

“Tri-angular” Approach of Badiuzzaman Said Nursi to Education

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ABSTRACT

The education setup of almost all the Muslim societies in the past as well as in the contemporary times is not in coherence with the modern challenges. On the one hand, the Western societies lay strong emphasis on the modern sciences marginalizing the ‘religious studies’ while contrary, on the other hand, the Muslim societies do the reverse. The former excelled in the scientific advancements least bother about religion while the later, hold fast to the traditional education ignoring the modern sciences. This resulted in the wide gulf between the Western societies and the Muslim societies. Apart from this, there is a vast section in Muslim societies which negate the esoteric aspect of Islam (spirituality) which further compounds the problem. In this backdrop many scholars, from time to time, tried to knot reason and revelation, modernity and traditionalism, the secular and the sacred and science and the Quran in a coherent manner to pave way for the unification of people, belonging to different ideologies, across the globe for the betterment in this world and the hereafter. Among such galaxy of scholars, Badiuzzaman Said Nursi (1876-1960) of Turkey envisioned an integrated “curriculum” which blends traditional religious, modern secular and Islamic spiritual education into an efficient and comprehensive system of education by restructuring the whole curriculum for the real development of Muslim Ummah in special, and the whole humanity in general. The present paper aims to critically analyze the “tri-angular” approach of Badiuzzaman Said Nursi to education vis-a-vis the *Madrasah al-Zahra*.

1. Introduction

The education setup of almost all the Muslim societies in the past as well as in the contemporary times is not in coherence with the modern challenges. On the one hand, the Western societies lay strong emphasis on the modern sciences marginalizing the ‘religious studies’ while contrary, on the other hand, the Muslim societies do the reverse. The former excelled in the scientific advancements least bother about religion while the later, hold fast to the traditional education ignoring the modern sciences. This resulted in the wide gulf between the Western societies and the Muslim societies. Apart from this, there is a vast section in Muslim societies which negate the esoteric aspect of Islam (spirituality) which further compounds the problem. This resulted in the further isolation of the two societies not only on the developmental front but also on the educational lines. In this backdrop, many scholars from time to time, tried to bring together the societies by carving out strategies in various fields, the educational field being the primary one. Badiuzzaman Said Nursi is one among these scholars who viewed this wedge from the educational perspective and opined that the real education, a proper combination of scientific education and religious education can foster the relations of the East and the West. He says that the most important problem of Turkey and the Islamic world is the inability to give a sound, efficient and proper education to children. The main cause behind most of the problems that we can imagine such as economic crisis, political problems, moral degeneration, terror, chaos in social life and disintegration of Islamic world is inadequate and improper system of education.

2. Nursi’s view of education

Badiuzzaman Said Nursi opines that the three dangerous enemies of humankind i.e. ignorance, poverty and disunity can

be only combated with proper and balanced education. He views the belief in God as the prerequisite of education. He is of the opinion that education without belief in God is not worthy and considers it valueless. That is why he is critical to both the Eastern and the Western education as the former lays emphasis on the religious sciences while the later emphasizes the scientific education. He strongly criticized the educational institutions for not coping with the new challenges- the Western education is devoid of religious and ethical values while as the Eastern education is lacking innovative and scientific advancements. Nursi had developed his own ideas on educational reform and method of teaching. He criticized the traditional learning in which emphasis was given on memorization. He advocated that religious sciences should be taught in secular schools and modern sciences should be taught in religious schools.¹ He wants to blend reason and revelation, science and the Quran, secular and sacred in order to make education balanced for the welfare of the whole humanity. The interrelationship between knowledge, love and belief forms the basis of Nursian view of education. He wants to restructure the whole curriculum and formulate an integrated curriculum which blends traditional religious, modern secular and Islamic spiritual education into an efficient and comprehensive system of education. He opines that the conscience is enlightened by the religious sciences (ulum-u-diniya) and the mind is enlightened by the science of civilization (funun-u-medeniya) and wisdom occurs from the combination of the two. Nursi says, “The light of conscience is religious sciences (ulum-u-diniya). The light of mind is civilized sciences (funun-u-medeniya). Reconciliation of both manifests the truth. The student’s skills develop further with these two sciences but when they are separated, superstition from the

former and corruption and skepticism from the latter is born". (Said Nursi, 2007, p. 507)ⁱⁱ

3. Introduction to Madrasah al-Zahra

Madrasa al-Zahra was a dream project of Badiuzzaman Said Nursi which he wanted to establish like Jamia Azhar of Egypt wherein he dreamt to blend the Eastern and the Western education to foster a new era of education. When Nursi saw the decaying and out of date system of education prevalent in the Muslim world, he thought to revive the system on the modern lines to address the new challenges. He pinpointed the loopholes in the prevalent madrasah education which only provided traditional education ignoring the positive sciences. He was quite unsatisfied 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.ⁱⁱⁱ The prevalent system of education during the time of Nursi was composed of Madrasahs, Maktabas and Tekkas which were disseminating knowledge according to their values. Nursi wanted to reconcile the trio and make his madrasah the embodiment of all these three systems.^{iv} Al-Zahra was to represent "the most superior (Maktab) by the reason, the very best (Madrasah) by the heart and the most sacred Zawiya by the conscience". He aimed at complete restructuring the madrasah education as he foresaw it as pivotal in securing the future of Kurdistan and unity of the empire and to play the role of Al-Azhar in the center of the eastern Islamic World and to release the region from the dungeons of ignorance and poverty.^v

As the 'Ulama of the times were superstitious and suspicious of the modern sciences, Nursi wanted to introduce new curriculum in these madrasahs to incorporate both religious and scientific sciences. He wished that Islam should function like an advisory council of Madrasahs, Maktabas and Tekkes so that each would complete the deficiencies of the other. He also supposed that the medium of these institutions should be Arabic, Turkish and Kurdish.^{vi} He wanted to restructure the whole curriculum which blends traditional religious, modern secular and Islamic spiritual education into an efficient and comprehensive system of education for the real development of Muslim Ummah in special, and the whole humanity in general.^{vii}

To reform the existing educational system, Said Nursi wanted to establish a university in the form of Madrasah al-Zahra where revealed and modern sciences would be taught side by side, and to play the role of Jamia Al-Azhar (Egypt) in Asia. He aspires to provide Muslim Ummah a guide to confront, and respond to the contemporary challenges faced by them, besides reforming exclusively Madrasah education with modern approach.^{viii} He wanted to establish his madrasah in Eastern Anatolia. During the last days of 1907, Nursi set off for Istanbul to get an official support for his Madrasah but unfortunately he could not meet the Sultan. After many years, the foundation of Al-Azhar was laid on the shores of Lake Van with a great celebration of feast and speeches but his dream could not materialize because of the outbreak of the Balkan War. The construction of the Madrasah was stopped and never

resumed thereafter. Also the unfavorable political circumstances further compounded the problem.^{ix}

Nursi aimed to combat the three enemies of humankind i.e. ignorance, poverty and disunity through his Madrasah Al-Zahra. He says that there is much in the modern sciences which is not contradictory to the religious beliefs and further adds that the Quran does not prohibit Muslims from having admiration for the civilization and the progress or from borrowing what is good from other civilizations.^x But he vehemently criticized the blind imitation of the West as he believes, it would cause disunity in the Muslim World. He advocates that the scientific advancements should be judged from the lens of the Quran whether they are compatible with the principles of Islam or not.^{xi} He is very optimistic and says that the day is not far when the different worlds of knowledge would meet and combine to form a single world of knowledge and with its light would demolish the false walls between the universe, life and man. He says that the Madrasah Al-Zahra project, if achieved can bring solutions to the separation of modern, spiritual and Islamic disciplines in educational institutions and it would contribute to the establishment of Islamic unity. The Madrasah would also combat the onslaught of the western challenges and would hinder the western intention of removing Islam from the lives of the Muslims. Regarding Madrasah Al-Zahra, Badiuzzaman Said Nursi himself says:

"The light of conscience is in religious disciplines. The light of reason is in natural sciences. The truth can be reached by the incorporating of both together. With both wings the zeal of the student will rise. However, when they are separated, the former will cause fanaticism, and the latter will result in doubt and deception."^{xii}

4. Importance of Madrasah Al-Zahra

Badiuzzaman Said Nursi views Madrasah Al-Zahra as an important channel to achieve unity in Muslim Ummah and to address other issues confronting them. Sultan Selim, the first Ottoman caliph and the one who established unity among Muslims during his reign, wrote the following poetry regarding unity of the Muslim Ummah:

*The anxiety of potential disputes and controversy
within my Ummah
Makes me unsteady even in my tomb,
Whereas unity is the only way of repulsing the attacks
of enemies
Should the Ummah not unite, greatly will I suffer.*

Said Nursi, Who declared that he was obeying Sultan Selim in terms of establishing the Islamic unity, is of the opinion that the most important obligatory duty is to work for the establishment of the unity among the Muslim Ummah. To this end, he aimed to have alliance of hearts and ideas by taking tawhid (oneness) as the point of focus. He foresaw the unity could be achieved by proper and balanced education for which Madrasah Al-Zahra is an important means. His intention was to develop the spirit of unity and togetherness by attracting students to his Madrasah from Anatolia, Arabia, India, Iran, the

Balkans, the Caucasus, Turkestan, Malaysia and Indonesia. He stated his ideas on this issue as follows:

“Al Jamia ul Azhar is a general madrasah in Africa, to the extent that Asia is greater than Africa, so there is a need for an even greater Islamic university in Asia matching its magnitude, so that the negative effect of nationalism does not destroy the Muslim communities. So that the nationality of Islam, which is the true, positive and sacred and general nationality, and the sacred ruling of the Quran, which is “The believers are but brothers”, (Al-Hujurat, 49:10) manifest themselves completely” (Emirdag Appendix, P.843)

Nursi says that the world is going through a spiritual crisis whose roots got originated in the West. With the modern means of communication like T.V., internet etc. it engulfed the whole world and the Muslim world could not withstand the onslaught of its currents. The Muslim youth, being the primary targets as they are very prone to it has become contagious. The use of harmful substances like alcohol and other drugs is increasing day by day, and immoral behaviours are now considered as normal behaviours. Nursi wants to develop the hearts and minds of the coming generations both materially and spiritually through his Madrasah Al-Zahra by giving them a balanced and proper education of positive sciences blended with religious and spiritual education.

5. Integration of Sufi lodge with Madrasah

One of the important features of Madrasah Al-Zahra is the integration of Sufi lodge and the madrasah. During past times, the Sufi lodges and Madrasahs were never separated from each other as two different and conflicting institutions of education rather they were the two overlapping aspects of the same educational system. But the recent trends somehow put these two aspects miles apart from each other. With the result, there has been disintegration and a conflict between Sufism and other Islamic disciplines. This situation restricted the Madrasahs to only intellectual activities and prevented them benefitting from the spiritual education and tradition of Sufism. Said Nursi not only wanted to integrate these two aspects but also wanted to integrate Madrasahs with modern schools. He appreciated the spiritual education aspect of Sufism which raised millions of awliya throughout history, and he stated his goal of collecting these three institutions under one roof as follows:

“If the religion of Islam embodies as a place materially, one section of it would be a modern school, the other section would be a Madrasah, and the other section would be a Sufi lodge, and at the

centre there would be a hall in which all of them would gather. It manifests itself as a harmonious luminous palace which is like an assembly in which each group complements the others’ shortcomings.” (The Debates, p. 134)

6. Integrated Curriculum

Badiuzzaman Said Nursi after a path breaking research and threadbare survey came to the conclusion that the prevalent educational curriculum in the Muslim World is incomprehensive, improper, unbalanced and ‘biased’. In order to empower the integrated education, he prescribed certain guidelines for the reformation of educational setup as follows:

- (a) A comprehensive and in-depth review of the whole system of education to revive a sustainable civilization.
- (b) Critical reviewing of traditional religious sciences.
- (c) Restructuring of whole curriculum.
- (d) Unification of traditional religious, modern secular and Islamic spiritualism systems of education.
- (e) Harmonizing material, spiritual and ethical elements of education
- (f) Practicing trilingual medium of instruction, emphasizing Arabic and native languages.
- (g) Assessing Islam to be a source of reference to all types of knowledge.
- (h) Establishment of an Islamic integrated university.
- (i) Development of new formulas to address novel challenges.^{xiii}

7. Conclusion

Throughout his life Badiuzzaman Said Nursi called for the revival of the educational system prevalent in the Muslim World as it was not compatible with the modern challenges posed by the Western onslaught and industrial revolution. He not only pinpointed the lacunas in the educational setup but also provided the strategies and methodologies to make the system of education dynamic and vibrant, addressing modern challenges effectively. He wants to reconcile reason and revelation, science and religion, secular and sacred by restructuring whole curriculum to make it compatible with modern challenges. He strongly advocated for the unification of traditional religious, modern secular and Islamic spiritualism systems of education to polish the hearts and minds of youth. He emphasized that secular education should be given in religious schools and religious education should be given in secular institutions, blended with spiritual education to combat the three enemies of humankind, ignorance, poverty and disunity effectively. In short, if Nursi’s novel approach to education would be followed in letter and spirit, a revolution in the educational system is bound to occur.

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