

Nursi and western civilization

by: Dr Lakhdar Cheriet

university of Algiers



Bediuzzaman Said Nursi was born in 1877 in eastern Turkey and died in 1960 in Urfa in Turkey.

Bediuzzaman displayed an extraordinary intelligence and ability to learn from an early age, completing the normal course of medrese (religious school) education at the early age of fourteen, when he obtained his diploma. He became famous for both his prodigious memory and his unbeaten record in debating with other religious scholars. Another characteristic.

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi emerges from these as a unique figure whose service to the Qur'an and belief this century is without equal. The child prodigy from Nurs who at the age of fourteen silenced in debate all the ulema of the area and from an even earlier age displayed an instinctive dissatisfaction with the existing educational system went on in his maturity as the New Said to open up a new way of relating the Qur'anic truths which would be the means of reinvigorating the belief of millions of Muslims within the framework of Orthodox Sunni Islam.

Bediuzzaman was born at a time when the fortunes of the Islamic world were at their lowest ebb, yet it was his unwavering conviction that the Qur'an and Islamic civilisation would dominate the future and be the means of mankind's salvation, as the lines quoted above fortelling the year of his death illustrate.

Forgoing every sort of comfort and personal benefit and undertaking every difficulty, he sacrificed himself to this end, chiefly serving it through his learning, but also as the Old Said through energetic participation in social and political life and in the wars and movements of that time. Realizing at an early

age that science also would dominate the future, contrary to other religious scholars, and indeed he received opposition because of it, Bediuzzaman studied and mastered most of the modern most of modern physical and mathematical sciences. He also took up the study of philosophy in the belief that it could be made to serve Islam. And while his wide knowledge of both these was selected in his inner struggle to free himself from philosophy which made way for the emergence of the New Said, who took the Holy Qur'an as his "sole guide".

Bediuzzaman should be seen in the context of the increasing Western influence in the Ottoman Empire at the 19th and early 20th centuries and the attacks which were being made on the Qur'an and Islam in the name of science and materialism, and Positivist philosophy in particular, it was in order to answer these attacks. When the leadership of Turkey came into the hands of the new leaders on the founding of the Republic, the drive for Westernization received a strong impetus, and philosophy was progressively inculcated into.

Bediuzzaman displayed from an early age was an instinctive dissatisfaction with the existing education system, which when



older he formulated into comprehensive proposals was the bringing together and joint teaching of the founding of a university in the Eastern provinces of the Empire, the Medresetü'z-Zehra, where this and his other proposals would be put into practice. In 1907 his endeavours in this field took him to Istanbul and an audience with Sultan Abdulhamid. Although subsequently, and its foundations were laid in 1913, it was never completed due to war and the vicissitudes of the times.

The same comparison of Western and Islamic civilizations appears in different contexts in a number of Bediuzzaman's works of the period. And from these and from other references to the same subject, and also the reasons for the optimism and hope for the future engendered by the dream.

However, in the West, the evils of civilisation had come to preponderate over its beneficial aspects. Bediuzzaman gave two reasons for this. The first was the permissive attitude of Western civilisation towards "dissipation" and "the appetites of the flesh", which arose from "not

making religion and virtue the principles of civilisation". While the second was "the appalling inequality in the means of livelihood", which also ultimately resulted from lack of religion. These would eventually lead to its destruction.

Bediuzzaman predicted that because Western civilisation had become distant from true Christianity and was based of revealed religion, but on those of Greek and, primarily, Roman philosophy, it would eventually "be dispersed" and "change its form", and make way for the emergence of Islamic civilisation. His comparisons, then, are between the "positive" principles and results of religion, and the "negative" principles and result of philosophy, or between divine guidance (*hüda*) and genius, meaning, "reason", as he sometimes calls them.

How is it then that while Islam comprises true civilisation, it was materially defeated by Western civilisation?

We will know the answer of the question in this research.