

AN ALTERNATIVE METHOD TOWARD EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN TURKEY IN THE LIGHT OF SAID NURSI
BADIUZZAMAN (1876-1960)

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Abstract

This paper attempts at studying the prominent Muslim scholar in Turkey, Said Nursi Badiuzzaman's proposal for educational reform and his alternative method to the old educational system in Turkey during his time. During the time of Nursi, Turkey had been heavily influenced by secularism under the leadership of Kamal al Tartuk. The religious values had been marginalized from the practical aspects of man's life. At the same time, the Muslims world had been dominated by the West in science and technology giving them the strength to control the economic power of the world. This domination had challenged the Muslims intellectually, spiritually and morally. It led to the weak conditions of Muslims. Said Nursi observed that those problems of Muslim could be solved through the educational reform program. He criticized the prevalent educational system in Turkey at that time was not able to produce a balance personality of Muslims as well as failed to achieve a progress in society. Therefore, the system of education, according to him, must be reoriented accordingly. He proposed for a restructure of the curriculum in order to be aligned with the requirements of Islam and adjusted with the requirements of modern time. Although Nursi's idea of educational reform was aimed at every level including primary level, secondary level, and university level, he gave emphasis on the university level. This paper did not only examine the theoretical dimensions of his educational reform but also highlighted the practical applications of the process.

Introduction

From the beginning of nineteenth century onwards the West had posed serious challenges to the Muslim world and its society, and it had become dominant over the Muslims in all aspects. This domination brought about immense changes in the political structure of the Muslim world, its

¹ This paper was presented in The International Conference on Badiuzzaman Said Nursi's Thought on Wasatiyyah and An Exemplary Society organized by Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences (KIRKHS), International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in collaboration with Institute Wasatiyyah Malaysia (IWM), International Forum for Moderation Jordan, and International Institute for Muslim Unity (IIMU) on 23-25th September 2017.

administrative and socio-economic affairs, and its educational system. There have been various religious responses to the challenges posed by the West carried out by Muslim revivalists and reformists of twentieth century throughout the Muslim world. However, Said Nursi Badiuzzaman² was distinct in approach from the others. Rather than giving emphasis on the political, economic or legal reforms, he emphasized more on revitalization of faith and morality in his idea of Islamic revivalism. He identified the greatest problem of the Muslims was the intellectual crisis of minds which was stemmed from the shortcomings in education.

Nursi was critical to the dual system of education prevalent in Turkey during his time. There was a division between two educational institutions; *maktab* or modern schools, and *madrasah* or traditional religious schools. The former institution focused on teaching of modern sciences with Western oriented model while the latter institution focused on teaching of religious sciences based on the classical traditional method. During that time, there was no educational system which offered a combination of both modern and religious sciences together. The modern and religious schools implemented their own separate curriculum. In addition, both institutions were critical to each other and had misunderstandings on many issues. The people of *madrasah* or religious schools accuse the people of modern schools to be weak in faith and poor in religious understanding, whereas the people of modern schools regarded the people of religious schools as ignorant of modern disciplines and backward in actions. Both groups had different views and approaches. The separate educational institutions represented by both groups, according to

²Said Nursi Badiuzzaman was born in 1877 in Nursi, a small village in the province of Bitlis, Eastern Turkey. He was considered to be a bright child with an excellent memory, having memorized the manuals of the classical Islamic fields of knowledge in a short period of time. He received a comprehensive education comprising of both traditional religious and scientific education. He completed his basic education in a traditional madrasah at the early age of fourteen and then studied physical sciences, mathematics, and philosophy. Refer to Nursi, Said, Encyclopedia of World Biography, 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-2506300125.html>. See also in <http://www.bediuzzamansaidnursi.org/en/icerik/nursi's-ideaa-science-development-muslim-countries>.

Nursi, was not able to address the needs of the society and it also built a gap between two groups of community; religiously oriented scholars and secular oriented ones. Traditionally oriented scholars were unable to demonstrate the relevance of Islamic traditions to the current problems³. Meanwhile, secular oriented scholars had separated the religious and moral values in their practical aspects of life. Nursi was not satisfied with the attitude of people represented by both educational institutions, and he claimed that those types of mentality could not provide solutions to the contemporary challenges of the time. The important agenda for him, therefore, was to bridge a gap between both modern and religious group of scholars. At this point, Nursi developed his idea on educational reform.

The Integration of Knowledge

During the glory period of Islamic civilization, the integration of knowledge had been inherent and applied by classical Muslim scholars where they were equally exposed to both Islamic and modern knowledge. When the West colonized many Muslim countries, the educational system in the Muslim world experienced a major shift. The West separated the religious educational system and the modern education into separate institutions. Their main objective was to instill the Muslims mind with the secular view of knowledge devoid of any spiritual connection. Turkey was among the earliest country affected and Nursi had a major concern on the problem of dual system of education in Turkey during his time and he took initiative to initiate for an integrated educational system.

Nursi was inspired with the idea of integration of knowledge based on his own experience in studying and teaching religious as well as modern sciences. After he completed his studies in *madrakah* or religious schools, Nursi continued to pursue studies in *maktabah* or modern schools in order to improve himself and to seek answers to many questions in mind. He was well

³ Sukran Vahide, *The Author of Risalat al nur: Badiuzzaman Said Nursi* (Istanbul: Sozler Publications), p.49

equipped with both sciences since he received a comprehensive education comprising of both traditional religious knowledge and modern knowledge. This idea of integration of knowledge had been manifested by Nursi himself through his experience of teaching religious and scientific subjects to his students. He taught his students various branches of knowledge, such as, engineering, algebra, physics, chemistry, history and geography along with religious sciences. For Nursi, it was a necessary for a paradigm shift in educational system. Students of modern schools should be taught the religious sciences. Similarly students of religious schools should be exposed with the modern sciences. Both should be taught side by side, and in this way students could have the opportunity to understand both sciences accordingly. Nursi believed that those who acquired modern form of education could be protected from the influence of secularism posed by the West, while those who acquired the traditional religious form of education could be saved from fanaticism and bigotry⁴. For him, religious sciences are the light of conscience and the modern sciences are the light of the mind. He said,

“The religious sciences are the light of the conscience, and the modern sciences are the light of the reason. The truth is manifested through the combining of them. The students’ endeavor will improve with these two wings. When they are separated it gives rise to bigotry in the first one, and wiles and skepticism in the other.”⁵

The integrated type of knowledge would be significant to produce a balanced personality of Muslims, to get rid of the crisis of Muslims’ mind, to fight against the ideological challenges posed by the West, and to initiate the progress and development of the Ummah in science and technology. Nursi highlighted the main reason for the downfall of civilization was due to the neglect of science and technology as well as negligence of religious values. For him, science is the important element for a progress and development of the society. Due to both internal and

⁴ Refer to Marazi, H. , Empowering Education with Values and Integration of Religion and Science: Madrasah Al Zahra Model in ICIC 2015. Retrieved from

https://www.unisza.edu.my/icic/images/fullpaper/07_Hamidullah_Marazi.pdf

⁵ Refer to <http://www.sozler.org/biography/contents/c2.htm>. Also www.bediuzzamansaidnursi.org

external factors, the Muslim world had suffered a decline in the field of science, and the glory of sciences had been shifted to the West. At the same time, Nursi believed that Muslims themselves also contributed to the problem of their decadence. Muslims lost their identity by alienating themselves from Islamic values, and this led to immorality of the society. Therefore, the only way for Muslims to regain the glory of Islamic civilization is through a synthesis of religious sciences and modern sciences in educational system. Both aspects are complementary to each other.

During his time, Nursi was critical to the traditional religious scholars who failed to provide solutions to the current issues in modern time. The inability of Muslims scholars was due to their negative attitude to the study of modern sciences and claimed them as *bid'ah*. In this regard, Nursi emphasized that Muslim scholars must not be rigid but must be able to comprehend all aspects of knowledge in a comprehensive manner since Islam is not only related to matters of faith only but also other aspects. He observed that traditional religious knowledge alone was insufficient as the modern world placed high value on science. For him, science would be important criteria for the intellectual and scientific activities in the modern era including in the area of religion⁶. That was the reason why Nursi always strive to integrate religion and science in his teachings and writings. Science and religion, according to him are compatible because science helps the believer to have deeper understanding of the Qur'an. The authenticity of the Qur'an could be proven through science. The aim of science, therefore, is to attain the spiritual perfection. In most of his writings, he put efforts to dispel the misunderstanding about the position of science reinstating the right position of science in Islam. He demonstrated through his *Risalat al nur* that there is no conflict between science and religion and urged man to observe the

⁶Marazi, H. , Empowering Education with Values and Integration of Religion and Science: Madrasah Al Zahra Model in ICIC 2015. Retrieved from https://www.unisza.edu.my/icic/images/fullpaper/07_Hamidullah_Marazi.pdf

physical universe. In his view, science is the realm of observable phenomena and it is a religious duty to investigate it. For him, the whole universe is an open book which is to be pondered, understood and interpreted. It reveals the signs of its Creator. In this sense, the fundamental religious beliefs could be proven scientifically and rationally. Therefore, religion and science could not be viewed in a dichotomous way.

Nursi has inspired a culture of education which was based on rational scientific thinking. He developed a modern intellectual outlook which was yet to be explored by any scholar in Turkey before him. He wanted Muslims to unite religion with science which could give certainty in belief and served religion. This method was distinct from the classical form of Islamic learning. Education, for him, must serve the religious and scientific functions.

In his approach, Nursi did not only advocate for integration of knowledge but also at the same time he emphasized on the need for amending, reinterpreting and adapting the components of modern sciences on the basis of Islamic worldview and its characteristics⁷. Although he did not use the term islamization or construct a systematic framework on islamization of knowledge at that time, it somehow had become his major concern. He highlighted his concern due to his observation that the West had exploited modern sciences into the secular worldview devoid of God's consciousness and irrelevant with religion. He was critical to the Western type of education which applied science against religion.

The Reconciliation of the Main Streams of Education

Besides the conflict between the modern and traditional educational institutions, the conflict has also been developed in *sufi* educational institution or *takkiyyah* which offered the studies of spirituality. Nursi said,

⁷Badiuzzaman, Sukran Vahide (trans), *Munazarat* (Istanbul: Sozler Nesriyat San,2004) 43.

“Those in the *madrasahs* accuse those in the *maktabs* of weakness in belief because of their literalist interpretation of certain matters, whereas those in the *maktab* consider the former to be ignorant and unreliable because they have no knowledge of modern science. While those in the *madrasah* look at those in the *takkiyyh* as following innovations....”⁸.

Therefore, Nursi’s main concern was to combine three main branches of educational system, namely, the traditional religious schools, modern secular schools, and the *sufi* schools into one stream of education⁹ in order to produce holistic minds of graduates. He believed that the *maktab* or modern schools which provided modern sciences could represent the importance of reason, the *madrasah* or religious schools which offered religious sciences could represent the importance of heart, and the *takkiyyah* or *sufi* schools which provided the spirituality studies could represent the importance of conscience. Each one completes the deficiencies of the other. In this regard, Nursi wanted to create multi-dimensional aspects of education; material, spiritual and moral aspects which could cater the needs of man in the affairs of this world and the world after. Nursi acknowledged three groups of scholars represented by *madrasah*, *maktabah* and *takkiyyah* institutions and their contributions in different ways. However, he stressed that there should be no barrier between them. For him, education must consist of the values of all the three streams in a holistic manner.

In his opinion, the three streams of education must not be separated and conflict each other rather they must be placed under one central educational system. When there was no disintegration and conflict, students of each stream would be able to benefit the modern, religious, and spiritual knowledge as well as tradition of sufism in a balance manner. The initiative of Nursi’s educational model should be appreciated. It is comprehensive and it blends the streams of education in a holistic manner which caters the needs of religion, science, and morality.

⁸ Ibid, 45.

⁹ Bediuzzaman, Sukran Vahide (trans), *Munazarat* (Istanbul: Sozler Nesriyat San, 2004), 71

The Basis of Education

The basis of educational model proposed by Nursi was based on *tawhid*- the need for faith of God. He prioritized faith in God in the pursuit of knowledge and argued that knowledge must be based on belief in God. It means man must first attain the knowledge of God before acquiring other fields of knowledge. The most valuable knowledge, according to Nursi, is the one which is produced from belief in God as it is the basis of man's existence and realities. When knowledge is associated with God's consciousness, it would never drive people away from the truth. For instance, the use of science and technology must be utilized in accordance with God's commandments. In this sense it can be justifiably claimed that Nursi's view on education is very much related to the refinement of spirituality and morality of man. For him, the religious consciousness of individual can be attained through education.

At this point Nursi demonstrated his distinct approach on education where he gave emphasis on the relationship between knowledge and faith. Education must be properly founded by faith, that is, the strong belief in God and the proper religious practices. Education which was devoid of religious consciousness was meaningless. Therefore, it is essential that faith and knowledge complement each other. The reconciliation of these two elements of education has made it different from the Western secular model of education which clearly presents its materialistic viewpoint which is cut off from Divine, Transcendent or Supernatural principles and does not refer to and is isolated from revelation¹⁰. In this sense, the higher level of reality, transcendent and immutable principles are eliminated and man himself became the center point of being where there is nothing higher than human reason. Truth is only possible to be perceived empirically through human senses. Nursi's emphasis on the faith in God as the main characteristic of education has made it distinct from the Western secular education which lost of

¹⁰ Sayyed Hossein Nasr, *Traditional Islam in Modern World* (London: Kegan Pau International, 1994), 98.

the sense of sacred. The reduction of intellect to reason has made sacred knowledge inaccessible and to some even meaningless¹¹.

Nursi emphasized that a scientific approach to all knowledge must always be established and developed with recourse to the Divine principles enshrined in the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*, and must always remained connected to the original sources of Islam. Although he claimed that it was necessary to justify knowledge on the basis of scientific explanation, Nursi did not assert its supremacy rather it was only to affirm the status of science as a true source of knowledge. For him, the approach Muslim scholars should not be reduced to one dimensional method, namely Islamic traditional or classical tradition but they must respond the issues intellectually which involved scientific arguments.

The Methodology of Teaching

The medium of instruction must be based on tri-lingual; Arabic, Kurdish and Turkish¹². He proposed Arabic language as a compulsory subject since it is a language of the Qur'an and students should be able to know Arabic for understanding the teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet (p.b.u.h). Meanwhile, Turkish and Kurdish languages were recommended since Turkey is a multi- racial society and students might come from the different ethnic community. For Nursi, students should be taught in the language that they understand using the simple sentences, examples and illustrations. The most important thing for Nursi is to create interest in the subject and to arouse the students' curiosity. Nursi criticized the old traditional method of teaching which was based on memorization and did not allow students to develop a constructive thinking. He implied teaching in the form of question and answer as well as encouraging a debate culture. This method would develop critical and inquisitive thinking in the

¹¹ Ibid, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 4

¹² Bediuzzaman, Sukran Vahide (trans), *Munazarat* (Istanbul: Sozler Nesriyat San, 2004), 71

minds of students. The inquisitive method of learning initiated by Nursi could be a solution to the problem of stagnation of religious thought and the closing of the door of *ijtihad* among Muslims at that time. In this sense, Nursi did not only focus on theoretical aspects of knowledge rather extended it to the application aspects as well. In addition, the relationship between teachers and students was an important element in education. According to Nursi, by having a good relationship between teacher and students, the process of teaching and learning became more effective. He initiated this idea based on his own experience with his students. Nursi treated his students more as friends than as students where he always had a dialogue with them and used to have intellectual circles together.

Practical Manifestation of Educational reform

Nursi's visit to a number of places made him realized that the establishment of university with the proper educational system was essential. It might avoid ignorance and backwardness of the Muslim society as well as solving the social and political problems faced by them. Therefore, Nursi put a practical effort to establish the university called *Madrasah az Zahra* as a manifestation of his educational reform. He already determined the organizational matters of *Madrasah az Zahra* including its objectives, vision and mission, syllabus and financial fund. However, due to the social and political disruptions resulting World War 1, it could not be materialized. This *madrasah* was said to be inspired by the educational system of *al-Azhar* University. Nursi stated few main objectives of the establishment of *Madrasah az Zahra*; the first objective was to advocate the idea of reconciliation between science and religion. The second objective was to promote the combination of different streams in education, namely *maktab* or modern schools which taught the modern sciences, *madrasah* or religious schools which taught the religious sciences, and *takkiyah* or *sufi* schools which taught the mystical sciences.

Meanwhile, the third objective was to promote unity and solidarity among Muslims where this university was expected to attract students from the entire Islamic world¹³. Another important agenda of the establishment of the university was to produce a new intellectual leadership who could run the administrative affairs in Turkey in accordance to the teachings of Islam not losing their religious identity.

Conclusion

The educational reform proposed by Nursi was not only suitable for the Turkish community but also viable for Muslims in its global perspective. Nursi's interpretation of education and his synthesis of religious traditions with the spirit of modern sciences were considered as a practicable alternative. He is very distinct from some secular Muslims who envisioned a secular model of education. Although he gave very much emphasis on the need for modern sciences, he put the basic religious elements on top of them where he argued that 'Islam is the master and guide of all sciences, and the chief and father of all true knowledge'¹⁴. At the same time Nursi was distinct from the traditional scholars who were conservative in outlook and rejected modern sciences all together as *bid'ah*. . Therefore, he was neither absolute modernist nor absolute traditionalist but mediating position between the two as he could bring bridge the gulf between modern and traditional learning in Turkey at that time.

Nursi's background of education equipped himself as a learned scholar who was qualified for the project of educational reform in Turkey during his time. He had a deep knowledge of modern science, and at the same time possessed a wide knowledge of Islamic religious traditions, such as, jurisprudence, *hadith*, *tafsir*, and *sirah*. Through his life, he defended Islam in terms of both

¹³ See Wan Jaffree Wan Sulaiman, *Mujadid Islam Sheikh Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Ulus Ankara: Ihlal Nur Nesriyat, n.d), 8

¹⁴ Sukran Vahide, *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, (n.p: Islamic Book Trust, 2011), 53. Refer also <http://www.sozler.org/biography/contents/c2.htm>

Islamic and modern knowledge. Having both of the intellectual realms, the religious tradition of Islam and the modern knowledge, Nursi was able to differentiate the positive and negative elements in each. He was critical to the rigidity of thought in Islamic education, and at the same time he was aware of the loss of sacredness in modern education, thus, brought it to be aligned with the Islamic worldview. His critical approach towards both system of education led him to propose for educational reform in Turkey. In his opinion, the syllabus thought in *madrasah* system was narrow in scope, and it did not consider the modern development which required the application of science in the pursuit of knowledge. Therefore, it should modified, restructured, and readjusted in accordance with the demands, necessity, and requirements of the modern age. The proposed educational model meets the demands of modern times and at the same time did not ignore the spiritual and moral values of education. The latter aspect is very significant weapon for Muslims to face onslaught challenges of ideologies posed by the West. Advocating Muslims to learn and adapt the modern sciences does not mean that they would detach from their own traditions. For example, the Korean and Japanese communities were able to produce scientific and technological advancements within their own cultural traditions. The main concern of Nursi was to bring back the lost glory of Islamic civilization during the Abbasid and Umayyad period which witnessed unprecedented development in the field of science. Nursi emphasized that Muslims should not be continuously defeated and became consumers of Western science and technology. On the other hand, they should gain dominance over them in all field of knowledge.

Although the establishment of the proposed university was a failure, Nursi left a great legacy of his work *risalat al nur* which explained the religious truths and beliefs in the light of scientific and logical interpretations. He also incorporated the modern scientific knowledge in his

interpretation of the Quranic verses in *risalat al nur*. This work was regarded as a symbol of his educational reform and brought a significant impact on the Muslims throughout the world. In this regard, Nursi did not only postulate ideas that provide the theoretical basis for integration of knowledge but also produced works that represent the integration of knowledge in practice.

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