

**Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual  
Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi**

*Shukran Vahide*

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Sukran Vahide's *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* is a timely contribution to the study of one of the most

prominent Islamic thinkers of the twentieth century. This comprehensive study on Nursi's life (1876-1960) and works would be appropriate for use in graduate and undergraduate courses in religious, Islamic, and Middle Eastern studies departments.

Vahide fills an important gap in the study of Nursi and his works, which has become increasingly popular among western scholars in recent decades. Prior to its publication, only a few brief biographies of Nursi existed, and those focused solely on presenting a chronological account of his life. Hence this book's most significant contribution is, as pointed out in the subtitle, the fact that it is an "intellectual biography." Although Vahide organizes the book into sections that correspond with the chronological developments in his life, the book is divided into three parts that denote the significant intellectual phases (also pointed out by Nursi himself in his writings): "The Old Said," "The New Said," and "The Third Said." In this way, the author situates Nursi's writings and ideas, which have inspired the most prominent faith movement in modern Turkey (approximately 7 million followers), into the historical context in which they were developed and transmitted to others at a much needed time in Turkish history.

The author first presents the Old Said, who was a political activist advocating for constitutionalism. At this earlier phase of his young adult life, Nursi was preoccupied with securing the unity of the Islamic world as well as that of the Ottoman Empire as a means thereof. He argued that the values of constitutionalism, the rule of law, and representative government were intrinsic values of Islam and not necessarily values that the Islamic world had to borrow from the West. He placed great importance on educating the masses in accordance with Islam's ingrained moral values.

His transition to the New Said gradually occurred after the Turkish victory in the War of Independence, when Nursi found himself disagreeing on grave matters with the leaders of the new regime. This led him to withdraw not only from politics, but also from public life completely. The majority of his best-known writings were transcribed during this period, when he concentrated on writing a contemporary exegesis of the Qur'an based on the need to give reason-based answers to the attacks launched by atheism, communism, and imposed westernization and secularization. His *magnum opus*, the *Risale-i Nur*, emerged during his years in exile through the circulation of his writings to his students. This text-based movement, later to be known as the Nur movement, was based on transforming individuals through a Qur'anic education both in one's mind and morals. His method and writings found a great resonance in Anatolia and, slowly, all over modern Turkey.

As Vahide points out, Nursi's farsighted vision even led him to launch the first attempt at interfaith dialogue by contacting leaders of the Christian world in the hope of establishing support and fraternity among people of faith against the ongoing attacks of atheism and communism. Hence his vision involved both a text-based faith movement that would transform the hearts and minds of Muslims and ensure unity within the Islamic world, as well as unity among all people of faith against unbelief. *Islam in Modern Turkey* presents a clear picture of these aspects of Nursi's personal journey in the face of historical developments taking place in Turkey and the world.

Despite the above-stated strengths, there is one (probably unavoidable) downside to the book. Even though Nursi's first and foremost mission was to present a new exegesis of the Qur'anic teachings based on the revival of faith by confirmation (*tahqiq*), the author focuses on the historical context of Nursi's life and writings to such a degree that she disregards the importance of expounding upon the *Risale-i Nur's* main message and Nursi's unique contribution to the study of Islam. Although it may be a conscious choice on Vahide's part to tilt the balance of this biography toward a more historical analysis, given the fact that it was Nursi's writings that have inspired and motivated millions, a greater focus on the content of his particular contributions would have been more appropriate.

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