THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN ISLAMIC COMMUNITY (AL-MUJTAMA’ AL-ISLAMI): BEDIUZZAMAN SAID NURSI AND SAYYID QUTB’S APPROACHES

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Abstract

This paper will discuss the concept of an Islamic Community (al-Mujtama’ al-Islami) and its importance since the Prophet Muhammad (saw) era up to the present day. In the context of the 20th century Islamic thought and awakening, names like Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and Sayyid Qutb were well known as major architects of contemporary Islamic thinking and movement in both Turkey and Egypt. Despite major challenges from the Western domination over Muslim world, both had contributed a lot in proposing approaches in building the Islamic personality. Islamic vision and Islamic awakening amongst their fellow Muslim suggesting that the Prophet Muhammad’s approaches was the best method to be followed in establishing an Islamic Community capable of facing the Western domination. Data for this study is based on Said Nursi and Qutb’s works such as Risale-i Nur, Taswir al-Fanni, al-Adalah al-Itimaiyyah fil-Islam and Fi Zilal al-Quran. Content analysis techniques and descriptive analysis are employed by examining those works which manifest Said Nursi and Qutb’s thought besides identifying some major themes relevant to the study objectives.

Keywords: Said Nursi, Qutb, Muslim World, Islamic Community

1. INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century continued to witness the decline of the Muslim world in its society, economy and politics as compared with the West. This phenomenon worsened with the appearance of corrupt political leaders in certain countries, who used their authority to exploit national resources for their personal interest and that of their cronies among the bourgeois and autocrats without considering the needs of the general population. Under the guise of socialism, nationalism and democracy, these leaders manipulated the uncertain political situation so as to keep their countries and their people in their grip. In so doing, oppression and political pressure were sometimes used against any Muslim group attempting to revive or reform the countries on the basis of Islam (Asyraf Ab Rahman 2015). In addition, the West’s interference in the politics and economy of the Muslim countries contributed towards the deterioration of the situation rather than solving the problems (Khalidi 1994; YY Haddad 1982).

Realizing this phenomenon, there appeared some Muslim scholars and thinkers in the early and mid-twentieth century, who were concerned about the problems and tried to find solutions from the Islamic perspective. Names like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d.1897), Muhammad Abduh (d.1905) and Rashid Rida (d.1935) were
among those who saw that “something must be done” to understand the causes of decline so as to rectify the situation and restore Muslim countries to their proper place in the world.

Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) was one of the most important and influential Muslim figures of the twentieth century who focused on the problems facing the Muslim Umma as a whole and Egyptian society in particular. The continuing dire economic situation of his country, the political corruption and the incessant squabbles of the political parties caused him to feel increasingly disillusioned and frustrated. In his view, the revival of the Muslim life in accordance with the teachings of the Qur’an and the Sunna of the Prophet, peace be upon him, was the only solution. Many books and articles were written by Qutb suggesting this strategy, and calling his fellow Muslims to return to Islam as “their own resource” to find solutions to the existing problems, besides restoring them to their proper place as Muslims. Al-Adala al-litima’iyya fil-‘Islam (1949), Marakat al-Islam wa'l-Ra’smaliyya (1951), al-Salam al-‘Alami wa’t-‘Islam (1951), FiZilal al-Qur’an (1952), and Maalimfi’t-Tariq (1964), were among those of Qutb’s works that clearly indicated his ideas.

In Turkey, there appeared name like Said Nursi (1873-1960) also known as Bediuzzaman, who was one of the most prominent of these ‘ulama and thinkers. Said Nursi perceived clearly the importance of renewal and reconstruction in Islam, and tried to find the solutions that conformed most closely to the needs of the age. His writings such Risale i Nur, or “Letters of Divine Light,” and a comprehensive commentary on the Quran exceeding six thousand pages were written for the sake of proposing Islamic way of life and establishing Muslim community in a real sense.

This paper will thus concentrate on discussing Bediuzzaman’s and Sayyid Qutb’s position and role for renewal in contemporary Islamic thought, and their ideas put forward as solutions for the problems faced by Muslim community of this century. Before elaborating further on their contribution, this paper will first discuss briefly on the concept of Islamic community during the Prophet’s era (P.B.U.H).

2. ISLAMIC COMMUNITY IN THE PROPHET’S ERA

The word community means all form of relationship that are characterized by a high degree of personal intimacy, emotional depth, moral commitment, and social cohesion. In another basic sense, a community is a comprehensive group bound together by a shared sense of belonging and a feeling of identity. From this meaning, an Islamic community means a community bounded or founded on the principle which designates submission to the will of Allah, obedience to His law and commitment to His cause following guidance from the Quran and sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) (Hammudah Abdalati 1972).

From its beginnings, Islam existed as a community-state; it was both a faith (Aqidah al-Tawhid) and a political order. The first model of Islamic community is the Medinan community that formed a total framework for state, society, and culture on the basis of the Quran and teachings guided by the Prophet (pbbuh). For the sake preserving this new established community, The Charter of Medina (سند مدينة) was drafted by the Prophet (P.B.U.H). The charter constituted an agreement between the various Muslim (Muhajirun and Ansar), Jewish, pagan, and Christian groups in Medina, declaring them to constitute ummah wāḥidah (أمة واحدة), and formed the basis of a multi-religious Islamic state in Medina.
The constitution was also created to maintain peace and co-operation among all Medinan groups for fashioning them into a social unity besides ensuring freedom of religious beliefs and practices for all citizens. It assured that representatives of all parties, Muslim or non-Muslim, should be present when consultation occurs (shura) or in cases of negotiation with foreign states, and that no one should go to war before consulting the Prophet. It also established the security of women, a tax system for supporting the community in times of conflict, and a judicial system for resolving disputes.

In this regard, Prophet Muhammad’s role (P.B.U.H) is full of examples that show his status as a role model for Muslim societies and individuals. In other words, every sort of person can find truths in Prophet Muhammad's life that constitute an example for them to follow. In the Quran the only verse that refers literally to the status of Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) as a role model is as follows: "Verily in the messenger of Allah you have a good example (uswa) for him who looks unto Allah and the Last Day, and remembers Allah much."(al-Ahzab: 21)

The Arabic word uswa (example) in the original verse means example or model that should be obeyed and followed. In terms of Islamic faith, uswa, that is to say being an example or a role model, is an attribute that is found in those who possess goodness, beauty and righteousness. This verse shows the importance of Prophet Muhammad’s sunnah in the lives of Muslims during the first Muslim era till the present day. As a matter of fact, the Quran clearly states that Prophet Muhammad has a superior character and demonstrates an exemplary lifestyle.

3. ISLAMIC COMMUNITY IN THE 20TH CENTURY: MAIN SCENARIO AND APPROACHES

As noted earlier, the twentieth century witness the decline of the Muslim world in its society, economy and politics. Some may say that the Western’s domination and influence may had an impact on the existing scenario, while some may assume that the internal weakness amongst the Muslim leader lead to the problem with the appearance of corrupt political leaders in certain countries. In this condition, the Muslim scholars in every country have been fulfilling their duties according to their respective capacities to defend the Islamic faith. The names of Maulana Maududi and his fellows (Pakistan and India), Hassan al Banna and Sayyid Qutb (Arab World) and many other leaders are quite prominent in this successful defense. In Turkey, the person who discharged this duty is Bediuzzaman Said Nursi. The way Islam got revived in Turkey as a result of his efforts is really unique perhaps in the whole Islamic history.

3.1 Bediuzzaman Said Nursi’s Approach

Said Nursi (1877-1960), also spelled Said-i Nursi, officially Said Okur and commonly known with the honorific Bediüzzaman (بديع الزمان), was a Kurdish Sunni Muslim theologian. He wrote the Risale-i Nur Collection, a body of Qur’anic commentary exceeding six thousand pages. Believing that modern science and logic was the way of the future, he advocated teaching religious sciences in secular schools and modern sciences in religious schools. (Badıllı:1998)

In the context of Turkey scenario, the dominance of Western thoughts had already made the utility of religion doubtful among a class of the masses in Turkey. During the World War, the behavior of Arabs and their anti-Turkish attitude arouse
the passion of antagonism with religion among the fanatic Turk fundamentalists. As a result, they grew hostile not only towards Arabs but their religion as well. The condition became worse with the establishment of Ataturk secular regime who generated such a revolution in Turkey against the religion. Their goal seems to be not different from the anti-religious policies of the Socialist countries. As a result, in Turkey, which had itself been a fighter country for Islam through ages, the survival of Islam became endangered. Therefore, it becomes the role of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi to change the status of his country “Turkey” from an anti-religious state into once again a follower of Islam.

The most important feature of Said Nursi which distinguishes him among his contemporaries is to endeavour for Muslim Revival without the means of politics or the establishment of Islamic state. Maryam Jamila has comprehended his mission absolutely. She describes the distinctions of Said Nursi among his contemporaries: “The basis of Badiuzzaman Nursi’s strength lies in the fact that he had grasped his own difficulties and pitfalls and he had realistically evaluated the conditions which Muslims were suffering from. Unlike other Muslim revivalists, he did not prepare splendid plans for the Islamic universal political, social and economic systems which cannot be put into practice in the near future.” (Ishtiaq Ahmad Gondal & Shumaila Majeed 2014). She further illustrates:

“When the majority of Muslim youngsters have shunned acting on Islam and they have been accepting the impact of the West blindly and tastefully then it is meaningless to talk about a united Islamic World, Muslim Block and Muslim-unity. Bediuzzaman with his visionary insight had comprehended it fully that it would be meaningless to participate in practical politics in such conditions. He knew that it was not possible to revive Islam only through getting the political strength….Therefore he quite wisely, refrained himself from establishing a rigid and inflexible organization because such an organization could easily be banned by some dictator …unlike this, Said Nursi strengthened the roots of faith in the hearts of millions of Turks through his preaching and his writings. This was such a revolution as could not be banned and even a despotic dictator could not constraint its teachings.”(Ishtiaq Ahmad Gondal & Shumaila Majeed 2014).

Said Nursi is also knowned as reconstructionist. According to Maulana Maududi, the qualities of revivalist as follows:

i. Diagnosis of the current ailments: to examine thoroughly how and to what extent Ignorance crept in.
ii. Scheme for reformation: to determine exactly where to strike the blow.
iii. Intellectual revolution: to shape the ideas, beliefs and moral viewpoints of the people into the Islamic mould.

We can observe all the above qualities in the personality of Said Nursi. He diagnosed the current ailment as the “weakness of Faith along with the unprecedented attacks by materialist and atheists in the name of science and development, which was the major reason of the decline of Islamic world”. Thus he gave all his attention on the revitalization of Islamic faith and the scheme he adapted for the reconstruction of Muslim society is ‘mânevî jihad,’ that is, ‘jihad of the word’ or ‘non-physical jihad’, and ‘positive action. “non-physical jihad or jihad of the word.”
He wrote a commentary of the *Quran Risal i Nur* in which “he explains the basic tenets of belief, the truths of the *Qur*‘an, to modern man. His method was to analyse both belief and unbelief and to demonstrate through clearly reasoned arguments that not only is it possible, by following the method of the Qur’an, to prove rationally all the truths of belief, such as God’s existence and unity, prophethood, and bodily resurrection, but also that these truths are the only rational explanation of existence, man and the Universe.” He proved that “science’s breathtaking discoveries of the universe’s functioning corroborate and reinforce the truths of religion”. The difference of renewal and reconstruction is necessary to be mentioned here.

Renewal is basically an attempt of regaining the previous golden period of Islam in which Muslims were the leaders of mankind and which once made them the pride of human civilization “the time of Khilafat al Rashida.” Whereas Reconstruction is the search for the solutions of the problems of Muslim community in the light of Islam in terms of contemporary settings, so that they could develop some conformity with modern ideas. “In which the irreversible world culture of science and technology could not be ignored.” Said Nursi revived the basic tenets of Islam and reconciled these creeds with innovative ideas keeping in view the contemporary settings of the world. “Hence in Nursi’s view, the restatement of the basic tenets of the Islamic religion, and “the renewing and strengthening of belief” through new methods, were of paramount importance and took precedence over every other form of struggle aimed at reconstruction.” (Ishtiaq Ahmad Gondal, Shumaila Majeed 2014).

In a friday sermon which he delivered on the occasion of his visit to Damascus in 1911, he pointed out the reasons of the decline of Muslim community in the form of six terrible sicknesses and also prescribed the remedies accordingly through the pharmacy of the Quran. As far as the methodology of Said Nursi is concerned, he identifies the problem first then gives logical as well as scientific analysis (where needed) respectively, in accordance with the mentality of modern age man. Hence he gives solutions as per current requirements which are quite applicable. This methodology can be observed at the beginning of sermon: “I have realized that what has allowed foreigners, Europeans, to fly towards the future on progress while it arrested us and kept us, in respect of material development, in the Middle Ages, are six dire sicknesses” After wards he enumerates those sicknesses as 1: Despair, 2: Death of truthfulness, 3: Love of enmity, 4: Unawareness of the bond that bind believers to one another, 5: Despotism, 6: Restricting endeavor to what is personally beneficial. After the identification of problem, he suggests the remedy in the form of six words and elaborates each with logical reasoning, which are Hope, Honesty, Love and brotherhood, Islamic unity (awareness of the luminous bonds uniting the believers) and mutual consultation.

Thus, Islamic community from Badiuzzaman’s view point refers to a strong Muslim community whose belief can overcome and defeat materialism, atheism and materialist philosophy. For Bediuzzaman, true enemies in this age are science, reason, and civilization that were diverted towards materialism and atheism, and their source, materialist philosophy. Through ‘positive action,’ and the maintenance of public order and security, the supposed damage could be ‘repaired’ by the ‘healing’ truths of the *Quran*. (Abdul Rahman Haji Abdullah 1987). Said Nursi revived the basic tenets of Islam and reconciled these creeds with innovative ideas keeping in view the contemporary settings of the world. Hence in Nursi’s view, the restatement of the basic tenets of the Islamic religion, and the renewing and strengthening of belief
through new methods, were of paramount importance and took precedence over every other form of struggle aimed at reconstruction. In doing so, science and technology can not be ignored in solving Muslims’ problems.

3.2 Sayyid Qutb’s Approach

Sayyid Qutb’s importance stems from the fact that his thought was so influential not only in Egypt but also at the global level outside the Egyptian society. His thought was seen as a response to the actual Egyptian socio-political conditions during World War II and the post-war period, which led Egypt into a period of increasing violence, chaos and anarchy. There was a breakdown of law and order between 1945 and 1952, in which strikes broke out everywhere, including among industrial workers, public employees and the police force. This indicated clearly the disillusionment of the Egyptians with the government in power, which had failed to solve the country’s pressing problems. They began to demand a social reform that would guarantee social justice put into practice (Musallam 1983).

Qutb’s interest in the Quran began since his early childhood. It was however in 1947, after his literary studies of the Qur’an from a literati’s perspective then, his interest in Islam merge with his awareness of the prevailing social and political conditions. Describing this new orientation in Qutb’s thought, Nettler (1994) and Haddad (1983) noted that the Quranic usages by Qutb was more towards justifying his existing thought and thus putting him in the rank of Muslim thinkers. Nettler (1994) notes, ‘the Quran served for Qutb as a court of last resort and the ultimate proof of his ideas’. As Muslim who sought for truth, Qutb’s Quranic usage should be seen as part of his justification about the truth and validity of Islam.

Among Qutb’s major works, al Taswir al Fanni fil Quran, al Adalah al Ijtimaiyyah fil-Islam and Fi Zilal al-Quran considered as paramount and fundamental since the works discussed Qutb’s perspectives based on the Quranic points. According to Khalidi (1986), Qutb’s prison experiences since 1954 onwards were extremely difficult for him, especially the first three years, for he was a generally sickly man who suffered from a number of afflictions. It is alleged also that he was made to undergo torture of various kinds. The experiences also enabled Qutb to see the real condition of the Muslims around him including the weakness in the faith of the Muslims and the loss of the spirit of the Qur’ân in their hearts. This was apparent from their continuous and unfounded support of the unjust government, despite knowing about its oppression of Islamic groups and their fellow Muslims in particular. There was the Quran that opened Qutb’s eyes to see the real Egyptian world and the existing unjust government. For Galford, Qutb’s interest to the Quranic interpretation was part of the current trend of modern tafsir method that emphasizes on tafsir al-Quran bil Quran (interpreting the Quran using the Quran). “Commentators this century are on the whole, if not unanimously, against the use of extra-Quranic materials…to elucidate the Quranic meaning…” (Galford 1998).

For Qutb, the importance of the Islamic concept (tasawwur) can be seen first in the Muslim’s needs for comprehensive interpretation of existence which includes divinity, the universe, life and mankind. Thus, the political system that rules over human life becomes, for its validity, dependent on the comprehensive interpretation of the Islamic concept and values mentioned earlier. Qutb’s articles written in 1945 advocated issues related to social, economic and political reform. His objectives during this period were to expose the real situation of the Egyptian society and the
need for reforms. None of his calling advocated “Islamic” solutions. In October 1947, after his long study of the Qur’an coupled with a consciousness of the national crisis, did he establish, with some friends, a weekly journal, al- Fikr al-Jadid (New Thought). The journal offered Islamic solutions to the social problems facing the country. The journal also attempt to bring people’s attention to Islam instead of following capitalist and communist groups, who were active in spreading their reformatory programmes for the Egyptians.

Qutb wrote in the journal that the time had come to look to Islam to solve the current problems in a practical and realistic manner, in true harmony with both an Islamic spirit and the contemporary human situation (Musallam 1983). The journal, however, did not describe in detail the Islamic method of achieving justice in human social and economic welfare, such as the obligation to pay zakat etc. Rather, it focused more on a just distribution of wealth in Egypt, relations between landowners and workers, and between employers and employees in regard to wages and working hours (Musallam, 1983). This lack of any comprehensive Islamic solution was perhaps due to the short period of its appearance: it was published for only six months (October 1947 to May 1948) before being closed down owing to martial law being declared prior to the Palestine war. Despite its short life, the journal successfully achieved its goals. The reform programmes advocated by the journal opened the minds of the Egyptians to the need to stand up to the privileged elite in their society and demand social justice the distribution of wealth, individual ownership and so on.

Besides writing books like al-Adalah, Ma’rakat and al Salam al Alami, Qutb began joining the Ikhwan group and participated in its dakwah activities. It was during this stage that he was in close contact with the Free Officers in their intention of overthrowing the monarchy and the liberal nationalist regime. Despite different ideological principles (Socialism versus Islam), the growing crisis in Egyptian politics and the economy had led them to agree to co-operate in the struggle for unity and justice for the Egyptian people. In describing the social and political sphere of Egyptian society after World War II, Mitchell wrote that the crisis in the country grew worse and greatly affected the economic, political, and social life of the Egyptian people. More importantly, it “had manifold consequences for both the momentum and the direction of the national movement.”(Mitchell, 1969) Therefore, “an agreement of sort” was reached later on between the Free Officers and the Ikhwan concerning the latter’s role on the day of the revolution. This agreement “attempted to foresee all the possible contingencies in which a well-disciplined, well-trained civil army could be of use.” The revolution of July 1952 saw Qutb’s emergence as one of its important figures. He played a vital role in influencing the people of the country and gaining their support. According to Mahmud al-Azab, an Egyptian military officer working at Port Said, Qutb played an instrumental role in the preparations. On the eve of the revolution, he commanded those military officers to be fully prepared. While attending the meeting held at Qutb’s house, Mahmud al-Azab found that some of the revolutionary leaders were also there, including Jamal Abd al-Nasir. (Khalidi, 1986).

In additions to his direct participation in the 1952 revolution, Qutb also wrote books and articles criticizing the corrupt royal government, feudalism and capitalism. This indicated that Qutb tried to implement what he believed as a true struggle as enunciated by his religious teaching; combating injustice in human society and affirmed the capacity of Islam as an appropriate and desirable ideology for the world.
of the mid-twentieth century. Qutb wrote in *Macraka*, for instance: “the deterioration in social conditions from which the masses of Egypt suffer cannot continue indefinitely... This is a fact that should be known by all. Of all Qutb’s early works, *Zilal* was his masterpiece. It tackled all the issues in more details approaching topics on society, economic and politics on the basis of the Quran. Throughout his discussion about Islamic way of life manifested in *Zilal*, Qutb employed an educational approach to human conscience believing that to be the best to bring people close to God. This is because with the fear of God in one’s heart, individuals will not only refrain from committing sin in public, but will also behave appropriately in private since he knows that God sees all His servant’s deeds and actions wherever they are.

**CONCLUSION**

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and Sayyid Qutb were well known as major architects of contemporary Islamic thinking and movement in both Turkey and Egypt. Despite major challenges from the Western domination over Muslim world, both had contributed a lot in proposing approaches in building the Islamic personality, Islamic vision and Islamic awakening amongst their fellow Muslim suggesting that the Prophet Muhammad’s approaches was the best method to be followed in establishing an Islamic Community capable of facing the Western domination. Bediuzzaman Said Nursi’s approach in regards to the welfare of Muslim community was strengthened the roots of faith in the hearts of Muslims through his preaching and his writings. To him, this was such a revolution as could not be banned and even a despotic dictator could not constraint its teachings. Sayyid Qutb’s approach on the other hand, views the establishment of Islamic community should come both, 1) through joining a strong Muslim group who will politically capable of establishing Islamic community or Islamic state and 2) educating human conscience. The latter approach however comes after his long study of the Quran as clearly stated in his *Fi Zilal al-Quran* believing that to be the best to bring people close to God. This is because with the fear of God in one’s heart, individuals will not only refrain from committing sin in public, but will also behave appropriately in private since he knows that God sees all His servant’s deeds and actions wherever they are.

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