small book Nursi wrote is called *Mūnā*

book *The Words*. It is an interpretation of the Qur'anic verse: "Look at the evidences of the mercy of God, how He revives the earth after it was dead. Surely, He will revive the dead and He is All Powerful" (Qur'ān 30:50).

With regard to the style of his writings, one can see a semi-uniform approach that starts with a Qur'

the Scottish philosopher, Thomas Carlyle (d. 1881), and the influential British historian

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