

Said Nursi and Imam Rabbani on the Concept of Prophethood

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Abstract

Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1877-1960 AD) and Imam Rabbani (1564-1624 AD) are two extraordinary personalities that the Muslim world has produced. Their intellectual and spiritual influence continues to be felt in the contemporary world. The aim of the paper is to compare the views and methods of Said Nursi and Imam Rabbani on the concept of Prophethood and to underline the points of convergence and divergence. The methodology applied is comparative, historical and analytical. The writings—*Risale-i Nur* and *Ithbat-i-Nabuwwah*—of Said Nursi and Imam Rabbani respectively serve as the primary source for this paper. The paper arrives at the conclusion that though the two thinkers are separated by time but are linked by the mission and spirituality. They both used combined approach and methods to defend the institution of Prophethood and its relevance and efficacy in the ever-changing times. In doing so they were greatly successful in rejuvenating the faith and importance of Prophethood.

Keywords: Imam Rabbani, Bediüzzaman Said Nursi, *Risale-i Nur*, *Ithbat-i-Nabuwwah*, *Maktubat-i Imam Rabbani*, Prophethood, Qur'an.

Introduction

Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1877-1960 AD) and Imam Rabbani¹ (1564-1624 AD), two extraordinary personalities—separated by time but linked by mission and spirituality, revisited the role and function of Prophethood in their respective times. Especially, when the question came under pressure of transformation due to the emergence of new interpretations rising from both within the fold of Islam as in the case of Imam Rabbani and through the emergence of modern scientific and technical age in the case of Said Nursi. As such both tried to revive and renew Islam by addressing the faith-questions arising out of intellectual encounters of their times. At the heart of any renewal

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and 'change' lies a great leader or champion of change – prophets of God. ² Therefore, after the Qur'an and God's Oneness (*tawhid*), Prophethood (*nabuwwah*) was sought to be re-affirmed by Muslim theologians as 'agents of change' or 'role models' that would be the 'agency' for change or the 'pillar' of continuity in society. To this effect the various aspects of Prophethood became important at various junctures of history of Islam, specifically here, in the writings of Nursi and Imam Rabbani. For this reason, and for their spiritual link, the two great thinkers warrant a comparative study of their views of Prophethood. The comparison is also apt and significant for the *tajdidi* links between two illustrious Muslim personalities.

The relationship between Said Nursi and Imam Rabbani is neither geographical nor nationalistic but a spiritual interface exhibiting the universal dimension of Islam's Ummatic consciousness. It is founded in their Naqshbandiyah fellowship, a Sufi order from Muslim Asia associated with Muhammad ibn Muhammad Bahauddin Naqshband (1317-1389 AD) of Bukhara. Said Nursi saw Imam Rabbani worthy of respect and emulation and refers to him as, "the hero and a sun of the Naqshbandi Order". ³

1. Objectives of the Research

The views of Said Nursi and Imam Rabbani on the concept of Prophethood in the light of their respective writings *Risale-i Nur* and *Ithbat-i-Nabuwwah* constitute the kernel of this paper. The conclusion will include a comparative analysis of their ideas of Prophethood to arrive at the points of convergence and divergence between the two.

2. Methodology of the Research

As the very title suggest the methodology applied will be comparative as well as historical and analytical. The writings *Risale-i Nur* and *Ithbat-i-Nabuwwah* of Said Nursi and Imam Rabbani respectively serve as the primary source for this paper. In addition, the relevant letters from *Maktubat-i Imam Rabbani* will also be utilised. Each scholar will be addressed separately and their views on the role and function of prophethood will be compared and analysed.

3. Analysis and Findings

3.1 Prophethood: Concept and History

Islam's view of Prophethood has five distinct and significant elements. Before elucidating them, one should bear in mind that a belief in previous prophets is a fundamental of the Islamic creed. First, Prophet Muhammad's mission is the same divine message with which God entrusted all human prophets, of whom Adam was the first and Prophet Muhammad was the last. The second meaning of Prophethood refers to prophet's qualifications. A prophet must be sinless, infallible, trustworthy, steadfast and sharp-witted. Third, Prophet Muhammad received God's messages through Qur'anic revelations. Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the literal and eternal word of God as revealed to Muhammad.

The fourth feature of Prophethood in Islam is the distinction between a prophet-messenger (*rasūl*) and a prophet (*nabī*). The *nabis* were entrusted to convey the divine message while *rasul* were endowed with books in addition, thus assigning major role to the latter. The fifth meaning of Prophethood in Islam revolves around the miraculous abilities that God grants each prophet-messenger as a way to demonstrate His divine signs to humans.⁴ Prophethood in Islam thus acquired a unique meaning that paved the way for the religious distinctiveness of Islam. But this construction of Prophethood came under scrutiny and challenge at different times of history.

3.2 Nursi's Views on Prophethood: Main Objectives

In Nursi's words, his main objective is to 'defend the truths of the Qur'an and *iman*[belief in God]'. In fact, Nursi begins writing about Prophethood and the prophet while explaining the 23-24thverse of surah al-Baqarah on the originality of the Qur'an. Thus, while defending the Qur'an, Nursi begins his discussion of *nubuwwah*. As such, due to the centrality of the Qur'an to Prophethood, Nursi's discussions of *nubuwwah* are the second most central theme in his writing, second only to God.

3.2.1 Nursi's Method and Argumentation

Nursi offers a unique blend of the various approaches, applied by his predecessors to *nubuwwah*⁵ in his esoteric Epistles of Light, the *Risale-i Nur*, and provides a culmination of all categories in order to discuss Prophethood. Nursi employs almost all sciences to defend his arguments on *nubuwwah*; this unique approach was arguably unprecedented.⁶ Nursi's aim is not to detail the historical aspects of the Prophet's life or to go into detailed theological discussion on prophethood, rather he chooses to focus on and address areas that he thinks require a new explanation.⁷ Nursi's prophetology is built on the existing discourse in Islamic *kalam*, his unique contribution lies in his address of the challenges of modernity and doubts put forward by the Orientalists (*mustashriqeen*). Therefore, his view on prophethood is 'reconstructed' with the use of reason, metaphors and combined methodology to appeal to the mind, heart and spirit.

3. 2. 2 Why Prophethood?

Nursi uses logical arguments and teleology reasoning to state the 'essentiality' of Prophethood for mankind. In the 734th Gleam, in the Words, he adopts the method of analogy of an ant to highlight that prophets are 'essential'. He states that just as divine power 'does not leave an ant without a leader, or bees without a queen, it surely would not leave mankind without a prophet or code of laws'. In doing so, Nursi demonstrates the 'essential need' for Prophethood and prophets, and also the key function of the need being a 'guide' or leader. Nursi's appeal to reason is further evidenced in the *Isharatal-I'jaz* (the Signs of Miraculous-ness) and in the Rays. In the *Isharat al-I'jaz*, to the question of the reason for the various outlooks of the prophets and their different ways, he equates the 'change of seasons' to the differences in prophetic laws and prescriptions.⁸ Nursi thus demonstratively 'simplifies' complex theological issues; his aim is not to enter into 'systematic logic' in his argumentation, but rather to employ what he calls the 'Qur'anic method' of simple 'analogies' that address the rational mind and are easily grasped due to the nature of the example. Nursi adopts this approach throughout the *Risale-i Nur* in order to put forward his theological understanding of the nature of Prophethood.

3. 2. 3 Prophethood and Miracles

Nursi, like Imam Rabbani, used ‘logic’ in addition to the Qur’an and Hadith to argue for the essentiality of miracles as part of *nubuwwah*. Nursi’s position on miracles is unique as he explains not only the need but also the various instances of wisdom underlying the miracles attributed to prophets. In the Twentieth Word, Nursi details selective key prophetic miracles outlined in the Qur’an including Abraham’s escapade whilst being in the pit of fire and Solomon’s flight through the air covering many kilometres distance in short periods.⁹ Here Nursi’s theological and ontological explanations are unique; his sophisticated explanation does not negate the possibility of the occurrence of these ‘miraculous events’, rather it strengthens his re-occurring argument in the *Risale-i Nur* that ‘causes or nature are not the real Law Giver’ and that causes ‘do not have creative power’ but are rather governed by the Creator and the governor of causes ‘whose kingdom has the hand-hold of every molecular, atomic and celestial and cosmic object in the universe and creation’. Such is the explanation that Nursi puts forward while discussing the verse ‘O fire be cool and calm’, where Abraham was thrown in the fire pit. Nursi explains that: *“God almighty suspends his own laws of nature temporarily as a sign and mark for a people of that time by the request of one of his own sent envoys or prophets and grants permission as a final chance for those that may need further proof for strengthening of faith.”*

Nursi does not delve into historical accounts of miracles or geological proofs, but selectively deduces stories and shows that ‘miracles are all an aim and goal for humanity to achieve it in material life’. For example, Solomon’s traversing of space became a reality thousands of years later with the invention of the transportation modes of trains and aeroplanes.¹⁰ This unique view of miracles sheds a whole new light and opens a wide door for scientific interest or study on prophetic miracles and other Qur’anic stances to see if they have been scientifically realised in our time.¹¹

Nursi therefore extends the understanding of miracles. His unique exposition on miracles of the prophets is innovative in that he sees miracles as ‘the confirmation by the Creator of the cosmos of his declaration of prophethood;

they have the effect of the words, ‘You have spoken truly!’¹² In doing so he upholds the position of ‘orthodoxy’, by showing miracles as part of everyday life.

3. 2. 4 Nursi on Prophetic Guidance and Philosophical Truths

Nursi affirms the superiority of Prophethood over philosophy. In Nursi’s prophetology, the world’s historical events may be seen through this lens of ‘prophetic history’ or ‘philosophy’ with the aspect that prophetic line represents ‘divine law’, guidance and favouring from God, and philosophy represents the rational mind that dominates the ‘*ana*’ or sense of I-ness in humanity. For Nursi, when revelation and reason are combined humanity produces great fruits – this means prophetic guidance and philosophy. Therefore, Nursi prefers holistic approaches that will advance humanity.

Know that among mankind Prophethood is the summary and foundation of human good and perfections; True Religion is the index of prosperity and happiness; belief is sheer, transcendent good. Since apparent in this world are a shining beauty, an extensive and exalted good, an evident truth, and superior perfection, self-evidently truth and reality lie in Prophethood and in the hands of prophets. While evil, misguidance, and loss are with those who oppose them.¹³

In summary, Nursi’s position amidst orthodoxy is very clear as he uses logical reason, more theological and philosophical approaches. He uses analogies to prove and reaffirm the need for Prophethood as guides as part of God’s mercy and creation.

3. 3 Imam Rabbani’s Views on Prophethood

According to Sayyid Abul Hassan Ali Nadwi, an acclaimed scholar of the modern Muslim world, Imam Rabbani’s main achievement as the Mujaddid was his reemphasising the need and importance of the Prophethood. After acknowledging the other achievements of Imam Rabbani, he writes, “but the fact that the greatest achievement of the Mujaddid which is the nucleus of his entire endeavour or the focal point of his multidimensional reformatory programme was his success in creating a trust in the need and abiding nature

of Muhammad's Prophethood".¹⁴ Imam Rabbani as an erudite scholar was expected to write on any issue pertaining to Islam and Muslims including Prophethood but the circumstances necessitated him to respond to certain developments.

Sirhindi's approach, objective and the factors in writing the defence of the prophethood can be had from the very title of the epistle i. e. *Ithbat al-Nabuwwah- (the Proof of Prophethood)*. The very institution of Prophethood was put in doubt for myriad reasons. That thousand years had elapsed as such the very edifice of Prophethood was made doubtful and outmoded. In fact, there was a movement propagating the 'ideology of second millennium'.¹⁵ It was made to believe that the Prophethood is concerned only with external aspects of human life, people would mock at the blessed names of the Last Prophet and the rank of the Prophet was also undermined. Under the influence of philosophy and logic it was being promulgated that "the 'ibâdât are not *munjî* (able to save) and that salvation depends upon beautiful habits". Moreover, even men of religion, who were expected to be healers for the disease of disbelief, were falling for this disaster and drifting into calamity.¹⁶

Although Sirhindi identifies many more aspects of Islam that were under attack in India but since he believed that the cause behind all ills is lack of proper understanding and importance of the Prophethood, he therefore concentrated specifically on this important institution of Islam. He writes, "I have studied the causes for this corruption in Muslim children's belief and have scrutinized the origin of their doubts. I have come to the conclusion that there is only one reason for the slackness in their î mân. And the reason is that much time has elapsed since Rasûlullah ('alaihi 's-salâm)".¹⁷ This shows the centrality that Imam Rabbani gives to Prophethood in his thought and writings.

3. 3. 1 Main Objective of writing on Prophethood

While referring to the abovementioned issues in the preface of the book-*Ithbat al-Nabuwwah*-Imam Rabbani himself marks the objectives to put pen to paper for prophethood. He writes, "with the intention of removing the doubts and suspicions of those who acquired their religious knowledge from the books of

religiously ignorant people and from the venomous pens of the enemies of the religion, I have thought of writing what I know.” He further marks the various facets of the Prophethood that he was going to address in the epistle. He writes, “By writing this book, I have tried to explain what Prophethood means, to verify that Muhammad (‘alaihi’s-salâm) was in full possession of Prophethood, to eliminate the doubts of the unbelievers concerning this fact, and to display the wickedness and harms of a few bigots of science who attempt to suppress this fact with their personal thoughts and opinions.”

3. 3. 2 The meaning of Prophethood

Imam Rabbani employs many approaches, in addition to theosophical, in defence of the Prophethood. He quotes classical scholars of Kalam, uses logical and philosophical argumentation and metaphors to elucidate his point of view. Here the Nursi’s and Imam Rabbani’s approach converge to a great extent. Imam Rabbani starts by detailing what prophethood means.

Quoting *Sharh-i-Mawâqif* by Sayyid Sherîf al-Jurjânî, Imam Rabbani first tries to identify the qualifications of a prophet. According to him a person to whom Allâhuta’âlâ says, “I have sent thee to the people in such and such a country or to the whole of mankind,” or “Reveal [My will] to my slaves!” or gives a similar command, is called a “nabî” or “payghambar” (Messenger or Prophet). Being a Prophet does not require having certain conditions like *riyâda* or *mujâhada* or having been born with qualities suitable for Prophethood.¹⁸ Allâhuta’âlâ can bestow this gift upon anyone He chooses. He knows everything and does what is best. He does whatever He wills to do. He is the Almighty. He also says that it is not necessary for a Prophet to display a *mu’jiza* (miracle), either. To have knowledge of unseen past and present with the grace of God is part of prophetic life but not a condition. Here he was disputing the influences of Greek philosophical thought on the conditions of a prophet.¹⁹

To highlight the essentiality of the Prophethood for the mankind Imam Rabbani uses logical arguments and reasoning. He states that ‘He has decreed that, as a blind person entrusts himself to those who will lead him or as a helplessly ill person commits himself to the care of compassionate doctors,

people must submit themselves to Prophets He has sent so that they will attain benefits beyond mind's grasp and escape calamities'. In doing so Imam Rabbani demonstrates the essential need for Prophethood and their key function of guides and leaders in continuity.

3. 3. 3 Prophethood and Miracles

According to Imam Rabbani a *mu'jiza* (miracle) is something proving the truthfulness of a person who said he was a Prophet. He lays down seven conditions for a *mu'jiza*.²⁰ He also makes a mention of *irhâsât* (preparatory signs of a prophet), and *karamas* to distinguish them from prophetic miracles. Wonders that happened before [the announcement of his Prophethood], such as 'Îsâ's ('alaihi 's-salâm) talking when he was in a cradle, his being handed dates when he asked for dates from a withered-up tree, and in Muhammad's (alaihi 'ssalâm) childhood, the cleavage of his chest and his heart being cleansed by washing, there being a cloud over his head continuously and his being greeted by trees and stones were not *mu'jiza*, but *karâmas* explains Imam Rabbani. They are called *irhâsat*. They emphasized Prophethood. It is possible for such *karâmas* to happen through Awliyâ' as well. Before Prophets were informed of their Prophethood, their status was not lower than that of the Awliyâ'. *Karamâs* were seen from them. He says that, therefore, *karâmas* of Awliyâ' are not *mu'jizas* because they do not claim Prophethood and because there is no *tahaddî* (challenge) in them.

Like Shah Wali Allah and Sabri, Imam Rabbani does not reject the view that 'a prophet should have miracles at his disposal for legitimation'. However, he deems it not a 'condition per se'. Sirhindi deals with miracles as a theologian and philosopher going into its nuances and at times taking recourse to rational explanations.

3. 3. 4 Imam Rabbani on Prophetic Guidance and Philosophical Truths

Imam Rabbani affirms the superiority of Prophethood over philosophy, as the horizon of Prophethood is beyond intellect and the methods of reasoning. To establish the argument Sirhindi starts on the note that the knowledge gained through intellectual process as well as spiritual intuition is imperfect. Their

incompetence lies in the fact that they cannot penetrate the metaphysical truths, such as the gnosis of god (*mu'rifah*), His attributes, the ultimate truth and reality of existence etc.²¹ Also, the *Tasfiya* (purification) and *Tazkiyya* (embellishment) of soul which depend on the divinely approved virtuous deeds are unattainable without the assistance of the prophets. He thus asserts that the knowledge through the sources other than Prophethood was neither beyond doubt nor free from mistake. In regard to intellect he writes that, it ought to be kept in mind that it is not self-sufficient to perform its functions of knowing, analysing and reasoning, since it has to depend on other subordinate faculties i. e. sensory organs which by themselves are insufficient to supply the information to the intellect, and operate within a limited compass.²² Thus Prophethood is indispensable, as it is through the agency of prophets alone that the knowledge of God and the correct way of divine worship could be known.

4 Conclusion

In the writings of the two great Mujaddids, Syed Nursi and Imam Rabbani, the concept of prophethood has seminal importance and significance. In particular, in their devotional and mystical depiction of the Prophet, their recounting of prophetic stories to demonstrate important lessons and their vision of the Prophet as the culmination of the perfected human self (*Insane kamil*). In addition to the devotional and mystical depictions, Nursi also approaches the Prophet with a focus on his role as messenger and prophet, and makes it the central focus of his Prophethology to emphasise and highlight the underlying and essential meanings of this role and function. This is in line with his greater objective of 'defending Qur'an and truths of belief *iman*'. Whereas, Sirhindi's main objective is protect Prophethood from all sorts of attacks and doubts, and project it as an indispensable component of Islam for all times and ages. They both are engaged in the criticisms on Prophethood and the Prophet.

They both appeal more to reason and the heart as well as the mind, and use a combined method, including the use of analogies, parables, scientific and literary tools, in order to illustrate the 'necessity' of Prophethood as essential

guide and role model for humanity. Nursi at times simplifies complex theological debacles of medieval times (such as the issue of the need for prophets), whereas Rabbani addresses them like a pure theologian.

Aware of their responsibilities and position as the Mujaddids of their time they address the subject of Prophethood to the wider audience keeping in consideration both Muslims and non-Muslims, another convergence of their method and worldview. At the heart of their Prophetologies lies the essential assertion for contemporary Muslims to find a role model and resolution to their myriad problems in Prophethood and Prophet only. Their elaboration of Prophethood echoes the voices *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah*.

Notes and References

¹ Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi will be addressed Imam Rabbani throughout the paper for Nursi prefers this appellation for him in his writings.

²Ms Mahsheed Ansari. 2013. "Nursi and Iqbal's Approaches to Prophethood and the Prophets", In *International Bediüzzaman Symposium Papers* (English).

³Bediüzzaman Said Nursi. 2007. *Letters*. New Jersey: 5thLetter. TheNaqshbandiyyaOrderspread from India to Mecca and Medina around 1857 AD and then onto Ottoman Turkey, Central Asia mainly through the sons and disciples of the great Indian Sufi Shah Waliullah (1703-1762) among them being Mawlana Khalid al-Baghdadi (1776/76 - 1827) from the Ottoman province of Mosul. Mawlana Khalid al-Baghdadi introduced the Naqshbandiya order into eastern Ottoman Turkey. Hence, the Naqshbandiyyah was known as *Naksibendi-Halidi* in Ottoman Turkey.

Having traversed through the Sufi path of following many masters dead and alive Said Nursi found himself in a state of bewilderment. And he remarks that he found his way to the Qur'an reflecting on the advice of Shaikh Sirhindi, "Make your *qibla* one. "

⁴Abed el-Rahman Tayyara, "Prophethood and the Making of Islamic Historical Identity" (2013). *Modern Languages Faculty Publications*. Paper 116.

⁵ Scholastic discourses on the topic of *nubuwwah* provide many illustrious works from various fields, such as biographical outlines of the Prophet's life (Ibn Ishaq) and Al Tabari's epistles to theological discussions like those of Taftazani's 'Creed of Islam' and Ibn Taymiyya's *Nubuwwah*; the mysticalepistles (Jalaludin Rumi's *Mathnawi* and philosophical approaches (Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd). In the centuries closer to Nursi the writings of Shah Wali Allah provided glimpses of a new theosophical approach to *nubuwwah*. (Ibid.)

⁶ Ms Mahsheed Ansari, op cit.

⁷Imaduddin Khalil. 1995. *God's Messenger (pbuh) in the Risale-i Nur*. p. 1.

⁸ Said Nursi. 2006. *Signs of Miraculousness*. Istanbul: Sozler Publications, pp. 31-32.

⁹ Said Nursi and ŞükranVahide. 1992. *The Words*. (20th word). Istanbul: Sozler Publications.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹That 'a prophet should have miracles at his disposal for legitimation' is corroborated by Shah Wali Allah and Sabri. However, he deems it not a 'condition per se'. (MS Baljon. 1970. "Prophetology of Shah Wali Allah. " *Islamic Studies* 9, no. 1, pp 69-79). This view is not distant from the majority position.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Said Nursi. 2004. *The Flashes*, Istanbul: Sozler Publications, p. 174.

¹⁴SayyidAbul Hasan Ali Nadwi. 1988. *TarikhDawatwaAzimat*. (Urdu), Vol IV. Lucknow. p 195.

¹⁵ The movement was known as *Nuqtawi* and their ideology as 'ideology of second millennium' (*Nazriya Alf Thani*). They contested the prophethood of Muhammad (SAW) by claiming that the new age requires a fresh principle of human action based on reason and philosophy. Dini Illahi of Akbar can be treated as an outcome of such ideas. (Maulana Manzur Numani. 1986. *TazkirahMujaddidAlfiThani*. Lucknow, p 44.)

¹⁶Imam Rabbani. 2011. *Ithbat An-Nabuwwah*. Eng Tr. *The Proof of Prophethood*. EBook. Istanbul: HakikatKitâbevi. Foreword.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Imam Rabbani, op cit.

¹⁹ According to ancient Greek philosophers, to be a Prophet requires three conditions; firstly, to reveal the *ghaib* (unknown, mystery), that is, to explain past and future events when required; secondly, to do extraordinary things, things that are mentally and scientifically impossible; thirdly, to see an angel in object and body and to hear Allâhuta'âlâ'swahy from the angel.

²⁰ 1) Allâhuta'âlâ made it in the absence of ordinary means, whereby to help His Prophet be confirmed. 2) It had to be extraordinary. Ordinary things, such as the sun's rising in the East every day or flowers blooming in the spring, could not be *mu'jizas*. 3) Others had to be incapable of doing it. 4) It had to happen whenever the person who announced his prophethood wished it to. 5) It had to agree with his wish. For example, if he said that he would enliven a certain dead person and if some other marvel took place, for example, if a mountain was broken into two, instead, it would not be a *mu'jiza*. 6) The *mu'jiza* happening upon his wish should not belie him. For example, while he was miraculously talking with a certain beast, if the beast said, "This man is a liar," it would not be a *mu'jiza*. 7) The *mu'jiza* should not happen before he said he was a Prophet.

²¹ Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi. *Maktubat Imam Rabbani*, Vol III, Letter 23.

²² Ibid.

