

Said Nursi's Theological Thoughts in the Light of *Sunni* Doctrine

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to evaluate the theological thought of Badiuzaman Said Nursi in the light of the doctrine (*aqidah*) of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* or briefly known as *Sunni*. It uses the qualitative methods of analytical evaluation and content analysis. It mainly evaluates Nursi's ideas derived from his primary sources including his speeches and writings including his masterpiece, *Rasail al-Nur*. The evaluation of Nursi's theological thought is divided into four aspects. The first aspect is the methodology of deriving legal verdicts, which is primarily divided into *dalil al-naql* (revelation) and *dalil al-aql* (reason). The second aspect is the pillars of faith (*iman*), which are firm belief in Allah, angels, the divine books, the prophets, judgement day and predestination. The third is related to the divine attributes and the beautiful names of Allah. The final is the different doctrines of various sects (*mazhab*) such as *Mu'tazilah*, *al-Qadariyyah*, *Syiah Rafidhah* and *Zindiq* (atheists). This study found that all four aspects of Nursi's theological thought are consistent with the principles of *Sunni* doctrine and the methods applied by *Sunni* scholars. Hence, it is concluded that Nursi made invaluable intellectual endeavours to defend *Sunni* doctrine through his speeches and writings.

Keywords: *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah*, *aqidah*, Badiuzaman Said Nursi, Islamic civilisation, Islamic doctrine, Islamic thought, *Sunni* beliefs

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INTRODUCTION

Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah (people of the Prophet's tradition and the Ummah consensus) or briefly known as *Sunni* is the largest sect of Islam as well as the

largest religious denomination in the world and the field of theology. One of the most prominent Muslim theologians to defend Sunni doctrine was Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1876-1960).

Islamic doctrine (*aqidah*) is the absolute essence referring to the term *al-din* in Islam. Al-Buti (1997) associated the term “*aqidah*” with aspects of a Muslim’s faith and trust in Allah, the Angels, the Messengers, the Books, Judgement Day and predestination or Divine Will and Decree (*Qada wa Qadar*). The word “*iman*” or faith has a similar connotation. Similarly, Nursi (1998) related *aqidah* to the actions and deeds of one who is consistently obedient to Allah Almighty without being associated with aspects of logic or the lack of it. Even the implementation of an action is based on the element of pure sincerity.

Nursi emphasised the role of religion in the problems of the Muslim world that is suffering from spiritual deterioration. Nursi (1956/1995) reminded the faithful that:

The greatest danger facing the people of Islam at this time is their hearts are being corrupted and belief harmed through the misguidance that arises from science and philosophy. The sole solution for this is light; it is to show light so that their hearts can be reformed and their belief, saved. (p. 1435)

He added:

It is a universal principle accepted worldwide that no nation can continue in existence without religion...If, God forbid, a Muslim apostasizes, he falls into absolute disbelief; he cannot remain in a state of ‘doubting unbelief,’ which keeps him alive to an extent. He also cannot be like irreligious Europeans. (p. 374)

Muslims should avoid being in a state of ‘doubting unbelief’ and should also avoid being irreligious. Nursi argued that “Islam is the master and guide of the sciences, and the chief and father of all true knowledge” (1956/1995, p. 374).

Hence, Nursi attempted to integrate traditional religious and modern scientific sciences in order to reveal the truth. Nursi (1956/2007) justified this theoretically:

The light of the conscience is religious sciences (*ulum-u diniye*). The light of the mind is exact or modern sciences (*funun-u medeniye*). Combining both manifests the truth. The student’s skill develops further with these two (sciences). When they are separated, the former breeds superstition and the latter breeds corruption and skepticism. (p. xv)

His main focus was *'ilm al-kalam* (theology) as the means of intellectual defence against the attacks of rationalistic skepticism. The second was *tafsir* (Quranic exegesis) as the means of explicating principal Islamic beliefs. Notwithstanding Western thinkers' attempt to demolish Islamic doctrine in the aspect of human development and civilisation, Nursi struggled to defend Quranic truth and its connectedness with all aspects in order to develop human beings and their civilisation.

Nursi claimed that the *Sunni* school was a school of thought that was compatible with the Quran and the *Sunnah*, and that other schools went off in some excess on one or another point. He considered the *Sunni* doctrine to be the true sect because the truth is predominant in its fundamental beliefs (Yavuz, n. d.).

This article aimed to evaluate analytically the theological thought of Badiuzaman Said Nursi in the light of the doctrine (*aqidah*) of *Sunni*. This paper will unfold his struggles and contributions in maintaining the true doctrine of *Sunni* among Muslims.

METHODS

In terms of methodology, this study used the qualitative approaches of analytical evaluation and documentation as well as content analysis. It mainly evaluated Nursi's theological thought contained in his primary works comprising his speeches and writings in his *magnum opus*, popularly known as *Risale-i Nur* (Epistles of Light). It is a thematic commentary on the Quran with

its main focus on the renewal of faith. In addition, several related secondary sources were also reviewed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The evaluation of Nursi's theological thought is divided into four aspects: the first is methodology of deriving legal verdicts; the second is the pillars of faith (*iman*); the third is the divine attributes and beautiful names; and the final is the different doctrines of the various sects (*mazhab*).

Methodology of Deriving Propositions and Legal Verdicts

The methodology for deriving legal verdicts or propositions practised by Muslims is based on revealed evidence derived from revelation (*al-naql*), namely, the Quran and the *Sunnah* and rational evidence based on reason (*al-aql*) and customs (*adat*). Propositions derived from reason or custom must adhere to the Quran and the *Sunnah*. Hence, the strength of Islamic doctrine is evident as freedom to prove any reasonable opinion is permissible in Islam. However, this permissibility is limited to the standards of compliance to the Quran and the *Sunnah*. Therefore, any breach against this standard of deriving proposition is rejected by *Sunni* belief (al-Misri, 1972).

Only a true doctrine can ensure that a man achieves salvation on the Day of Judgement in the Hereafter. *Aqidah* is an established adherence and not an illusion or myth without a single doubt. The main core of Islamic doctrine is the pillars of faith, and

all Muslims are enjoined to believe in them as true doctrine (al-Bayjuri, 2011).

In order to prove the purity of faith in Islam, Nursi often introduced arguments based on the guidance of the Quran, the *Sunnah* and reason. Such a propositional method resulted in strong conviction of the soul.

According to Nursi (1956/1994), the Quran reveals all matters that can create conviction in the human soul. For instance, the Quran mentions Allah's power that is manifested in His creation, nature, heaven and hell as well as the histories of previous nations as lessons for future generations. The Quran is the most authentic source of information about metaphysics, the beauty of language and endless magnificence. The Quran also describes the action, the attributes and the beautiful names of Allah.

Nursi proved the Quran as the most authoritative and authentic source of revelation and stated that it should become a major source of guidance for humankind in their beliefs and doctrine. Simultaneously, the status of the *Sunnah* as a source of deriving propositions is acknowledged by Allah. As evidence, al-Nursi referred to some Quranic words:

This is the Scripture whereof there is no doubt, a guidance unto those who ward off (evil). Who believe in the Unseen, and establish worship, and spend of that We have bestowed upon them; And who believe in that which is revealed unto thee (Muhammad) and that which was revealed before thee, and are certain

of the Hereafter. These depend on guidance from their Lord. These are the successful. (*Surah al-Baqarah* 2, 2-5)

Say (O Muhammad): O mankind! Lo! I am the messenger of Allah to you all - (the messenger of) Him unto Whom belongeth the Sovereignty of the heavens and the earth. There is no God save Him. He quickeneth and He giveth death. So believe in Allah and His messenger, the Prophet who can neither read nor write, who believeth in Allah and in His Words, and follow him that haply ye may be led aright. (*Surah al-A'raf* 7, 158)

He it is Who hath sent His messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth, that He may make it conqueror of all religion however much idolaters may be averse. (*Surah al-Saf* 61, 9)

Besides the Quran and the *Sunnah*, Nursi (1956/1995) acknowledged the power and authority of human thought on evidence of truth. However, the status of evidence based human thought regarding faith resolves very little compared with both sources. In other words, if there are differences in the ruling of the Quran and the *Sunnah* in terms of faith, evidence derived from human reasoning cannot provide a better understanding and therefore, should be ignored altogether.

It can be concluded that the evidence method adopted by Nursi is in accordance with the method used by other *Sunni* scholars who derive evidence regarding all aspects of faith from the Quran and the *Sunnah*.

Pillars of Faith

Islam upholds six pillars of faith, namely, faith in Allah, angels, scripture, messengers, the Hereafter and the determinations of Allah. Nursi (1956/1993) explained the pillars of faith in the following way:

- a. Believing in Allah means to acknowledge aspects of His divinity as *Rabb* (Lord), being the owner of beautiful names and possessing a perfect nature. This is followed by having confidence in Allah, the Most Gracious, and acknowledging that He alone is worthy of worship.
- b. Believing in angels demands that a believer must be convinced of their existence. They are honourable creatures of Allah who are ever ready to fulfil all His commandments. Each angel is assigned duties such as delivering revelation, giving sustenance, separating the soul from the body and so on.
- c. Believing in scripture means to believe that Allah presented revelation compiled in books to the apostles to guide people towards the path of truth. Each believer must follow the instructions as taught by the apostles who received the books. The last scripture was received by the Prophet Muhammad, and it revealed an eternal truth based on the teaching of the

Quran.

- d. Having faith in the messenger means believing that the messenger's mission stems from the commandments of Allah. Therefore, a faithful believer must trust, obey and follow all the teachings that the messenger has conveyed. Among the messengers of Allah, the most honourable was the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).
- e. Believing in the Hereafter signifies the reality of resurrection. All human beings will be resurrected from their graves and proffered reward or punishment for all their deeds while living in the world.
- f. The belief in the *qada' wa qadar* (divine will and decree) whether good or bad. All these decrees are predestined at the beginning in *Luh Mahfuz*. Allah performs all decrees according to his absolute free will.

Al-Hulaymi (1979) claimed that the pillars of faith elucidated by Nursi are in accordance with the tenets of faith believed by the *Sunni* at an earlier stage.

Properties and the Beauty of Allah's Names

Al-Nursi recognised the nature and beauty of Allah's names. Research into his *rasail* has compiled all this evidence. In his writing, he stated that everything manifests the existence of Allah. All objects become a window to knowing Him. It is expected that no one denies that all objects in the universe were created based on the nature and beauty

of His name. For example, human wisdom is due to His name *al-Hakim*, while medical science is due to His all-curing name, *al-Syafi* (Nursi, 1956/1992b).

For Nursi (1956/1992b), Allah S.W.T. possesses every great characteristic. Allah is the Most Powerful and the Wisest in creating and sentencing reward or punishment upon His creatures. Every faithful believer must entrust that Allah is perfect in nature. Those who deny the nature of Allah based on evidence of the universe are deviated from the right path.

On the absolute power of Allah, Nursi (1956/1992b) described the human weaknesses that need protective power. Only Allah has protective power. The declaration of human weakness and the belief that Allah alone could provide absolute protection encourages human beings to prostrate before Him and obey His commandments.

On the gracious nature of Allah, the limited human mind is unable to evaluate it. Human beings are only able to express gratitude, thankfulness and endless appreciation. Among the practices to show the degree of gratitude is the recitation of prayer five times every day (1956/Nursi, 1992b).

Al-Nursi also compiled all the beautiful names of Allah. These include the names *al-Rahman*, *al-Rahim*, *al-Latif*, *al-Karim*, *al-Musawwir*, *al-'Alim*, *al-Mun'im*, *al-Hannan*, *al-Adl*, *al-Jawwad*, *al-Jalil* and *al-Baqi*. He explained the details of these names for the benefit of the faithful (Nursi, 1956/1992b).

Al-Nursi's discussion of the nature and

beauty of Allah's names coincided with the analysis presented by *Sunni* disciple. Al-Nursi took care to keep up with the discipline of the *Sunni* faith.

Sect Differences

In the history of the sects, faith and theology were often discussed. The truth and falsehood status of certain sects can be identified by their theology. If the theology conformed to the principles of the Quran and the *Sunnah*, it was correct and acceptable. However, if it diverted from Islamic law, it must be avoided.

In relation to this, al-Nursi displayed numerous writings on certain Islamic sects that displeased him and which he said should be avoided by every Muslim. Among the sects are:

Muktazilah. Al-Nursi (1956/1992a) criticised this group as a group that diverted from the path of righteousness. He stated that the group was not following the straight path traversed by the *Sunni*. Even though the *Muktazilah* made an effort to worship Allah S.W.T. through the assertion that the creature created its own deeds, they had forgotten that everything was produced by Allah's resolution in accordance with the method proposed by the *Sunni* group. He asserted that the *Sunni*'s ways are more subtle, careful and meticulous although *Muktazilah* figures such as al-Zamakhshari and al-Jabba'i labelled the *Sunni* group by various names. However, the *Sunni* believe they will thrive in the Hereafter.

Al-Qadariyyah. This is one of the sects that denies *al-qadr*. It is sub-divided into several groups and tribes. Nursi (1956/1992a) based his reasoning on the Prophet's saying: "The Qadariyyah are Magians of this Ummah. If they fall ill do not visit them, and if they die, do not pray over them" (*Sahih al-Bukhari* and Muslim). The *Al-Qadariyyah* were among the first of the deviant sects to emerge in the period of the Companions and thus, was rejected by *Sunni* scholars.

Syiah Rafidhah. According to Nursi (1956/1992a), loving *Ahl al-Bayt* is commanded by Allah and His Messenger. However, the *Syiah Rafidhah* took a more extreme loving approach even though devotion is divided into two parts. The first approach of devotion is worship based on speech, which refers to the feeling of love towards Ali, al-Hasan, al-Husayn and *Ahl al-Bayt* as worshipping Allah and His Messenger. This feeling of love increases the devotion towards the Prophet Muhammad p.b.u.h. As such, this kind of devotion is a bridge to loving Allah S.W.T. and is allowed in Islam. If there is excessiveness in this type of devotion, it does not cause harm because love has no boundaries and it does not propose hate towards others.

The second type of devotion is the feeling of love in the name of individuals. This type of love encourages a person to be devoted to the body of an individual such as the love towards Ali because of his agility and courage, or the love towards al-Hasan and al-Husayn due to their superiority and other qualifications. However, this type of

love does not lead a person to devotion to the Prophet. Even among the *Rafidhah* group, there were those who loved themselves but did not recognise Allah and His Messenger. As such, this type of devotion does not provide a bridge of love to Allah and His Messenger. Furthermore, this kind of love can lead to extreme hatred and hostility towards others.

It might appear that the *Syiah Rafidhah* have acted extremely by devoting towards to Saiyyidina Ali, while detesting Abu Bakar and Umar. This is the wrong kind of love as it leads to infidelity in Islam.

Zindiq. Nursi (1956/1992a) asserted that his preaching was based on the Quran to defend against atheists who were full of wrongdoing. For example, talking to snakes in human form could lead to further offences that could result in hypocrisy and willingness to sacrifice one's religion. Such people make up the deviants of the *zindiq* group who rejected truth although they knew it was truth. They should soundly opposed by all.

Other sects mentioned and opposed by al-Nursi were similarly resisted by *Sunni* scholars over the centuries. This can be observed in the writings of *Sunni* scholars (Al-Syahrastani, 2003).

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the methodology of deriving legal verdicts and propositions, the pillars of faith, the most beautiful names of Allah and His divine attributes as well as the various sects elucidated by Nursi is

consistent with the method used by other *Sunni* scholars and jurists in presenting and defending *Sunni* doctrine. It is evident that his theological statements strengthen the doctrinal arguments upholding *Sunni* scholars, considering his contributions and struggles in defending the most righteous beliefs and practices of Islam and rejuvenating Islamic civilisation.

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