An Agenda for Nursi Studies: Towards the Construction of a Social Theology

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Introduction

In the world of scholarship on Muslim revival thought, the Ottoman Turkish thinker, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1877–1960) remains marginal. This is by no means a reflection of the depth or lack of relevance of Nursi’s thought, but rather of the parochial manner in which scholarship on Islam has developed. In most Muslim societies, the focus is on thinkers that are local to the area or who write in the local language. Thus, few nineteenth century Turkish, Iranian, Indian or Malay thinkers are read in the Arab world. In that sense, one can speak of an Arabo-centrism that dominates Arab thought on the phenomenon of Muslim revival. The same is true of non-Arab speaking Muslim societies. To put it in other terms, there is a lack of cosmopolitanism, even within the circle of the intelligentsia in Muslim societies. Indeed, this is a modern problem that emerged during the colonial period and can be explained by the predominance of another ethnocentrism, that is, Eurocentrism. Both the local ethnocentrism within Muslim societies, as well as the all-encompassing Eurocentrism that has defined education in the Muslim world for a long time, contribute to the marginalisation of a host of Muslim thinkers throughout the Muslim world and function to obstruct the emergence of systematic attention to these thinkers.

My view is that while the critique against Eurocentrism in the social sciences and humanities has been made effectively during the last two centuries, the calls for alternative discourses have not been implemented in any serious way. This is reflected in the fact that important nineteenth and twentieth century thinkers, such as Said Nursi, are not as widely discussed in seminars and conferences, are not as frequently cited, and are not as popular in university courses as others, such as Jamaluddin Afghani, Muhammad ‘Abduh,
Rashid Rida, Sayyid Qutb, etc. This is partly because these other thinkers had been taken notice of in Euroamerican scholarship which has played a significant role in defining the research interests and foci of scholars in the Muslim world. Thinkers that tend to fall outside of the purview of Western scholarship gradually gain less currency and popularity as subjects of research and teaching activities. As a result, alternative ideas and concepts outside of the Euroamerican sphere, that is, those that have not been promoted directly or indirectly in Western scholarship, have not been taken seriously enough by the various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. This can be illustrated with recourse to the example of Said Nursi.

The aspect of Said Nursi’s thought that is stressed here is social theology. Nursi’s important role as a modern thinker was to give a social dimension to kelam or theology. It is interesting to note that the attempt to establish a social theology in the Muslim world took place as early as the 1910s in the Ottoman Empire, decades before it became popular in the form of liberation theology in Latin America and the Philippines. Özervarlı notes the example of Mehmed Şerafeddin Yaltkaya’s (1879–1947) ictimai ilm-i kelam (social theology) project.¹ I believe it would be accurate to state that there is a social theology to be found in Nursi’s works and that this social theology does not occupy an insignificant place in his overall thought. While Nursi was not a mutakallim (theologian) in the classical sense of the term,² he was very much concerned with the relevance of theology for the social life of humans.³

I suggest that a serious obstacle to the development of Nursi’s thought is the Eurocentric nature of education in most of the world. Eurocentrism defines the content of education in such a way that the question of alternative points of view is not thematised. It is this lack of thematisation which makes it highly unlikely that the works of non-European thinkers would be given the same attention as European and North American thought or those Muslim thinkers that are part of the agenda of Western thought. Eurocentrism is a thought-style that is not restricted to Europeans and Americans. The social sciences and humanities are taught in the Muslim world and elsewhere in a Eurocentric manner. In the Muslim world, this has contributed to the alienation of the intelligentsia from their scholarly tradition. I argue that a casualty of this alienation is the works of Said Nursi.

The papers in this special focus on Said Nursi all contribute towards highlighting the dimension of Nursi’s work as social theology. M. Sait Özervarlı’s paper discusses in broad strokes Nursi’s social thought, while the papers by

³ For more on Nursi and Nursi Studies, refer to http://www.nursistudies.com.