

Realization of Madrasah-tu-Zahra Project through Risālah-i-Nūr in Turkey: An Analytical Review

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Abstract

The study aims to analyze the educational accomplishments of *Risālah-i Nūr* (Qur'ānic exegesis) in realizing the objectives of Madrasah-tu-Zahra University, which *Badī'uz-Zamān Sa'īd Nūrsī*, 20th Century Turkish Muslims Scholar, wanted to establish. Firstly, the paper presented a short description of the causes of *Nūrsī's* dissatisfaction with the education system of his time. This was followed by an analysis of his efforts to bring about educational reforms in the existing structure. Next, the study analyzed the factors that thwarted *Nūrsī's* efforts for the establishment of Madrasah-tu-Zahra. This was followed by a detailed analysis of how *Risālah-i Nūr* proved to be a *ma'navī* Madrasah-tu-Zahra in achieving the same objects which *Nūrsī* wanted to accomplish through the university. A qualitative research approach has been chosen for this study. Findings of the paper showed that despite the lifelong efforts of *Nūrsī* he could not establish his desired university owing to some unfavorable circumstances including the outbreak of WW1, his exile and imprisonment, and the anti-religious policies of the Turkish Republic. The study also found that though he couldn't establish a physical university, *Nūrsī* managed to achieve the same objective through *Risālah* by establishing small study circles of his devoted students. The study of examples from *Risālah* showed how successfully *Nūrsī* achieved all his objectives and exerted himself to revitalize the educational system of that time through *Risālah*. The study is significant to understand the shortcomings of parallel education systems of Ottoman Turkey and the contributions of *Sa'īd Nūrsī* to synthesize religious and modern education without compromising on the fundamentals of Islam.

Keywords: *Badī'uz-Zamān Sa'īd Nūrsī*, Madrasah-tu-Zahra, *Risālah-i Nūr*, modern education, anti-religious policies

Introduction:

Badī'uz-Zamān Sa'īd Nūrsī (henceforth referred to as Nūrsī) was a twentieth-century Muslim Turkish scholar, born in a semi tribal region of Ottoman territory in 1877. It was an age marked by a general decline in Ottoman Turkey. Nūrsī, a gifted youngster with profound insight, analyzed very early in his life that an ineffective education system lay at the heart of the problems facing the Muslim society. It was due to his dissatisfaction with the education system that for the first five years of his studies he could not stay long at any madrasah. While at *Sheikh Jalālī's* madrasah in *Dogubayazit* in the city of *Agrī* in Turkey, he expressed his disillusion with the education system thus: "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"¹

Although Nūrsī's early experiences had convinced him of the unsatisfactory education system of the Ottoman Turkey at an early, the damaging impact of secular schools was disclosed to Nūrsī while his correspondence with the government officials in 1890. This strengthened his view that the system needed a complete reformation. Nūrsī identified three main problems with the existing educational institutions. There was secular schooling that inculcated atheistic ideas among the Ottoman elite and young Muslim graduates. This system was not just indifferent to religion; rather, it was actively anti-religious and promoted a feeling of antipathy among the Muslims for their beliefs. The second problem was the inadequateness of the traditional branches of Muslim sciences such as *kalām* and *tafsīr*. In Nūrsī's view, Muslim sciences, imparted traditionally, could not dispel the doubts in the minds of the educated Muslims, which had been created by modern science and philosophy. He understood the importance of learning modern sciences to use them in service of the truths of belief. He was the first religious scholar in the Eastern Provinces to learn modern sciences. His third objection was on the parallel education systems. There were three distinctively different classes of educational institutions: *madrasah*, *maktab*, and *tekke*. The *madrasah* imparted religious education; *maktabs* were the centers of modern physical sciences; whereas, *tekke* was concerned with the Sūfī' oral mode of education. In Nūrsī's view, such compartmentalization of different spheres of knowledge was creating disharmony among the Turkish Muslims.

Once, he had identified the drawbacks of existing educational institutions, Nūrsī resolved to bring about comprehensive educational reforms. His proposed reforms in education rested on three main foundations: synthesis of religious and modern science to prove the truths of belief, reviving the traditional Muslim sciences of *kalām* and *tafsīr*, and merging parallel systems (*madrasah*, *maktab* and *tekke*) into one unified curriculum to

bring about harmony in society. He set himself to the establishment of a university in eastern Anatolia to realize his ambition and named his project Madrasah-tu-Zahra University.²

He planned to open three branches of the university in different areas of the Eastern Provinces of the Ottoman Empire, Van, Bitlis, and Siirt.³ In 1908 Nürsī presented a proposal to the court of Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876–1909) requesting for the establishment of a university in the Eastern Provinces of the Empire. However, Nürsī's proposal was not accepted; rather, he was arrested and sent to the hospital.⁴ During the reign of Sultan Resad (1909-1918) the situation became favorable and financial support of one thousand gold Liras was given. The construction started on the shores of Lake Van but could not be completed due to outbreak of the World War-I.⁵

A Glimpse of hope again emerged when in 1923, the foundation of Madrasah-tu-Zahra was officially approved and a bill was also signed by 167 deputies including Mustafa Kemal then again it could not be proceeded further due to uncertain circumstances. Meantime statute for the unification of all educational institutes and the closure of *madrasah* throughout the country was approved in March 1924; this was followed by the period of Nürsī's exile and imprisonments.⁶ Now the circumstances turned unfavorable for the establishment of any religious institute due to anti-religious policies of the government established by Mustafā Kamāl Attātürk. Many years later, when the Democratic Party came into reign and Adnan Menderes (1950-1960) became the Prime Minister, Sa'īd Nürsī once again put his efforts for Madrasah-tu-Zahra in 1951. But this last effort could not bear fruit this time as well.⁷

Although physical Madrasah-tu-Zahra could not be built, it was established in a non-physical way that is to say *ma'navī* (informal, spiritual, immaterial)⁸ Madrasah-tu-Zahra in the form of Risālah-i Nūr (henceforth Risālah) study circles. This last point forms the basis of the main objective of this study: to analyze the role of Risālah in realizing the objectives that Nürsī had wished to achieve through his Madrasah-tu-Zahra University.

Literature Review

The significance of Nursi's vision to reform the education system and his determined efforts for its practical implementation in the form of Madrasah-tu-Zahra have been the source of inspiration behind numerous scholarly works on this subject. The best sources are the works written by Sukran Vahide on life and thoughts of Nürsī titled: *The Author of the Risāle-i Nūr collection Badī'uz-Zamān Sa'īd Nürsī*⁹ and its revised version *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Badī'uz-Zamān Sa'īd Nürsī*¹⁰. Both are also considered the most detailed and comprehensive sources pertaining

to conditions of the education system of Ottoman Society in Nürsî's time, Nürsî's educational views, the proposal for educational reforms, and his efforts for the establishment of Madrasah-tu-Zahra.

Besides, some academic papers of Vahide are also significant in this regard for instance "The Life and Times of Badî'uz-Zamân Sa'îd Nürsî."¹¹, "A Chronology of Sa'îd Nürsî's Life"¹² and "Toward an Intellectual Biography of Sa'îd Nürsî"¹³ are very significant sources on Nürsî's life as well as on his educational views. Similarly, Serif Mardin's works are also important; particularly, his book *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey the case of Badî'uz-Zamân Sa'îd Nürsî*¹⁴ gives an account of Nürsî's life in the context of socio-political and educational conditions. It also describes the strong influence of the spiritual orders on the education system of the region where Nürsî was brought up.

A few other sources which explore Nürsî's educational views and features of his Madrasah-tu-Zahra project include: "The Risāle-i Nūr and Educational Principles and Methods"¹⁵. Another paper "Bedî'uzzamân's Education Method"¹⁶ elaborates how Nürsî guided and ethically educated individuals through Risālah. The paper "An Evaluation of the Risāle-i Nūr from the Point of View of Knowledge and the Categorization of Knowledge"¹⁷ explains the concept of knowledge in Islam, different categories of knowledge, and then explore the category in which Risālah should be placed.

Some publications analyze Nürsî's views on education together with the significance and implementation of his integrated approach for the reformation of the divergent education systems in the Muslim world. These researches analyze Nürsî's Madrasah-tu-Zahra model in the above context i.e. "Integration of knowledge in theory and practice: the contribution of Badî'uz-Zamân Sa'îd Nürsî"¹⁸; "An Appraisal of Sa'îd Nürsî's concept of education"¹⁹; "Integrating Secular and the Sacred Branches of Knowledge: Badî'uz-Zamân Sa'îd Nürsî's Perspective"²⁰; "Effective educational philosophy for spreading Islamic education: The Risāla-i-Noor perspective"²¹; "Integrated Education as a Solution for Educational Dualism from Sa'îd Nürsî's Perspective"²². However, these studies address almost similar questions. It would have been more useful if they had focused on such a dimension of Nürsî's educational plan, as has not been addressed yet.

An important study has been carried by Hamidullah Marazi titled "Empowering Education with Values and Integration of Religion and Science: Madrasah Al-Zahra Model"²³. The research gives a comparative analysis of the educational thoughts of Nürsî and other Muslim scholars.

The papers focus on the role and contribution of Risālah regarding the integration of science and religion are "The Conception of Science in the

Risāle-i Nūr" by Alparslan Acikgenc²⁴, and "The Religious Impact of Science and Natural Science in the Writings of Badī'uz-Zamān Sa'īd Nürsī," by Bekim Agai²⁵, are two important works on this subject; whereas the sources which provide analysis on Nürsī's ideas and contribution on 'ilm ul kalām (Muslim Theology) are: Ozerverli's "Sa'īd Nürsī's Project of Revitalizing Contemporary Islamic Thought"²⁶; al-Hamid's "Bedī'uzzamān Sa'īd Nürsī: The Kalām Scholar of the Modern Age."²⁷, and Yusuf Sevki's essay "Sa'īd Nürsī's Views on the Science of Kalām..."²⁸ Although these studies are significant contributions towards the subjects they deal with, yet as per their requirement, they only focus upon a single educational aspect of Risālah.

One of the recently published works by Zeyneb Sayilgan "The Medresetu'z-Zehra--Explorations into its Nature and Significance"²⁹ provides a very significant analysis of Nürsī's dream of establishing Madrasah-tu-Zahra university. She also establishes in the light of Nürsī's statements that the system of *dershāne* (Risālah-i Nūr study circles) in Turkey, established in the life of Nürsī, is the embodiment of Nürsī's dream university. This is the only scholarly work that discusses in detail that how Nürsī's Madrasah-tu-Zahra was converted into Madrasah-tu-Nūriye in Nürsī's life. Zeyneb's work is the main source of inspiration for the researcher of this study to explore the similar objectives of Madrasah-tu-Zahra and Risālah-i Nūr. The paper will study the examples from Risālah to analyze how Risālah proved to be Madrasah-tu-Zahra and accomplished the same goals that Nürsī had previously planned to achieve through Madrasah. Despite the many academic works on Nürsī, this role of Risālah against the backdrop of Nürsī's educational efforts is an important area of study that needs to be critically analyzed. This study attempts to fill this gap.

Research Questions

The study will answer the following questions to achieve its objectives:

- What reforms did Nürsī want in the educational system of Ottoman Turkey?
- How did Risālah prove to be a *ma'navī* (informal, spiritual, immaterial) Madrasah-tu-Zahra?
- How did Nürsī achieve the objectives through Risālah which he intended to attain through Madrasah-tu-Zahra?

Research Methodology

As mentioned above this research aims to study examples from Risālah regarding all three objectives which were focused to establish Madrasah-tu-Zehra i.e. integration of religious and modern sciences, revitalizing the sciences of *kalām* and *tafsīr*, and unification of three different educational structures (*madrasah*, *maktab*, and *tekke*) into one system.

Therefore, to explore such examples, the analytical methodology has been adopted for theoretical study. Also, the paper has chosen a qualitative research approach and will be limited to the efforts of Sa'īd Nūrsī to reform the education system of Ottoman Turkey. It will not address his services in other fields of life.

Accomplishment of Madrasah-tu-Zahra Project through Risālah-i-Nūr

As previously mentioned that physical establishment of Madrasah-tu-Zahra could not be materialized nevertheless non-physical and informal Madrasah-tu-Zahra was established through Risālah study circles. Nūrsī himself suggested his students "open a small Risālah study center [*dershāne*] at every place"³⁰ to read treatises of Risālah in groups thus a large number of the houses of Nūrsī's students became an embodiment of this informal *madrasah*.³¹ Where people of all age groups including children, young, old, women used to read and write Risālah. Surprisingly in the first decade of the Republican's³² rule, these Risālah madrasahs were opened and spread throughout Turkey and even to other parts of the world.³³

Nūrsī began to call Risālah students, students of the Madrasah-tu-Zahra³⁴ probably with the hope that "God willing, the Risāle-i Nūr students will succeed in establishing the *māddī* (material, physical or formal) form of this exalted truth (the *madrasah*) in the future."³⁵ Sayilgan truly depicts the features of this spiritual Madrasah-tu-Zahra in the following words:

*"The Madrasah-tu-Zahra was now represented through the informal collective council of the Nūr students. Its visible shape was non-existent but the content surely wasn't. In his writings, we see how the [madrasah] became alive. In this sense, the ma'navī Madrasah-tu-Zahra had its center in Ispārta. All other cities or villages like Sav (elsewhere also mentioned as Sava) were described as sections of the center. In calling his followers to turn their private homes into a [madrasah] he went beyond the classic understanding of the [madrasah]. This reminds one of the Qur'anic passage in which Prophet Moses is ordered by God to turn his people's houses into places of worship (Quran 10:87). Nūrsī, stating that he took the Qur'an as his sole guide, seemed to have been inspired by this model. This practice was also carried out by the early Muslim community, which suffered persecution in the Meccan period and therefore met in the safe space of Dār al-Arqam (The House of Arqam--a companion of the Prophet)."*³⁶

One can realize thus, in the second phase of Nūrsī's life his Madrasah-tu-Zahra was turned into Madrasah-tu-Nūriye.³⁷

The paper has concisely discussed Nūrsī's ideas on educational reforms and his efforts for the establishment of Madrasah-tu-Zahra University. The following section will analyze the role that Risālah played in

realizing Nürsī's aims that he wanted to achieve by founding the university. The major objective of Risālah indeed was to renew the faith of individuals through the Quran based methodology; nonetheless, it also played a unique role in the area of educational revitalization. As has been discussed earlier, the prime objectives of Nürsī behind the establishment of a central university were synthesizing of science with religion; revitalization of *tafsīr* and *kalām*, and unification of three different educational systems (*madrasah*, *maktab*, and *tekke*) of that time into one system with spirituality as its integral part. In other words to integrate and re-conciliate different forms of knowledge under one umbrella. Now, the study will explore how his educational aims came true through *ma'navī* Madrasah-tu-Zahra i.e. Risālah-i-Nūr.

i. Synthesis of science with religion and Risālah-i-Nūr

The main characteristic of Nürsī's Madrasah-tu-Zahra project was to combine "Islamic disciplines (*ulūm-i dinīyye*) with contemporary sciences (*funūn-i medenīyye*) and learning"³⁸ That is to say he intended to merge the subjects taught in *madrasah* and *maktab* under one program of study. Nürsī maintained that truth could not be attained if either religious sciences or modern sciences were ignored as the former was necessary for inner conscience and the latter for illuminating reason.³⁹ He wanted to answer the questions posed by modern science without forsaking Islamic identity. Nürsī achieved this objective through Risālah in a very successful way.

Nürsī's usage of the term modern sciences in Risālah is to mean natural/physical sciences⁴⁰ and his intention is not to elaborate these particular disciplines rather his purpose is to utilize these sciences as 'means' to achieve the basic aim of man's creation which is to gain the knowledge of God, Alparslan explains:

"Since the questions of the physical sciences are frequently discussed in the Risālah-i-Nūr, it gives one the idea at first that the work may be put into that category. But closer examination shows that these questions are not discussed as though they were part of the physical sciences. For example, blood circulation is discussed in the Risālah -i Nūr, but not as a question of biology; it is used as a means to the chief aim. Moreover, the fact that numerous questions to do with philosophy are mentioned in the Risālah-i-Nūr does not mean that it is philosophy. For since its basic aim is guidance, which is also the chief aim of revelation, or to use Bedī'uzzamān's frequently employed phrase "to save belief," all these matters are used as means for the basic aim."⁴¹

It was a common notion in Nürsī's time that modern science was the only source of knowledge that gave certainty and precision.⁴² The main reason for Nürsī's emphasis on the integration between science and religion

was his belief that the conflict of science and religion emerged due to “contemporary materialistic movements which reflect modern sciences according to their atheistic views”⁴³. Nürsî believes “[in] this century, materialism is so widespread, [and] materiality is thought to be the source of everything.”⁴⁴

Nürsî’s thought was developed on the conviction that if purged from materialistic impact; modern sciences would uphold the truths of religion instead of refuting them. Because he mentions, it is Islam which is the bedrock of all sciences and has given birth to most of them⁴⁵. Therefore an important characteristic of the Risālah is “its relating science to the truths of belief and showing that rather than their conflicting in any way if considered in the light of the Qur’an science may broaden and strengthen belief.”⁴⁶ Risālah contains numerous treatises which prove this compatibility of science with religion.

In Nürsî’s concept, the harmony of science with religion is linked with the perfect design of the universe which is the initial point of his “experimental theology”⁴⁷. Nürsî deems the Quran and the universe as interdependent for their proper understanding. There are verses in the Quran related to the natural phenomenon which helps to enhance one’s understanding of the universe. This approach was an attempt to explain the intellectual dimension of the Quranic faith about the modern age.⁴⁸ Therefore, it is clear from Nürsî’s understanding of the Quran and modern sciences that he saw sciences as a vehicle to unravel the multiple facets of the perfection and beauty of the universe. The revelations that modern sciences were making only strengthened the proof in favor of intelligent design and the existence of God.

He did not give a literal interpretation of the Quranic verses related to the creation and design of the heavens and the earth. He maintained that these verses should be interpreted figuratively. For example, the verses explain the creation of the seven heavens and earth and their design,⁴⁹ their creation in six days,⁵⁰ and parting the earth from heaven.⁵¹ To him, when the Quran mentioned seven heavens or the creation of the universe in six days, it was not to be taken in the literal sense. In the Arabic language, it was common to use ‘seven’ to refer to multiplicity. It was a reference to the multiple astronomical and geological levels in the sky and earth. This was the reason why different commentators gave different interpretations to this verse, each according to the available knowledge and discoveries of their respective period.⁵² Similarly, the word ‘day’ in the six-day creation of the universe did not refer to the twenty-four hours of an earthly day. It merely meant a long epoch which might be even thousands of years.⁵³ He saw epochs in different kinds of time to differences in the speed of motion in sound, rays, currents, and even as the distance of imagination. Dreams, for example, he said, could be taken as an example to understand this concept. Dreams happened in a

short real time, but could be perceived as years.⁵⁴ This also led him to attempt to establish a link between some sciences and the divine attributes (*asmā-al hasana*). For example, he established a link between philosophy and the divine attribute “al-Hakīm”; similarly, “al-Shāfī” was linked with medicine, and geometry with “al-Mukaddir”.⁵⁵ If studied in the light of these divine attributes, sciences were a means to transcend from the mundane to the ethereal. Therefore Nürsī advises to study the beautiful names of Almighty God with the help of sciences and to make science and progress as steps to the divine heavens.⁵⁶

Nürsī also justified the Quranic wisdom in not explicitly detailing realities of the universal phenomenon. According to him if the Quran had succinctly explained these concepts, it would not be possible for the people of earlier ages to understand these concepts. Secondly, the Quran does not refer to natural phenomena just to understand their reality per se, as do philosophy and science; rather observing the order and functions of the physical world is a means to understand the wisdom of the Creator. So, the Qur'an, not a science book though, still alludes to scientific and technological discoveries of the modern age such as the airplane, electricity, railways, and telegraph. To elucidate his point he gave the example of prophetic miracles mentioned in the Quran. Though the primary objective of those miracles was to confirm and verify the prophetic claims, they were also a way to refer to the scientific discoveries of subsequent ages.⁵⁷

Following is an example from Risālah that how physical sciences may strengthen the truths of belief by reading it in the light of the Quran:

“The All-Wise Maker has created the human body as though it was a well-arranged city. A number of the blood-vessels perform the duties of telephones and telegraphs, while others of them are like pipes from a fountain through which blood, which is the water of life, flows. As for blood, created within it are two sorts of corpuscles. One of them, known as red corpuscles, distributes nutrients to the cells of the body; it conveys sustenance to the cells according to Divine law. (Like merchants and food officials.) The other sort is white corpuscles, which are fewer in number than the former. Their duty, like soldiers, is a defense against enemies, such as illness... As for blood as a whole, it has two general duties; the first is to repair the damage done to the body. There are two sorts of blood-vessels, veins, and arteries. One of these carry purified blood, they are the channels through which clean blood is conveyed. The others are the channels for the turbid blood which collects the waste-matter; these convey the blood to where breathing occurs; that is, the lungs.

The All-Wise Maker created in the air two elements, nitrogen, and oxygen. As for oxygen, when it comes into contact with the blood in breathing, it is

drawn to itself, like amber, the impure element, carbon, which is polluting the blood. The two combines and are transformed into matter called carbonic acid gas. Oxygen also maintains body temperature and purifies the blood. This is because, in the science of chemistry, the All-Wise Maker bestowed on oxygen and carbon an intense relationship, which might be described as 'chemical passion', whereby, according to this Divine law, when those two elements come close to each other, they combine. It has been established by science that heat is produced by combining because it is a sort of combustion.

The wisdom in this is as follows: the motion of the particles of those two elements is different. On combining, the particles of one element unite with those of the other, each two particles thereafter moving like a single particle. The other motion is transformed into heat according to a law of the All-Wise Maker. As a matter of a fact, 'motion produces heat' is an established principle.

Thus, as a consequence of this fact, by this chemical combination, as carbon is removed from the blood the body temperature of human beings is maintained, and at the same time, the blood is purified. On inhaling, oxygen both cleanses the body's water of life and kindles the fire of life. On exhaling, it yields, in the mouth, the fruit of words, which are miracles of Divine Power."⁵⁸

Risālah is full of such examples for instance "The Air A window on to Divine Unity" in Thirteenth-Word (thirteenth chapter of the first volume The Words) is another example in which by describing duties of the air Nūrsī proves Divine activity.⁵⁹ Similarly in Twenty-Fifth Word Nūrsī explains in the light of the verse: *And the mountains [its] pegs* (Qu'ran 78:7),⁶⁰ that "how people of different disciplines from literature to science all receive their share from this verse, Bedī'uzzamān displays his knowledge of geography and geology."⁶¹ To conclude, Risālah is filled with numerous examples of observing the universe and Divine activity in it, with the help of physical sciences to establish the truths of faith.⁶² Thus, Risālah proves there is no contradiction between science and religion. Nūrsī also gives logical replies to the criticism of modern materialistic science and philosophers "to rebuff the imputed conflict"⁶³ between science and religion which caused much confusion towards religious beliefs purposely to disgrace Islam.⁶⁴

ii. Revitalization of tafsīr and kalām through Risālah-i Nūr

An important educational objective which Nūrsī achieved through Risālah is revitalizing of significant Muslim sciences of *tafsīr* (Quranic exegesis or explanation) and *ʿIlm ul kalām* (Muslim theology). The basic aim of Nūrsī was to "revivify belief through developing new teaching methods" as the existing forms of Quranic exegesis and *kalām* works were inadequate to

answer the recent criticism of materialism to religious truths. The primary function which Risālah performs is of *tafsīr* and *kalām* both, which Nūrsī himself emphasized by identifying it as *ma'navī tafsīr*⁶⁵ as well as a work of *kalām*⁶⁶ “and has been credited with carrying out a genuine renewal (*tajdīd*) in this field.”⁶⁷ Nevertheless “Nūrsī can be regarded mostly as a scholar of *kalām* and *tafsīr*.” However, he cannot be considered “Mutakallim and Mufassir in a classical sense”. What he contributed was “to integrate *kalām* and *tafsīr* disciplines, and reviving them as a theology based on the Qur'an and the methods of contemporary education.”⁶⁸

As far as the revitalizing of *tafsīr* and Risālah's contribution is concerned, keeping in mind the chief objective ‘savior of belief’ in writing Risālah, it is a thematic commentary in which the subjects of the Quran regarding belief have been focused and elaborated. According to Nūrsī, there are four main themes of the Quran which are Divine Existence and Unity, Prophethood, Bodily Resurrection, and worship and justice⁶⁹. So Risālah also concentrates and explains these four themes.⁷⁰ He explained these main subjects' incompatibility to the requirements of the modern age. The method and way of Risālah are primarily based upon ‘belief thorough investigation’ which Nūrsī has derived from the Quran, thus Risālah is “based on criteria set by the Qur'an itself (*tafsīru'l-Qur'an bi'l-Qur'an*)”. And this is the major distinction of Risālah which differentiates it from other works of exegesis.⁷¹

The best treatise in Risālah to understand the methodology of belief through investigation is Seventh Ray in the collection of The Rays (4th volume) entitled “The Supreme Sign”. The treatise is on “the observations of a traveler questioning the universe concerning his Maker”. It relates an imaginary journey of a traveler who is desperate to learn about “the author of this great book and the monarch of this lofty realm.”⁷² Nūrsī begins the treatise with the verse:

نُسَبِّحُ لَهُ السَّمَاوَاتُ السَّبْعُ وَالْأَرْضُ وَمَنْ فِيهِنَّ وَإِنْ مِنْ شَيْءٍ إِلَّا يُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِهِ وَلَكِنْ لَأَنْتَ أَتَقَفَّهُونَ
تَسْبِيحَهُمْ إِنَّهُ كَانَ حَلِيمًا غَفُورًا

“The seven heavens and the earth and all that is in them extol and glorify Him, and there is nothing but glorifies Him with praise, but you understand not their glorifying; indeed, He is Most Forbearing, Most Forgiving.”⁷³

To inquire about the Maker, the traveler first looks at the heavens and all they contain including the sun, moon, and other heavenly bodies. He continues his journey thus through the testimony of the atmosphere with its lightning and thunder, the testimony of the earth, wind, rain, seas, rivers, mountains, and so on, each bearing the witness and testifies the necessary existence and unity of the Creator. Thus “in this treatise, the universe is

studied together with all its beings and its visible and invisible worlds, and its testimony to its Creator is described on thirty-three different levels or degrees."⁷⁴ To put it another way "as the traveler travels through the universe questioning all of its realms and learning of their testimony to the divine existence and unity, his belief gains universality and strength with each degree, and passes from being 'imitative belief' to the degree of 'certain, verified belief', and beyond."⁷⁵

Also, Risālah has many passages demonstrating 'nature' and 'causation' as baseless ideologies and particularly Twenty Third Flash in The Flashes collection (3rd volume) titled "Nature: Cause or Effect?", on the whole deals with this issue. In the beginning, Nūrsī states: "[T]here are certain phrases that are commonly used and imply unbelief. The believers also use them, but without realizing their implications." Then he mentions three commonly used phrases: "Causes create this." "It forms itself" and "It is natural; nature necessitates and creates it". Afterward, he demolishes these concepts through nine detailed 'impossibilities', proving them logically absurd.⁷⁶ For example, Nūrsī mentions:

"If the art and creativity, which are discerning and wise, to be seen in beings and particularly inanimate beings are not attributed to the pen of Divine Determining and Power of the Pre-Eternal Sun, and instead are attributed to Nature and force, which are blind, deaf and unthinking, it becomes necessary that Nature either should have present in everything machines and printing-presses for their creation or should include in everything power and wisdom enough to create and administer the universe. The reason for this is as follows:

*The sun's manifestations and reflections appear in all small fragments of glass and droplets on the face of the earth. If those miniatures, reflected imaginary suns are not ascribed to the sun in the sky, it is necessary to accept the external existence of an actual sun in every tiny fragment of glass smaller than a match-head, which possesses the sun's qualities and which, though small in size, bears profound meaning; and therefore to accept actual suns to the number of pieces of glass."*⁷⁷

Due to the refutation of materialist concepts of nature, causality, and others, Risālah is also regarded as a work of *kalām* with the contribution of revitalizing it. Nūrsī himself recommended his students to consult various treatises from Risālah at certain times on their questions related to the issues of *kalām*.⁷⁸ Since the basic aim of '*Ilm ul kalām*' is "to explain Islamic beliefs and to defend them against foreign ideas and beliefs considered heretical."⁷⁹ Yet Risālah played this role very effectively, as through "the Quranic theology, Nūrsī could make a serious attempt to protect the Islamic faith from materialistic challenges of the age using an experimental approximation

rather than any philosophical and/or theoretical methods".⁸⁰

Therefore "Risālah-i-Nūr contains just about all the subjects dealt with in the science of *kalām*".⁸¹ For instance one can list these subjects as Philosophy of Nature, just mentioned above; Divine existence, Unity, Names and attributes primarily with two proofs; (i) perfect design and order of the universe and, (ii): man's inborn nature. Nūrsī prefers these two proofs on "cosmological arguments of classical *kalām*" because these are easier to understand.⁸² Likewise, another subject is Divine determining and man's free will (*Jabr-o-Qadar*) explicated in the Twenty-Sixth Word, which Nūrsī claims to have solved in "two pages... in a way that everyone can understand" which could not be completely clarified even by leading *kalām* scholars.⁸³ Similarly, Bodily Resurrection and the Hereafter explained in the Tenth Word, which Nūrsī also claims to have proved rationally, which is also comprehensible even for children on which *Ibn e Sina* confessed his impotence to rationally understand⁸⁴. Likewise, Prophethood and Belief-sin-accusations of unbelief,⁸⁵ etc. are also some examples of *kalām* subjects discussed in Risālah.

Although all the subjects of *kalām* are included in Risālah, the methodology Nūrsī adopted to prove those truths is different from traditional *kalām* methodology because of certain reasons. Firstly, Nūrsī believes philosophical arguments of *kalām* scholars are not understandable for a majority of believers and cannot "raise people to a level of belief in God's existence, unity, and attributes which satisfies them."⁸⁶ Secondly, preferring reason over revelation was another element in the methodology of traditional *kalām* due to which Nūrsī turned his attention from that way. Nūrsī says that through preferring reason over revelation, *kalām* scholars "have not been able to express with clarity even ten of the Qur'an's verses, or prove them decisively." This convinced him that the conventional approach to theology was inherently incapable of countering the doubts regarding faith, created by the skeptical modern age. He devised a new science of *kalām* which was based on "the Qur'anic practical theology"⁸⁷ to free it from the narrow approach of the *madrasah*; reinterpret it as a response to skeptical schools of thought; and impart it to laymen to purify their minds, strengthen their beliefs and reform the society. In Risālah therefore he provides "rational proofs for all the main tenets of belief and other question with which *kalām* was concerned" thus considers Risālah "to be a new form of that discipline within its general function of the renewal of belief."⁸⁸

A prime example of Nūrsī's departure from the methodology of traditional *kalām* is his treatment with the arguments of Divine existence. Mindful of the needs of his time and challenges posed by agnosticism, he did not accord much importance in his works to the famous cosmological

arguments of classical *kalām* i.e. contingency (*imkān*) and creativeness (*hudūs*).⁸⁹ Rather “he preferred arguments such as the perfect design [*nizām*] in the book of the universe (*kitāb-i kaināt*) [as explained earlier] and the innate ability of conscience (*vijdān*) within human beings.”⁹⁰ To Nūrsī, the man himself is one of the undeniable proofs of the existence of God. The man was an embodiment of the physical and spiritual features of the universe. Being a smaller example (*Mithāl-i-Musaghar*) of the universe, man is a microcosm of the cosmos.⁹¹

To sum up, Nūrsī’s contribution in revitalizing the *tafsīr* and *kalām* through Risālah is to provide rational explanations of the main tenets of belief, which are equally understandable for simple-minded people and the intellectuals as well. He explained all the subjects of classical *kalām* theology with new methodology; therefore one can conclude that Nūrsī formed a new science of *kalām* which is similar to the classical *kalām* in terms of subject and purpose to an extent, but it is different in respect of methodology.

iii. Integration of Spirituality in Risālah-i-Nūr

Nūrsī strove for the integration of different branches of knowledge including religious, rational and spiritual in Risālah “to establish an ‘epistemological wholeness’ and organic relations between the various categories of knowledge, revealed and scientific, and art, ethics, and belief, and within man himself with his many faculties. This is consistent with the Qur’an and its insistent teaching of divine unity.”⁹² In Nūrsī’s vision, the training of all human faculties’ i.e intellect, heart, and soul is essential because to him the purpose of education should not be to ensure only the material needs and prosperity of an individual. It should also purify a person’s heart and soul for success in the life hereafter. Because a society that would not cater to the spiritual and intellectual needs of man would be destined to be ruined.⁹³ This is why Nūrsī integrates Spirituality as a branch of knowledge in Risālah because it addresses the human faculty of heart in addition to the intellect.⁹⁴ Zeyneb Seyilgan justly explains this educational aspect of Risālah, she notes:

“Reconciliation, integration, unification, and forming alliances--these were the guiding principles in Nūrsī’s educational vision, bringing together various streams of knowledge and members of society. This is specifically seen in his approach towards Sufism as a branch of knowledge. With this in mind, Nūrsī depicted the Risālah path as the summation of the twelve great ṭarīqas and underlined the importance of all of them. Nūrsī stated repeatedly that the Nūr circle provided the benefits of the ṭarīqas and that one did not need to look for them somewhere else.”⁹⁵

Nonetheless, Nūrsī considers Sufism in-appropriate for his time

because of the immense difficulties of this way which were not possible for everyone to bear. Due to the long way and hardships of this path, some people might be de-tracked and their faith might be endangered.⁹⁶ Conversely, he also asserts that due to negative aspects of some orders of this path, of which he is also a critic⁹⁷; it is not justified to condemn and prove the whole system invalid.⁹⁸

Nürsī also criticizes the method of Sufism time and again while comparing it with the method of Risālah. The basic difference between the two is in their treatment of the universe. According to Nürsī, Sufism completely ignored the Universe in their pursuit of the ultimate truth. They “either denied the universe’s true existence or entirely disregarded it; that is, they cast it into oblivion.” Whereas Risālah stressed the importance of minutely observing the entities present in the universe, in other words by reading the book of the universe, to ascend to the understanding of The Creator. Nürsī puts this difference in approach to Sufism’s tendency to rely purely on inner human faculties, primarily ‘the heart’, to reach The Almighty. This reliance on the journey of the heart appeals more to intuition than intellect.

It should be noted that Risālah does not ignore the importance of illuminating the inner self through this spiritual journey, but it equally stresses the use of intellectual reasoning and proofs to understand this universe and the wisdom of The Creator. It was important for Risālah to appeal to logic and facts present in the universe to convince the modern skeptic brains to accept the Quranic truths. Nürsī gave an apt description of the methodology of Risālah explaining that unlike the traditional religious scholars Risālah did not merely rely on and proceed “with the feet of the reason”. Instead, it was a synthesis of heart and reason, mentions Nürsī: “proceeding with the feet of the blending and combining of the reason and the heart, and the mutual assistance of the spirit and other subtle faculties, it flies to the highest peaks; it ascends to where the feet and even the eyes of the philosophy that attacks [religion] cannot reach; and it shows the truths of belief even to eyes that are blind.”⁹⁹

This is one of the primary features of Nürsī’s new method of revitalizing the belief of individuals adopted in Risālah, which is to proceed with the alliance of heart and mind. That is to say man’s “reasoning faculty and intuitive inner senses” both “are utilized in ascertaining the truth, and in the process are illuminated with the knowledge obtained.”¹⁰⁰ This is the way of Risālah which Nürsī named as *haqīqat* (reality) a direct way derived from the Quran. This he places within “the legacy of prophethood (the greater sainthood)”¹⁰¹ instead of *sufī* way. He states: “it is reality (*haqīqat*) rather than *tariqat*. It is *Shari’ah*.”¹⁰² Nürsī mentions three ranks of sainthood about

Sirhindī and among them: “The greater sainthood (velāyet-i kubrā) is to open up by way of the legacy of prophethood a direct way to reality without entering the intermediate realm of Sufism.” This short but elevated path “looks to the unfolding of divine immediacy. For there are two ways of passing from the apparent to reality: one is to traverse the degrees through spiritual journeying, as in Sufism. The second is to pass directly to reality without entering the intermediate realm of Sufism. According to Nūrsī, this way is particular to the Companions of the Prophet and those who succeeded them.”¹⁰³ This was Nūrsī’s desire to furnish Risālah with these characteristics to guide his people directly.

Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate how Nūrsī accomplished his educational reforms through Risālah, which he had hoped to achieve by founding Madrasah-tu-Zahra University. The data was distilled from reliable books and treatises. The findings of the research reveal:

- Nūrsī got disillusioned with the parallel structures of education at a very early age and resolved to transform the educational system.
- He aimed to establish Madrasah-tu-Zahra to accomplish his mission, which he couldn’t due to many hindrances; however, he achieved his aims of Madrasah-tu-Zahra through Risālah.
- Contrary to the claims of the secularists, Nūrsī established with proof that there were no contradictions between modern sciences and religious truths.
- Nūrsī propagated belief through investigation and revived *tafsīr* and *kalām*. He considered the traditional *tafsīr* and *kalām* incapable of answering the questions of modern-day skeptics.
- Risālah rendered great services for the unification of parallel structures of education with the teachings of spirituality as its integral part. However, Nūrsī’s method of attainment of spirituality was different from that of traditional Sufism. Unlike Sufism, Nūrsī did not agree with ignoring the universe for spiritual elevation. On the contrary, he maintained that a deeper understanding was essential for spirituality.
- Risālah propagated an education system that promoted synthesis of heart and reason, enabling a Muslim to excel in modern sciences and understand logical arguments for the truths of his beliefs simultaneously.

The researcher believes this study will serve academia in many ways. It will be of assistance to the scholars wishing to enhance their understanding of the educational problems of twentieth-century Turkey and how its major revivalist, Nūrsī, contributed to alleviate the situation. The study may also be beneficial for aspiring researchers who wish to explore in more depth some of

the areas discussed in this paper. The study may prove to be helpful for anyone who would work on how the present-day education systems, in the Muslim world in general and in Turkey in particular, can take help from Nürsī's ideas to answer the challenges posed to Muslim beliefs by modern sciences.



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¹ Serif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bedī'uzzamān Sa'īd Nürsī* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 68. This was Nürsī's reply to his teacher when he amazed at the method of learning Nürsī adopted, he ignored all explanatory works and concentrated upon original and selected texts of curriculum thus accomplished whole course of madrasah education in just three months.

²For details see Sukran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bedī'uzzamān Sa'īd Nürsī* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 10,27,29,33; Shumaila Majeed, "Bedī'uzzamān Sa'īd Nürsī's Approach to Reconstruction of Muslim Society; An Analytical Study" (PhD diss., University of the Punjab, 2018), accessed August 19, 2020, http://pr.hec.gov.pk/jspui/bitstream/123456789/10502/1/Shumaila%20Majeed_Ismic%20Std_2018_UoPunjab_PRR.pdf.

³ Sakir Gozutok, "The Risāle-i Nūr and Educational Principles and Methods," in *Fifth International Symposium on Bedī'uzzamān Sa'īd Nürsī, The Quranic view of Man According to the Risāle-i Nūr* (Istanbul: Sozler, 2002), 393.

⁴ 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*, 80-81.

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⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 596-97.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 655.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 270-71. For further explanations see Ozerverli, "Nürsî's Project of Revitalizing," 326.

⁵⁷ See for details Nürsî, *The Words*, 260-70. Ozerverli adds: Nürsî's this approach of miracles of prophets was very similar to the approach adopted by another famous subcontinent scholar of his time Shibli Naumani, who did not interpret miracles mentioned in the Quran as supernatural events contradicting the physical laws, but as something whose proper understanding was not possible due to limited human knowledge and which might, as the result of scientific discoveries in future, strengthen Quranic claims. See Ozerverli, "Nürsî's Project of Revitalizing," 327. (however, this approach needs further investigation)

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⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 402-05.

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⁸⁵ Yavuz, "Nūrsī's Views on Science of Kalām," 498.

⁸⁶ Ibid. Also see al-Hamid, "Nūrsī: The Kalām Scholar," 430.

⁸⁷ M Sait Ozervarli, "The Reconstruction of Islamic Social Thought in the Modern Period: Nūrsī's Approach to Religious Discourse in a Changing Society," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 38(2010), 538.

⁸⁸ Vahide, "Toward an Intellectual Biography," 19,20.

⁸⁹ Ozervarli, "Nūrsī's Project of Revitalizing," 322. Although Nūrsī employs the proofs of createdness and contingency but not in similar manner as the scholars of *kalām* developed moreover he also criticizes their methods see Nūrsī, *The Words*, 716-19; Nūrsī, *The Rays*, 163-64. For the explanation see Ali Mermer, "The Ways to Knowledge of God in the Risāle-i Nūr," in *Third International Symposium on*

Bedi'uzzamān Sa'id Nürsî. The Reconstruction of Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century and Bedi'uzzamān Sa'id Nürsî (Istanbul: Sozler, 1995), 62.

⁹⁰ Ozervarli, "Nürsî's Project of Revitalizing," 323. See for example Nürsî, *Reasonings*, 45; Nürsî, *The Words*, 719-20.

⁹¹ See for instance Nürsî, *The Words*, 558-60, 67, 683-84.

⁹² Vahide, "Nürsî's Approach to Religious Renewal," 61.

⁹³ Sayilgan, "The Medresetu'z Zehra," 300.

⁹⁴ Vahide, "Nürsî's Approach to Religious Renewal," 60.

⁹⁵ Sayilgan, "The Medresetu'z Zehra," 299.

⁹⁶ Nürsî, *The Letters*, 510.14. Actually Nürsî's readings and observation of the time and its necessities convinced him that his contemporaries were exposed to many doubts and were challenged to provide rational responses to skeptics who thought faith incoherent and implausible... otherwise their faith would be weakened by such doubts and they would have the risk of losing faith. Loss or lack of faith is the extreme detriment in Nürsî's view, for its consequence would be the loss of one's eternal happiness. This is the risk involved in journeying on *tarīqah* which require lengthy training, including some challenges that result in not all seekers successfully completing the journey. And, as the way of heart *tasawūf*, Sufism, could fall short in resisting to doubts of the time harming belief, that is why Nürsî concluded that compelling circumstances of the present time required belief to be the necessity and it was not the age of Sufism. See Ian S Markham and Suendam Birinci Pirim, *An Introduction to Sa'id Nürsî: Life, Thought and Writings* (Uk: Ashgate 2011), 40-41.

⁹⁷ Nürsî, *The Letters*, 517, 20-22.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 510.

⁹⁹ Nürsî, *Kāstāmonū Lāhikası*, 10 as quoted in Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 235-36.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁰¹ Nürsî, *The Letters*, 68.

¹⁰² Quoted in Sener Dilek, "The Risāle-i Nür's Method and Aim," in *International Symposium the Reconstruction of Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century and Bedi'uzzamān Sa'id Nürsî* (Istanbul: Sozler, 1992), p: 116.

¹⁰³ Nürsî, *The Letters*, 38,68-9; for explanation see Sukran Vahide, "A Survey of the Main Spiritual Themes of the Risāle-i Nür," in *Spiritual Dimensions of Bedi'uzzamān Sa'id Nürsî's Risāle-i Nür*, ed. İbrahim M Abu Rabi (Albany: State University of New York press, 2008), 7; also consult Dilek, "Risāle-i Nür's Method and Aim," 116-17; Marcia Hermansen, "Faith Development and Spiritual Maturation in the Works of Sa'id Nürsî," in *Spiritual Dimensions of Bedi'uzzamān Sa'id Nürsî's Risāle-i Nür*, ed. İbrahim M Abu Rabi (Albany: State University of New York press, 2008), 94; Turner, *The Quran Revealed*, p: 350.