

NURSI'S ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTAL IDEOLOGY ON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN EASTERN TURKEY

Kamaruzaman Yusoff*, Mansoureh Ebrahimi**, Omer Yilmaz***, Zaharah bt Mustaffa**** and Ahmad Muhyuddin bin Hj. Hassan****

Abstract: This study clarifies the history as well as concepts and approaches to the *Mektab* vs. *Medrese* dispute in Eastern Turkey. It does so by examining Bediüzzaman Said Nursi's rationale and struggle to establish a qualified educational system, the *Medresetü 'z-Zehra*, that would better support a prosperous Muslim society. From his childhood, Nursi focused on education by reading, memorizing, understanding, explaining and attempting to inform society by implementing the most appropriate and contemporary educational methods. This study concentrates on *Mektab* vs. *Medrese* debate that ended with the decline of *Medreses*. Turkey's education system has a long history of development under the wings of religious movements. Although political changes affected Nursi's personal and spiritual perspectives, they never altered his position on education. The system he put forth during his youth and later pursued politically to the end of the Ottoman State and thereafter, survived. According to Nursi, education affects more than man's earthly life, as its effects extend to the life hereafter.

Keywords: Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, Religious Education, *Mektab*, *Medrese*, *Medresetü 'z-Zehra*.

INTRODUCTION

Institutions called *medreses* began during the 9th century and were systematized during the 11th at the hands of *Nizamu 'l-Mülk*, the Grand Vizier of the *Selçuklular* (Seljuks) as a model for the future. Early *medreses* were comprehensive in scope and covered subjects such as *fikih* (jurisprudence), theology, *tefsir* (commentary on the Qur'an), Hadith, Astronomy, Mathematics, Physics, etc. Only later were particular areas of studies introduced. The *medreses*, especially higher levels, eventually became specialized and dedicated to narrow fields of study and transformed into vocational schools in which Islamic Law (*fikih*) was taught. This was most likely the result of bureaucratic staffing by *fukaha* (jurists) whose focus of knowledge was jurisprudence. By the 16th century, attitudes towards traditional *medreses* gradually became negative in light of Europe's progress and rapid developments in philosophy, science and technology that upstaged Eastern weaknesses. *Medrese* scholars, caught up in the dilemma, took opposing views and debated as to whether

* Faculty of Islamic Civilization, University Technology Malaysia (UTM), Malaysia. Email: y.kamaruzaman@utm.my

** Corresponding author, Faculty of Islamic Civilization, University Technology Malaysia (UTM), Malaysia. Email: suriebrahimi@gmail.com; mansoureh@utm.my

*** History Department, The National University of Malaysia (UKM), Malaysia. Email: omeryilus@yahoo.com

**** Faculty of Islamic Civilization, University Technology Malaysia (UTM), Malaysia

or not the ‘new sciences’ should be taught in their institutions. Towards the second half of the 17th century, *medreses* began following a new system (*usûl-ü cedid*) established by a few progressive individuals. Nonetheless, most of the Islamic world was left to struggle on its own with the opening of European style schools (Alparslan, 1999). Unfortunately, this served to widen the gap between traditional and modern education while *medreses* become entrenched in bigotry and European style schools turned from religion.

After the French Revolution¹ in 1789, the Westernization of Ottoman Turkey began with its army towards the end of the 18th century under the hand of Sultan Selim III. From then onwards, the Ottoman Army invited instruction from French lieutenants and teachers. Of significance, this also accompanied *Tanzîmat* (Administrative) reforms whereby a series of changes were made in bureaucracy, along with educational and juridical concerns that attended essential economic and financial rights. However, education, the subject of the present study, drew the utmost attention. In 1834, Sultan Mahmud II opened the *Mekteb-i Ulûm-u Harbiye* (School of Military Science), a precursor of contemporary Military Schools, with French as the medium of instruction. A formal educational system based on the European style was soon adopted for the general populace with secondary schools (*rüşdiye*). *Tanzîmat* statesmen used innovative *rüşdiye* to train the large number of functionaries necessary to implement reforms (Mardin, 1989). The establishment of *i'dâdiye* (high schools) modelled on French secondary programs soon followed. Between 1882 and 1900, every Ottoman city had at least one *i'dâdiye* (Mardin, 1989); hence, the popularity of the French language increased. However, whereas French instructors had dominated military training before Sultan Abdülhamid, the new civilian changes relied more on German instructors (Alkan, 2001). Notwithstanding these significant advances, serious attempts to modify or further reform society did not occur until 1914.

At the beginning of the 20th century, one of the *medrese ulema* (Nursi) began championing the need for more coherent educational reforms (Yusoff et. al., 2013). At a time when the debate between *mekteb-medrese* vs. science-religion were at its highest point, Bediüzzaman Said-i Kürdi promoted his *Medresetü'z-Zehra* project (Yusoff et. al., 2016), which he especially hoped to implement in Eastern Turkey (Awang et. al., 2015). Even as colonial masters threatened the Islamic World in the Middle East, Nursi planned to unify all educational elements in a *medrese*. If students were taught as he planned, those in secular schools would be rescued from irreligious futures, and those in religious schools (*medrese*), would be saved from bigotry (Vahide, 2000).

¹ The French Revolution (1789-1799) a period of French history during which, republicanism replaced the absolute monarchy, and the French sector of the Roman Catholic Church was forced to undergo radical restructuring.

We will now discuss (i) the situation in Eastern Turkey during the last centuries of the Ottoman period; (ii) the emergence of Nursi's *Medresetü'z-Zehra* project; (iii) and the dispute between *medrese* and new style schools (*mekteb*). We will investigate the historical background that wrought the emergence and urgency of the movement and its important functions.

THE RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALIST DISPUTE BETWEEN *MEKTEB* AND *MEDRESE*

During the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates, Muslims strengthened Islamic civilization by acquiring the arts and mastering trade, just as the companions of the prophet and their successors had practiced and which guided their societies to higher levels. During the reigns of the first ten Ottoman sultans, that is to say until the second half of the 16th century, science and industry were held in high esteem among Muslims, but thereafter people gradually lost interest. A lack of productivity ensued that was accompanied by lassitude and general regression (Albayrak, 1994). From the time of the *Tanzîmat* reforms until the early 1900's, the new schools (*mekteb*) became distant from traditional *medreses* and the widening gap complicated matters even further. The *medrese* appeared as centres promoting bigotry in the eyes of *mekteb* society, while the former viewed *mekteb* supporters with growing scepticism. During the first decades of the 20th century, this dispute grew horns, especially as *mekteb* graduates blamed the Empire's backwardness on *medrese* for failing to adopt scientific innovations. According to Albayrak (Albayrak, 1994), attacks against the *mekteb* focused on the lack of the Islamic way of life as an essential foundation. Graduates and proponents of the *medrese* simply reacted by arguing that the most significant cause of Muslim backwardness was the *mekteb*'s introduction of studies not soundly based on religion and which distanced people from religion. For this reason, they argued, they were forced to focus solely on religious sciences.

Most journalists tried to mobilize support for innovation and *mekteb* acceptance. Europeans argued that the backwardness of the Empire was due to Islamic fanaticism, which had become an enemy of progress, a view that *mekteb* proponents disseminated throughout Ottoman lands. During the second decade, Abdullah Cevdet² translated "*Tarih-i İslamiyet*" (*History of Islam*) by the orientalist, Reinhart Dozy,³ a book so full of fabrications that some scholars considered it tantamount to disbelief in God.

² Abdullah Cevdet (1869–1932) was born in Arapkir in Malatya. He was an Ottoman politician and thinker. During the Second Constitutionalist period, he had significant influence on the philosophical structure of the time, together with the Young Turks.

³ Reinhart Pieter Anne Dozy (1820-1883) was born in Leiden. He was one of the most learned and critical scholars of his day. He studied in Oriental literature, Arabic language and history. His real fame as a historian mainly rests on his work, *Histoire des Mussulmans d'Espagne, jusqu'à la conquête de l'Andalousie par les Almoravides*.

Nursi believed Reinhart Dozy was a *zındık* (heretic) whose books should not be made available to the public. After *medrese*-based journalists criticized Abdullah Cevdet because of his irreligious actions, the journal containing his article was confiscated by the military (Albayrak, 1994). The *medrese* community expected the institution of *Şeyhü'l-İslam*, to which they belonged, to prevent the dissemination of western cultural values and practices. However, the *Şeyhü'l-İslam* was subservient to the CUP government (Albayrak, 1994) that favoured the *mekteb* community. After independence in 1908, the *mekteb* community used the media to scathingly attack *medrese* supporters. To their credit, the *medrese* community remained calm and refrained from responding in kind, a matter they later explained was a result of the virtues they acquired through religious education. Nursi, however, wanted these same virtues adopted by the *mekteb*, much as he wanted science and technology adopted by the *medrese*. Although *mekteb* proponents lost their initial engagement with the *medrese*, their control of the media increased. Even military authorities banned Islamic journals for attacking *mektebs*. Moreover, although a few *medrese* journalists defended the *medrese*, they complained that most *ulema* neither bought their journals nor showed any consideration for their articles (Albayrak, 1994).

Out of fear that the sacrosanct position of the *medrese* quarter would become blemished, merely responding to attacks apparently satisfied the *ulema*. Some, realizing their difficult situation, opted for the middle road of combining *mekteb* and *medrese*. Nursi followed this path of reconciliation by offering positive sciences for inclusion in the *medrese* curriculum and religious sciences for inclusion in the *mekteb*. In this manner, criticism against both could be avoided and his *Medresetü'z-Zehra* project became the prospective model for reconciliation. Since most scientific discoveries and innovations came at the hands of disbelievers, some *medrese ulema*—ignorant-of and opposed to innovations—rejected them in their sermons. They claimed that any Muslim who showed respect for innovations would be considered a supporter of infidels and might even become an infidel (Albayrak, 1994). Even so, many *medrese ulema* and proponents of *mekteb* were against such an attitude. Nursi warned these witless *ulema*, declaring their ignorance was Islam's worst enemy. Moreover, many statesmen and bureaucrats considered such *ulema* a kind of organized *softa* (fanatics) (Albayrak, 1994). Even Nursi was accused of fanaticism, an accusation he considered nothing but simple prejudice. Nevertheless, he tried very hard to distance himself from the traditional *medrese* by offering solutions that would unite both *mekteb* and *medrese* with a common perspective.

Mekteb proponents vigorously applied themselves to a more appropriate religious model (*içtihad*) to meet contemporary societal needs. In response, some *ulema* argued the doors of *içtihad* had been closed while others argued that establishing an *içtihad* organization could open these same doors (Albayrak, 1994). Meanwhile, *ulema* lamented the possible degeneration and corruption of Islam through reinterpretations (new *içtihad*). In a later treatise on *içtihad*, Nursi argued

that the door of *içtihad* had never been locked but that the present age produced very few qualified to open it. He also argued that everyone could do their own *içtihad* in personal matters as long as they did not generalize. Some *medrese*-based journalists considered the Ottoman defeat in the Balkan Wars was due to weaknesses arising from quarrels between *mekteb*, *medrese* and *tekke*; specifically, that interference from *medrese âlîms* in politics, and interference from *mekteb*-based soldiers in religious matters compelled each group to neglect their main duties by attending to matters for which they were unqualified (Albayrak, 1994).

The main quarrel was whether positive sciences and foreign languages should be taught in *medrese*. As there was no established balance between positive and religious sciences, the *mekteb* proponents desired a curriculum dominated by positive sciences, leaving little space for a few religious sciences. The search for consensus found a few members of the *medrese* community who held that differences between *mekteb* and *medrese* proponents could only be removed by unifying the institutions (Albayrak, 1994). Nursi wished that positive sciences were taught in *medreses* along with a trilingual language program including Arabic, Turkish, and Kurdish, especially as a large segment of the *medrese* curricula concentrated on Arabic grammar and syntax, etc. Compared to young Arabs, students in the Ottoman State needed additional years and effort to study Arabic, an impediment that caused many to neglect or even abandon science and other important disciplines. Even a few far-sighted *medrese* students complained that the positive sciences (*riyâziyât*) were insufficiently emphasized. They did not hesitate to suggest solutions for *medrese* reforms (Albayrak, 1994). Prominent personalities such as Ali Suavi⁴ and Süleyman Paşa⁵ also criticized *medrese* education and supported reformation. However, they failed to propose practical solutions (Mardin, 1989).

From the Balkan Wars until WWI, which had been declared a Holy War (*cihad*), *medreses* lost many students to military service by order of Enver Paşa.⁶ This loss of teachers and students reduced many classes by half or even more, while other schools were totally closed for want of students (Albayrak, 1994). Many former students were martyred and many *medreses* were destroyed. After the war, surviving students and demobilized soldiers and others who had missed the draft,

⁴ Ali Suavi (1839-1878) worked as a teacher at Bursa elementary school and preached at Sehade mosque in Istanbul; also as writer for Philip Efendi's newspaper, *Muhbir*; and in different positions at Simav, Plovdiv and Sofia. He was a member of the Society of Neo Ottomans and editor of its official journal. He was exiled to Kastamonu because of his writings against Abdulaziz.

⁵ Süleyman Paşa (1840-1892) was chief commander of Turkish military operations in the Balkan Peninsula during the Russo-Turkish War, 1877-78. His incompetence is considered one of the main reasons for Turkey's defeat. After the war he was exiled.

⁶ İsmail Enver (1881-1922), known to Europeans as Enver Pasha or Enver Bey; a Turkish military officer and leader of the Young Turk revolution and main leader of the Ottoman Empire in both Balkan Wars and WWI.

changed occupations due to extreme poverty in the Ottoman State (Albayrak, 1994), which inevitably collapsed the *medreses*. In 1910, shortly before the First World War, Kamil Paşa,⁷ a political genius, realized the situation and stated that unless a true reformer appeared (*müceddid*), the *medreses* would gradually decline and disappear. At this time of misfortune, Nursi strove to implement his vision of the *Medresetü'z-Zehra*.

Effective opposition to the CUP government weakened along with the decline of *medreses* in quality and quantity. Unwanted teachers from Istanbul *medreses* were sent to rural *medreses* in other provinces, while others were given either new positions or totally disqualified from teaching by the government, who used this opportunity to appoint teachers who would follow new orders (Albayrak, 1994). By executive power, the government began implementing *mekteb* curricula in *medreses* under the 'law of unified education'. The law's obvious shortcoming was that it did not stipulate any inclusion of the *medrese* curriculum in the *mekteb* curricula (Albayrak, 1994). Consequently, the government satisfied only part of Nursi's vision. Hence, the *mekteb* remained completely void of religious education. In addition, *medreses* did not provide sufficient exposure to positive science due to a lack of qualified teachers.

MEDRESETÜ'Z-ZEHRA: THE IDEOLOGICAL PARADIGM SHIFT IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

It is very difficult to understand the concept of *Medresetü'z-Zehra* if one compares it with the traditional *medrese*. We can only grasp Nursi's intention by referring to his works. *Medresetü'z-Zehra* encompassed a theory that had no empirical precedent. Nursi posited that new sciences should be integrated with traditional Islamic knowledge and the wisdom of this integration was to protect young minds from sophist oppression. Nursi considered it a matter of utmost importance to establish a neo-*medrese* in which religious and modern sciences were taught side-by-side and comprehensively integrated. He pursued this dream to the end of his days. Humanly, Nursi saw religion as representing the heart and conscience, while the sciences represented reason. Both were necessary for genuine progress. In short, the basis of Nursi's proposition was an integrated curriculum comprising both religious and modern sciences. When he was in the city of Van,⁸ he had hoped his *Medresetü'z-Zehra* would become similar to Istanbul's grand *medrese* with branches in several provinces where large Kurdish tribes resided in Eastern

⁷ Mehmed Kamil Paşa (1832-1933), born in Cyprus, Ottoman politician and statesman. Between 1885 and 1913, he was appointed as Grand Vizier. When CUP members became involved in politics, he disagreed with the Young Turks and resigned.

⁸ Van, an Eastern city in Turkey where Bediuzzaman stayed for 15 years in the governor's house while teaching in his old *medrese* in his own style.

Turkey. Until 1911, his idea developed and grew to embrace a vision as grand as *Câmiü'l-Ezher*⁹ in Cairo. Considering the natural character and religion of the people, *Medresetü'z-Zehra* would become the regional source of progress. It would serve as a bridge between religious school graduates and those from the new secular schools that had developed during the *Tanzîmat*, and would exist to generate mutual understanding (Yildiz, 2000).

The word *medrese* held a special status among eastern locals as their highly respected spiritual leaders were trained in these modest establishments. Hence, according to Nursi, the '*Blessed Medrese*' implied a distinct authenticity that was most appropriate because of this widespread veneration (Nursi, 2002b). As a common and appealing designation, it would also generate tremendous enthusiasm. Hence, Nursi's public relations muse deigned to attract community support and benefit from the fame, legacy and existential character implied by the designation, '*medrese*'. It would ease local acceptance and natural band people together, especially since Eastern societies had already rejected secular schools and the name, *mekteb*. Moreover, the populace generally identified the acquisition of knowledge and virtue only with the *medrese*. Thus, by using the familiar and acceptable name, Nursi would avoid negative emotive associations with the term, *mekteb*. From 1911 onwards, he used the name *Dâru'l-Fünûn* for his project, which, at that time, meant university. However, after 1923 during the Republic period he did not insist on the name (Nursi, 1993), saying it could be changed according to the understanding of the time. By the 1950's, when referring to *Medresetü'z-Zehra*, he used various names such as *Dâru'l-Fünûn-u İslamiye* and *Islamic University*, but it still bore the meaning of *Medresetü'z-Zehra*, including both *mekteb* and *medrese*.

Comparing the names *Medresetü'z-Zehra* and *Câmiü'l-Ezher*, we note that *medrese* means a 'place of studies where lessons are taught' while *câmi*' means a 'comprehensive cultural centre for all activities' or 'place where people gather together'. *Ezher* means a 'tree's flower before fruiting' while *Zehra* simply means 'flowers'. Both words also bear the common alternative meaning of 'shining' or 'brilliance'. Fatimids in Cairo established the *Ezher* component of *Câmiü'l-Ezher* to reflect the title given to Fatima, the daughter of prophet Muhammad (pbuh). While *Ezher* is a masculine adjective in Arabic grammar, *Zehra* is female. Thus, according to Fethullah Gülen, *Zehra* also implies 'being prolific' (Şahiner, 1996). Perhaps for these reasons, Nursi described *Medresetü'z-Zehra* as the sister of *Câmiü'l-Ezher* (Nursi, 2002b). Nevertheless, he hoped *Medresetü'z-Zehra* would follow the system of *Câmiü'l-Ezher* while bearing the implications attached to *Medresetü'z-Zehra*.

⁹ Al-Azhar University was built by the Fatimids (909–1171) in Cairo, their capital. It is a premier Egyptian institution of higher learning, world-renowned for its position as a centre of Islamic scholarship and education.

EMERGENCE OF THE FUNDAMENTAL RELIGIOUS CONCEPT OF *MEDRESETÜ'Z-ZEHRA*

Towards the end of the 19th century when much of the Islamic world fell into colonial hands, western imperialists sought to strengthen and sustain their various positions for future advantage. At this time, the British Prime Minister, Gladstone,¹⁰ famously said, "... so long as there were followers of that "accursed book" (the Qur'an), Europe would know no peace." (Pickthall, 1919) He fully intended to discredit the Qur'an as a means to dominate Muslims and gain currency for Britain's inauspicious ambitions (Bozkurt, 1966). In his view, this required either to take the Qur'an from Muslims or to cause them lose their love for it. Between 1897 and 1907, Nursi avidly read the newspapers without fail, particularly articles concerning Islam and the Islamic world. In 1900, he read a report of the speech against the Qur'an made by Gladstone in the House of Commons that overwhelmingly aroused his passion. Nursi immediately resolved to show the world the Qur'an's miraculous qualities as an inextinguishable source of light (Vahide, 2005). With this in mind, he tried to join *Câmiü'l-Ezher* but failed. In his words, "it was not kismet". He further thought that since Asia was greater than Africa, it deserved a greater Islamic university than *Câmiü'l-Ezher*, one that would unite the Islamic nations of Arabia, India, Iran, Caucasia, Turkistan and Kurdistan. Hence, Nursi's *Medresetü'z-Zehra* project, especially following Gladstone's outburst, was conceived (Nursi, 1993).

Up to this moment, Nursi's interests, studies and teaching roles had solely involved various sciences. But his enlightenment embraced no more than theoretical pursuits. Realizing the West's evil intent concerning the Qur'an, his ideas suffered radical changes. Prior to 1907, Nursi searched for evidence to establish the miraculous nature of the Qur'an while planning his grand Islamic University, even preparing maps of all neighbouring villages, towns and cities (Badıllı, 1998). During his time in Van, Nursi developed ideas on educational reform and fashioned his own teaching methodology. He re-examined the principles of whatever he had studied and compared these with his experience of teaching religion and science in view of any and all relevance to contemporary needs. His fundamental approach was to 'integrate' religion and modern science in such a way that the latter would both prove and strengthen religious truth. Nursi then implemented his methods while teaching as many as sixty (Badıllı, 1998) students in his Van *medrese* (Nursi, 2002c).

At the age of 31, in November of 1907, Nursi set off for Istanbul with the intention of obtaining official support for his greater Islamic University (*Medresetü'z-Zehra*). He had been planning eight years for its wide-reaching service to mankind. He would appeal to the Caliph. But before going to Istanbul he visited his friend Tahir Paşa, the governor of Bitlis, to seek his advice. On 16 July 1907,

¹⁰ William Ewart Gladstone (1809-1898) was born in Liverpool. He became Prime Minister of Britain in 1868, 1880, 1886 and 1894.

Tahir Paşa provided Nursi with a letter of recommendation to Sultan Abdül Hamid, the Caliph of Islam. The letter introduced Nursi as a man of great fame in the East and emphasized his qualifications as being more than sufficient to solve problems facing public education in those regions; “*a humble man who refused to change from his student clothing because he considered himself a student still*”.

According to Ramiz (Nursi, 2003), Nursi went to Istanbul determined to change the direction of politics at Yıldız Palace, policies that had been devastating the barren Eastern Provinces through ignorance. While waiting for the opportunity to meet the Sultan, he wrote a petition to the Sultan’s High Committee (*Mâbeyn-i Humâyun*). Within a short time he successfully presented his ideas for educational reform in the Eastern Provinces to the Sultan. The text of the petition was even published in newspapers such as *The Council of Muslim Community Gazette* (*Şûrâ-yı Ümmet Gazetesi*, 19 Nov. 1908), and *The East and Kurdistan Gazette* (*Şark ve Kürdistan Gazetesi*, 3 Dec.1908) (Nursi, 1999).

While the petition offered much gratitude to the Sultanate for opening new schools in the East, it also stated the project was incomplete. Teachers taught in Turkish, which prevented Kurdish children from benefitting. The language deficiency denied the acquisition of knowledge by Kurdish students, who then appeared unsuccessful compared to Turkish students. Hence, despite access to the new schools, Kurds remained deprived of an education, which left them in a primitive state. Such people remain uncivilized and subject to the blind imitation that leads to victimization, doubts and suspicions. Eventually, this would cause chaos in the East (Nursi, 1999: p.796). Nursi’s petition was clear and straightforward. Turkey’s Eastern people believed that the authentic source of knowledge and virtue dwelled in *medreses* and were unable to appreciate or accept the *mekteb* schools. Moreover, because *mektebs* opened in select areas, rural children (mostly Kurds) could hardly benefit. Hence, the problems facing education in the East had not been completely solved. Nursi suggested renaming the schools *medrese* and integrating religious instruction with necessary modern sciences as already presented in *mektebs*. Furthermore, such *medrese* were to be established where tribal people lived. He further suggested that the government should financially support these poor tribal students. According to Nursi, this approach would best set a sustainable educational foundation.

“*Even if the proposal was not considered in its totality*” he said, “*it should at least be considered for the Kurds.*” Fifteen years later, when addressing Deputies of the Grand National Assembly, Nursi again argued that should the government not consider it appropriate for Western Turkey, it was vitally important for the Eastern regions (Nursi, 1993). Although the project would likely benefit all Turkish students, he thought the probability of success was greater in the East and would more justly serve efforts to civilize the Kurds and allow them to display their natural

abilities. Although Nursi's educational reforms were far-reaching and innovative, the High Committee of the Sultan failed to regard his petition. Nursi was not well known when he first arrived in Istanbul. As he had been exiled from Van, Bitlis and Mardin before coming to Istanbul, shortly after his arrival he was considered suspicious and kept under surveillance by the Sultan.

In an attempt to be made known for his mastery of revealed knowledge (Vahide, 2000), he openly challenged Istanbul's *ulema* by writing a notice and hanging it on the door of his hotel room promising "that he could answer all questions directed to him but would ask none". His answers combined knowledge from books on revealed knowledge with eloquence and logic. Scholars were therefore impressed and satisfied. Even the rector of *El-Ezher* examined him when he came to Istanbul and valued his answers, saying "eloquent speech was a special gift given to Nursi alone". Nursi's success with the *ulema* scared the authorities. His knowledgeable challenges made officials even more suspicious and he was arrested several times. At last they sent him to the Toptaşı Insane Asylum in Üsküdar¹¹ and confined him there. While in custody he was eventually offered a salary and official position on condition that he returned to the East. But Nursi insisted he had come to obtain assistance to establish the combined *mekteb-medrese* in his native region and desired nothing else (Nursi, 2003). He also considered the offer of a salary before establishing his *medrese* very strange and intriguing. A few months later he was released.

He came to Istanbul to solve educational problems in the East but he observed that Istanbul, the centre of politics, was also sick. He then sought solutions for Istanbul's problems. During political changes (1908–1911), he returned to the East and then went to Damascus. On his way to Damascus in 1911, he lectured on his *Medresetü'z-Zehra* project to the people of the East in Bitlis, Van, Diyarbakir, Kudan and Mamehuran *aşirets*, which belong to Ertuş *aşirets* (Nursi, 2002b). In response to that speech, a saint from among the *aşirets* criticised Nursi for having exaggerated things by showing what was imaginary as real. Nursi reproached the saint and his followers by saying that he was addressing coming generations for the next three hundred years. These were the generations he was seeking to establish his *Medresetü'z-Zehra* as a physical reality.

Although a hundred years has elapsed, Nursi's call remains vitally relevant. Nonetheless, and according to Nursi, those who would establish his vision were future students of *Risâle-i Nur* (Nursi, 2002a). His role, therefore, as he saw it, was only to establish the metaphysical concept of *Medresetü'z-Zehra*. The physical *medrese* was established with his later works on *Risâle-i Nur* after 1926 in Isparta, as discussed in coming chapters.

Two years after the ascension of Sultan Reşad, after delivering his famous Damascus Sermon, Nursi left Damascus for Beirut and from there travelled by sea

¹¹ Town of Istanbul province, Turkey, across the Bosphorus from Istanbul.

to Izmir and Istanbul in the spring of 1911. His intention was to renew his efforts to found the *Medresetü 'z-Zehra* (Eastern University). On 05 June 1911, Sultan Mehmed Reşad set out with a large entourage on his famous Rumelia Journey. The Palace requested Nursi to accompany the Sultan as a representative of the Eastern Provinces. When the group arrived in Kosovo (11 June), Nursi had opportunity to offer his Eastern University project to CUP leaders who were discussing the establishment of a similar university in Kosovo. But Nursi suggested to the Sultan and CUP leaders that the East was in greater need, especially since it was the geographic centre of the Islamic world. In response, they promised a university would be established in the Eastern Provinces. By the end of 1912, the Balkan War broke out and Kosovo was lost. Nursi immediately applied for the nineteen thousand gold liras that had been allotted for its proposed university. His application was accepted and he returned to Van and finally laid the foundations of his *Medresetü 'z-Zehra* at Edremit, on the shores of Lake Van.

Sultan Reşad was duly informed of progress through correspondence with the Governor, Tahsin Bey. The initial plan accommodated eighty students. On 17 June 1913, plans and preliminary construction were completed. Although the governor was enthusiastic, he was also concerned about Shi'a propaganda, which had been growing daily and took advantage of uneducated Kurds (Şahiner, 1990). Tahsin Bey realized the university would strengthen the understanding of Islam by countering misinterpretations. That same year, Ahmed Sirani Efendi,¹² editor and owner of the *Journal of Medrese İtikadları*, wrote an article stating that if success was a son, the father was physicality and the mother was spirituality (Albayrak, 1994). Just as this *medrese*-based journalist wrote, Nursi had finally laid the foundation of his newly incarnated *Medresetü 'z-Zehra* to implement that very same idea.

As construction of *Medresetü 'z-Zehra* continued, Nursi was unemployed and began teaching again in his old *Horhor Medrese*. At the beginning of 1914, he warned his students to be ready for approaching danger (Süzen, 2000). On 28 July 1914, WWI broke out and within three months the Ottoman Empire joined the War in the name of religion; thus, making it a Holy War. During that war nearly two million Ottoman soldiers were martyred and Armenians murdered an additional one million Muslims (Akgündüz, 1999). Nursi commanded a volunteer militia force in which his own students comprised the corps. Construction of *Medresetü 'z-Zehra* halted. When Bitlis fell to the Russians in early March of 1916, Nursi was

¹² Ahmed Şirani Efendi (1879-1942) was born in Karaca village in Şiran town of Gümüşhane. In 1913 he gave lectures in Sahn Medrese while studying in Istanbul. In 1914, he graduated from *Medresetü'l-Kuzat* with good grades. In 1918, he worked as a first class transcriber in *Daru'l-Hikmeti'l-İslamiyye* and then as the director of the newspaper, *Ceride-i İlmiye*. In 1923, he became the director of *Medresetü'l-İrşad* and in 1925 he was appointed as director and teacher at the Imam Hatib School in Konya. He published three magazines during the Ottoman period, namely *Medrese İtikadları*, *Hayru'l Kelam* and *İ'tisam*. He appreciated and supported the works of Nursi (<http://ansar.de/eccad119.htm>).

captured and spent two years in various prisoner-of-war camps in Kosturma, Russia. The American Intelligence Service recorded one of his many adventures (Badıllı, 1998, Vahide, 2000). He escaped and travelled safely across Russia and arrived in Istanbul on 08 June 1918, via Vienna and Sofya. Although not yet recovered from the fatigue of war and prison, Nursi was given no opportunity to rest. On 25 August 1918, the army reposted him to *Dâru'l-Hikmeti'l-İslamiye*,¹³ where he remained at duty until 1922.

On 29 September 1922, the Grand National Assembly won its War of Independence. Because of his heroic opposition to British forces that had occupied Istanbul for two years, Mustafa Kemal,¹⁴ president of the Grand National Assembly (Vahide, 2005), called Nursi to Ankara. On 09 November, he was asked to offer prayers at the Assembly, after which he delivered his famous speech.¹⁵ While in Ankara, Nursi took opportunity to pursue the continued founding and funding of his Eastern University. Deputies and paşas, especially Mustafa Kemal, held him in high regard and promised to fulfil his wishes (Badıllı, 1998). Understanding that the essence of backwardness vs. progress depends on both degrees and educational style, Nursi insisted on integrating *mekteb*, *medrese* and *tekke* through his project.

On 15 April 1923, Nursi proposed a bill on the project that Alim Efendi,¹⁶ the deputy of Kayseri, presented to the Assembly. A full complement of 167 deputies endorsed the bill, including Alim Efendi, Mustafa Kemal and İsmet İnönü.¹⁷ On 30 April it was sent to the presidency of the Grand National Assembly. On 04 May,

¹³ This organization was set up to seek solutions for religious matters and to answer questions related to Islam. It guided the public management of publications to fulfill religious needs and prevent internal and external misguidance. It officially answered questions from non-Muslims based on the commission's consensus. It existed for four years (1918 to 1922).

¹⁴ Mustafa Kemal (1881-1938) was one of the founders of the Turkish Republic in 1923. He was a revolutionary paşa who, with dictatorial management and in the name of Westernization and Turkish nationalism, abolished the Ottoman Sultanate, Caliphate and all religious and educational representatives related to the Ottoman State. He was known by many of public as the savior of Turkey from its enemies.

¹⁵ In his speech, he reminded the deputies to perform the prescribed prayers and referred to the question of the Eastern Provinces. This included his last suggestion for Medresetü'z-Zehra during his pre-Republic period.

¹⁶ Mehmed Alim Çınar (1861-1939) was born in Kayseri-Bünyan. Deputy of the First Grand National Assembly during the 1920s, his father was Müderris Mehmed Efendi, known as 'Great Hoja' in the township Bünyan. He was one of the spiritual architects of the Independence and Republic. He supported the national struggle and was awarded an Independence Medal. He lost his two sons; one in the Çanakkale War, another in the Independence War. His third son was also a Ghazi of Balkan and Independence Wars. (N. Şahiner, Doğu Anadolu Üniversitesi: *Sur Aylık Fikir ve Yorum Dergisi*, October (2005), pp. 50-52.)

¹⁷ Mustafa İsmet İnönü (1884-1973), second president of the Republic of Turkey following Mustafa Kemal's death in 1938. İnönü served as Prime Minister for several terms, maintaining the system that Atatürk put in place. When president, he maintained the dictatorial regime more strictly against Islamic traditions under the name of the secular Republic until 1950.

the Assembly directed it to the Commission of Formal Proposals. On 19 November, the Commission accepted the proposal, and returned it to the presidency of the Grand National Assembly with the recommendation that 150,000 liras be assigned to it (Vahide, 2005). On 25 December, the Assembly's General Commission approved the budget and instructed the *Şer'iyye ve Ma'arif Vekâleti* (Islamic Law and Education Commission) to act accordingly. Meanwhile, while official procedures meandered, Nursi left Ankara for Van and withdrew to isolation in a cave. The proposal had again been sent to the Commission of Formal Proposals where it remained for nearly two years (Badıllı, 1998). Finally, on 12 December 1925, it was returned to the Assembly but seemed to lose momentum. When put to a vote, it was rejected, probably because, by then, a new Assembly had passed a more current law calling for the unification of education and closing of *medreses*.

During the Constitutionalist and beginning of the Republican period, the approval of Nursi's proposed *Medresetü'z-Zehra* demonstrated the high esteem and appreciation that politicians held for his knowledge and ideas (Nursi, 1998). For Nursi, *Medresetü'z-Zehra* was of paramount importance for Eastern Turkey, the Turkish nation, and the entire Islamic world. The need for such a university only increased, but from 1923 to 1950, Nursi could not actively pursue it due to unremitting government oppression,¹⁸ which began in 1925 and continued to the end of his life. In 1950, the Democratic Party that was more tolerant of religion came to power. Its government revived the matter of establishing the Eastern University. In 1951, Nursi sent a congratulatory letter to parliament deputies in Ankara. Elated at the prospect, Nursi also offered advice on the university's significance.¹⁹ President Celal Bayar agreed to establish a new university in Van. He effectively ordered the Ministry of Education to begin its preparations. Had it not been for poor health, Nursi would have accompanied the Minister of Education in his study tour of the Eastern provinces.

On 04 August 1951, Celal Bayar addressed the public in Van, accompanied by Tevfik İleri (Minister of Education). He promised that a university would be established in Van. In 1952, Celal Bayar re-emphasized the university's importance in a 1.5-hour speech delivered to parliament (Badıllı, 1998). Nursi, pleased with such efforts, attributed the government's growing understanding to the services of his students. He advised government officials to give special consideration for Qur'anic truth and the lessons of the *Risâle-i Nur* in the university's curricula.

¹⁸ Oppression consisted of exiles, constant surveillance, isolation from the public, and imprisonment. He was also poisoned many times by unknown perpetrators.

¹⁹ His letter congratulated the Democratic government for coming to power. He reminded the government of his previous attempts during the reigns of Sultan Abdülhamid, Sultan Reşad, and the Grand National Assembly founded by Mustafa Kemal. He suggested the establishment of a university similar to his *Medresetü'z-Zehra* project to the Republican government. Nursi usually appointed Mustafa Sungur, one of his living successors, to carry his letters to officials.

In 1956, the university was transferred to Erzurum from Van because of attacks by the press, which reported that the Democrat Party was establishing the *Medresetü 'z-Zehra* of Nursi in Van (Kırkinci, 2004). Since they considered Nursi a reactionary, the opposition party (RPP) capitalised on this (Canan, 2005), even though he had been acquitted and his works had been cleared of any such charges.

Mehmed Kırkinci, one of Nursi's students in Erzurum, was anxious to establish the university in Erzurum. Erzurum was known for its religious people and the university staff feared any moves that might demoralize the locals. Noticing his anxiety, Nursi wrote to Kırkinci saying that the university in Erzurum was his university and that his students would study there and reiterated the message for his other students (Yeğin, 2005). This served to dispel Kırkinci's misgivings about the project. He and his friends made copies of Nursi's letter for distribution to other students (Kırkinci, 2004). What Nursi meant by "*his students*" was clarified by witnesses, Abdullah Yeğin being one of them, whom Nursi told personally, would become a Professor at the university (Yeğin, 2005). But instead of Abdullah, his brother, Mehmed Münib Yeğin became Professor of Chemistry. Working together with the rector at the time, Mehmed Münib Yeğin, also a *Nursi* student, contributed much to the advance of science at the university. Another witness was Zekeriya Kitapçı, also told by Nursi that he would be lecturer at the university (Kitapçı, 1998). He later served as Professor for eight years in the Faculty of Divinity from its inception in 1971.

The university officially opened on 17 November 1958. To avoid criticism from the press, the government later changed its name from 'Eastern University' to 'Atatürk University'. During the opening ceremony of the Erzurum University, Celal Bayar said that Mustafa Kemal wanted the university in Van; consequently, the name change was appropriately apologized for (Badıllı, 1998). However, Nursi was disturbed by the name change, especially since he had devoted much of his life to it (Güleç, 2005). Mustafa Kemal, on the other hand, had only asked Celal Bayar and Afet İnan to study Van's feasibility. Mustafa Kemal was so interested in the university he had commanded concerned officials to accelerate the process at opening ceremonies of the TBMM (Great National Assembly of Turkey) (1937–1938) (RADIKAL). Mustafa Kemal died in 1938, which left Celal Bayar to complete his request when he became president in 1950. Although he founded the Turkish Republic, there are questions as to how and why Mustafa Kemal approved and conformed Nursi's project, especially since his regime actively oppressed Nursi. Özgürel indicated it is not possible to say that Atatürk conformed to Nursi's wishes, but at least he did not fanatically oppose Nursi's idea (RADIKAL). In fact, he merely postponed Nursi's dream and overshadowed Nursi's name to avoid any serious attention being given to rebuilding any genuine Islamic enterprise while he crafted the secular state and destroyed what remained of Muslim dignity.

In the end, Nursi's vision of an Eastern university was finally implemented with the establishment of Erzurum's Eastern University. Although Nursi was the inseminating genius that spearheaded all efforts through official channels, beginning in 1907, Mustafa Kemal announced its importance in 1937. Nursi's contributions were certainly recognized by the officials who managed to appropriate them for the Eastern University in Van, and later move the project to Erzurum and name it for Atatürk. Ostensibly, Nursi's dream and name had been hijacked due slanderous and negative propaganda concerning his person and the political anxieties harboured at the time.

CONCLUSION

When Europe became powerful it turned east to colonize Muslim countries and eliminate or neutralize the Qur'an, their source of strength and inspiration. Nursi wished to nullify western ambitions by establishing institutions of higher education in which science and religion were integrated. He constructed the intellectual and physical foundation of *Medresetü'z-Zehra*. Unfortunately, WWI halted further implementation and then came the fall of the Ottoman Caliphate and subsequent legal banning of *medreses*. Under these circumstances, it was impossible for his project to process. Nevertheless, his monumental efforts were eventually rewarded when two successive governments finally accepted his proposal.

The dangers Nursi predicted, such as WWI, terrorism, and the transformation of the Ottoman Caliphate into a European civilization, all occurred. Terrorism and cultural westernization resulted from the government's failure to properly appreciate religious education, which was the focus of his *Medresetü'z-Zehra*. Today, terrorism remains a significant threat in Turkey, although Nursi clearly identified its genesis as the backwardness that plagued Muslims and the negative influences of nationalism, ignorance, poverty, disunity and lack of scientific knowledge and technological achievement. He argued that these problems could all be easily remedied by proper approaches to education with the inculcation of Islamic virtues. Such an authentic and holistic education could only be made possible by the integration of religious and positive sciences. Progress in the Muslim world was/is made possible in this manner and is best realized by the removal of entrenched barriers and religious disputes between alim and modern scientific innovators, on the one hand, and by demonstrations of the marvelous synchrony between religion and science on the other. Nursi's *Medresetü'z-Zehra* had these goals as its primary focus. Despite a slow start and many negative developments, Nursi remained steadfast and laid the foundations of a movement that garnered significant influence with numerous followers who later became financially formidable.

His initial concept of the *Medresetü'z-Zehra* eventually revitalized *medreses*. Sensing that *medreses* were struggling and on the verge of collapse, Nursi attempted

a 'by-pass' operation after discovering first hand he was unable to remove the 'embolism'. He did this by implementing his *Medresetü 'z-Zehra* project in the East, which to him was the heart of Asia. Had he been successful on the first attempt, the *medreses* quite likely would have survived. In short, Nursi planned and justified his project philosophically and religiously, proposed it to officials and succeeded in laying its foundation. Next was to design its curriculum. As there were no ready-made materials, this necessitated a specific scientific determination of essentials. However, owing to the unfortunate circumstances which made it impossible to proceed, Nursi was forced to change strategy. With renewed enthusiasm, he then wrote the fundamental texts that later launched a completely new movement called *Dershanes*, which then spread Nursi's *Medresetü 'z-Zehra* concept worldwide.

References

- Akgündüz, A. (1999). *Bilinmeyen Osmanlı*, İstanbul, OSAV.
- Albayrak, S. (1994). *Meşrutiyetten Cumhuriyete meşihat şeriat tarikat kavgası*, Mizan yayınevi.
- Alkan, A.T. (2001). *II. Meşrutiyet devrinde ordu ve siyaset*, İstanbul, Meşrutiyet Devrinde Ordu ve Siyaset.
- Alparslan, U. (1999). Bir Model Olarak Medresetüzzehra Projesi, 12-21.
- Awang, R., Yusoff, K., Ebrahimi, M., Yılmaz, O. (2015). A Challenge from Teaching to Social Movement: Bediüzzaman Said Nursi's Struggles for Modification in Turkey. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*. Vol. 6, No. 6, S1. pp. 444-451. DOI: 10.5901/mjss.2015.v6n6s1p444.
- Badıllı, A. (1998). Bediüzzaman Said-i Nursi Mufassal Tarihçe-i Hayatı. *Books On Nursi Studies*, 1, 2 & 3.
- Bozkurt, O.N. (1966). Yunan politika pyunu. *Türk Kültürü Dergisi*.
- Canan, İ. (2005). A philosophical approach to the educational model of Medresetü 'z-Zehra and Dershane. *Interview*. İstanbul: Marmara University, Faculty of Divinity.
- Güleç, M.N. (2005). Universality of Medresetü 'z-Zehra educational model in light of historical development and the dershanes. *Interview*. İstanbul: The İstanbul Foundation for Science and Culture.
- Kırkinci, M. (2004). *Hayatım-Hatıralarım, Mehmed Kırkinci*, İstanbul, Zafer Yayınları.
- Kitapçı, Z. (1998). *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi ve Anadolu İman Hareketi*, Konya, Kuzucular Ofset.
- Mardin, Ş. (1989). *Religion and social change in modern Turkey: The case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, SUNY Press.
- Nursi, B. (1993). *Emirdağ Lahikası I-II (The Letters of Emirdağ)*. İstanbul: Sözler Yayınevi Publication.
- Nursi, B.S. (1999). *Osmanlıca Asâr-ı Bediyye (in Ottoman Language)*.
- Nursi, B.S. (2002a). *Kastamonu Lahikası (The Letters of Kastamonu)*, İstanbul, Sözler Yayınevi.
- Nursi, B.S. (2002b). *Munazarat (The Debates)*, İstanbul, Sözler Yayınevi Publication.
- Nursi, B.S. (2002c). *Risale-i Nur külliyyatı müellifi Bediüzzaman Said Nursi hayatı-mesleki-tercüme-i hali*, İstanbul, Sözler Yayınevi Publication.
- Nursi, B.S. (2003). *Divan-ı Harb-i Örfi*, İstanbul, Sözler Yayınevi Publication.

- Nursi, S. (1998). *The rays collection*, www.nurpublishers.com.
- Pickthall, M. (1919). The Perils of a Propaganda. *The New Age, Weekly Review of Politics, Literature, and Art*.
- Radikal. *Nurculuk ve Said-i Nursi* [Online]. Available: <http://www.radikal.com.tr/2001/03/01/turkiye/01nur.shtml> [Accessed 15 October 2006].
- Şahiner, N. (1990). *Bilinmeyen taraflarıyla Said Nursi*, İstanbul, Yeni Asya.
- Şahiner, N. (1996). *Bediüzzaman Üniversitesi Medresetü'z-Zehra*, İstanbul, Timaş.
- Süzen, M. (2000). *Bediüzzaman'ın üç Tarihçe-i Hayatı*, Ankara, Yeni Kuşak Yayınları.
- Vahide, S. (2000). The Author of the Risale-i Nur: Bediuzzaman Said Nursi. *İstanbul: Sözler Publications*.
- Vahide, S. (2005). *İslam in modern Turkey: an intellectual biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, State University of New York Press.
- Yeğin, A. (2005). Historical development of the dershaneshane and profession of vakıf. *Interview*. İstanbul: Vatan Dershanesi.
- Yıldız, I. (2000). The Search in the Transitional Period (1924-1950) for a Religious Education Model; The Qur'anic View of Man, According to the Risâle-i Nur. *International Symposium on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*. İstanbul: Sözler Publications.
- Yusoff, K., Ebrahimi, M., Hamidifar, F., Yılmaz, O. (2016). Philosophy and Functional Structure of Medresetü'z-Zehra: A Study on Bediüzzaman Said Nursi. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*. Vol. 7, No. 1, S1. pp. 36-43. Doi:10.5901/mjss.2016.v7n1s1p36
- Yusoff, K., Yılmaz, O., Ebrahimi, M. (2013). Transition in Turkey: An Overview of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, His Life and Works for Medresetü'z-Zehra. *International Journal of West Asian Studies*. Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 67-77. DOI: 10.5895/ijwas.2013.11

