

# Said Nursi: A Brief Overview of Vision and Reformative Thoughts

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## Abstract

The focus of the article is Said Nursi's contributions in the fields of education, religion, and politics. Nursi was a Kurdish theologian, an Islamic scholar, and the most popular and influential intellectual of Turkish history. His influence and popularity among people are indicative of the titles he received from the people including "Badiuz-Zaman" (Wonder of the Age) and "Ustaad" (Muallam or teacher). Besides this, Nursi was widely famous among his people for his extravagant memory: his long-term memory was able to reproduce certain books. This reflects upon his unordinary personality as he was able to recite many books from memory. An unusual narrative about him was that when he used to read a page of a book, he would learn it by heart at the same moment. His vast study, intelligence, powerful memory, and oratory skills impressed his contemporaries to a great extent.

**Keywords:** theologian, vision, Badiuz-Zaman, reformative thoughts

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## **Introduction**

Said Nursi was a theologian, religious scholar, and notable Turkish figure who lived during the Ottoman Empire. His scholarly contribution and towering achievements made him an influential personality with the “Badiuz-Zaman” means “Wonder of the Age” and “Ustaad” means “the teacher”. His long and short-term memories were amazing and attracted innumerable followers. There is a famous story about his strong memory when his memory was tested by renowned scholar, Mullah Fethullah. Fethullah presented Said Nursi a work offal-Hariri of Basra who himself had earned a name for his memory. It is narrated that Said Nursi read a page and read or recited the selected page by heart the next moment. With his intelligence and powerful memory, Said Nursi not only impressed Mullah Fethullah but he was amazed by his character.

Nursi was modern in his thoughts. Despite being graduated from a religious seminary, he not only learned modern Western philosophy but also mastered scientific knowledge. He opined that to get rid of the problems faced by the Muslims, it was important to cope with them with modern Western and scientific education. Nursi was a believer in the fact that with the adoption of positive ideas from other religions, a Muslim does not oust from the fold of Islam but this practice is rather favorable for Muslims as it strengthens them in their missions. Importantly, Said Nursi was somehow secular in his views of nationhood. Nursi lived during the upheavals of secularism in the Ottoman Empire. However, he believed in the supremacy of Quranic teachings for which he made efforts as well.

Nursi has contributed a great deal to literature and Islamic teachings. He spent a long time, a considerable amount of years, in imprisonment and incarceration. During this time, he continued to pen down books and other content for the perusal of his readership and followers to remain connected with Islam and learning. He thoroughly believed in the capabilities of humans and encouraged them to know their strengths and utilize them in their lives practically. He encouraged the men and women to know their hearts and have a conscience. He was of the view that men should stray from God’s way and should keep their conscience alive. Nursi was against violence and sedition.<sup>1</sup> He was in favor of peace and wanted men to remain as peaceful as they can. Said Nursi delivered a message of peaceful coexistence. He wanted men to have feelings for each other; they should not enjoy the pain of others but should feel other men’s pain. All Muslims, in Said Nursi’s opinion, were a part of one body; the loss of one part was the loss of the entire body. Therefore, he urged Muslims not to have jealousy of each other and not to be sadists.

Nursi encouraged Muslims to have a proper role of “human selfhood”. He believed in plurality and a good civic sense of humans. He tried to inculcate

the importance of nationhood and constitutional government in his people through his speeches, writings, and deeds. Importantly, he is among the few religious scholars who have praised diversity. Diversity is the beauty of life. When diversity is encouraged, inclusivity is encouraged. Inclusive societies are peaceful and forward-looking. Around a century ago, when no one even thought about inclusiveness, Said Nursi talked about it. It is indicative of his vision and thoughtfulness. At the same time, he also enlightened the people on the importance of jihad and encouraged them to contribute their part of the good in the fight for freedom. In his books, he has highlighted how important it is to have jihad and how Muslims should dedicate their lives and properties to Islam and not resist sacrificing for the betterment of the religion. Jihad is an important belief of Muslims. Islam has directed Muslims to participate in jihad at the behest of the kingdom or state. Any individual or unofficial group cannot announce jihad but it is the prerogative of the state or the government to call jihad. Said Nursi encourages his people to come for jihad when the government asks them.

The study in hand reflects upon Said Nursi's distinguishing features and qualities. This is a qualitative work that contains opinions and ideas of researchers, scholars, and the authors and attempts to answer the question that how Said Nursi's vision was distinctive from traditional religious scholars and why is it important to couple Islamic beliefs with modern scientific education for the benevolence of people. Since Nursi's philosophy is based on the fundamentals of Islamic ideology, his works can be interpreted in the frame of religion; the religion of Islam. Exceedingly, the brief paper also discusses the reasons for the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the ways suggested by Said Nursi for the upheaval of the empire, among which advocacy of scientific education holds an important position. Nursi's courage during World War I remained another talk of the town, and the same has been highlighted by the researcher, "A distinguishing feature of Nursi's personality was that he not only exerted himself theoretically to save the Ottoman Empire from the decline but also practically participated in WW-I as a last effort to save this center of Muslim's union. He joined the army as a regimental commander in Eastern provinces. He fought at the forefront of war with his students and was finally captured by Russians.<sup>2</sup> In this connection, it is important to mention that the article provides a panoramic view of happenings and episodes in the life of Said Nursi; his early age, works, contributions, and struggles during life. It is important to note that Said Nursi was an important figure in politics as well. He spend a few years in jail as a political prisoner and returned with a stronger position. During his imprisonment, his struggle of guiding mankind did not stop, but he continued to enlighten the people with the light of education, religion, discipline, and nationhood.

His idea of '*Tajdīd*' and '*Iṣlāḥ*' remains the focus of researchers as these

two terms are widely discussed and “applied in the process of reshaping the identities and in the cultural confrontation with the Western thought and ideology”.<sup>3</sup> Said Nursi’s reformatory thoughts are crucial for the integration and reshaping of societies. Nursi has laid great emphasis on reshaping the system, i.e. *Tajdid*, and correcting the selves and system, i.e. *Islāh* which is still light for the developers of societies. However, his contributions in various categories that include education, politics, and religion have yet not been classified, whereas, this paper attempts to classify his contributions in the aforementioned category. But, due to limited domain and time frame, just major contributions have been highlighted and thus, the paper is not expressive of his vision in totality reason being the presence of his contributions in such a large amount.

### **Discussion**

Nursi was born in village Kurdistan, Nurs near Hizan in Biltis Vilayat of the Ottoman Empire and was educated in a local religious seminary by local religious scholars. His sharp memory and oration made him an intelligent, and eloquent speaker. His popularity among the people earned him the favors of the governor who invited him to reside in the Governor’s official residence. He blended religious and scientific learning for the propagation of his ideas. He argued that Quran and science were compatible. He learned all the mathematical and physical sciences and urged his followers for the same. However, during the time of this turmoil, Said Nursi advocated the case for scientific and mathematical education. Said Nursi was not only active in religion and education but he played a pivotal role in strengthening society and the public. During the world war, he commanded the militia.<sup>4</sup> Nursi’s opposition to the Mustafa Kamal Atatürk worried him to a level where he offered him a place in his government as Minister of Religious Affairs. However, Nursi openly rejected this offer and continued to oppose him. Here he broke his ways with Kamal Atatürk and his group, the *Kemalist* circle. Therefore, on his return to Istanbul, Nursi announced to openly advocate Quran as a sun that was unbreakable, unfadable, and universal. He said that nobody could dare to eliminate Quran from the earth and this was when he started writing a book on Quran.

Every person who gets increasingly popular magnets enormous opposition. He was blamed for provocative speeches and discouraging secularism. He was charged with violation of basic laws that aimed at secularism as its mandate. Imposing punishment on him, he was sent into exile. He freed himself from these blames during the year 1956. During the last ten years of his age, Nursi lived in Isparta. Being a supporter of democracy, he advised and guided the people of his party which he had founded to vote for the Democratic Party of Adnan Menderes. This party had played a crucial role

in restoring religious freedom.

### **Works**

Nursi founded a university for Islamic education along with modern disciplines. He has authored several books on Muslim theology and modern education that helps to get out human beings from the darkness and superstitions:

#### **Risale-i-Nur**

Published in Turkish language, after his coming back to Turkey from exile. The focus of the book is the revival of the spirit of Islam.

#### **Risale-i-Nur**

A tafsir of the Holy Qur'an, comprising 6000 pages, provides a true picture of Islam and explains religion in such a way that God seems to be physically present everywhere. The book strengthens men's relationship with God and Islam as it invites men to observe God in nature.

#### **Gençlik Rehberi**

Published in 1951, a guide for the youth to lead an ideal life. Nursi reminds young people of life after death. He warns them that if they do not make good utility of their energetic life, they will suffer in eternal life.

#### **Maktubat (The Letters)**

Published in 1958, contains the firm established traditions of correspondence between spiritual scholars and their followers. The letters contain basic knowledge about theology and nature and the intensity of hell.

#### **Lem'alar and The Rays**

Published in 1957 and 1959 respectively, the books guide mankind to the true spirit of Islam and the message of Allah.

### **Major Contributions**

The age through which Said Nursi lived was an age of political and social turmoil on a global level, the age of the world war. In Turkey sultanate and secularism were confronting each other, affecting religious, educational, and social setups. Nursi's contributions proved quite fruitful in maintaining a balance in the social, political, educational, and religious spheres. His pursuits can be reflected in Educational, Religious, and Political fields.

### **Educational Contributions:**

Awareness was an important tool that Said Nursi used for the propagation of his thoughts and learnings. As a scholar, Said Nursi had such oratory skills which could attract the attention of people. Like any other major

contributor to the world, Nursi tried to give courage to the people so that they speak for freedom and live a life of esteem. In his beliefs, Said Nursi was also too modern. Unlike other religious scholars, he never negated the importance of scientific education. Nursi believed and argued that scientific knowledge was as important for life as religious knowledge was. Turkey's progress in science today credits a great deal to Said Nursi's motivation and encouragement. Nursi wanted the spirit of humans to be aligned with Islamic knowledge, while for life and livelihood one should learn science and mathematics. The use of the word "enlightenment" for science shows that how Said Nursi was in favor of worldly education which is very much unusual for any religious maestro.

On his return from exile, Said Nursi wrote a book called as *Risale-i-Nur* the purpose of which was to convey the true message of the Holy Qur'ān to men. He tried to prove the fact that Holy Quran was a light, a sun that was not breakable, not exhaustible, and universal. *Risale-i-Nur* contains commentaries and explanations of Said Nursi's understanding and comprehension of the Holy Quran and other Islamic teachings besides examples from his own life. In the said book, Said Nursi has interpreted Holy Quran as a lamp that guides men for a better life in the world and even hereafter. It is important to mention that due to the genuineness of the book, six hundred thousand handwritten copies of the book were circulated due to the ban on religious books during the secular regime. His powerful writings helped him in initiating Nurcu Movement despite having no money and property. Nursi in particular and his movement, in general, continued to influence the people of Turkey in a large number and thus, all the efforts of nipping it went in vain. After 1950, the movement grew with immense rage and spread its wings beyond Turkey.

What makes Said Nursi different from other traditional religious scholars is his enlightened approach to institutionalized education. He turned out to be the most modern scholar as he believed in supporting education at the institutional level, instead of individualism. During the world war, education suffered a lot and nobody was paying it any heed, as "And also the education system was not a total concern of the nation, being the quantity as well as the quality of the institutions were comparatively within certain limits. In addition, the advancement of education, technology and other changes of the world were at a slower terrain".<sup>5</sup> During the age of turmoil, when every other religious scholar was ignoring the importance of education, Said Nursi was not only acknowledging or accepting it but he was trying to put efforts into the promotion of education through his oration, writings, and establishment of educational institutes.

### **Religious Contributions:**

"The theological philosophy of BediuzZaman is uniquely suited to

addressing not only all Muslims but also all of mankind for several reasons".<sup>6</sup> Said Nursi concerned himself not only with his country but the world as he did not confine himself to Islam only but focused on the greater humanity. Nursi wanted to have peace, love, affection, inclusivity, care, adjustability, and warmth among people for each other. His message was kind of universal, but not limited to a certain group of people or followers of a particular religion. Nursi encouraged inter-faith harmony in a time when no one would even think of it. Nursi wanted the people of his land to accept the fact that the world was a global village and people were expected to live in peace, love, and consideration. No man, in Nursi's views, was disrespectful and all men were equally respectable and honorable in his eye.

Nursi is considered the champion behind bringing back Islam to Turkish life. After the wave of secularism in the country, religion was not discussed. And, yet, importantly, anyone who would mention religion would not only be cursed by the people but punished by the state. It was Nursi who dared to talk about religion for the first time which led him to problems too. "Islamic educators owe a debt of gratitude to Said Nursi (1878-1960), the Turkish scholar, theologian, and writer who inspired a movement of faith leading to the revival of Islam in Turkey and the rest of the world".<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Nursi's essay on God put him in hot water was published during the year 1943. Nursi was jailed and during this time, he wrote more essays and literary content to inculcate discipline in prisoners and guide them. His essays had a significant impact on the prisoners. Even when he was acquitted, he was not granted complete liberty but he was forced to live his life in a village where he continued to spread the light of education and love. Nursi was always in favor of jail reforms and the welfare of prisoners by educating them and training them and grooming them. It is pertinent to mention here that Islam also directs the state to safeguard the basic human rights of prisoners and take care of their self-esteem.

Nursi in his book *Risale-i-Nur* has reflected upon the divine names in a way that he provides a natural touch and connectivity of divine names with the world. He explains the names in such a manner that God seems to be present in every element and happening of the world. Ozgur Koca points to Nursi's beautiful interpretation of divine names by calling him significant of all scholars, ".....the most important thinker who speculated on the topic of the Divine Names and their cosmological significance is the famous philosopher and mystic ibn 'Arabî, who explains the multiplicity, gradation, and vicissitudes of the created order by employing the Divine Names. As Toshiko Izutsu aptly summarizes, for ibn 'Arabî "the world is nothing but the whole sum of the Divine Names as concretely actualized".<sup>8</sup> For example, he tells mankind that only God is '*Al-Razzaq*' why should one raise his hand to a man? Or if He is '*Samî*' why not will He be able to see what they are doing? This

empowers a man's relationship with God and gives him hope for life.

Risale-i-Nur is a response to false propaganda that modern education and Quran are two different things. Interpreting the Quran in his way in this book, Nursi proves the fact that faith is a truth that could not be ignored and the attacks on Islam by the secularists are unjustified in all ways. This gives wings to Islam to fly high and empowers men in religion and makes them stronger. Nursi attempted to establish links between Koranic verses and the physical world. He also proved the important fact that Quran and science in no way stand in opposition to each other. Said Nursi's style was quite critical. He was a staunch believer in critical thinking and all his discussions on the relationship between Quran and science are based on logic and arguments which makes it difficult for pseudo-intellectuals to challenge his thoughts and ideas. Thus, he remains successful in establishing his point.

### **Political Contributions and Contributions towards Society:**

Nursi considered Islam as a light. On his arrival in Turkey, he addressed his students in his book, *Kuliyat*, "I hope to see light". He treated Islam as a light for men in their political journey. He opined that Islam will guide men to progress in world politics. He expected his students to believe in the fact that Islam allowed all men to live a life of their choice; that religion should not be imposed; that secularism should not also be imposed. Said Nursi's political career is full of devotion, selflessness, contributions, and efforts for the upheaval of Islam. As stated earlier, Nursi's vision was not confined to Turkey, thus, Nursi believed in the unity of Muslims around the world unlike "*Turkists*" who believed in the unity of Turkish people on social and a secular cause and not Islamism.

Upon request of the government, Nursi while speaking to the members of the parliament of the Republic of Turkey on January 19, 1923, emphasized religion, prayers, and character. He reminded the parliamentarians of the Day of Judgment and the life hereafter. In his empathetic speech, he allowed Koranic verses to aid him in conveying a stronger and more meaningful message. Stressing the importance of prayer, Nursi added that the believers of Islam were asked to offer their prayers undoubtedly.

Since Eastern societies are religion-oriented, Said Nursi understanding the nature of these societies, instructed the parliamentarians and members of the administrative bodies to respect the religious sentiments of the masses. He added that even if administrators and parliamentarians themselves were not religious, they were still supposed to be respectful towards all religions because Eastern societies were different from Western societies where the former were dense in religion, while the latter was secular. He advised them that if peoples' religious sentiments were hurt, this could lead the administrators to problems,



disabling them from properly focusing on their work and developmental process.

Nursi always believed that belief in God was important for humans. He disagreed with Ataturk, the founder of the new and secular Turkey. While speaking to parliamentarians and administrators, he nullified Mustafa Kamal Ataturk's beliefs and opinions and openly denounced him. He called for him and said, "Pasha, Pasha, the most important truth in the universe is to believe in God, and then comes prayer".<sup>9</sup> It is pertinent to mention that Said Nursi was thought of as a hurdle in his way by Mustafa Kamal Ataturk and thus, Ataturk offered him a place in his government and parliament. He also offered him a place in the religious affairs of the state and wanted to hire his services as a state religious advisor and preacher. Significantly, Ataturk's offers were coupled with higher salary packages and perks but Said Nursi turned down these offers and requests and continued to oppose Ataturk and his secular regime. Another scholar Dr. Shumaila Majeed analyzed and concluded that Said Nursi suggested certain reforms to address the decline in the Muslim world, as, "Nursi's approach to reform the Muslim society was not stagnant. In the 'Old Said' phase, he attempted to neutralize the decline in Muslim community through sociopolitical reforms".<sup>10</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Nursi is an important figure in the field of theology, sociology, education, and politics. He played a significant role in reviving the religious engagements of the Republic of Turkey after the secular regime of Mustafa Kamal Ataturk. His countless contributions continue to guide mankind even in the field of theology, education, societal norms, political advancement, the importance of scientific and mathematical education, and above all, for an ideal life. Nursi believed in paying back his part of the good to society. He never changed his ways for others and played a role of paramount importance in establishing the name of Islam. He spoke of Islam during difficult days of secularism. Nursi's contributions are too important as they lead mankind from the darkness of illiteracy and non-religious beliefs to the lights of education and religion. He was popular among the people of his age and inspired a considerable number of people to come under his mentorship who continued to serve Islam. He encouraged modern scientific learning in line with religious learning which helped him in gaining the sympathies and approval of his people.



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