

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

History, Politics, and Charisma in Risale-i Nur

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The objective of the chapters included herein is to present the reader with a picture of the spiritual dimensions of a major religious movement in the contemporary Muslim world by focusing on the spiritual ideas of its leader, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi. The Nur community is one of the most significant religious and social movements in contemporary Turkey, with millions of adherents and a strong institutional and educational system running across the country.

Modernity poses a curious set of problems to the modern and contemporary Muslim world. It is nearly impossible to summarize modernity in a few statements; however, it suffices to say that a great number of intellectual forces, institutions, and ideas have emerged within modernity since its historical beginnings in the fifteenth century. Throughout its long history in modern European societies and during European colonialism in various regions in the world, modernity has given birth to such modern phenomena as secularism, nationalism, capitalism, socialism, imperialism, colonization, and modern criticism.

There were several Ottoman responses to the nineteenth-century question of European modernity and the threat it posed to the integrity of the Ottoman state: first was the response of the modernizing elite in the Ottoman Empire, which opted to modernize the infrastructure of the Empire while preserving the status of Islam in that society. The second response was aimed at preserving the Ottoman Empire without giving any central role to Islam in either society or politics. The third response was nationalist in orientation and was mainly represented by Turkish nationalists who did not much care about empire or religion.

The fourth was more mass-oriented than the previous positions, and focused on religious community, text, and Shari'ah.

It is within these four major configurations that one must locate Ottoman debate about religion, civil society, constitution, modernization, and progress. Also, it is within this tumult that a critical appreciation of the Islamic tradition among a small but influential number of Ottoman Muslim intelligentsia emerged. This critical examination of tradition took place on at least on two fronts: (1) the Sufi front, especially the Naqshebandia tariqah and the efforts of Mawlana Khalid al-Naqshebandi to revive Sufism in the nineteenth-century Ottoman empire, and (2) on the front of dialectical theology, or *ilm kalam* or *yeni Osmanli kelam* pioneered by a number of Ottoman intellectuals in the nineteenth century.

This critical examination of Muslim tradition was necessary because the empire itself was going through some major changes, and the Muslim intelligentsia felt that it was their duty to revive the Muslim notion of *ummah* and connect it to nation and state. One may argue that *ummah*, nation, and state are the three terms that most aptly summarize Ottoman political philosophy in the nineteenth century. Nursi himself dealt with these three concepts in various ways throughout his religious and intellectual life. However, after the defeat of the Ottoman army in World War One, Nursi turned his attention to Islamic spirituality and the spiritual mission of Islamic communities in a new era marked by radical secularism and Westernization.

Nursi scholars are fond of dividing the philosopher's life into the "Old Said" and the "Young Said" periods. In his "old" phase, Nursi was totally immersed in traditional Islamic sciences and was actively pursuing a single mission: saving the Ottoman Empire from further decay and loss. In his "young" phase, Nursi focused less on saving the Empire and more on saving Islamic spirituality and ethics in a secular age. In his first phase, Nursi fought on many different fronts. He understood that there were deep gaps between 'center' and 'periphery' in the Ottoman Empire. As someone who belonged to the periphery, he sought to remedy the situation by advocating far-reaching educational, constitutional, and social reforms.

Nursi did all this with a view toward solidifying the bond between *ummah*, nation, and empire in the Ottoman state. That is, he did what he did in the name of Islamic solidarity. He tried to revive the Ibn Khaldunian notion of solidarity in a new age, and he did this on the basis of his understanding of Islamic identity. He thought that it was possible to accept the tremendous institutional and social changes that began within the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the nineteenth century while reviving the great bond between *ummah* and empire. Nursi argued that religion (i.e., Islam) must be organically linked to empire to

preserve its identity in the modern era. He basically did not see any contradiction between Islamic bondage and the major changes that had been taking place in the empire since the early days of *Tanzimāt*.

However, Nursi went through a radical transformation after World War One. Generally speaking, Nursi was disappointed with the failure of the empire to preserve Islam and began to look into new ways to promote Islam and its spirituality in a radically new phase of modern Turkey. Right after World War One, Nursi became well aware of the fact that it was a matter of time before the empire would be dismantled; that there were powerful forces, both internal and external, that were no longer interested in preserving the political integrity of the Ottoman Empire. He was aware of all of this because he was captured for two years during World War One while fighting for the Ottoman army.

While at some point Nursi was ready to let go of the empire, he was not ready to give up on Islam and the Muslim *ummah*. These two concepts began to acquire strong spiritual meaning for him. He still thought of the Muslim world in a universal sense and was anxious to preserve the great bond between the Turkish nation and Islam. He still thought of the Turkish nation not in nationalist terms, but in ummatic terms. And clearly, this went against the grain of the leading political authorities in the post-Ottoman phase of Turkey. The most dominant political current, epitomized by Kemal Atatürk and his comrades, defended the notion of severing ties between the Turkish nation and the Muslim world and attempted to relegate religion to a secondary status in the lives of the Turkish people.

Said Nursi and his comrades, on the other hand, were the only group to intellectually defend the traditional bond between the Turkish nation and the Muslim *ummah*. As we know, Nursi refused to subscribe to the European notion of nation when he denied assistance to the Shaykh Said rebellion, a Kurdish rebellion against the state in the mid-1920s.

As mentioned, empire, nation, and *ummah* played significant roles in Nursi's intellectual life, especially before World War One. With the progress of years, a new constellation of forces came to the fore in Nursi's life and that of his community in a secularized Turkey. This new constellation of forces can be called text-individual-community.

The text is, of course, Nursi's magnum opus, *Risale-i Nur*, which begins to take shape from the 1920s on. And the *Risale-i Nur* must be seen as Nursi's deep reflection on the Quran in light of the modern and rapidly changing conditions in Turkey. However, there is a central dimension of the text that many scholars have overlooked. The text was not a simple exegesis of the Quran; it was a product of Nursi's crisis, imprisonment, exile, and alienation. I believe his experiences give *Risale-i Nur* a unique edge. The text is similar in this sense to the

works of Antonio Gramsci in Italy and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Germany under Nazi authorities. It is a text forged from tremendous pain and suffering in the extreme. This is the main reason why the text is so charismatic.

Despite his spiritual, psychological, and emotional struggles, Nursi had an objective goal, which was to preserve the integrity of Islam in the high age of radical secularism. He immersed himself in the infinite treasures of the Islamic sacred to express his new position and achieve his goal. In so doing, he was also expressing the feelings of numerous people who were not affected by the new secular formula of nation, Turkification, and Westernization.

It is in this context that we must read the chapters in this book. The world is indeed fortunate that leading scholars of Nursi's work and spirituality shed light on a spiritual tradition in modern and contemporary Turkey that has steadfastly survived the secular project of Kemalism.

In conclusion, I sincerely thank Dr. Faris Kaya of the Istanbul Science and Culture Foundation for conceiving of the idea for this book and supporting its progress from the beginning.