

BEDIUZZAMAN SAID NURSI AND THE SUFI TRADITION

Machasin

Professor of History of Islamic Cultures at Adab Faculty, UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta

الملخص

يحاول هذا البحث الكشف عن ذاتية رجل من رجال التصوف المعاصر من تركيا وهو بديع الزمان سعيد نورسي وبدأ الكاتب التحليل بالنظر الى المبادئ الأساسية لتعاليمه الصوفية. والصوفية عند نورسي مهمة لكل مسلم ولكن هناك جوانب من التصوف قد يجعل الإيمان في الانحراف وفيها جوانب من الطقوس والتقاليد الباطلة والتي لا تتناسب مع الظروف المعاصرة. فقد عرض نورسي التصوف البديل الذي يراه أنه يعتمد على القرآن في مسيرته الصوفية مع عدم الإنكار أن هناك طرقا أخرى غيره والطريقة البديلة التي سماها الحقيقة كما هي مكتوبة في رسالة النور تنقسم إلى أربع مقامات وليست سبعة مقامات كما هي معروفة عند المذاهب الصوفية الأخرى. والمقامات الأربع هي : العجز والفقر والشفقة والتفكر. وبجانب آخر يرى نورسي أن التصوف لا بد أن يطبق في إطار الشريعة لأن الشريعة عنده ليست الجانب الظاهري للإسلام فقط ولكنها نظام متكامل تشمل الجانب الظاهري والباطني للإسلام. والبحث ينظر أيضا الى تأثير نورسي برجال التصوف الكبار مثل أبو حامد الغزالي وعبد القادر الجيلاني وأحمد رباني السرهدي.

Abstrak

Berbicara tentang pribadi dan pemikiran Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, artikel ini dimaksudkan untuk mengungkap jati diri tokoh sufi modern dari Turki ini. Analisis diawali dengan melihat ajaran dasar sang tokoh bahwa sufisme di satu sisi masih merupakan sesuatu yang penting bagi seorang muslim, tetapi di sisi lain juga sangat mudah menjadikan keimanan seseorang mengarah pada titik yang salah. Meskipun tidak semuanya, ada beberapa praktek dan tradisi sufisme yang tidak benar dan tidak lagi cocok untuk diamalkan pada masa Said Nursi hidup, bahkan mungkin juga pada masa sekarang. Terkait dengan hal ini, Nursi menawarkan satu alternatif yang menurutnya didasarkan pada al-Qur'an dalam meniti jalan sufisme, tanpa menafikan adanya cara-cara yang lainnya. Alternatif yang disebutnya sebagai ḥaqīqa, cara a la Risālat al-Nūr ini terdiri dari empat langkah, bukan tujuh atau pun sepuluh langkah sebagaimana umumnya dalam ajaran sufisme: al-‘ajz, al-faqr, al-shafaqa, dan al-tafakkur. Di samping itu bagi Nursi, Sufisme harus dipraktekkan dalam bingkai dan tanpa meninggalkan sharī‘a karena sharī‘a bukanlah sisi luar dari Islam, tetapi merupakan satu sistem utuh yang mencakup inner dan sekaligus outer aspect dari Islam. Artikel ini juga melihat jejak-jejak pengaruh pemikiran tokoh-tokoh besar sufi dalam pemikiran Nursi, seperti Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, dan Aḥmad Rabbānī al-Sirhindī.

Keywords: Nursi, sufism, *Risālat al-Nūr*, *ṭarīqa*, *ḥaqīqa*.

A. Introduction

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1877-1956), like many other great thinkers, has many facets in his thought and it is not easy to put him in a strict category of school. He appreciates and seems to hold some thought of great Muslim scholars of the past and some prevailing practices but still criticizes some of them. This goes true in matters of Sufi tradition.

In many places of his writings collected in the *Risale-i Nur* or *Rasā'il al-Nūr*,¹ one can find Nursi's eloquence in speaking about Sufism, *ṭarīqa* and things related to them. He taught as well a way in which human being can reach the reality of belief, a way that resembles to *ṭarīqa*, though he called it *ḥaqīqa* instead of *ṭarīqa*. He criticized the practices of Sufism and ideas like the unity of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) and the unity of witnessing (*waḥdat al-shuhūd*). One may then wonder about his real position towards Sufism: Is he against or for it?

Basing his study on the writings of Nursi, an Ahmed Akgündüz came to a conclusion, which I think cannot be denied, that the *Risale-i Nur* movement that was initiated by Nursi is not a Sufi order.² Meanwhile, Bilal Kuspınar using the same sources concluded that Nursi had his own concept of Sufism which was inspired by the spirit of the Qur'ān and conceptualized in the context of his Sufi forerunners, though he did not elaborate it in a thorough exposition. His ideas were dispersed here and there throughout his works, since he was not to construct a Sufi theory of his own.³ It can not be denied either that the colors of Sufism are too conspicuous in the teaching of this figure that anyone who studies it can help questioning his relation to the Sufi tradition.

In what follows I would like to highlight these two apparently contradictory attitudes of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi towards Islamic mysticism. To give the picture more clarity there will be a discussion on three prominent figures in Sufi tradition about whom he speaks everywhere in his writings and from whom he takes some ideas and guidance. They are the famous Imam Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Shaykh*

¹The present writer used the Arabic translation made by Iḥsān Qāsim al-Sālīhī under the title of *Kullīyyāt Rasā'il al-Nūr*, in 9 volumes (Cairo: Dār Sūzler li'l-nashr, 2nd edition, 1992) and the English translation by Sükran Vahide in four volumes [Istanbul: Sūzler, (1) *The Words*, 1992; (2) *Letters*, 2nd edition, 1997; (3) *the Flash*, revised edition, 2000; and (4) *the Rays*, 1998].

²See Ahmed Akgündüz, "The Risale-i Nur Movement: Is it a Sufi Order, a Political Society, or a Community?", paper presented in the 3rd Symposium on Nursi.

³Bilal Kuspınar, "Nursi's Evaluation of Sufism", paper presented in the 3rd Symposium on Nursi.

‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī,⁴ and Imam Aḥmad Rabbānī al-Sirhindī.⁵

B. Sufism is Important for Individuals but Inappropriate for this Age

It is a fact that Nursi used Sufi terms and ideas everywhere in his writings on religious matters. He used terms like *tajallī* or manifestation, purification of the heart, the unveiling (*inkishāf*), spiritual poles (*aqṭāb*), etcetera which are related to Sufi tradition.

Being asked of which were superior, the great scholars of the Holy Law (*a’imma al-mujtabidīn*) or the *shaykhs* and the poles of the true Sufi paths, Nursi said that not all of the great scholars were superior, but only the four famous of them: Abū Ḥanīfa, Mālik, al-Shāfi’ī and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, were superior to the poles and the *shaykhs* of the Sufi paths. It is true that in some respects, some of the great poles attained more brilliant stations. However, the general virtue was for the imams.⁶ It also explains the position of Sufism *vis-à-vis* the formal teaching of Islam (*sharī‘a*). It is clear from this answer as well that for Nursi there is good, valid, real Sufism beside the false, wrong, misleading ones.

In the ninth section of his *Mektūbat*, Nursi discussed Sufistic tradition in a Sufistic style. He divided his discussion entitled *al-tahwīhāt al-tis‘a* or “The Nine Allusions” —a Sufi term— into nine allusions and then added his “sufistic way” which consists of four steps. In the first allusion he stated that “Underlying the terms ‘Sufism,’ ‘path,’

⁴‘Abd al-Qādir bin Abī Sāliḥ Abū Muḥammad al-Gīlānī (al-Jīlānī, al-Jīlī or al-Kaylānī), known as al-Ghawth al-A‘zam, was the founder of the Qādirī order and a very prominent figure in Sufi tradition. He lived 1077-1166 (470-561 AH). See note no. 1 by Iḥsān Qāsim al-Sāliḥī in *al-Maktūbāt*, 27 and note no. 2 by Sukran Vahide in *The Letters*, p. 41.

⁵Aḥmad bin ‘Abd al-Aḥad al-Sirhindī al-Fārūqī, also known Imam-i Rabbānī, lived in India 1563-1624 (971-1034 AH). He struggled against the policy of the Emperor Akbar (1542-1605) who wanted to do away with Islam entirely replacing it with a new religion composed of elements taken from many different religions. He did his best to purify Islam of polytheistic accretions and to reform Sufism. That’s why he got the title of The Regenerator of the Second Millennium (*Mujaddid al-Alf al-Thānī*). See note no. 1 by al-Sāliḥī in *al-Maktūbāt*, 26 and note no. 1 by Vahide in *The Letters*, p. 40.

⁶Nursi, *the Letters*, p. 331 and *al-Maktūbāt*, p. 362.

‘sainthood,’ and ‘spiritual journeying,’ is an agreeable, luminous, joyful, and spiritual sacred truth.” This appreciation goes as well to savants of mystical taste and unfolding who studied them and communicated the results to their fellow Muslims.⁷ Accordingly, Nursi dealt with some of Sufi teachings, by not only following them, but also expressing his own understanding and criticism of them.

About *ṭarīqa*, he said that its aim and goal are knowledge of the truths of belief and of the Qur’ān, and achieving them through a spiritual passage and journeying with the footsteps of the heart, in the shadow of the ascension of the Prophet (*ḥabīb*) and under his banner. By these steps one will reach a state of inner consciousness and mystical taste in a way which is like witnessing. And thus, *ṭarīqa* and Sufism are elevated human secret and human perfection.⁸

Then Nursi compared human brain with his heart. While the former receives sciences and arts of the universe, discovers them and spreads them, the latter is a center of the innumerable truths of the universe, the place of their manifestations and even their core.⁹ Thus, it is clear that the place of mysticism or *ṭarīqa* is as important as, or even more important than, that of religious knowledge, since the first concerns external deeds, while the latter concerns the core, the essence of religion itself. Then, as the brain needs development and exercises in order the faculty of reasoning and reflection to be ready to use, the heart is created by its creator to be employed, moved, discovered its faculties and changed from its potential state into actuality in order to be ready to reach the true knowledge of God. The most effective means of working the heart is turning it towards the truths of belief on the Sufi path (*ṭarīqa*) through the remembrance of God in the degrees of

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 518 and *al-Maktūbāt*, p. 571.

⁸Nursi, *al-Maktūbāt*, p. 571. The rendering of Vahide is, “The aim and goal of the Sufi path is —knowledge of God and unfolding of the truths of belief— through a spiritual journeying with the feet of the heart under the shadow of the Ascension of Muhammad (*ḥabīb*), to manifest the truths of belief and the Qur’an through illumination and certain states, and to a degree of certainty by witnessing; it is an elevated human mystery and human perfection which is called ‘the Sufi path’ or ‘Sufism.’ Nursi, *the Letters*, p. 518.

⁹Nursi, *al-Maktūbāt*, p.571 and *Letters*, p. 518-9.

sainthood (*wilāya*).¹⁰

The Sufi path is very important in its relationship with the whole body of Islamic teaching. Nursi stated,

Sainthood is a proof of Divine Messengership (*al-wilāya ḥujjat al-risāla*) and the Sufi path is a demonstration of the *sharī'a* (*al-ṭarīqa burhān al-sharī'a*). The reason is that the truths of belief, which Messengership preaches, sainthood sees and confirms with a sort of witnessing of the heart and illumination of the spirit at the degree of 'certainty'. Its confirmation is a certain proof of the truth of Messengership. Through its illumination and unfolding, and through its being benefited from and effulgence being received from it, the Sufi path is a clear proof of the truths and the matters which *sharī'a* teaches; that they are the truth and that they are from the truth. Yes, just as sainthood and the Sufi path are evidence and proof of Messengership and the *sharī'a*, so they are a perfection of Islam and a means to its lights, and through Islam, a source of the progress and prosperity of humanity.¹¹

Nevertheless, some people refuse the importance of Sufi path and go into extreme that they are deprived from its light and cause others to be deprived. Some scholars who judge everything from the external side and neglectful politicians, from those who are attributed to the people of Tradition and Congregation (*ahl al-sunna wa'l-jamā'a*), close the access to this treasure of Islamic tradition. They base their position on the fact that some people of the Sufi path committed some faults and abuses, whereas there is almost nothing in this world which is without faults and abuses. Fair judgment must be made concerning the Sufi path and by this judgment, Nursi is sure that it will be clear that the goodness of *ṭarīqa* —which is within the bounds of the Practices of the prophet— is definitely preponderate over its badness.¹² So, what is needed is not to throw it away but to put it under careful study and scrutiny in a way within which we can find its goodness and benefit from it, and know what is bad and then clean it.

Important and useful as it is, the Sufi path is dangerous and sometimes misleads those who take it in their way to the truth. Nursi stated,

Together with being very easy, the way of sainthood is very difficult. And together with being very short, it is very long. And in addition to

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 519 and *al-Maktūbāt*, p. 571-2.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 520 and *al-Maktūbāt*, p. 573.

being most valuable, it is very dangerous. And together with being very broad, it is very narrow. It is because of this that some of those who journey on the path sometimes drown, sometime become harmful and sometimes return and lead others away from the path.¹³

Therefore, Nursi reminds those who take this path to hold fast the balance of the *sharī'a* and take for themselves the rules of the scholars of the principles of religion, and to take as their guide the instructions of the authoritative scholars from among the saints like Imam al-Ghazālī and Imam al-Rabbānī. They should constantly accuse their own souls, and attribute nothing to their souls other than fault, impotence and want.¹⁴

The best, finest, straightest and most brilliant way to the state of sainthood, for Nursi, is following the Practices of the Prophet. To follow these practices means that the Muslim think of them and imitates them in all of his acts and deeds, and takes as guide the rules of *sharī'a* in their conduct and dealings. All this will make their deeds and dealings have the value of God worship (*ibāda*). Besides, their thinking of the practices of the Prophet will make them in a state of constant consciousness and awareness of the injunctions of the *sharī'a*. This will leads them into the remembrance of God, the owner of the *sharī'a*, which will cause the quietude of the heart. This may make all the moments of person's life like worship in Divine presence.¹⁵

Accused of being teaching Sufism which was prohibited by the secular government of Turkey at his time, Nursi defended himself saying,

Firstly, all my books which you have in your possession testify that I am occupied with the truths of belief. I have, moreover, written in numerous of my treatises that it is not the time of Sufism, but the time to save belief. There are many who will go to Paradise without joining a Sufi order, but none who will go there without belief. It is therefore necessary to work for belief.

Secondly, I have been in the province of Isparta for ten years. Let anyone come forward and say I have given him or her instruction in Sufism. I

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 520 and *al-Maktūbāt*, p. 573-4.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 521 and *al-Maktūbāt*, p. 575.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 523 and *al-Maktūbāt*, p. 577-8.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 526 and *al-Maktūbāt*, p. 581.

have certainly given instruction to some of my special brothers in the sciences of belief and other elevated truths, since I am a teacher. But this was not instruction in the Sufi way (*ta'lim ṭarīqa*), it was instruction in reality (*tadrīs ḥaqīqa*). Then, there is another thing I want to let you know: I belong to the Shafi'ite school; my doxologies after *salā* differ a little bit from that of the Hanafites. I occupy myself in solitude with begging forgiveness of my sins and with reciting verses of the Qur'an and alike, in which I do not meet anyone after sunset prayer (*salāt al-maghrib*) up to night prayer (*salāt al-ʿiṣyā*) and before dawn prayer (*salāt al-subḥ*).¹⁶

This quotation reveals that Nursi holds for himself some kinds of prayers or practice common in Sufi circle. This fact sometimes misleads some people to thinking that he is a Sufi master. The following quotations will make it clearer:

“Since I was child, if some insignificant thing like a walnut got lost, [I would say] ‘Oh *Shaykh*! I’ll say a *Fatīḥa* for you and you find this thing for me!’ It is strange and yet I swear that a thousand times the venerable *Shaykh* came to my assistance through his prayers and saintly influence. Therefore, however many *Fatīḥas* and supplications I have uttered in general in my life, after the Person of the Prophet (*ḥabīb*), they have been offered for *Shaykh*-i Gilānī. While I am a Naqshī in three or four respects, the Qadiri way and love of it prevail in me involuntarily. But preoccupation [with study of religious sciences] prevented my becoming involved with the *ṭarīqāt*.¹⁷

“The reason of giving the name of *Rasā’il al-Nūr* (The Epistles of Light) to the collection of the thirty-three Words, thirty-three Letters, thirty-one Flashes and thirteen Rays is that the word *nūr* (light) has everywhere confronted me along my life. To mention some, my village was Nurs, my late mother’s name was Nuriye, my Naqshi master was Sayyid Nur Muḥammad, one of my Qadiri masters was Nuruddin, one of my Qur’an masters was Nuri, and of my students those most attached to me have been those with Nur in their names. (But how strange it is that there is no one among the important Risale-i Nur Students with the name Nuri). And what elucidates and illumines my books most are the comparisons about light. And what has solved most of my difficulties related to the Divine truth is the luminous name of Nur, out the Most beautiful Names. And my particular leader in my

¹⁶Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Sīra Dhātīyya*, prepared and translated into Arabic by Iḥsān Qāsim al-Sāliḥī (Istanbul: Dār Sūzler li’l-Nashr, 1st edition, 1998), p. 259.

¹⁷Nursi, *Sikke-i Tasdik-i Gaybi* as quoted in Sükran Vahide, *The Author of the Risale-i Nur Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (Istanbul: Sūzler Publications, 1992), p. 5.

passionate enthusiasm for the Qurʾān and my restricting my service to it, is ʿUthmān Dhiʾl-Nurayn (May God be pleased with him).”¹⁸

Yet, he did not want that the people of his age take the *ṭarīqa*. Indeed he thought that *ṭarīqa* was good and gave some benefits to those who followed, but it was too luxurious and misled sometimes. The most important is belief and every Muslims should nurture his belief. Nursi even took as task for him and for his followers who are called the students of light to save the belief of others.

A person without belief may not enter Paradise, but very many have gone to Paradise without Sufism. Man cannot live without bread, but he can live without fruit. Sufism is the fruit, the truths of Islam, bread.¹⁹

If you say: The *shaykhs* sometimes interfere in our business, and they sometimes call you a *shaykh*; I reply: Good sirs! I am not a *shaykh*; I am a *hoja* (teacher). The evidence is this: I have been here four years and if I had taught a single person the Sufi way, you would have had the right to be suspicious. But I have told everyone who has come to me: Belief is necessary, Islam is necessary; this is not the age of Sufism.”²⁰

The greatest good deed and the loftiest duty in this age, for me, is saving one’s belief and trying hard to help others saving theirs.²¹

For Nursi the Sufi path is just appropriate for certain people. He said, “One of the paths to this realized belief is to attain the Reality through the perfect sainthood with unveiling and witnessing. This belief by witnessing is only for the most special people.”²² He did not say wrong to those who take the Sufi path. However he said that the passage of *Risālat al-Nūr* is better and even realized the benefits of the Sufi path.²³ He reminded in another place, “It is obliged that every man of *ṭarīqa* enter the circle of *Risālat al-Nūr* which is the widest way and comprises the excerpt of the important 12 *ṭarīqas* within the circle of the tradition of the noble prophethood.”²⁴

¹⁸Nursi, *The Rays*, p. 434 and *al-Shuʿāʾāt*, p. 490. Cf. *al-Malāḥiq*, p. 70-1.

¹⁹Nursi, *The Letters*, p. 41 and *al-Maktūbāt*, p. 27.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 85.

²¹*Al-Malāḥiq*, p. 259.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 111.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 309.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 344.

He criticized as well the way of the people of the unity of being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) who throw away the existence of anything other than God in order to reach the eternal presence of heart. They say accordingly, “There is no existent being save Allah.” He did not agree either with the way of those who believe in the unity of witnessing (*waḥdat al-shuhūd*) who neglect their world in order to attain the real knowledge of God and the eternal presence of the heart. They say, “There is no witnessed thing save Allah.” Instead, Nursi said, “The *Risālat al-Nūr* explains that in every single thing, from atoms to galaxies, there is a window through which you can see signs and signals pointing directly to the One Unique Ego with his lofty qualities.”²⁵

C. The Way of *Risālat al-Nūr*

Then Nursi offered his own way which he called *ḥaqīqa* or the way of *Risālat al-Nūr*. This way consists of four steps, instead of seven or ten which are common in the teachings of Sufi *shaykhs*. In his word, “The ways leading to Almighty God are truly numerous. While all true ways are taken from the Qur’an, some are shorter, safer, and more general than others. Of these ways taken from the Qur’an is that of impotence (*al-‘ajz*), poverty (*al-faqr*), compassion (*al-shafaqa*) and reflection (*al-tafakkur*).”²⁶

Awareness of the impotence of the self leads someone to God. This is even the shorter and safer path, since it leads to being loved through the way of being servant. The consciousness of one’s poverty will leads to God’s name of All-Merciful (*al-Raḥmān*), while compassion, like ecstatic love (*al-‘ishq*), is swifter and broader path leading to God’s name of All-Compassionate (*al-Raḥīm*). Reflection is a path richer, broader and more brilliant than compassion. It leads to God’s name of All-Wise.²⁷

Concerning impotence and poverty, it should be remembered that Nursi does not mean that anyone who take his “way” must feel impotent and poor in front of other human beings and show his

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 352.

²⁶*The Letters*, p. 526 and *al-Maktūbāt*, p. 581.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 536 and *al-Maktūbāt*, p. 594.

weakness. It is contrary to the dignity of human being. Man has to feel that way only in front of Almighty God. Here he will find himself nothing in front of the All-Powerful and All-Wealthy.

Nursi elaborates further these four steps saying that the source is the Qur'an. The first step is based on sura 53/al-Najm: 32, "Therefore, do not justify yourselves". It is man nature and innate disposition to love his self. He sacrifices everything other than himself to his own soul and he does not see any fault as being appropriate for him and does not accept it. Thus he needs to purify himself and his purification in this step is not to adore himself. In the word of Nursi, The purification of soul is not to purify it.²⁸ The second step is based on sura 59/al-Hashr: 19, "And don't be like those who forgot Allah, and He made them forget their own souls!"

This verse teaches that man is oblivious of his self and is aware of his self. If he thinks of death, it is in relation to others. If he sees transience and decline, he does not attribute them to himself. At this stage, the purification is to reverse the state: When neglectful, it is not to be neglectful; to forget himself when it comes to pleasure, ambition and greed; and to think of himself when it comes to death and service of others.²⁹

The third step is based on sura 4/al-Nisā': 79, "Whatever good, (O man!) happens to you, is from Allah; but whatever evil happens to you, it is from your (own) soul." The nature of evil-commanding soul demands that it always considers goodness to be from itself and it becomes vain and conceited. Here, then, one sees only faults, defects, impotence and poverty in himself, and understands that all his good qualities and perfections are bounties bestowed on him by the All-Glorious Creator. He gives thanks instead of being conceited, and offers praise instead of boasting. The purification at this stage is to know his perfection to lie in imperfection, his power in impotence, and his wealth in poverty.³⁰

The last step is based on sura 28/al-Qasas: 88, "Everything (that exists) will perish except His own Face." This verse teaches that the

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 537 and *al-Maktūbāt*, p. 595.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 537-8 and *al-Maktūbāt*, p. 595.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 538 and *al-Maktūbāt*, p. 596.

evil-commanding soul considers itself to be free and independent and to exist of itself. Accordingly man claims to possess a sort of dominicality and conceals a hostile rebelliousness toward his True Object of Worship. Whereas, everything by its very essence and its real meaning is transitory (*zā'i*), wanting (*mafqūd*), accidental (*ḥādith*), non-existent (*ma'dūm*). However, according to its literal meaning and in respect of its being a mirror of the All-Glorious Maker's Names and as it is charged with various duties, everything is a witness, it is witnessed, and it is existent. It is only by realizing this fact that man can be saved of that evil. The purification of the soul in this stage is then to know that its non-existence is in its existence, meaning that if it sees itself and give existence to its being, it will be drown in the darkness of non-existence. If man is occupied by his own existence, neglecting the True Giver of Existence (*al-Mujīd*), he will find himself alone, submerged in an endless darkness of non-existence and separation. But if he gives up egotism and sees that he is a mirror of the manifestations of the True Giver of Existence, he gains all beings and an infinite existence.³¹

One can say that this path is a Sufi path, but for Nursi it is a reality of *sharī'a* rather than a Sufi way. "The passage of the *Risālat al-Nūr* is not that of the Sufi path, but the passage of reality (*ḥaqīqa*), for it is a passage adapted from the light of the passage of the Companion, may God's pleasing be upon all of them."³² Accordingly, he replaces the *awrād* (invocations) and *adhb̄kār* (God remembrance) with following the Practices of the Prophet, observing religious duties, especially *salā* (five-time-a-day prayer) and God remembrance thereafter, and not committing great sins.

The way of *Risālat al-Nūr* is based as well on taking firmly the reality of sincerity, throwing away the selfishness, knowing that the self is always neglectful and being very cautious of self veneration.³³ "Beware, my friend, of the selfishness and stubbornness, and be away of anything leading to both. It is suggested for the people of reality in this age to deny their selves, throw away stubbornness and selfishness

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 538-9 and *al-Maktūbāt*, p. 596.

³² *Al-Malāḥiq*, p. 262.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

... and everyone should look at the negligence of his/her self, be suspicious of it and take complete humbleness.”³⁴

D. Imam al-Ghazālī and *Shaykh* ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī

Not only that from Imam al-Ghazālī Nursi took some ideas, but also his desperate situation at the end of his first phase of his life resembled that of this great thinker. From *Shaykh* ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī Nursi found part of the healing and, as is clear in a story of him quoted above, he uttered supplications for this *shaykh* many times. He said also that the *shaykh* came to his assistance through his prayers and saintly influence. These two figures are dealt with here at once for it is not easy to speak of them separately in the life of Nursi.

Returning from the prisoner-of-war camp in Russia, Nursi was in a very bad physical condition while the Ottoman defeat and foreign occupation were sources of distress. Till then he thought that the philosophical sciences were the means to spiritual progress and enlightenment. He was of the opinion that European science and philosophy could be used to reinforce and strengthen Islam. But, then he realized that those sciences and philosophy could do only the opposite. Realizing this and that he was getting older and older and the fleeting nature of everything to which he was attached, he was distressed and found no light.³⁵

“Thirty years ago dreadful blows descended on the heedless head of the Old Said and he pondered over the assertion ‘Death is a reality.’ He saw himself in a muddy swamp. He sought help, searched for a way, and tried to find a savior. He saw that the ways were many; he was hesitant. He took an omen from the book *Futūḥ al-Ghayb* of *Ghawṭh al-Aẓam Shaykh* Jilānī (May God be pleased with him). It opened at these lines, “You are in the *Dār al-Hikma*, so find a doctor who will heal your heart.”

It is strange, but at that time I was a member of the *Daru’l-Hikmeti’l-Islamiye*. It was as though I was a doctor trying to heal the wounds of the people of Islam, but I was sicker than they were. A sick person must look to himself first, then he may look to others. Thus,

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 259-60.

³⁵Vahide, *The Author of the Risale-i Nur*, p. 164.

the *shaykh* was saying to me: ‘You yourself are sick; find a doctor for yourself.’ So I said: ‘You be my doctor!’ I took him as my doctor and read the book as though it was addressing me. But it was most severe. It smashed my pride in the most fearsome manner. It carried out the most drastic surgery on my soul. I could not stand it. I read half of it as though it was addressing me, but did not have the strength and endurance to finish it. I put the book back on the shelf. Then a week later the pain of that curative operation subsided, and the pleasure came in its place. I again opened the book and read it right through; I benefited a lot from that book of my first master. I listened to his prayers and supplications, and profited abundantly.³⁶

Then Nursi read another book, the *Maktūbāt* of Aḥmad Sirhindī. To his surprise, his sight was caught by two letters at the head of which was written “Letter to Mirza Bediuzzaman”, whereas his father’s name was Mirza. This coincidence made him feel as though he was addressed by the author. There should be a person having the similar state as mine, he said, for I found these letters to be the cure for my ills. “Only the Imam persistently recommended in many of his letters what he wrote in these two, which was, ‘Make your *qibla* one.’ That is to take one person as your master and to follow him; do not concern yourself with anyone else.”³⁷

Nevertheless, he thought that this recommendation was not appropriate for his state of mind, and he was bewildered as whom to follow. Then came God’s mercy giving him guidance.

While thus bewildered, it was imparted to my heart by God’s mercy that the head of these various ways and the source of these streams and the sun of these planets in the All-Wise Qur’ān; the true single *qibla* is to be found in it... That is to say, the Words and those lights, which proceed from the Qur’ān, are not only scholarly matters pertaining to the intellect, they are rather matters of belief which pertain to the heart, the spirit, and spiritual states. They resemble most elevated and valuable knowledge of God.”³⁸

³⁶Nursi, *The Letters*, p. 418-9 and *al-Maktūbāt*, p. 457-8.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 419 and *al-Maktūbāt*, p. 459.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 418-19 and *al-Maktūbāt*, p. 458-9.

Two notes can be made from the above narration. First, unlike al-Ghazālī who was distressed of being uncertain of his sincerity in observing religious duties and the reality of his belief, Nursi was bewildered by his failure in using the sciences and philosophy of the West to cure the illness of the community. Thus, the crisis for al-Ghazālī came from individual problem, while for Nursi, it came from the problem of the community. Second, al-Ghazālī found the light in the way of Sufism, while Nursi in the Qur’ān. *Tasawwuf* or the Sufi way is appropriate for an individual who seeks the light in this bewildering world by journeying a spiritual way to come closer to God, but when you want to save people who are in a process of annihilation by a materialistic Weltanschauung you cannot use it.

If al-Ghazālī examined four ways prevailing in his age in which man attained knowledge, i.e., that of theologians, that of philosophers, that of the Bāṭiniyya and that of Sufis and chose the last to be elaborated and trodden, Nursi mentioned also four ways, three of them are the same as that of al-Ghazālī, excluding only the of the Bāṭiniyya. The fourth for Nursi was the way of the Qur’ān.³⁹ However, his conclusion differed from his forerunner for he did not take Sufism as his way and instead he elaborated his own way based on the Qur’ān. Nevertheless, this way, which he called *ḥaqīqa*, rather than *ṭarīqa*, resembles the way of the Sufi in many aspects. Or rather, following Ahmed Akgündüz that the word *ṭarīqa* has two meanings: general meaning as a way leading to God and specific meaning of Sufi order, Nursi’s way is actually a *ṭarīqa* in the general meaning.⁴⁰

An Oliver Leaman gave a very brilliant essay placing Nursi in the *Ihya’* (the revivification) tradition introduced by al-Ghazālī, in solving the problem of combining Islam with modernity faced by the Islamic community. He concluded by saying that al-Ghazālī failed to give an answer to ordinary members of the community.

Al-Ghazali argues against philosophy and particular theological schools in other of his works, and even his *Ihya’* seems designed more for an intellectual and spiritual elite. It has a very personal flavor, which

³⁹Nursi, *Saīqat al-Islām*, p. 122-3 and *al-Mathnawī al-‘Arabī al-Nūrī*, p. 427-8.

⁴⁰Akgündüz, “The Risale-i Nur Movement.”

is a stylistic strength. One really feels that a soul is intent on coming close to God when one reads his text, and his interpretations of the Qur'an rarely fail to be fresh and inspired. Yet the question really has to be put as to how generally acceptable the *Ihyā'* is as an example of *ihyā'*. It really reveals al-Ghazali's conclusions after a life of examining premises, but since the premises are largely to be found in his earlier works, it is difficult to understand why the position in his *Ihyā'* should be taken as anything more than a personal illustration of a specific spiritual journey.⁴¹

Mohammed Iqbal did answer philosophical problems in technical works, and he also presented his idea of philosophy and Islam in his poetry and political works. So his output as a whole is expressive of *Ihyā'*. Nevertheless, there are problems in his work. He tends either to be too abstruse, or too atheoretical. His writings, which were popular, were largely the poetry, and these do not really manage to incorporate much in the way of argument about the role of Islam in the modern world. It was Nursi, said Leaman further, who provided the best example of *Ihyā'* literature.

It is not the case that he argues better than al-Ghazali and Iqbal, or does he express himself more gracefully. What he does is express himself clearly and in a way, which combines emotion and argument. That is, he tends to mix his discussions of particular problems and Islamic text with personal illustrations and impersonal argument, thus making the ideas which he is presenting genuinely available to the widest possible audience.⁴²

E. Imam Rabbānī

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi quoted some passages of this master and called him the hero and the sun of Naqshabandi order. The influence of the master's teaching on him is very decisive that he found the way to be born again as New Said. There is no need to repeat the story narrated above on the desperate situation Nursi experienced at his

⁴¹Oliver Leaman, "Nursi's Place in the *Ihyā'* Tradition" (paper presented at the 4th symposium on Nursi in Istanbul).

⁴²*Ibid.*

Old Said phase.⁴³ Here, suffice it to say that Nursi used some ideas of Imam Rabbānī to build some his positions in matters related to Sufism.

As an example, let me take his preferring of strengthening the truths belief and tenets of Islam to following a *ṭarīqa*. In the Fifth Letter he quoted first some passages of the master's *Maktūbāt*,⁴⁴ "I prefer the unfolding of a single matter of the truths of belief to thousand of illuminations, ecstasies, and instances of wonder-working"; "The final point of Sufi ways is the clarification and unfolding of the truths of belief." Then, he quoted a passage concerning three grades of sainthood the highest grade being "to open up by way of legacy of prophethood a direct way to reality without entering the intermediate realm of Sufism."⁴⁵

Still quoting, he said that the Naqshi way is with two wings, i.e., having firm belief in the truths of faith and carrying out the religious obligations. Then, basing on this statement, he explained that the Naqshi way consisted of three scenes (*mashāhid*),⁴⁶ which are: (1) the direct service to the truths of belief, (2) the service to religious obligations and Glorious *Sunna* under the veil of the Sufi way, and (3) to work to eliminate the sicknesses of the heart by way of Sufism and to journey with the feet of the heart. The first he considered *farḍ* (greater obligation), the second *wājib* (lesser obligation),⁴⁷ while the third *sunna* (suggestion).

Concluding he said,

Since the reality of the matter is thus, my conjecture is that if persons like *Shaykh* 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī (May God be pleased with him).

⁴³Old Said is the name Nursi used for the period in which he was involved actively in political life, which lasted around the end of the First World War. The New Said, in which he drew himself from political life, followed this period and the Third Said, in which played a high politics, covered the last ten years of this figure who lived from 1877 to 1960.

⁴⁴See, even for the name of his collection, he used his master's.

⁴⁵Nursi, *The Letters*, p. 40.

⁴⁶The translation of Vahide (ibid.) has "veils" for this word taken from al-Ṣāliḥī's Arabic translation (Nursi, *al-Maktūbāt*, p. 27).

⁴⁷*Farḍ* is a religious duty based on a fixed indication (*dalīl maqtūṭ*), while *wājib* is that which is based on an ambiguous indication (*dalīl fihi shubḥa*). See 'Alī bin Muḥammad al-Jurjānī, *al-Ta'wīḡāt* (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī wa-Awlāduh, 1938), p. 144 & 222.

Shah Naqshband (May God be pleased with him) and Imam-i Rabbānī (May God be pleased with him) were alive at the present time, they would expend all their efforts in strengthening the truths of belief and tenets of Islam. For they are the means to eternal happiness.

It is clear that Imam Rabbānī was one of the prominent figures from whom Nursi took ideas whereby he built his own religious teaching. Even the last form of his understanding and practice of what he called the *ḥaqīqa* of faith, he took from this master: the following only the guidance of the Qurʾān and the direct service to the truths of belief. He stated clearly that he came from the word of the master, “Make your *qibla* one”⁴⁸ and the second was “the way taken by Imam Rabbānī in his later years.”⁴⁹

F. Conclusion

For Nursi the Sufi tradition is not something should be thrown away. He sees it as a treasury containing many valuable treasures, but some of which is out of date, appropriate only in its time. One may take them as inspiration in the efforts of defending and saving the belief. He criticized some of the practices of Sufism, but in doing that he did not aim at denigrate or deny them, but only to show that some aspects of the Sufi tradition were not appropriate to his age (and perhaps to our age either). He call all Muslims to use the way of the Qurʾān and to measure all the practices of the Sufi tradition with the teaching of this Revealed Book.

Sufism for him must to be within the *sharīʿa*, which for him is not only the outer aspect of Islam. It is the whole system of Islam covering the outer and inner aspect. So, one should not practice the Sufism in the risk of neglecting the *sharīʿa* but within the guidelines of the *sharīʿa*.

Al-muḥāfaẓa ʿalā al-qadīm al-ṣāliḥ waʾl-akhdh biʾl-jadīd al-aṣlah or preserving what is good from the past while taking what is better things from today, is a suitable expression for the position of Nursi concerning mystical tradition. Built on a very firm knowledge of the past of Islamic society as in Nursi’s thinking, this position will surely enable a Muslim

⁴⁸See the above mentioned story.

⁴⁹Nursi, *The Letters*, 40 or *al-Maktūbāt*, p. 27.

to keep abreast with what happen in the new world, new way of life, without loosing his own identity. The cultural rupture of Islamic societies should be amended with this position and they will be peoples with one long continuous tradition.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Akgündüz, Ahmed, “The Risale-i Nur Movement: Is it a Sufi Order, a Political Society, or a Community?” http://www.sozler.com.tr/symposium/3/symp3_aakgunduz.html.
- Fattāh, ‘Irfan ‘Abd al-Ḥamid, “The Communion of Ideas Between Hujjat al-Islam al-Ghazali and Servant of the Qur’ān Ustad Said Nursi.” [Http://www.sozler.com.tr/symposium/4/symp4_ifattah.html](http://www.sozler.com.tr/symposium/4/symp4_ifattah.html).
- al-Jurjānī, ‘Alī bin Muḥammad, *Al-Ta’rīfāt*, Cairo: Mustafā al-Bābī al-Halabī wa-Awlāduh, 1938.
- Kuşpınar, Bilal, “Nursi’s Evaluation of Sufism.” [Http://www.sozler.com.tr/symposium/3/symp3_bkuşpınar.html](http://www.sozler.com.tr/symposium/3/symp3_bkuşpınar.html).
- Leaman, Oliver, “Nursi’s Place in the *Ihya’* Tradition.” [Http://www.sozler.com.tr/symposium/4/symp4_oleaman.html](http://www.sozler.com.tr/symposium/4/symp4_oleaman.html).
- Nursi, Bediuzzaman Said, *Sözler [Kulliyāt Rasā’il al-Nūr 1]*, English Translation, *the Words*, by Sükran Vahide, Istanbul: Sözler Ne_riyat, Ticaret ve Sanayi, A.S., 1992; Arabic translation, *al-Kalimāt*, by İhsān Qāsim al-Şālīhī, Cairo: Shirka Sūzler li’l-Nashr, 2nd ed., 1992.
- , *Mektūbat [Kulliyāt Rasā’il al-Nūr 2]*, English Translation, *the Letters*, by Sükran Vahide, Istanbul: Sözler Ne_riyat A.S. 2nd ed., 1997; Arabic translation, *al-Maktūbāt*, by İhsān Qāsim al-Şālīhī, Cairo: Shirka Sūzler li’l-Nashr, 2nd ed., 1992.
- , *Lem’alar [Kulliyāt Rasā’il al-Nūr 3]*, English Translation, *the Flashes*, by Sükran Vahide, Istanbul: Sözler Ne_riyat A.S., New Revised Edition, 2000; Arabic translation, *al-Lama’āt*, by İhsān Qāsim al-Şālīhī, Cairo: Shirka Sūzler li’l-Nashr, 2nd ed., 1993.
- , *Suālār [Kulliyāt Rasā’il al-Nūr 4]*, English Translation, *the Rays*, by Sükran Vahide, Istanbul: Sözler Ne_riyat A.S., 1998; Arabic translation, *al-Shu‘ā’āt*, by İhsān Qāsim al-Şālīhī, Istanbul: Dār Sūzler li’l-Nashr, 2nd ed., 1993.
- , *al-Mathnawī al-‘Arabī al-Nūrī [Kulliyāt Rasā’il al-Nūr 6]*, Ed. İhsān Qāsim al-Şālīhī, Istanbul: Dār Sūzler li’l-Nashr, 4th ed., 1999.

- , *al-Malābiḡ* [*Kullīyyāt Rasā'il al-Nūr* 7], Transl. İḥsān Qāsim al-Şāliḥī, Istanbul: Dār Sūzler li'l-Nashr, 1st ed., 1995.
- , *Saqīl al-Islām* [*Kullīyyāt Rasā'il al-Nūr* 8], Ed. and transl. İḥsān Qāsim al-Şāliḥī, Cairo: Shirka Sūzler li'l-Nashr, 3rd ed., 1999.
- , *Sīra Dhātīyya* [*Kullīyyāt Rasā'il al-Nūr* 9], Prepared and. transl. İḥsān Qāsim al-Şāliḥī, Istanbul: Dār Sūzler li'l-Nashr, 1st ed., 1998.
- Vahide, Sükran, *The Author of the Risale-i Nur Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, Istanbul: Sūzler Publications, 1992.