

## SUFISM OR FAITH AND WHAT IS MORE IMPORTANT TO MODERN ISLAM: SAID NURSI'S PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

*Being a primordial religion (Din al-Fitrat), Islam not only refers man/Insan as the outward (al-zahir) and the inward (al-Batin), nonetheless fashioned him in such a form to carry both (esoteric/exoteric) dimensions in his personality within the general human environment by considering the foundation of Islam on three dimensions: 1) Islam/Submission) 2) Iman/Faith); 3) Ihsan /Spiritual perfection. As such, generally faith and Sufism are considered mutually interdependent. However, for Nursi (who emerged the most influential Muslim scholar of late Ottoman environment for the service he has rendered) faith had to be emphasised above all other considerations-, and, Sufism which for many is the code of heart (Fiqh al-Batin) and the feeling of His (God) presence (al-Ihsan), for him (Nursi) is the fruit. With this intention to realize all the possibilities of the human state (Ahwal) to become the universal man (al-Insan al-Kamil) by reminding man to tear his roots from the outer world to absorb in the divine nature which resides at the centre of his heart, Sufis seek the infinite (la Maqam) by doing/spreading such beliefs/practices that not only contradict the fundamentals of Islam, nonetheless are not relevant/rational to modern times. As such, this led Nursi to discuss the nature/history of Sufism in the light of the classical Sufism. While saying that the time for Sufism is over on the one hand and it is a fruit on the other presents a different account of the subject. It resulted in certain uncertainty that needs serious research on the subject of faith and Sufism. In the given context, this research seeks to answer the following queries from Said Nursi's Perspective:*

- 1) *Are there any roots of Sufism in Qur'an?*
- 2) *Is Faith and Sufism mutually interdependent?*
- 3) *If yes, why then he says that the role of Sufism is over?*

**KEYWORDS:** *Blind faith, Intellect, Modernity, Crisis, Spirituality, Common good*

## INTRODUCTION:-

The term Islam essentially means to submit and surrender one's will to higher truth and a transcendental law in order to be governed by a life informed by the divine purpose of creation, and where both mind/body and spirit are equally valued. Being a primordial religion (Din al-Fitrat), Islam not only refers man/Insan as the outward (*al-zahir*) and the inward (*al-Batin*), nonetheless fashioned him in such a form to carry both (esoteric/exoteric) dimensions in his personality within the general human environment by considering the foundation of Islam on three dimensions: 1) Islam/Submission) 2) Iman/Faith); 3) Ihsan /Spiritual perfection. The idea of divine as well as the conception of human nature in Islam is permeated by a deep humanistic ethos. God is the absolute epitome of kindness and mercy towards mankind and man is His vicegerent. Islam views man as essentially a rational being endowed with a reasoning faculty, self-consciousness and moral choice. According to the Islamic view, human nature is characterized by a certain duality or polarity. On the one hand, the human has been created from clay-a lowly substance.<sup>1</sup> God has breathed His soul into him, on the other end.<sup>2</sup> In addition, man has been given the freedom to exercise a choice between good and evil.<sup>3</sup> Thus, man has two kinds of potentialities: sublime and divine-like, on the one hand, and base and demonic, on the other hand.<sup>4</sup>

The dawn of the 20th century has witnessed the growth among humans of a new awareness, that mankind must live together, every group of it interdependent with the others. As such the unity of mankind is being felt with ever growing intensity around the globe<sup>5</sup>, says, Ismail Ragi al-Faruqi (1339-1406/1921-1986) a renowned Palestinian-American philosopher widely recognized as an authority on Islam and comparative religion.<sup>6</sup> For the reasons, faith must be treated as an encompassing way of life and its fundamentals should be given much preference over all other things for the betterment of humanity at large under the *weltanschauung* of Tawhid, as it is the central pivot around which the whole doctrine and teachings of all religions revolve. From this world view of Tawhid, proceeds the fundamental/supreme matters in the world of humanity and Islam- Belief/law/life in order to bring about accord in the relationship of man to God and man to other fellow human beings, says Said Nursi-(1876-1960)-<sup>7</sup> a great contemporary figures in Islam whose intellectual content and awakening can be seen from his monumental work *Risale-i Nur*- a thematic exegesis of the Qur'an. He occupies a significant place in modern Turkey and Islamic thought. He led movement for the revival of Islamic belief and faith, and displayed a rare combination of integrity, dedication

<sup>1</sup>Qur'an 23:12; 32:7

<sup>2</sup>Qur'an 15:29

<sup>3</sup>Qur'an 76:3; 90:8-10

<sup>4</sup>A.R.Momin, "Pluralism and Multiculturalism: Islamic Perspective", American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences, USA:IIIT, vol. 18, No. 2, 2003, p.129

<sup>5</sup> Ismail Ragi al-Faruqi, Islam and other faiths, USA:IIIT, 1998, p.129

<sup>6</sup>In a life spanned over 30 years, he authored, edited and translated 25 books and published more than 100 research papers. Also, the late Scholar was a visiting professor at more than 23 universities in Africa, Europe, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia, and served on the editorial boards of seven major journals, see John L.Esposito, The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, vol.2, P.3

<sup>7</sup>Sarwat Saulat, Turkey ka mard-i Mujahid-Bediuzzaman Said Nursi,(Urdu), Delhi: MarkaziMaktaba Islami, 2002, p.19 widely known as Badiuzzaman (wonderer of his age)

And clarity of thought. He emerged as one of the leading religious scholar of the highest standing who had wide knowledge of modern science and many areas of modern life and learning, to say that he stands a colossus above twentieth century Muslim scholarship in Turkey is no over statement.<sup>8</sup> He is regarded as the *Mujadid* (the Reviver) and deemed to be the saviour of Islam in Turkey, and the most proficient Turkish Muslim theologian and exegete in the modern era who interpreted the tenets of the Qur'an in accordance with the understandings and demands of the day. He witnessed the painful events of World War 1st and 2nd, as well as the challenges of Modernity posed to humanity in general, and to various faith communities in particular. Virtually, all those who have studied the circumstances of the Muslims in recent centuries agree that Ustad Bediuzzaman Said Nursi was an Islamic figure of great stature, of strong faith and complete sincerity; a person of great dignity who was cognizant of divine unity and its truths; one of the most distinguished of his time, vast knowledge, of penetrating thought.<sup>9</sup>

Faith is something people believe in as a state of mind with strong conviction. In religious traditions, it is one of the most central parts which define our relationship to someone higher than us on earth under skies. Almost all religions are faith based. Islam too is a religion of faith. So in order to be a follower of Islam, one has to submit to it without questioning its authority to a large extent, however doesn't advocate blind faith in many matters. In this sense, Islam is not something new. However, it is the youngest version of God's will in the ministry of Muḥammad- the last Prophet in the series of Prophets send by God to guide mankind. In other words, Muslims are a people of faith having not only faith in the oneness of God- *Wahdat-i Rab*, but also in the oneness of mankind- *Wahdat-i 'Ab*. For Nursi, the most important objective of his endeavours was the safeguarding and strengthening of belief in the oneness of God.<sup>10</sup> He strongly believed that Islam holds that the message of all Prophets/nations/people had but one essence and core, composed of two elements: First is *Tawhid*<sup>11</sup> or the acknowledgement that God alone is God and that all worship, service and obedience are due to Him alone. Second, is morality, doing good and avoiding evil. Each revelation had come futurized in a code of behaviour particularly applicable to its people, and hence relevant to their historical situation and conditions. This particularization doesn't affect the essence or core of the revelation. If it did, God's justice will not be absolute and the claims of universalism and egalitarianism would fall to the ground.<sup>12</sup> With the change and evolution in societies and civilizations, laws have indeed changed; however, faith and righteous deeds, which are the foundations of religion, have not undergone any change. However, there are some of the biggest challenges to faith in today's world; many believers struggled to maintain their faith in the modern-day landscape- an issue that affects negatively the entire humanity.

For the reasons, Nursi served, loved and struggled with the placing of faith over all other things in his entire life. Faith was near and dear to his heart and soul. Almost, all of his writings have been written in defence of faith. Nursi grew up in an unfavourable political atmosphere when the caliphate had become the sick man of Europe which had a direct bearing on his personality. As such, he was able to gain knowledge thereby of the broader problems facing Ottoman society and the wider Muslim world. The demise of the Ottoman Empire was succeeded by a republic based on the principles of secularisms and Westernisation and with other such materialistic/atheistic

<sup>8</sup> Ali, Jamiel, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and his approach to modern challenges in Turkey, Shah-i Hamdan Institute of Islamic Studies: Insight Islamicus, 2011, p.51

<sup>9</sup> Said Nursi, "Signs of miraculosity," in Risale-i Nur, New Delhi: Barla Publications, 2015, p.7

<sup>10</sup> Colin Turner, Makers of Islamic Civilization-Said Nursi, New York: I.B.Tauris, 2009, p.47

<sup>11</sup> For its importance, see al-Faruqi, al-Tawhid- its implication for thought and life, USA: IIIT, 2000

<sup>12</sup> Ismail R. al-Faruqi, Islam and other Faiths, ed., Atallah Siddiqui, USA: IIIT, 1998, P.79

philosophies that brought doubts concerning Islam which left on their lives a deep spiritual crisis. As such, he responded positively by emphasizing his belief that the Qur'an was the only truth and man's true happiness/progress could be achieved exclusively through adoption of reforms including Sufism.<sup>13</sup> Sufism with multiple opinions about its origin,<sup>14</sup> is based on the simplicity/piety and beauty of the faith.

Although, Sufism throughout Islamic history/civilization, serves a path for individual spiritual purification and a purveyor of moral values on the social front. As the fundamental goal of Sufism is purifying oneself of bad habits and adorning oneself with good habits. Throughout history, institutionalised Sufi orders have ensured the moral education and consolidation of societies through their ascetic and pious education, while spreading virtues and values, such as selfless love, sincerity, generosity and humility and endless sacrifices. Tekkes served as spiritual centres and ethical educational institutions that reached wide audiences until the Ottoman Empire. Throughout the 19th century, Westernisation and reform movements in the Ottoman Empire weakened the influence of some classical religious institutions, including Sufi orders. Secularisation policies, which gained momentum with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, dealt a major blow to the institutional appearance of Sufism due to radical initiatives, such as the closure of Sufi lodges (*Tekkes* and *Zawiyas*) after 1925. As religious life withdrew from the public sphere during this period, spiritual crises and moral vacuums began to emerge. The strict secularism policies implemented in Turkey at the beginning of the 20th century led to the exclusion of Islamic values from social life, thus creating a critical environment for faith and morality. Similarly, modernisation had made it difficult to transmit religious values from one generation to the next in many Muslim societies, bringing to the fore the search for new approaches to meet an individual's spiritual needs. Also, Sufism has been believed to be the root cause of blind imitation, intellectual paralysis and domination of the Muslim world by European powers.<sup>15</sup> Hence Sufism needs to be judged by the normativity of the Qur'an.<sup>16</sup>

Nursi proposed an alternative spiritual path that preserved the essence of traditional Sufism, while being compatible with modern conditions in terms of form and method. Nursi, a scholar who witnessed the final years of the Ottoman Empire and the early years of the Republic, closely observed the spiritual decline of Islamic society and developed radical ideas as solution to overcome this decline. According to him, the fundamental cause of material and spiritual decline in the Islamic world lied in a weak belief and loss of moral values. Therefore, Nursi prioritised strengthening the faith of individuals and embedding Qur'anic revelations in their hearts through contemplation. This approach differed from the *Seyrü-Sülûk*<sup>17</sup> discipline of classical Sufi orders, though it ultimately aimed to achieve similar spiritual maturation. He directly presented Quranic exegesis and lessons on the truths of faith to a wide audience through his collection of literary works entitled. In the absence of

<sup>13</sup>Colin Turner, Said Nursi, op.cit, p.33

<sup>14</sup>For the definition of Sufism see, Abdul Haq Ansari, Sufism and Shari'ah: A Study of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi's effort to reform Sufism, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1986, pp.31-33

<sup>15</sup>Sayyed Hussain Nasr, Living Sufism, Srinagar: Gulshun Books, 2008, p.2 (see introduction).

<sup>16</sup>Mir valiuddin, The Quranic Sufism, Delhi: Motilal Banarasi Dass, 1977, pp.1-16

<sup>17</sup>Seyr ü sülûk is a core concept in Sufism, meaning a spiritual journey or path where a seeker (sâlik) travels from ignorance/worldly self (Nafs) towards spiritual maturity/authenticity, divine knowledge (Ma'rifah/Irfan), and closeness to God, guided by a spiritual teacher (Murshid) within a Sufi order (Tariqah). This rigorous process involves purifying the soul, refining morals, and progressing through defined stages (Maratib) of spiritual awareness and experience, ultimately aiming for union with the Divine (Fana fi-Allah)

*Tekke* training,<sup>18</sup> he established what is basically called a *Nurschool* of faith and morality. Mardin while discussing the Nur movement that developed under Said Nursi's leadership as an example of religious and social change in modern Turkey, emphasised that this movement was organised as a text-based community rather than a classical Sufi order; whereby, the text-student relationship takes precedence over the disciple-mentor relationship. In this way, Nursi succeeded in transmitting the core values of Sufism through a different approach during a period when Sufi orders were banned.<sup>19</sup> Reflection which helps us to understand our strengths/weaknesses/values and to re-orient ourselves to become best versions of ourselves occupies a special place in the *Risale-i Nur* collection. Said Nursi regarded reflection as one of the most important principles in his spiritual path/journey. Nursi stated that it plays a decisive role in the transition from imitation faith (*Iman-i Taqlidi*) to investigative faith (*Iman-i Tahqiqi*), while a superficial faith that is not supported by rational and spiritual evidence can be easily destabilised by doubt, and investigative faith strengthened by reflection can withstand a multitude of doubts. As such, one of the fundamental goals of *Risale-i Nur* is to guide its readers to a desired level of faith through reflection. Nursi's main objective was to explain the truths of faith in a way that everyone can understand, and he tried to achieve this through his writings. His method allows the mind, heart and soul to synchronise, since reflection is not just a mental activity but a comprehensive process of understanding that also involves the heart and soul. Thus, reflection becomes one of the most important means of advancing the efforts of grasping knowledge about God (*Ma'arifah/Irfan*) and perfecting one's faith.

To modern ills besetting the Muslims and others he responded by introducing a Qur'anic method of proof based on reflection. According to him, in comparison to the path of theologians based on reason and logic or the path of Sufis based on discovery and pleasure, the Qur'anic method of explanation offers a much more comprehensive and powerful path. Sufism overtime is preached in such a way that come with equal harm in our personnel/collective life where religion/Islam is seen something separate from the rest of our activities making it difficult to see faith and Sufism antagonistic to each other as against to a unified search for meaning. Nursi's understanding of Sufism, based on the impotence, poverty, reflection and contemplation concepts, has shown that Sufism can be practised in the modern era as an effective spiritual education system without being tied to a Sufi order. Nursi, in response to the needs of his time, had presented a new path inspired by the al-Qur'an which he refers to as the time of truth. The reasons why Bediuzzaman believed the time for Sufism was over are many. He is noted for quoting Imam Rabani (for Nursi, a hero of *Naqashbandi* Order) that even to classical Sufis that a disclosure of a single matter of the truths of faith is preferable to thousands of illuminations, ecstasies and instances of wonder-working, as the final point of all the Sufi way is the clarifications and unfolding the truth of faith.<sup>20</sup> For the reasons, he is of the strong belief that if persons of great stature as Shaykh Abd al-Qadir Gilani (1077-1166)<sup>21</sup>, Shah Naqashband (1318-1389)<sup>22</sup> and Imam Rabbani (1564-1624)<sup>23</sup> were live today, they would

<sup>18</sup> It refers to the spiritual education and practices of Sufi disciplines that took place in a Sufi lodge, known variously as a tekke (Turkish), zawiya (Arabic), khanaqah/Dargah (Persian). These centres served as places for gathering, lodging, worship, and training for Sufi initiates (murids or dervishes) under the guidance of a spiritual master (murshid or pir)

<sup>19</sup> Said Inan et.al. Said Nursi's concept of Tasawuf: An Ethical framework for modern Muslim Societies, International Journal for Advanced Research, vol.13, No.8, 2025, p.768

<sup>20</sup> Said Nursi, the Letters from Risale-i Nur, op.cit. p38

<sup>21</sup> The traditional founder of the Qadiriyyah order and adherent of Hanbali School of Islamic legal thought.

<sup>22</sup> Founder of one of the largest Spiritual paths- the Naqashbandi Silsila

<sup>23</sup> Of Indian origin widely known as Mujadid Alf-i Thani and known for the concept of Wahdat-i Shuhud (A refined perspective on Divine Unity). See for details, Abdul Haq Ansari, Sufism and Shari'ah: A Study of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi's effort to reform Sufism, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1986

expand all their efforts on strengthening the truths of faith- being the core of Islam no one can enter paradise, but very men will go there without Sufism. For him, faith is the bread while as Sufism is the fruit.<sup>24</sup> In former times, through spiritual journeying from forty (40) days to as much as forty years, a person could rise to some of the truths of faith. However, now there is a way to rise to those truths in forty minutes.<sup>25</sup> For Nursi, at the end, the way to salvation consists solely in choosing faith over other things as for him among the three supreme matters<sup>26</sup> in the world of humanity and Islam, the truths of belief are the greatest duty because the aim of the Qur'an is to guide the man to belief/faith and those who sense genuine will use that experience to turn their minds/hearts/souls to faith.

Although, as Iqbal Choosing Rumi as his guide,<sup>27</sup> Nursi during his formative years was greatly influenced by the writings and teachings of the classical *Ahl- al-Tasawwuf* as his way to set out on a spiritual journey as he was seeking relief from his spiritual crisis. As such, he spent much of his time on Çam Dagi (Prime Mountain), while in exile to Barla.<sup>28</sup> By considering their teachings previously as safer, later on retracted from his earlier position by adopting a new way. Which consists of four main pillars: impotence (*Ajz*); poverty (*Faqr*); compassion (*Shafaqa*); and reflection (*Tafakkur*). His 'way' aims at four things: the admission of one's total powerlessness and inability (*Ajz*); the acknowledgment that one possesses nothing (*Faqr*); the realisation that compassion (*Shafaqa*) is the key principle upon which the cosmos is founded; and the attainment of constant reflection (*Tafakkur*), deliberation and self-awareness. To admit one's impotence and to acknowledge one's poverty, Nursi says, is to invoke God's love and mercy, while to act with compassion and to reflect upon God and one's own soul is to appeal to Divine compassion and wisdom. The path of 'ecstatic love' adopted by certain Sufi groups may have the same aims, Nursi says, but their way is longer and potentially more dangerous. The way of impotence, poverty, compassion and reflection comes directly from the Quran and the way of the Prophet, he says. It is therefore not like the stereotypical Sufi 'path' with its various psycho-spiritual techniques, rites and rituals. Rather, it means simply seeing oneself as the Quran says the self should be seen, namely as an impotent, poverty-stricken being in constant need of worship and Divine succour. The Nursian spiritual path is one which aims at continuous awareness and self-reflection, together with the stringent adherence to the precepts of the Qur'an and the practices of the Prophet. In other words, Islam must be treated as an encompassing way of life and faith in it is a primary with preference over all other things for the betterment of humanity at large under the *weltanschauung* of Tawhid, as it is the central pivot around which the whole doctrine and teaching revolve. From this world view of Tawhid, proceeds the fundamental unity of the universe, of man and life in order to bring about accord in the relationship of man to God and man to other fellow human beings as One thing that is common and fundamentally important part to all religions is faith. As faith is the core of Tasawwuf, so the answer has to be faith. What he means is that the kind of Sufism which is prevalent in Muslim societies is no longer fit for the purpose for the two main reasons: 1) it has been uprooted from the soil of the broader pietistic culture which was prevalent at that time. 2) today it is open to misunderstanding and abuse, so it is here we understood his perspective that Sufism was no longer of benefit and common good. Spirituality, however is always of benefit by separating it from Sufism.

<sup>24</sup>Said Nursi, the Letters from Risale-i Nur, op.cit. p.39

<sup>25</sup>ibid

<sup>26</sup>Belief/ law/life

<sup>27</sup>See for further details, Gerhard Browning, Iqbal between India and Europe in Mohamed Taher, ed. Islam and the western world, New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 1998, pp.224-242

<sup>28</sup>Said Nursi, tr. The Fourth Letter, in The Letters, Risale-i Nur, op.cit., 2015, p.35