

Muslim Response to the West: A Comparative Study of Muhammad ‘Abduh and Said Nursi

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Abstract

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the entire world witnessed dynamic changes. Dramatic alterations such as the decline of the Ottoman Empire, colonization of Muslim lands, two world wars, divisions in the Muslim world and quest for unity, emergence of major ideologies like Communism, Capitalism, Materialism, and other political changes like the French Revolution affected the globe in general and the Muslim world in particular. These ideologies and philosophies earmarked the development of the Western world, which created imbalance and resulted in the socio-political and economic hegemony of the West on the rest of the world. With the intellectual and military domination of the West over the Muslim world, a process of taking over Western institutions for the benefit of the Muslim world commenced.

Islam became a rallying point against these philosophies and hegemony. Many Muslim reformers and intellectuals worked to counter Western influence on Muslim institutions and ideas, which resulted in the emergence of various reform movements that arose from different parts of the Muslim world. While some reformers rejected the West at the outset, others advocated the West and still other reformers maintained a balance between the two. Notable among such Muslim thinkers and reformers were the Egyptian Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905) and the Turk Said Nursi (1876-1960), who left such an indelible imprint on Muslims minds that their ideas and thoughts are still reverberating in both the academic and public discourses. Since these two contemporary scholars witnessed the whole milieu of the changing Muslim world, this paper aims to analyze and compare their response to the West.

Keywords: Modernity, Abduh, Nursi, Muslim Response

Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905): The Egyptian

Muhammad Abduh, an Egyptian philosopher and sociologist, is ranked among the epitomes of the modern Muslim world.¹ He was a jurist, and leader of a major social reform movement in the Muslim world who propounded the modernist reinterpretation of Islam, thus receiving the title *al-Ustadh al-Imam* (The Master and Guide), and became familiar as the “father of Islamic modernism.” Muhammad Abduh, son of a farmer, Abduh Hassan Khairallah, was born in the village of Mahallat Nasr in the province of Baheira in 1849. He committed the whole Quran to memory in his childhood. His first school, at the age of 13, was the *Masjid al-Ahmadi* at Tanta, where he became distressed and depressed by the teaching system. It was his uncle Shaykh Darvish who played a commendable

role in shaping Muhammad Abduh's life, persuaded him to go for higher studies, and remained his spiritual mentor throughout his life. Writing about his uncle, Abduh said that he was the one who opened to him (*abduh*) the doors of knowledge and liberated him from the dungeon of ignorance. He brought him back to life with true religion and unchained him from blind imitation.²

The great event of his life was his entry in the legendary University, Al-Azhar in February 1866. He studied there for two years but was not satisfied with its *modus operandi*. During his stay in Al-Azhar, he was seen involved in mystical exercises and tried to detach himself from the rest of the world. His first work was *Risalah al-Waridit* (mystic inspirations) which was completed in 1876.

In 1877, he completed his graduation from Al-Azhar University and started teaching there for the next two years. During this period, Muhammad Abduh's thought was profoundly influenced by the Pan-Islamist, Jamal al-Din Afghani, who had received unequivocal fame as the daring champion of religious and political freedom for the people of the East. Thus, he decided to pursue the path of Afghani. Muhammad Abduh spent eight years (1871-1879) with Afghani during which he lived an active life. Apart from the normal curriculum of Al-Azhar, he studied philosophy, mathematics, ethics and politics. He endeavored for curricular and institutional reform at Al-Azhar in order to make it a center of model education.³

Jamal al-Din Afghani left Egypt and Muhammad Abduh continued the movement for reformation. When Egypt came under control of the English, Abduh gave a verdict (*fatwa*) in favor of the deposition of the Khedive Tawfiq Pasha which resulted in his exile in 1882.⁴ During this period, he spent time in Tunisia, France, England and Beirut. Muhammad Abduh met his master in Paris and both of them jointly started a bi-lingual journal known as *Al-Urwah al-Wuthqa*. Its contents were aimed at the political awareness of the Muslims but it was banned in Egypt.⁵ After the period of exile, Muhammad Abduh was appointed as the Grand Mufti (*Qadi al-Qudat*) of Egypt on June 3, 1899⁶ and remained on this post till his death. Being in authority, he worked for the reformation of education and exclusively for the education system of Al-Azhar.⁷

Abduh's Response to the West

Muhammad Abduh had keenly observed the Western system of education and civilization. With a good command over French and study of Western sciences, he worked to create a moderate path between the extremes of the Muslim and Western civilizations. While rejecting the extensive misuse of Western secular values, he advocated the middle path of Islam that values the human intellect and modern sciences on one hand and respects the divine as the basis of human morality on the other.⁸ Abduh witnessed the imperialist period of the French and the English in Egypt and therefore, wanted to liberate Egyptians from their occupation. Through his religio-educational reforms, he strived to evade the decadence of the Muslims; he believed that lack and deviation from religious beliefs were the prime cause of Muslim decadence. Apart from educational reforms, Abduh sought to revive religion and purify it of unfamiliar things.⁹

While aiming to demonstrate the compatability of Islam with modernity, he interpreted religious text in the modern context. He in particular, saw many parallels between Islamic concepts and ideas associated with the European 'Enlightenment' and drew on these for inspiration.

To Muhammad Abduh, Islam encouraged reason, hence bringing forth compatability between science and revelation. Admitting that throughout the course of history, there has been a continuous interaction of civilizations and cultures that resulted in the inter-exchange of important and diverse socio-cultural aspects, he related that the Aryan-Occident has borrowed more from the Semitic-Orient than the Orient is borrowing now from the Occident.¹⁰ Moreover, he argued for the adoption of those scientific achievements of the West without any trepidation or vacillation to which Muslims had contributed in their traditional era.

If Muslims showed resistance against these developments, it would impede progress and lead to backwardness or blind following of Western ideas, resulting in loss of Islamic values. Striving to create the possibility of dialogue between Islam and the modern world, he developed a criterion to distinguish and manage the impact of Western civilization. Thus, he was the architect of Islamic modernism.¹¹ He advocated unitary Islam, emphasised the concept of *Umma*, aimed to modernize Islam, demonstrate its viability for all times, and promote social and political change within the confines of the *Shariah*. Thus, Muhammad Abduh makes the statement that there is no difference between the Aryans and Semites as they both have freely bartered with each other throughout history. He endeavored to modernize Islam in a way to make it 'fitting' for all the times within the confines of *Shari'ah*.¹²

Said Nursi (1876-1960): Biographical Account

Said Nursi, commonly known with the honorific *Bediuzzaman* (wonder of the times), was born in a hamlet, Nurus, attached to Hezan in the province of Bitlis in eastern Turkey. His father Mirza, and mother Nuriye, belonged to a Kurdish family. Nursi's brother Abdullah was his first teacher. Nursi was sent to the village of Tag and the *Madrassa* of Mulla Mohammad Amin Affendi.¹³ His education started at the age of nine. He received early education at various religious schools in the region. After some years, he left his village to pursue higher studies at several centers of learning. He mastered the Quran, Islamic jurisprudence, oratory, philosophy, history and geography in a short period. He had a photographic memory; as a result he memorized the Quran by heart and the most important Arabic dictionaries and several texts on Islamic law. He studied science, mathematics and gained proficiency in some foreign languages.¹⁴

Said Nursi visited a number of *Madaris* (Islamic seminaries) but his thirst was not quenched by any of the teachers or *Madaris*.¹⁵ Nursi was not satisfied with the then *Madrasah* system as he found it incompatible with the requirements of the modern age. He realized that the traditional form of Islamic theology was inadequate for answering the doubts concerning Islam.¹⁶ In order to reform the existing education system, he wanted to establish a university envisioned as *Ma-*

drasah al-Zahra, which would disseminate knowledge of reason and revelation hand in hand, with locations in eastern and southeastern Turkey.¹⁷ He believed that educational reform could invalidate ignorance and backwardness, and contribute to solve social and political problems.

Said Nursi spent some time in *Naqashbandi* lodges and studied mostly under the direction of the teachers who belonged to the *Naqashbandi* order (an orthodox Sufi order). Nursi studied all the texts taught then under the supervision of Shaykh Mohammad Jalali, the Principal of Bayazit Madrasah, who later gave him *Ijazah* (certificate).¹⁸ In fact, all of Nursi's relatives were followers of the *Naqashbandi* Order but Nursi sided in favor of Shaykh Abd al-Qadir Jilani (d.1166) and the Indian, Imam Rabbani Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (d.1624). He displayed a deep reverence and respect towards Shaykh 'Abd al-Qadir Jilani throughout his life.¹⁹

At the age of 18, he came to be known among the celebrated scholars of the country.²⁰ Before the age of 20, he mastered several sciences and gained proficiency in mathematics, physics, chemistry and astronomy. As his eminence was increasing, so were his difficulties. He was facing antagonism from local scholars who were covetous of Nursi's name and esteem.²¹ Due to his fame, he was invited by the governor of Van to reside with him. Nursi took full advantage of the governor's library and keenly studied various sciences. In 1907 and 1908 in Istanbul and Salonica, he advocated the establishment of a university in Eastern Anatolia (*Madrassa al-Zehra*) where physical sciences would be taught alongside religious sciences. He founded an organization to combat Western addiction of Turkish society known as *Al-Ittehad-i Muhammadi* (The Muhammadan Union).²² The slogans of this organization were; unity, freedom and reform, and its policies, program and objectives conformed to Islamic ideology and law.²³

Nursi took part in World War I, got wounded and was taken as prisoner of war in 1915. Later, he managed to escape and reached Istanbul in 1918. He led a non-violent struggle against the British occupation through his writings. Said Nursi was chosen as a member of *Darul Hikmeti'l Islamiye* (Academy of Higher Islamic Studies), a learned organization meant for seeking solutions to the problems faced by the Muslim *Ummah*.²⁴ He played a commendable role in the renovation of the Turkish society. Although he supported Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk) during the Turkish War of Independence (1919–1922), he was arrested in 1925 and exiled to Barla where he remained for eight and a half years, in the province of Isparta for his alleged participation in the 'Shaykh Said revolt'²⁵ in eastern Turkey. Since the period between 1925-1949 was the period of decadence and abolition of the unity of the Muslim world, Said Nursi made great efforts to save and strengthen belief in God and other universals Islamic truths.²⁶

In 1925, he began writing his *Risale-i Nur* (Epistle of light) and completed a greater part of it. Distrusted and opposed for his religious views by the Kemalist state, Said Nursi was arrested, imprisoned, and exiled to various Anatolian cities although the accusations against him were never proved. From 1949 onwards, he took a closer interest in social and political matters and during the elections of the

1950s, he supported the newly formed Democratic Party. It was at this time that his major works were published in Latin script.

After a brief illness in 1960, he died in Urfa in southeastern Turkey. Later in the same year, his mortal remains were moved to an unknown location in Isparta. Through his writings, Said Nursi argued that religion reflects the social and human environment and that Islam could be interpreted according to the current needs of society. His *Risale-i Nur*, a commentary on the Quran, explains and expounds the “truth” in the Quran, besides covering numerous subjects such as concepts of belief in God, purpose of life and creation, life after death, human responsibility and accountability, justice and worship.²⁷

Said Nursi and the Western Civilization

The Western *weltanschauung* upheld by the Kemalist regime (of Mustafa Kemal Pasha) that relegated religious code merely to personal/individual life, had created restiveness among the Turkish masses. Initially, Said Nursi worked for him but later, he changed his mind and devoted his whole life to Islam and its universal principles. The prime motive of Said Nursi was to rejuvenate faith under the conditions of modernization. He aspired to bring together several evident contradictions such as those between modernity and tradition, religion and rationality, faith and science, belief and doubt, and the West and Islam. He was not satisfied either by the secular intellectuals or the traditionalists who failed to comprehend the nature of change in all its dimensions.²⁸ He wanted to unite all Muslims under one banner of common faith. “Nursi was influenced by Ali Suavi (d.1878), Hoca Tahsin (d. 1881), Namik Kemal (d.1888), Jamal al-Din Afghani (d.1897) and Muhammad Abduh (d.1905) in the matter of Muslim unity.²⁹ Nursi’s message was a means of integrating faith with modernity, nationalism and social revitalization.³⁰ He wanted to reconcile the achievements of the modern age with Islam and focused primarily on *Madaris*. His interpretation of Islamic principles offers a union between religion and science. He remarked that “The light of conscience is the result of the sciences of religion, and the light of the mind is the result of the natural sciences. By bringing these together, the truth will come out as a result. The lack of modern science causes fanaticism, while the lack of religious sciences causes skepticism.”³¹

Nursi regards ‘the West’ as complimentary but not uncritical. He means by the ‘West’ a region that has created a philosophy that is both positive and negative. Intellect should be used after filtering Western values through the Quranic norms, responds Nursi. Describing the post-1920 Western civilization as negative, Said Nursi highlights that it justifies self-interest and force; therefore it becomes a threat to socio-ethical life.³² He admits that there are numerous virtues in Western civilization which he regards as common property produced out of need.³³ Nursi admired Western civilization and scientific developments. Moreover, he opines that concepts such as liberty, democracy, freedom, justice, equality, republicanism, technology and industry should be adopted, where from they had originated, as long as they are in conformity with Islamic truths. He regarded Islamic freedom and consultation, and Western democracy as the same.³⁴ Nursi and the fol-

lowers of his thought have been more sympathetic to the West than other scholars in the Islamic world. Said Nursi was against 'Westoxification' of Muslim society and he opposed Western style secularism. He wanted to bring about revolutionary changes through Islamic tenets for which he strived stalwartly.³⁵

The adherents of the *Nur* movement, which is regarded as an order advocating the union of modernity with Islam, are careful in their openness to modernity. The movement is also a critique of several characteristics of modernity. Nursi's teachings challenge individualism. As Serif Mardin points out, Said Nursi's primary aim was always to "repersonalize Turkish society through the personalized stamp of the *Risale-i Nur*". This was an attempt to preserve strong communal ties against the individualistic tendencies of modernization.

Thus, Said Nursi's 'West,' what he calls 'Europe,' is two-faceted in nature. One facet of this civilization, to which Said Nursi is not opposed to, follows science and technology which is beneficial for the whole humankind for it retains the values of justice, belief and social harmony on the one side and eases the hardships of the masses on the other. The second facet, which Nursi rejects, is the dark philosophy of Naturalism that promotes vice, evil and misguidance.³⁶ The side which is gloomy believes, according to Nursi, in antagonism, force, dissension, conflict, lust, obsession, etc.³⁷

Conclusion

The views of Muslim modernists regarding the relations of Islam and the West differ. As a result, myriad views see nothing against Islam in the spirit of Western civilization. As far as the duo is concerned, both reformers' approach to the West seems in a way similar; both wanted to relate the Quran with the then circumstances, hence, they translated the Scripture in conformity with modern science. Avoiding the extremes, they worked to create a middle and moderate path in response to the West. They urged the use of those Western elements and ideas, which they thought necessary for the development of the Muslim world without loss to Islamic heritage. Both aimed to unite the Muslims and worked to create a possibility of dialogue between the two civilizations. They worked to manage the impact of Western civilization on the Islamic world.

A civilization is neither completely good nor completely evil. Some Western values and concepts like democracy, abolition of slavery and feudalism, better status of women, etc., corroborate the values of Islam. However, there are various aspects in Western values, which need critical evaluation. Nevertheless, unfortunately Muslims themselves have followed the West in its evil aspects for which the West should not be blamed.

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- ²³ Jameelah, op.cit., 190.
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