

Strategies for Unifying Humankind Through the Empowerment of Civilizational Dialogue According to Bediuzzaman Said Nursi

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Abstract: This study attempts to examine the civilizational thoughts of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, a prominent Turkish Muslim scholar who was known for his universal humanitarian ideas in his masterpiece, *Rasail al-Nur*. This study is qualitative and critically analyze the contents of Nursi's primary works including his speeches and writings. Civilizational dialogue is a form of interaction among civilizations which is aimed at leading world harmony and stability. Islam provides a firm foundation of unifying the diversities of humankind. According to Nursi, there are three Islamic principles becomes the ways of unifying humankind which are highlighted in the first phase of this paper. Firstly, mutual recognition (*ta'aruf*) for integrating human relations based on the concept of global humanity for international affairs. Secondly, mutual understanding (*tafahum*). Thirdly, living together harmoniously (*ta'ayush*). Subsequently, the second part of this study identifies three vital strategies which could be used to strengthen those principles. The first is empowering the value of brotherhood through education system. The second is forming the two-way interaction between Islam dan Christianity through dialogues of civilization due to the influence of both religions on world political crisis nowadays. The third is practicing universal ethical principles in interfaith civilizational dialogue. The study gives some implications on the role of education as the most influential instrument in promoting the values of civilizational dialogue, integrating all contemporary civilizations towards world peace and empowering Islamic civilization to be the best civilization in this world.

Key words: Dialogue of civilizations, civilizational thoughts, unity of humankind, bediuzzaman said nursi
islamic civilization

INTRODUCTION

Civilizational dialogue is a form of discussion between two or more parties that represent different beliefs, opinions or ideologies on an issue in an ethical and harmonious environment in order to achieve a mutual understanding and benefits (Talib *et al.*, 2015). Islam provides a strong foundation on how diversity could be nurtured to strengthen the unity of mankind. There are three main principles that should be emphasized as follows:

Mutual recognition (*ta'aruf*) in strengthening human relationships, so it is regarded as fundamental of the concept of 'universal humanity for international relations. Mutual understanding (*tafahum*) in which human relations is expanded from the commencement of the first principle. Living together (*ta'ayush*) harmoniously or peaceful coexistence among individuals or communities is the foundation of prosperity, especially in this current context

that is no longer limited by the boundaries of culture, whether in cyberspace or in the real world due to the rapid development of human technology.

STRATEGIES OF STRENGTHENING THE UNITY OF MANKIND

In the view of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, a prominent Turkish Muslim scholar who was known for his universal humanitarian ideas in his masterpiece, *Rasail al-Nur*, there are three strategies that can be applied to empower those three principles namely *ta'aruf*, *tafahum* and *ta'ayush* (Mohamad, 2013). Three strategies mentioned are followings:

- Empowering the sense of brotherhood through education
- Islam and christianity bond formation as a model
- Exercising an ethical dialogue

EMPOWERING THE SENSE OF BROTHERHOOD THROUGH EDUCATION

The establishment of Madrasah al-Zahra was Nursi's fundamental struggle for preserving the integrity of Ottoman empire. This is proven by his strong determination to realize his educational reformation which began since the reign of Sultan Abd al-Hamid II until the reign of the Turkish Democratic Party in 1950. He believed that the proper Islamic education provided to students in educational institutions will create the unity and brotherhood of mankind. Hence, he emphasized such traits of comprehensiveness (*shumuliyah*) and internationalization (*alamiyyah*) in the philosophy of Madrasah al-Zahra (Badrani and Ibrahim, 2000).

In his memoirs, Nursi has highlighted some basic goals and importance of the establishment of Madrasah al-Zahra' towards the unity of empire by fostering sense of brotherhood among people of various nations. Among the points such as follows. Education is capable of establishing a society with a vast knowledge by mastering both religious and modern sciences. Therefore, the integration of knowledge is necessary in order to avoid conflict of ideas among religious and modern groups. According to Nursi, the conflict and rejection happened between both groups is not due to the clash which exists between religion and science because both are complementary to each other. The actual cause of the problem is insufficiency in mastering knowledge in one field that seemed to be there is no compatibilities between religion and science. Muslim society are far behind in terms of material progress compared to the Western world needs science to be more advance. However, religious guidance is needed in order to make scientific advancement beneficial and brings prosperity, rather than harmful and leads to destruction. That is why Nursi suggested Madrasah al-Zahra' to implement the concept of integration of sciences in its educational system. Nursi asserts that:

I repeat again and again what I have said hundreds of times-indeed-even for this school (Madrasah al-Zahra) would harmonize among religious and modern schools and Sufi groups. The school will make them united at least at the aim. This consolidation will occur among those with the inclination and the exchange of ideas (dialogue)

Education is a key instrument for eradicating illiteracy or ignorance. According to Nursi, ignorance is a tool for the enemy to create disunity and strife among members of

a society. If the disunity happens, Nursi believed that the contribution of public power (energy, finance, time and so on) to the country is not going to happen. He stressed that:

Among the major actions for the future of Kurdistan in the aspects of material and spiritual is the establishment of schools. With emphasis on the fundamental knowledge in both aspects, will constitute the unity of Ummah and thus a great power (that had been wasted because of internal divisions) can be contributed to the government to deal with enemies from outside. In addition, it will also make it easier for local people to disclose their true personality and prepare them to accept the advancements and rights of justice for them

Nursi has identified two main strategies used by the enemies in their conspiracy to weaken the Muslims; firstly, eliminate the position of al-Qur'an in the eyes of Muslim and subsequently, keep Muslim away from the teaching of al-Qur'an in their daily lives. For Nursi, this dirty strategy of the enemy should be countered with the establishment of Madrasah al-Zahra' which will be upholder to the teachings of the holy Qur'an. With knowledge, solidarity and unity would not be easy resolved, even with the true knowledge of Islam, the brotherhood and friendship will be enhanced (al-Nursi, 1998)

Education will prevent a narrow racism. In addition to the knowledge gained, the students would also be able to meet and communicate with each other. Through this process of socialization, the mutual recognition and understanding could be nurtured positively. This noble objective could be understood from Nursi's words as follows: Indeed, in the East there are millions of Kurds, about 100 millions people of Iranian and Indian and the Arab nation of 70 millions and 40 millions people of Caucasus, then they are all tied by kinship, neighborhood and need each other, I ask you, (the Government): which is more important, education obtained by students at Van Madrasah (Madrasah al-Zahra) that unites the nation and the Ummah or subjects that divide nations and cause students to think only about their own people's interest and deny their Islamic brotherhood. He struggles to learn the sciences of philosophy regardless of Islamic sciences.

This phenomenon indicates the significance of the role of knowledge and educational institutions in educating people towards solidarity and brotherhood. Nursi views that the attitude of ethnocentrism (*asabiyyah*) is a contributing factor to the phenomenon of

disintegration in a society. Everybody upholds strictly their own points of views but just understand superficially the views of others. This situation proves that those who have sound knowledge and always socialize seems to be open-minded and rational in response to a problem or issue. Thus, the role of an educational institution as a catalyst for unity and brotherhood should not be ignored absolutely.

In sum, education is regarded as a vital means that will ensure the success of the concept of civilizational dialogue because the credible system of education is capable at unifying people of various civilizations. Through education, basic knowledge of unity and a conducive environment could be provided to the students, so that they can interact among each other whether the same or different nation positively.

THE FORMATION OF ALLIANCE BETWEEN ISLAM AND CHRISTIAN AS FOUNDATION AND MODEL

A problem could not be solved properly without diagnosing the actual cause of the problem. In the current context, the problem of the relationship between the world civilization is rooted from a clash of ideas between the West and Islam. It is claimed that Islam as the leading cause of clash of civilizations by some western scholars such as Huntington. The recent conflicts and violences seem to prove that strong statement. For instance, the attack on the World Trade Center (WTC), the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan and the US-Iran conflict. Therefore, it can be concluded that the interaction between the West and Islam greatly influences the stability and security of the world (Saritoprak, 2008). Indirectly, this means that without resolving the issues between the West and Islam first, the conflict between civilizations is not possible to find a solution. The conflict of the West versus Islam becomes the main focus in the dialogue of civilizations.

Initially, Nursi's thinking is based on the jurisprudence of priorities (Fihq Awlawiyyat). He realized that the global crisis happened during his lifetime is due to the negative nature inherited from Western civilization and misconceptions towards Islam either from the West or perception of the Muslim community themselves. Nursi never perceive both Christianity and Islam as religions which bring the root of the problem, but it is rooted from their thinking and actions which are not based on religious teachings. Based on this understanding, Nursi attempted at resolving the Western-Islamic conflict thought and juxtapose the two civilizations through the debates that are included in al-Khutbah al-Shamiyyah (Sukran, 2005).

Element of a strong and clear similarity is essential in building a positive interaction between the Western-Islamic. Without power on the meeting between the two parties, it is very difficult to interconnects Islam and Western civilizations which the history of their relationship was in conflict. Therefore, the meeting element must be an absolute in nature and this element is often closely related to religion. Nursi identified this element and put "faith in Allah" as the core of similarities between Christianity and Islam (Sukran, 2005).

In addition, there are three additional elements highlighted by Ian S. Markham, namely facing the attack of secularization, upholding democracy and scientific advancements as well as dealing with the issue of denying the divinity. Seeking for such element of similarity is also the principle of civilizational dialogue proposed by the United Nations.

Nursi used psychological approaches when trying to correct the negative perception of the West against Islam by regarding the prophet Isa AS. as a connecting element between the Christian-Islam. Nursi brought his argument based on the hadith of the Prophet regarding the descending of the prophet Isa AS in the last days, promoting the Shariah of Prophet Muhammad. He further, posited that the true Christians at the end of day will be together with the Muslims to confront the attacks of atheism.

Assuming to a good relationship between Islam and Christianity, Nursi is seen to bring a new interpretation which is quite different from the current scholars' writings who are more rigid and having confrontation with Christian. Nursi also had invited Christians to accept the Qur'an as this holy book recognizes the Prophet Isa AS and the new testament revealed to him. Thoroughly, Nursi had pleaded with them to accept the truth of the Qur'an by manifesting their recognition of the Qur'an only not to convert their religion but it is sufficient to correct some errors in their doctrine as stated in the Qur'an.

The historical experiences especially in the Crusades and the Western colonialism, have influenced the perception of Muslim world towards Christians. Those bad experiences has made most Muslim communities could not distinguish between the Christian and Western. For them, Christianity and the West are the same, and both represent the negative elements that need to be avoided or opposed. Nursi had rejected such thinking, as Islam and the Muslim community are dissimilar, so as in the case of Christianity and the West. Christianity is a holy religion like Islam. If there are any flaws and shortcomings in the respective religion, it is because of the incorporation of external elements into the Christian doctrine. This was happened when the contents of the

Bible or holy Scriptures had been altered and changed. According to Nursi, modern civilization (the West) are now centered on the deviated teachings of Christianity, rather than originated from the true teachings of the Bible. Such deviations have been derived from the Hellenic philosophy of thoughts that attempted to be infused in the truth of the Bible. However, according to Nursi, this infusion seems to be failed like an engaging mixture of water and oil.

According to Nursi's thought, the difference among the faith (Iman) Islam and morals (akhlaq) can be a meeting point for the Muslim-Christian relations. An adherent of Islam, according to Nursi, can be a Muslim but not a Mukmin if his moral conduct and practices do not meet the prerequisites of Iman. On the other hand, a non-Muslim can be a Muslim but not a Mukmin if his character meets the requirements of Islam. Hence, the relationship between Muslims and Christians is strong enough because the emphasis is on the aspect of morality, but from the aspect of faith, basically both have a common principle, that is faith in God. For Nursi, the true teachings of Christianity are similar to the teachings of Islam which emphasize the retribution in the Hereafter and inculcation of noble moral values in the worldly life. Faith is the main principle which becomes the source of strength of religious doctrine for both Muslims or Christians. The influential impact of atheism and secularism during that time required the devotees of both religions to unite and collaborate with each other to defend their faith. Therefore, the evaluation of a virtue according to Nursi is not referring to his or her religion, but based on a his or her character and personality (Saritoprak, 2008).

Nursi supported his idea of collaboration between Christians and Muslims with Qur'anic evidence in Chapter al-Ma'ida: verse 5 which permits a marriage with a woman from the members of the Book (Ahlul Kitab). This verse indirectly gives limitation the meaning of verse 51, of the same chapter as an evidence to those who reject such collaboration or establish any relationship with the Christian or Western. Nursi opined that establishing a good relationship between Christians-Muslims is not included in the prohibition of that verse. Nursi argued that because of the existence of a verse which permits a good relationship between the Christians and Muslim, and vice versa, thus, the permissibility and the prohibition are not absolute, but rather it is relative (*muqayyad*) and has limitation. Nursi viewed that the context (*zuruf*) is required in determining the ruling which should be derived either legal or illegal. According to him, *zuruf* and *waqi'* (reality) must support the permissibility of the relationship. It should be established in the context of developing civilization, progress and getting some benefits from the

West. In addition, it aims to create social stability of the humankind as a whole. In the same context, Christians also should agree to form a coalition for the betterment of all, in particular, in the aspect of social stability. Apparently, according to Nursi's view (Saritoprak, 2008) is the establishment of friendly relationship with any nations or civilizations does not fall within the prohibition of verse 51 in Chapter al-Ma'ida which means:

“O you who have believed, do not take the Jews and the Christians as allies. They are [in fact] allies of one another. And whoever is an ally to them among you—then indeed, he is [one] of them. Indeed, Allah guides not the wrongdoing people”

The differences between Western and Christian can also be seen obviously in al-Nursi's mind, when he opined that positive values in Western civilization are based on the true Christian teachings. Al-Nursi's support for Muslim-Christian coalition does not mean he made the equality of Christianity and Islam is absolute. He also did not deny the elements of the differences between the two religions. However, disputes and disagreement in views among various religions should be resolved by peaceful means, especially with rational arguments that he termed it as *jihad ma'nawi* and not struggle by war. Regarding this matter because of religion is a firm foundation of meeting between Islam and Christianity, Nursi viewed that the clergy or religious Christians are the ones who should be given priority to have dialogue. Some of them also are the ones who are kind hearted and open minded. The researcher himself had some experiences in dialogue and communicate with these kind of people such as Prof. Dr. Michel Thomas and Prof. Dr. Ian Markham while attending symposiums and workshops in Istanbul. The Qur'an mentions their attitudes in the form of praise and honor. Allah says which means:

“You will surely find the most intense of the people in animosity toward the believers (to be) the Jews and those who associate others with Allah and you will find the nearest of them in affection to the believers those who say, “We are Christians”. That is because among them are priests and monks and because they are not arrogant (al-Qur'an, al-Ma'ida)”

Nursi observed the need of forming a peace pact and coalition with Christians due to critical attacks from atheism and materialism which trigger the humanity and are becoming more serious from time to time. This coalition can not be delayed just it is based on the reasons of differences and disputes. He said, “With this, the members of faith and reality in these days do not need a

total agreement among themselves but they are required to form a coalition with the true spiritual religious believers from Christianity. They have to put aside temporarily whatever that can trigger conflicts and disputes in order to face their enemy that is dogmatic atheists. Nursi also reminded not to provoke any defamatory statements by debating any divergence issues in this current situation. It is significant that this great mission for facing the atheist attacks could be continued effectively. He said:

Even those who believe attributed to the misguided groups, we can not even provoke any contentions and enmities with them in these critical times. Also let us not make a point of difference and conflict as an issue of discussion with those who believe in Allah and the Last Day even though they are Christians

However, it should be understood that this is not a conspiracy plot to destroy other parties such as alliances in a clash of civilizations. The unity of Muslim-Christian according to Nursi's thought could become a model of how the whole religion can be harnessed towards human happiness as a whole. This is because the existing values of unity such as enjoying the good and avoiding the harm is the basic elements that can be highlighted. All religions promote peace and prosperity in this world. Nursi reminded that people have no time to fight among each other because the available time must be allocated for the collaborative work because the threats and attacks on humanity are so powerful and violent.

If the above said words of Nursi could be applied in a civilizational dialogue, as a consequence, it will bring a positive impact. People all over the world irrespective of civilization can come and work together to face the current world crisis. The struggle of finding solutions for socio-economic injustice and natural disasters that struck the globe will be more focused to be solved (Cuzzort and King, 1989; Ozervarli, 2010).

THE PRACTICE OF AN ETHICAL DIALOGUE

Implementation of an ethical dialogue is crucial to ensure the dialogue in the state of harmony and effective. Such dialogue will be able to prove to the public that Islam is a religion of dialogue and Muslims are a society who love the dialogue. The principles of an ethical dialogue which are derived from Nursi's thoughts such as follows:

- The truth should be conveyed with love. This means that violence is not able to reveal the truth but it tends to provoke hostility and strife
- The message about Islam should be delivered wisely because people never know about Islam before. A clear explanation will help them to understand Islam properly
- If we make mistakes and we are given a reprimand during the dialog, we must accept the advice sincerely and should say thanks to those who give the advice because actually, they have helped us to correct our mistakes before we fall into ruin
- During the dialogue, we must make sure that we do not do anything that could possibly contaminate the purity of Islam because of our mistakes and negligence would make Islam and our Muslim brothers and sisters become the target of ridicule.
- Dialogue must put the interests of "We" instead of "I" because true happiness is when the majority achieve the happiness rather than the minority. In other words, the public interest such as building community stability, socio-economic upgrading, empowering the education system is among the topics of discussion that can be highlighted. The aim of a dialogue is not to seek who is more powerful or influential
- Dialogue needs to be involved by those who really want to establish mutual understanding and cooperation. It is important to ensure that dialogue brings benefits to all. If not, do not waste time in fruitless dialogue, especially in the dialogue which brings disputes and conflicts
- The participants of the dialogue need to hold a principle of unifying on the basis of goodness because if not united, permit the badness becoming stronger
- Do not punish a person or a party due to one mistake done, while his/her other good deeds are being concealed. On this basis, we have to admit that there is no perfection for human beings. Only Allah is perfect
- In dealing with any threats or danger, any differences and disputes should be avoided among people. Nursi urged Muslims and Christians to be united in facing the attack of atheism. Meanwhile, in facing the moral crisis in a society, the proponents of every religion should be united in formulating preventive ways and thus equally take further actions according to their own capabilities
- The main enemy who make the failure of a dialogue is the enemy within oneself namely lust. Thus, we must engage in dialogue with humility and seek the truth
- Men who avoid religion will be savage and violent. Thus religious approach is the main mechanism that should be applied in order to find solutions for any problems, challenges and disasters

- Everyone must tell the truth during the dialogue because the truth could bring mutual understanding and cooperation among the involved parties
- The truth must be revealed wherever we are because of keeping silence from telling the truth or permitting the falsehood, consequently will be insulting the truth itself
- Forgiveness should be given priority because the nature of humanis making errors and imperfect, so that, never bear a grudge because it bring destruction rather than built
- Do not set the goals of the dialogue just for the sake of the present, but make it as a medium of creating future generations of the world
- Seperate the goodness and badness in a person because his goodness should be benefitted and his badness shold be avoided
- Efforts to achieve stability and prosperity requires patience. Hence, the effort of a patient is better than 20 people who have no patience. Despite those effort do not fruitful in this worldly life, but the reward could be obtained in the Hereafter

CONCLUSION

It could be concluded that without good ethics and manners, a dialogue will not lead to the expected results. Therefore, the practice of an ethical dialogue need to be concerned by all parties to ensure the success of a dialogue.

The principle of civilizational dialogue that upholds the values of equality and positive acceptance of diversity is a strength for the dialogue of civilizations. Nursi views the role of education as the most significant instrument for empowering the values of civilizational dialogue. Besides education, strategies of civilizational dialogue should be enhanced with the bilateral

collaboration between Islam and Christianity because both have greatly influenced the current world political turbulence. The collaboration must be based on a high spirit of tolerance, in addition to trying to achieve the good and reject the bad together. According to Nursi's thought, the civilizational dialogue should be conducted in harmony with emphasis on the appreciation of manners and ethics of dialogue, so that the goal of a dialogue could be achieved successfully.

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