An introduction to Said Nursi: life, thought and writings

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Bediuzzaman (his name means ‘Wonder of the age’) Said Nursi (1878–1960) is an important Islamic thinker who has not received nearly enough attention from English-language writers, especially given his influence on modern Turkish Islamic phenomena such as the Gülen movement. Markham and Pirim’s An introduction to Said Nursi is a useful undergraduate-level primer intended to address this gap, and it makes an admirable start. The book is divided into three sections: a brief history of Said Nursi’s life, an exposition of some of his theology and, lastly, extracts from his writings.

The history chapter covers the political context in which Said Nursi worked – namely the post-Tanzimat fall of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of Kemalism; his education and exposure to modern knowledge and ideas; the effect upon him of his time spent as a political prisoner and his exile by the secularists; the ‘New Said’ emphasis on non-violent social justice, developed by fostering spirituality; and the rise of the Nur (‘Light’) community – devotees who spread his teachings. This last chapter does suffer from a rather uncritical hagiographical style, drawing heavily on Şükran Vahide’s biography, although the authors might be excused, given the lack of critical biographies.

The second section (chapters 2–4) presents some important theological topics from Said Nursi’s masterpiece, the Risale-i nur (Letters of light), in particular: the nature of God and his interaction with creation; the importance of the Qur’an; the possibility of marrying rationality and belief to counter atheism and materialism; ‘grounded pluralism’ as a middle path between theocracy and anti-religious secularism; and the need for interfaith cooperation based on justice. Said Nursi was an Islamic thinker who emphasized rationality, non-violence and pluralism. The authors note: ‘It is because he is a committed Muslim that he accepts pluralism, not despite his commitment to Islam’ (p. 53). This is a refreshing alternative to the academy’s preoccupation with Islamic thinkers who advocate politicized interpretations of Islam. The authors’ expertise in interreligious dialogue shines through.

Markham and Pirim discuss Said Nursi’s rejection of classical Sufism as inappropriate for modern times, but what we do not learn, however, is where to place Said Nursi’s thought within the context of Sunni theology generally. Furthermore, the book does not make clear the extent to which Said Nursi was influenced by his contemporaries, and they by him. Several of his analogies and arguments – science and religion being two necessary wings; the physics of gravity as a visible manifestation of divine love; criticism of the Sufi doctrines of unity of being and unity of witnessing; comparing the universe’s manifestation of divine attributes to the sun’s light variously reflected by mirrors of varying capacities, among others – are all found in the talks and writings of Said Nursi’s contemporary ‘Abd al-Baha. Unless a reader is already familiar with the genre of modern revivalist thinkers, it is difficult to compare Said Nursi with his peers, and this introduction reads as if the Risale-i nur descended from heaven through semi-divine inspiration.

The third section of the book contains extracts from Said Nursi’s writings on: belief; prophethood; life after death and resurrection; and justice and worship. This gives an opportunity for readers to access primary texts directly. A brief list of further reading suggestions and a glossary of terms is also included.

Overall, the text is very readable, despite some stylistic idiosyncrasies: ‘Nursi’s transition from Old to New Said was not a rupture; rather it could be understood as a passage from the restlessness of rivers to the stillness of oceans’ (p. 14), is rather too poetic, perhaps, for an academic textbook. The inclusion of study questions at the end
of chapters is very useful for the book’s intended audience: students and those interested in interfaith dialogue.

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The fourteenth-century Damascene scholar Ibn Taymiyya is probably best known as a key inspiration to the assassins of Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat in 1981, the late Osama bin Ladin, and others of like mind. These figures draw on Ibn Taymiyya and especially his famous fatwas mobilizing jihād against the Mongol invaders of Syria to justify their violent acts, and this has earned him notoriety in both academic and international security circles as the father of modern Islamic radicalism. The purpose of Yahya Michot’s book under review is to wrest Ibn Taymiyya from the extremists and read him instead as an inspiration for Muslims seeking to live meaningful religious lives that make positive contributions to society, especially in minority situations. To achieve this end, Michot’s Against extremisms presents a sizable collection of Taymiyyan texts in translation on religious and theological moderation, human and divine love, and political pragmatism. As with Michot’s other publications, this is a work of considerable historical and philological erudition that will be of interest to students of Ibn Taymiyya, medieval Islamic thought, and perhaps even modern Muslim trends. However, Against extremisms is not history or philology in the first instance, but an apologetic work of theological ethics seeking wisdom in Ibn Taymiyya for Muslim life today.

Each of the 18 chapters in Against extremisms consists of an introduction and the translation of one or more Taymiyyan passages accompanied by scholarly notes. The chapters have been selected from Michot’s earlier French translations found in three text series published in Muslim magazines in Paris (1990–98) and Mauritius (1999–2002) and on the internet (2009–present) – all three series are now online at http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/it/ – and in two small books: Ibn Taymiyya: un dieu hésitant? (Beirut: Albouraq, 2004) and Ibn Taymiyya: mécréance et pardon (Beirut: Albouraq, 2005). Michot’s chapter introductions in Against extremisms are those found in the French source texts, and at times they include polemical and hortatory reflections on the contemporary significance of the text at hand.

The first four chapters translate texts in which Ibn Taymiyya presents Islam as the middle way between religious and theological extremes and counsels great care on questions of communal boundaries. As Michot observes, Ibn Taymiyya does prescribe capital punishment for unrepentant unbelievers, but he is nevertheless in reality very reticent to declare someone an unbeliever. Michot further suggests that Ibn Taymiyya’s declaration that the Mongols were unbelievers due to their imperfect practice of Islam was nothing more than a matter of war propaganda to mobilize Syrians to fight a foreign invader. Michot sees no relevance in this for normative Muslim practice today, and he points instead to Ibn Taymiyya’s leniency with Muslims recently converted to the faith.

In texts translated in the following two chapters, Ibn Taymiyya clarifies the relationship between God and creation. The Taymiyyan God creates and commands all things in wisdom, and, while humans can make no claim on God, God keeps His promises, and that is something