

Contemporary Islamic Political Thought

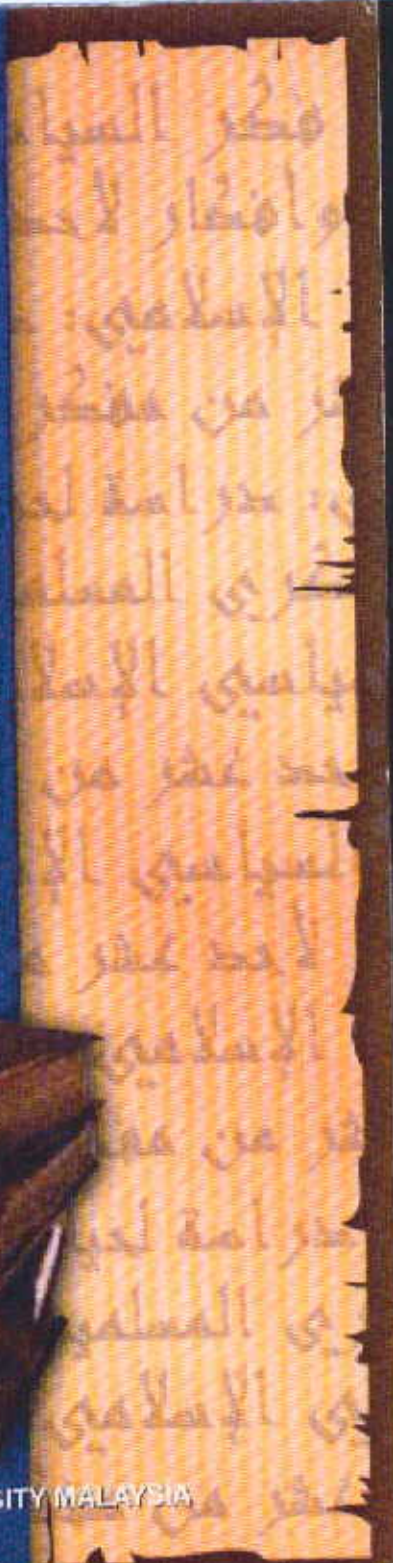
A Study of Eleven Islamic Thinkers

Edited by

Zeenath Kausar



INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA



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For My father,
Late Maulana Maqbool Ahmad Jamaie (Rahmatullah 'Alaih)
whose thought and political activism inspired
my life and thought!



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Zeenath Kausar
Kuala Lumpur
2005

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Chapter Two

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: An Overview of His Life and Position Towards Globalization

Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim

Introduction

While certainly not an expert or authority on the expanding studies of *Rasā'il al-Nūr*; the *magnus opus* of the twentieth century *Mujaddid* Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, the writer of this bird's eye view claims to be an enthusiastic learner and student in this field. Hence, this piece is a preliminary attempt to trace Nursi's scholarly life, and some main aspects of his thought, particularly what may be considered as an "ethical model" that the *Rasā'il* suggests to the aggressively on-going process, perhaps an ideology too, of globalization.

Part I: Nursi's Life and Career: An Overview

The life and contribution of this monumental *Mujaddid* is usually studied under three main periods each of which represents a watershed in his career: the Old Said 1876/77-1918, the New Said 1920-1950 and the Third Said 1950-1960.¹

The Old Said 1976/77-1918

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, a descendant of a family of *Sayyids* and the fourth of his parents' seven children, was born around the year 1876/77 in the province of Bitlis in Eastern Anatolia. His early extreme self-discipline, high self-esteem, independent-mindedness and dissatisfaction with the traditional Islamic education impelled him to move from one

meдресe to another. By 1891 he, however, joined the *meдресe* of Shaykh Muhammad Jalālā where he won his *ijāzah* (diploma) in record time, three months, and at an early age of fourteen or fifteen years. This entitled him to be an *ālim* (scholar) in his own right, and enabled him to frequently engage in heated religious dialogues with some of the prominent *ʿulamāʾ* of his time. His personal and intellectual courage, as well as his vast knowledge in Islamic disciplines and in the Arabic language, had soon won him some distinguished titles like the “*Yalī*” (Saint), “*Meshur*” (Famous) and “*Bediuzzaman*” (Wonder of the Age).²

Bediuzzaman had exhibited considerable activism during this period. He traveled extensively to and from his home region Eastern Anatolia into other Ottoman domains: Damascus in 1910, Istanbul in 1911 and 1918, and Rumelia in 1911.³ In Damascus he gave a famous *Khutbah* (sermon) at *al-Masjid al-Umawi* (the Umayyad mosque) that was later published under the title *al-Khutbah al-Shāmiyyah* (the Damascus sermon). This and other works addressed various ailments that afflicted the Muslim world at the time, e.g., “Prescriptions for the Common People,” “Prescriptions for the *ʿUlamāʾ*,” “Diagnosis of the Complaint,” “The Cure for Despair,” and “*Munāzarāh*” (Dialogue) that consisted of answers to questions addressed to him during his journeys in Anatolia. His convincing answers to these and other questions had confirmed his claim: “Here all questions are answered, all problems are resolved and no questions are asked.”⁴

Bediuzzaman advocated far reaching reforms in the Islamic educational system, which opposed what he called “scholastic despotism.” He called for the democratization of the *meдресe* system, and for its restructure in a way that would allow for the teaching of modern science, which he appeared to have studied by personal effort, side by side with religious education. Nursi established his own *madrasah* (school) in Van, Anatolia, called “Horror Madrasah,” where he practiced his educational ideas, methods and reforms. It was then and there that he had the idea of founding an Islamic university in Anatolia, which he named after *al-Azhar* in Cairo, *Meдресetuʾl-Zehraʾ*, as it was hoped to be its sister university in the eastern Islamic world. The foundation of this institution, which he described in his biography as “the most important matter,” was actually laid in mid-1913 at Edremit on the shores of Lake Van, but its construction was indefinitely shelved on the outbreak of the First World War.⁵

Said Nursi seemed to have been influenced by two great *Sufi* leaders, *Ghawth al-Zaman* (The Man of the Hour) ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilāni and *Mijādīd al-Af al-Thānā* (The Regenerator of the Second Millennium) Ahmad Sirhindī, and he read some major *Sufi* works, particularly al-Gaylānī’s *Futūḥ al-Ghayb* (Keys to the Unseen) and Sirhindī’s *Makūbāt* (Epistles or Letters). Nonetheless, he never followed any of them exclusively, nor did he join a particular *Jarīqah*. The reason, or rather the pretext, that he gave for this non-committal was his preoccupation with his studies, but the real motive was seemingly his conviction of the unsuitability, and irrelevance, of *Sufism* to the modern world.

The “Old Said” had been, in one way or another, increasingly involved in politics, particularly since the 1908 constitutional revolution that was masterminded by the Committee of Union and Progress (C.U.P.), which he initially supported.⁶ In his writings and lectures to his expanding number of students, Bediuzzaman expressed strong opposition to despotism and full support to freedom and constitutionalism. Like many thinkers of the day, Nursi maintained that the latter, with its basic concepts of the rule of law and equality before it, sovereignty of the nation and consultation, was entirely in conformity with the *Shariʿah*. Constitutionalism, he added, was not just a privilege that the Muslim may enjoy, but a religious obligation that they had to work for in order to uphold “the might of Islam” and exalt “the word of God.” Constitutionalism was, in his view, the vehicle to achieve material progress which, in turn, would be the surest means to uphold the supremacy of Islam.

As in a number of previous incidents, Bediuzzaman played a pacifying rôle in the revolt of April 1909. In a famous defence before a military court, he described his effort to persuade eight battalions of soldiers to give up mutiny and return to their barracks.

Like Ibn Taymiyyah before him, Bediuzzaman was then a fierce warrior who took active part in the *jihād* in support of the Caliphate and Islamic unity. During the Great War, he commanded a four to five thousand militia force, that included many of his own students, against the Russian and Armenian threats to the Ottoman Caliphate.

Nonetheless, the jealousy and intrigues of his religious and political adversaries inflicted upon Bediuzzaman, and his students, considerable difficulties and hardship that they faced with admirable courage and patience. He was frequently deported and detained, and several of his students martyred during the War, including his trusted and beloved student and scribe, Molla Habib, who wrote the celebrated

his sweeping de-Islamization, Nursi realised that it would be unwise and disastrous to overtly oppose Kemalism. Alternatively, he opted for a constructive and positive struggle that he called the "jihad of the word." He wrote, "the sword is to be drawn against external enemies, it may not be used internally. Our only salvation at this time is to offer illumination and guidance through the truth of the Qur'an and belief; it is to get rid of our greatest enemy, ignorance."⁷⁹

Since his adolescence, particularly after he came across an utterance by the British premier Gladstone to the effect that Europe could not subdue the Muslims as long as they have the Qur'an in their hands, Bediuzzaman had fixed his mission in the defence of the Qur'an through expounding its miraculous nature. Earlier events had distracted him from this task, but the persistent general laxity towards religion and its rituals, as well as Nursi's failure to persuade the new rulers to ground their government on the Qur'an and to make Turkey the centre of the Islamic world, had finally impelled him to energetically resume this "Qur'anic way." The outcome of this intellectual drive was a series of well-thought treatises and sermons that dealt with a variety of subjects, notably the fundamental truths of belief, divine unity and resurrection of the dead. These came in many collections, such as the "Words," "Letters" and "Flashes", that were subsequently, included in his famous *Rasā'il al-Nūr* (The Epistles of Light). While still in Ankara, Bediuzzaman wrote in January 1923 a short treatise in Arabic on which he, subsequently, based his Twenty Third Flash "Treatise of Nature". His first major treatise about the resurrection of the dead and the hereafter was written in 1926. Others quickly followed, though dictated under difficult conditions in the countryside. While in Barta for eight and half years, Nursi completed the first two collections of the *Rasā'il*, "The Words" and "The Letters," and wrote a greater part of "The Flashes," a total of 119 pieces. Amongst them were pieces that described the main truths of belief, and articulated the principles of Divine existence and unity. Others talked about the miracles of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), the angels, the immortality of man's spirit, and the resurrection of the dead. Three other Flashes, the Nineteenth, Twentieth and Twenty-Six, consecutively called "On Frugality," "Message for the Sick" and "Treatise for the Elderly," were written in 1926. While in prison, which, incidentally, he called "The School of Yûsuf" (Joseph), Nursi wrote six other major treatises, the Twenty-Seventh to the Thirtieth Flashes, that included his defence speeches which spoke clearly and

Qur'anic commentary *Ishārāt al-Jāz* (Signs of the Miraculous), which Bediuzzaman dictated while on horseback "raising the morale of his men under the heavy Russian shelling."⁸⁰ Nursi was himself imprisoned by the enemy in a town on the Volga for two and half years till he managed to escape in the spring of 1918, via Petersburg, Warsaw and Vienna, to Istanbul.

Bediuzzaman received a heroic welcome in Istanbul, and the Ottoman authorities rewarded his courageous services by appointing him a member of *Dār al-Hikmah* (House of Wisdom), a newly established learning institution that was attached to *Şeykh al-Islam's* office to remind the peoples of Turkey of their religious obligations, and to respond to the new challenges facing the Muslim World. His membership continued for four years during which he diligently pursued his duties by publishing nineteen works. By 1922, Nursi had, however, left Ankara in dismay, severely shaken by his long solitary confinement, and by the horrors and devastation of the war. But he did not allow this disillusion to develop into despair; his inner turmoil was soon resolved with the emergence of a second constructive phase of his life, the "New Said."

New Said 1920-1950

Under the leadership of Mustafa Kamāl Atatürk, the People Republican Party (PRP) pursued during the period 1920-1950 ultra secular policies that aimed at discarding all institutions of the past, and to curtail Turkey's connection with the Islamic world. Alternatively, the leaders of the new republic strove to strengthen contact with the West, and to reconstruct life on western patterns. In their drive to root out the Islamic past, they masterminded a cultural revolution by which they closed down the *Suflî tekkes*, and founded a "modern" educational system based on "universal - humanist - secular - positivist principles."⁸¹ The call of the *Azân* in Arabic was prohibited, the Caliphate abolished in 1924, the Latin alphabet introduced, and, by 1928, the Ottoman / Arabic script banned. In 1938, these secular principles of Kemalism were incorporated in the constitution, and any kinds of opposition to them was suppressed, often mercilessly, as was the case with the 1925 uprising in Eastern Anatolia against the Ankara government.

To neutralize Bediuzzaman and his rising influence, the Kemalists offered him several posts. Though he declined the offers in protest against

logically of the absurdity of the charges against him. He admitted his occupation with the "sciences of belief" which, he insisted, constituted no crime. The *Rasā'il*, he forcefully argued, was a scholarly work to save believers from the atheism of European philosophers and their ilk in Turkey. During the years 1936-1940, Nursi wrote the Third to the Ninth Rays of which the Seventh, called the "Supreme Sign," was of particular importance as it emphasized the harmony between physical sciences and religion. Other treatises were entitled "The Fruits of Belief," "The Shining Proof," "The Eleventh Topic" (on the angels), "The Staff of Moses," "The Illuminating Lamp," "The Ratifying Stamp of the Unseen" and "A Guide for Youth."¹⁰

Notwithstanding Nursi's claim of being apolitical, the government soon realised that his rational and logical approach to religion would undermine its position, hence was the systematic campaign of harassment, solitary detention and imprisonment of Nursi and his students several times and for varied durations. Bediuzzaman was subjected to four trials, in 1934, 1944, 1948 and 1952, on vague charges such as opposing "the principles of secularism and republicanism," forming a countrywide network of "reactionaries," and even wearing the Islamic dress. Though acquitted by the court in each and every of these trials, the authorities held him under close surveillance, and he was often maltreated by junior officials. Nonetheless, his dedicated students, nicknamed "*Nūr* postment" disseminated the *Rasā'il* to a large sector of the public who viewed them as a source of hope and inspiration, even a saviour, in these dark days.

The Third Said 1950-1960

The devastating defeat of the PRP in the 1950 elections, and the consequential accession to power of the Democratic Party, under 'Adnān Mandarīs, was instrumental to, and coincidental with, the emergence of the "Third Said" who had by then returned to Istanbul after twenty-seven years of exile. Bediuzzaman was not a fan of the Democrats, so to speak, but he was realistic enough to realise that they were "the lesser of two evils," and the only vehicle to prevent the return of the ultra-secularist PRP to power. By offering Mandarīs his cautious support, in the nature of advice and guidance, Bediuzzaman hoped to encourage the new government to combat the atheistic drive and repair the moral and spiritual damage caused by its predecessor. Nursi expected the Democrats

to take measures to strengthen Islam as a faith and way of life, which they actually did, though partly, for example, they declared a general amnesty and lifted the ban on the Arabic call to prayer. Being anxious to mend and strengthen relations with the Muslim world, Bediuzzaman sent letters to President Celal Bayer and Premier Mendarīs commending their decision in 1955 to join the Baghdad Pact, which Nursi considered an important means towards peace and reconciliation between the peoples of Islam.¹¹

This considerable relaxation and greater freedom had, more importantly, led to a sizable growth and consolidation of the *Nūr* movement during this decade (1950-1960). The number of Nursi's students and sympathisers greatly increased, and *Nūr* study centres were opened all over the country. The *Rasā'il* were finally and formally cleared by order of the court in 1956. Their limited circulation and primitive reproduction, through duplicating machines and by hand, had by then been replaced by printing on modern press in the Latin Alphabet. The ailing and aging reformer, who spent most of his life in the wilderness, was overwhelmed with joy by this great victory, which he called *Rasā'il al-Nūr's* festival.¹² He happily concluded his life by a series of visits to his students in different parts of Turkey, and finally died peacefully in his sleep on 23 March 1960.

Part II: An "Ethical Model" for Globalization in the *Light of Rasā'il al-Nūr*

As argued above, *Rasā'il al-Nūr*, had been essentially "designed to lead Muslims from belief by imitation to belief through investigation,"¹³ and to emphasise that there is no contradiction between scientific knowledge and revealed knowledge. In essence, the Epistles are a Qur'anic commentary against irreligion. The thoughtfully written Letters, Rays and Flashes of this volume address – directly and indirectly – some important issues that have been facing the *Ummah*, and humanity at large, in the modern age.

Globalization is indeed the buzzword of our time, yet its meaning remains elusive. One tends to agree with Prof. Ibrahim Abu Rabi' that it is almost impossible to give a simple definition to this complex process,¹⁴ or a specific time framework for its operation. Nonetheless, there may be no harm in trying to give a broad, perhaps vague, definition of the phenomenon as "all those processes-technological economic and financial, as well as political social and cultural – in consequence of which spacetime earth and all its institutions have recently been transformed, with hitherto

unprecedented speed, into what is in effect a single relatively distanceless and borderless planetary village."¹⁵ The word "globalization" itself may be new, but, as Professor Ali Mazrui persuasively argues, "the actual processes towards interdependence" started centuries ago,¹⁶ perhaps since the age of European discoveries in the fifteenth century. Thus, while accepting this historical root, the concept of globalization, as defined above, seems to have become distinctively visible and crucial for the entire human race since the 1960s at most.

The advocates of globalization, an apparently unstoppable and inevitable process, argue that it has considerable positive impact on the "tele village,"¹⁷ particularly with regard to economic prosperity, transparency, and democracy. In principle it calls for the establishment of good governance that caters for effective participation, accountability, transparency and respect for human rights. Just a while ago only a dozen countries had democratic systems, but now more than half the world lives in countries in which elections are held in one way or another. In 1972, when Freedom House started its practice of ranking countries on a scale of free and unfree, it placed fifty-four of the world's then 149 countries as unfree. Today (2005) only twenty-five of the world's 192 countries fall in this category.¹⁸ It has recently been persistently argued that wars, which were conventionally exclusively fought to protect sheer interest, should, in the globalization era, be also waged to defend values, hence the term "humanitarian wars"¹⁹ has been coined.

Globalization has also developed a "global sense," viz what happens in one part of the world affects other parts. It has shortened geographic distances, eased human travel through faster means of communication, and helped to traverse physical differences through the electron – telephone, fax and the internet. The vast and free dissemination of information and ideas has been instrumental in the moderation rather than imposition of ideologies, which in itself encouraged people to think for themselves rather than be subject to what one historian called "mind slaughter."²⁰

Until recently it was assumed that the present version of globalization provides definite answers to all social, economic and political problems of the world. But it has soon been realised that globalization largely works for the enrichment of developed countries and the enhancement of their domination and hegemonization of the developing countries, including Muslim countries. The opening up of the economies of the weaker countries under the guise of trade liberalisation has caused economic turmoil, massive unemployment, and stubborn social problems in these countries. While

twenty per cent of the world population in the developed countries receive 82.7% of the total world income, two of the six billion world population, who largely reside in the so-called Third World, live under poverty line subsidising on less than a dollar a day. During the globalization era the indebtedness of the developing countries to the developed skyrocketed, and their per capita income sharply declined, particularly so in Sub-Saharan Africa.

These far-reaching economic inequities have triggered a worldwide public backlash against the prevalent concept and process of globalization. Since the famous violent Seattle protest, riots and demonstrations flared from time to time, particularly during the meetings of the major vehicles of globalization: the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). The anti-globalization protest movements that flare in many parts of the world during the celebrations of the first of May, Labour Day and on many other occasions, such as those during the annual meetings of the World Economic Forum, are examples of the growing concern of large sectors about the negativity of globalization.

Globalization does not only strive towards maximum profit and the accumulation of wealth, but its onslaught extends to values. Morality has, in fact, been increasingly destroyed in the present day excessively materialist world. Marriage and families are largely no longer "sacred" and respected institutions. They are often neither formalized nor considered necessary. A family is sometimes defined as two people, not necessarily "male" and "female", or more, living together, without any recognized marriage ceremony or registration. Since the partners are not legally or morally bound to continue in the "wedlock," either of them could simply walk away at any time; hence, the prevalence of the repugnant and hazardous institution of "single parent." Homosexuality is accepted, even encouraged, and incestuous relations between siblings and parents – even grandfathers – are alarmingly increasing.²¹ This extensive economic inequity and alarming moral laxity have provoked some scholars and celebrities to call for modifications that would regulate and reshape present day globalization. In effect, this move asks for a new version of globalization that would benefit everybody, rich and poor, big and small, developed and developing, or, at least, works less in the service of the wealthy and much harder in the service of the very poor.

Though Bediuzzaman Nursi did not live long to witness and experience globalization, a close look at his Epistles helps us in the quest for a much needed ethical dimension that would guard against

the perils of globalization. The letter and spirit of many of Nursi's Rays are squarely against the two prime causes of these evils, viz excessive materialism and atheism that encourage a "get-rich-quick mentality" and a "free or neutral society." The Flashes dispense selfishness and greed, and advocate a symbiotic relationship between human beings. To Nursi, the essence of being civilized is not just to acquire material products, but rather to learn how to live in a community, and, at the same time, to realize the utmost importance of the social relations network for the organization of human life. Nursi has in his Twenty-Fourth Flash this to say on the alarmingly growing disintegration of the family in the modern era, "Family life now, which, under the guise of culture and civilisation, is a temporary animal relationship followed by eternal separation, is being destroyed at its very foundation."²²

The following extract from the Thirteenth Flash may, in this respect, be of such importance that it is not out of place if quoted in full:

It should not be misunderstood; Europe is two. One follows sciences which serve justice and right and the industries beneficial for the life of society through the inspiration it has received from true Christianity; this first Europe I am not addressing. I am rather addressing the second corrupt Europe which, through the darkness of the philosophy of Naturalism, supposing the evils of civilization to be its virtues, has driven mankind to vice and misguidance. As follows:

Oh my journey of the spirit at that time I sail to Europe's collective personality, which apart from beneficial science and the virtues of civilization, holds in his hands meaningless, harmful and noxious, dissolute civilization:

"Know this, O second Europe! You hold a diseased and misguided philosophy in your right hand and a harmful and corrupt civilisation in your left, and claim: Mankind happiness is with these two! May your two hands be broken and may these two filthy presents of yours be the death of you!... And so they shall be."²³

The dominance of the notion of materialism during the era of globalization had encouraged slogans such as the world market is the "new God," "religion is the opium of the people," "God is dead" and "render unto Caesar what's Caesar's and render unto God what's God's." Many of the advocates of globalization contend that religion is irrational, fanatic and has always been against progress. It should therefore be totally ignored, or, at best, strictly restricted to the personal domain, and never allowed to be the basis of governance.

But the teachings of Bediuzzaman strongly reject this trend of the marginalization and redundancy of religion. To Nursi, this atheist position and the prevalent tendency to "worship the market" are responsible for the widespread "animality" in the modern world. In many parts of his Epistles, he emphasized the ultra importance of religion, and the supremacy of Allah (S.W.T), the undisputed Creator of this universe. The *Rasā'il* urges the "crazy" people of this universe "to come to their senses," and believe in "the utterly just, compassionate, beneficent, powerful, order loving and kind"²⁴ (God as the only means to give them comfort and uplift them from this "savagery."

To illustrate Nursi's insistence on the centrality of spirituality in the present troubled world, it may be worthwhile to record the following long quotation from the Epistles:

What makes this boundless universe rejoice is clearly Divine Mercy. And what illuminates these dark beings is self-evidently Divine Mercy. And what fosters and raises creatures struggling within these endless needs is self-evidently again Divine Mercy. And what causes the whole universe to be turned towards man, like a tree together with all its parts is turned towards its fruit, and causes him to look to his assistance is clearly Divine Mercy. And what fills and illuminates boundless space and the empty, vacant world and makes it rejoice is self-evident Divine Mercy. And what designates ephemeral man for eternity and makes him the addressee and beloved of a Pre-Eternal and Post-Eternal One is self-evidently Divine Mercy.

Oh man! Since Divine Mercy is such a powerful, inviting, sweet, assisting lovable truth, say: *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate*, adhere to this truth and be saved from absolute desolation and the pains of unending needs. And draw close to the throne of the Pre-Eternal and Post-Eternal Monarch, and through the compassion and rays of Divine Mercy, become the addressee, friend, and beloved of that Monarch....

Oh man! Come to your senses! Is it at all possible that the All-Glorious One, Who causes all the varieties of creatures to turn towards you and stretch out their hands to assist you, and causes them to say: "Here we are" in the face of your needs, is it possible that He does not know you, is not acquainted with you, does not see you? Since He does know you, He informs you that He knows you through His Mercy. So, you know Him too, and with respect let Him know that you know Him, and understand with certainty that what subjugates the vast universe to an absolutely weak, absolutely impotent,

absolutely needy, ephemeral, insignificant creature like you, and dispatches it to assist you is the truth of Divine Mercy, which comprises wisdom, favour, knowledge, and power...

Oh man! Is it at all possible that the One Who gives you this face, and places such a Stamp of mercy and Seal of Oneness on it would leave you to your own devices, attach no importance to you, pay no attention to your actions, make the whole universe, which is turned towards you, futile and pointless, and make the tree of creation rotten and insignificant with decayed fruit? Would He cease to be denied His Mercy, which is as obvious as the sun, and His Wisdom, which is as clear as light, neither of which can in any way be doubted, nor are in any way deficient? God forbid...

He is rich without limit being in no respect needy of the universe and beings. The whole universe is under His command and direction, utterly obedient beneath His majesty and grandeur, submissive before His sublimity. That is divine Mercy for you, Oh man! It raises you in the presence of the One absolutely lacking any need, the Eternal Sovereign, and makes you His friend, addressee, and well-loved servant. But just as you cannot reach the sun, as far from it and can no way draw close to it, although the sun's light gives you its reflection and manifestation by means of your mirror, in the same way you are infinitely distant from the Most Pure and Holy One, the Sun of Pre-Eternity and Post-Eternity, and cannot draw close to Him, but the light of His Mercy makes Him closer to us.³

It has been increasingly asserted, particularly since the publication of Francis Fukuyama's controversial book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) that "modern civilization is western civilization and western civilization is modern civilization." The corollary of this contention is that the world is divided into two main incompatible parts: "the civilized West" and the "uncivilized Rest" whose core is the Muslim world. Being perceived as dogmatic, violent and prejudiced, Islam has been viewed as a formidable obstacle in the way of progress in the past and in this globalization era, and that it aspires to impose its message at the edge of the sword, and is thus bound to clash with the west sooner or later. This hypothesis of an "inevitable" civilizational clash between Islam and the west had been the theme of Samuel P. Huntington's article "The Clash of Civilizations"³² on which he based his controversial book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1995).

A close look at the Epistles would, however, categorically negate this gloomy picture about Islam. They convincingly present it in its true nature,

a tolerant and peaceful religion that has been sent as mercy to the entire humankind and at all times. It does not claim exclusivity, nor does it aspire to impose itself by force on others. After all the Qur'an says in translation "To you be your religion, and to me mine."³³ The Epistles show that Muslims had during their golden age interacted and benefited from other civilizations, and they urge them to continue doing this in the modern age. Nursi had, in fact, earnestly called all "the people of religion" to unite against the mighty collective force of the people of misguidance and falsehood" in order "to preserve justice and right in the face of that fearsome collective force of misguidance."³⁴ In the Twentieth Flash, Nursi alarmingly posed the following "painful," "disgraceful" and "Awesome Question" that reflected his call for understanding and harmony within Islam itself, i.e., between different *madhāhib* and Islamic sects, and with all other believers:

Why is it that the worldly and neglectful and even misguided hypocrites cooperate without rivalry, the people of religion, the religious scholars and those who follow the *Sufi* path oppose each other in rivalry although they are the people of truth and concord? Agreement belongs in reality to the people of concord and dispute to the hypocrite.³⁵

He continues to say:

On account of difference in outlook, they (the people of religion) feel no real need for the aid of the one whose outlook apparently opposes their own, and see no need for agreement and unity. Indeed if obstinacy and egoism are present one will imagine himself to be right and the other to be wrong, discord and rivalry take the place of concord and love. Thus sincerity is chased away and its function disrupted...

One must realize how painful to Islam dispute is, and how it helps the people of misguidance to triumph over the people of truth, and then, wholeheartedly and sacrificingly, join the caravan of the people of truth, with a sense of his own utter weakness and impotence. Finally one must forget his own person, abandon hypocrisy and pretensions, and lay hold of sincerity.

With such strong belief against the common enemy of "aggressive atheism," Nursi appealed to the Muslims to unite "not only with their own fellow believers, but also with the truly pious Christians." For such an effort to succeed, Muslims and Christians will have to refrain from dispute, and Nursi had, in fact, boldly declared that "the time for enmity and hostility" between these "two families of believers" is finished.³⁶ According to the Christian scholar S. J. Thomas Michael, Said Nursi was "one of the first religious thinkers" in the course of the

twentieth century "to propose and promote dialogue between Muslims and Christians," his "advocacy of this dialogue dates back to 1911."³⁰ Guided by the Qur'ān, Nursi recorded the following beautiful words on the "art of debate" in Islam that emphasises what is known in Islamic jurisprudence as "*Adab al-Iditilāf*" (the civility of dissention): "Whoever desires, in debate on any subject, that his own word should turn to be true, whoever is happy that he turned out to be right and his enemy to be wrong, whoever is happy such a person has acted unjustly. Not only that, such a person loses, for when he emerges the victor in such a debate, he has not learned anything previously unknown to him, and his probable pride will cause him loss. But if his adversary turns out to be right, he will have learned something previously unknown to him and thereby gained something without any loss, as well as being saved from pride... If he sees his adversary to be right, he will accept it willingly and support it happily."³¹

Unlike some traditional Muslim scholars and activists, Nursi did not ask for the denunciation and boycott of the West as the land of the ungodly. He, furthermore, did not see any doctrinal evidence³² that obliges the Muslims not to live in non-Muslim countries. The twenty millions or so of Muslims living in Europe and North America, including Nursi's own compatriots, would find in his "*Ghurbah* (estrangement) Model"³³ an effective response to the three major problems that they face in the west, namely belongingness, identity and citizenship, and a stimulus to overcome their profound sense of estrangement and alienation. His prescription to conquer the *ghurbah* is through *imān* (belief), *tawakkul* (trust) and *ṣabr* (patience), and by the preservation of the Islamic identity and treasured values.³⁴

Conclusion

By virtue of the ongoing globalization, most people have no time or interest to think beyond the thickness of their wallets. But it is now crystal clear that this growing money-making mentality have not – and would not – solely lead to happiness and tranquility in the world. Skills alone are not enough to achieve this goal, but they have to be augmented by a moral code that would check the prevalent greediness and individualism. By addressing the two major enemies of humanity, excessive materialism and aggressive atheism, *Rawā'ih al-Nūr* of the enlightened Muslim *mujtahid* Bediuzzaman Nursi goes a long way to

formulate a vitally and urgently needed "moral model" for the process of globalization that would check its present tendency to predominate matter over the soul. Hence, globalization will be in the service of mankind rather than mankind in the service of globalization. This Islamic model demonstrates that Islam is essentially a humane and tolerant religion that rejects confrontation and advocates dialogue between all religions and peoples on this planet. The intellectual legacy of Nursi has, furthermore, urged the Muslims not to repeat the tragic mistake that they committed during the Industrial Revolution and the Industrial Era, viz reluctance, often refusal, to acquire scientific knowledge. Rather, they should enthusiastically learn information technology, the major source for power in this era of Globalization. Otherwise, they will once more be placed in a historical limbo that cut them off between the seven and twenty-first centuries, and facilitate their easy swallow by the mechanics of globalization.

Endnotes

- 1 This article is based on the Rasail and some important studies on and around them, particularly an excellent collection of scholarly articles published in a special issue of the Muslim World on "Sa'id Nursi and the Turkish Experience," Vol. LXXXIX, Nos. 1-4, July-October 1999.
- 2 Sakran Vahide, "The Life and Time of Bediuzzaman Sa'id Nursi," *The Muslim World*, LXXXIX, vols. 3-4, pp. 208-10.
- 3 He went to Romania as the representative of the Eastern provinces in an official delegation led by Sultan Mehmed Resat.
- 4 Sakran Vahide, op. cit., pp. 208-10.
- 5 Later, in 1951, the then government of the Democratic Party under the patronship of Adnan Menderes built a University in Eastern Turkey. In a letter to the President, Celal Boyer, Bediuzzaman commended this decision, which he equated to his earlier aborted project, and stressed that the university should play a unifying role, both culturally and academically.
- 6 Soon, however, Nursi opposed the CUP because of its corruption and misuse, and became an ardent supporter of its rival the society of *Iskân-ı-Mahamedî*. He was penalized for this defiance by arrest and tied before a court martial.
- 7 Sakran Vahide, op. cit., p. 220.
- 8 Ibid., p. 226.
- 9 Quoted in ibid., p. 224.
- 10 Ibid., pp. 229-32.
- 11 This Pact was violently criticized by the Egyptian president, Jamal Abd al Nasser and all his satellites in the Arab world who condemned it as an imperialist plot to recolonize the Arab *Ummah*.
- 12 Sakran Vahide, op. cit., p. 243.

13. Golin Turner: "The Risale-i Nur : A Revolution in Belief" in Sukran Vavide, *The Ideas of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi in the Thirtieth Year since his Death and their Place in Islamic Thought* (Istanbul 1993), p. 159, quoted by Imriyaz Yusuf: "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Discourse on Belief in Allah: a Study of Texts from Risale-i Nur Collection," *The Muslim World*, LXXXIX, 3-4, July-October 1999, p. 339.
14. Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi: "Globalization, a Contemporary Response," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 15, 3, 1998, p. 16.
15. Muddathir Abd al-Rahim: "Globalization and the Nation-State," a paper presented in an international seminar on the "Impact of Globalization on the Islamic World: Issues and Challenges in the 21st Century," Kuala Lumpur, 11-13 June 2001.
16. Ali Mazrui: "Globalization, Homogenization or Hegemonization", *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 15, 3, 1998, p. 1.
17. The term "tele-village" was coined to indicate the hegemony of the mass media in the realm of human consciousness.
18. *Newsweek*, 31 January, 2005.
19. "The concept of "humanitarian wars" raises some questions, particularly whose human rights are worth waging a war to defend? The American-led United Nations led, for example, interfered militarily to protect the rights of the Muslims in Bosnia, but it failed to do so in Palestine.
20. For a detailed critique of the pitfalls and perils of globalization in both the economic and moral fields, see Muhsin Monamad (edited by Hashim Makaruddin): *Globalization and the New Realities* (Kuala Lumpur, 2002).
21. From the Risale-i Nur Collection 3, the Flashes Collection, by Bediuzzaman Nursi, p. 263.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 260.
23. *From the Risale-i Nur Collection, the Words*, by Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, p. 23.
24. *Ibid.* pp. 20-22 and 25.
25. *Foreign Affairs*, 72, 3, 1993, pp. 22-46.
26. *Surat al-Kafirun* (109), ayat 6.
27. *From Risale-i Nur Collection 3, The Flashes Collection* by Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, p. 205.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 201-7.
30. The Davaeus Sermon (Istanbul 1996), cited in Thomas Michel, S.J.: "Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Cooperation in the Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi", *The Muslim World*, LXXXIX, 3-4, July - October 1999, p. 335.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 325.
32. *From Risale-i Nur Collection 3, the Flashes Collection*, by Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, p. 211.
33. Some cognate Muslim thinkers insisted that the *mawla* (living in an "infidel" territory) is strictly forbidden. The African *usafidi* 'Uthman Dîn Fodio (1754-1817) supported this position in a booklet entitled *Fi Waḥīdī Mawālī al-Muslimīn wa al-Nabī 'an Mawālī al-Kāfirīn*.
34. To the best of my knowledge the term "Ghurba Model" was coined by Yazbeck Haddad in his article "Ghurba as Paradigm for Muslim Life: A Rasale-i Nur Worldview," *The*

Muslim World, LXX XIX, 3-4, July-October 1999, p. 307. By this Haddad seems to refer to Nursi's own personal *Ghurba*, particularly his three weeks isolation in the mountains.