Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediüzzaman. Edited by Said Nursi Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi'. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003. ISBN: 0-7914-5700-1 (pbk). Review doi: 10.1558/CIS.v2i2.189

This volume is an attempt to introduce the life and work of the charismatic Kurdish scholar Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1877–1960) to a general (Western) audience. It is a rather loosely arranged collection of twenty chapters by a diverse group of nineteen contributors, their occupational status ranging from those who are academics, journalists, philosophers, freelance writers, Ph.D. students and journal editors to the one who works as an Interfaith Education Officer for the Episcopal Church. The authors are mainly based in either Turkey or the United States. Whether the book is the edited proceedings of a workshop/conference on Nursi, the editor regrettably does not tell, but the common thread in all chapters seems to be that the authors reflect on their readings of Said Nursi's *magnum opus*, the *Risale-i Nur*, a monumental exegesis of the Qur'an written in the form of sermons, speeches, exhortations, supplications and mystic poetry. However, a tightly edited, topically arranged and synthetically summarized volume was neither achieved nor, I assume, intended.

In the introduction the editor discusses briefly the importance of Said Nursi and of the *Risale-i Nur* movement for the study of modern Muslim thought and merely hopes that "this book will aid the readers in looking seriously at the dynamics between religion and society in the modern Muslim world in general, and in modern Turkey in particular" (xiv). Şükran Vahide provides "A Chronology of Said Nursi's Life," dividing his life into three parts: the *Old Said* (1877–1920); the *New Said* (1920–1950); and the *Third Said* (1950–1969). The same author aims then "Toward an Intellectual Biography of Said Nursi," in which he sums up the material from his more substantial biography *The Author of the Risale-i Nur, Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (2d ed. Istanbul, 1992) which, in fact, was the first biography of Said Nursi ever to have been published in English. Fred A. Reed walks "In the Footsteps of Said Nursi" and recapitulates motives, objects and outcomes of his travel account *Anatolia Junction: A Journey into Hidden Turkey* (Burnaby, 1999) where he had introduced the general reader to the historical and geographical origins of the *Nur* movement. Şerif Mardin offers his "Reflections on Said Nursi's Life and Thought," which are, however, much better expressed in his seminal *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany, 1989), a book that had successfully created an interest in Said Nursi outside Turkey. Dale F. Eickelman's "Qur'anic Commentary, Public Space, and Religious Intellectuals in the Writings of Said Nursi" is actually a reprint from a special issue on Said Nursi that appeared in *The Muslim World*, vol. 89, nos. 3–4 (1999)—although this is not acknowledged in the article. The editor's "How to Read Said Nursi's *Risale-i Nur*" is in fact a paper which he had already presented in 2000 during the *Sixth International Symposium on Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (held in Istanbul)—again not stated in the article and only to be gathered from a footnote in a later chapter (289).

In the next part of the book (though not as such marked by the editor), contributors aim at clarifying Nursi's positions by contrasting his ideas with those of better-known luminaries. Ayize Jamat-Everett compares in "Prison is Hell for the Unbelievers:

Thoughts and Reflections on Two Imprisoned Muslims” the experiences of incarceration by Said Nursi and the American Black activist Malcolm X, finding several parallels between the civil rights movements in the United States and the Islamic opposition movement in the Turkish Republic. Kelton Cobb, in the book’s perhaps most rewarding chapter, looks at “Revelation, the Disciplines of Reason, and Truth in the Works of Said Nursi and Paul Tillich,” and clearly and most convincingly explains where the two theologians agree (in their attempt to reconcile revelation with reason) and fundamentally differ (e.g. in their views on the status of the sciences, arts, and humanities vis-à-vis religious knowledge). In “The Concept of Man: Mevlana Jalal al-Din and Said Nursi,” Bilal Kuşpınar studies the more obvious similarities between Al-Rumi and Said Nursi and indeed finds Rumi’s “anthropology” similarly expressed in Nursi’s writings. Mucahit Bilici traces in “Forgetting Gramsci and Remembering Said Nursi: Parallel Theories of Gramsci and Said Nursi in the Space of Eurocentrism” so many similarities between the two writers that he calls the former the “Italian Nursi” and the latter a “Turkish Gramsci” and yet, he cannot answer the question whether the two thinkers have ever read each other’s work.

In a third part (not as such marked) several authors analyse different aspects of the *Risale-i Nur* and cover a wide range of perspectives, disciplines and ideological angles. In his third contribution to the volume, Şükran Vahide outlines “Said Nursi’s Interpretation of *Jihad*,” where he stresses the continuities of Nursi’s views in spite of Nursi’s dramatic move away from politics and public engagement of all kinds halfway through his life. Lucinda Allen Mosher, in “The Marrow of Worship and the Moral Vision: Said Nursi and Supplication” investigates Nursi’s social ethics, eschatology and cosmology on the basis of the rather under-researched *du‘ā* in the *Risale*. Taha ‘Abdel Rahman looks at “The Separation of Human Philosophy from the Wisdom of the Qur’an in Said Nursi’s Work,” Mehmet S. Aydin discusses “The Problem of Theodicy in the *Risale-i Nur*,” and Barbara Freyer Stowasser focuses on “The Apocalypse in the Teachings of Said Nursi.” Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad’s “*Ghurbah* as Paradigm for Muslim Life: A *Risale-i Nur* Worldview” is another reprint from the 1999 *World of Islam* special edition (again unacknowledged), and Oliver Leaman discusses “Islam, the Environment, and Said Nursi” where he points out that despite Nursi’s complete withdrawal from public life he nevertheless called for maintaining a balance between spiritual introversion on the one hand and social interaction with the outside world on the other hand. Finally, M. Sait Özervath evaluates “Said Nursi’s Project of Revitalizing Contemporary Islamic Thought.”

A fourth part (not as such marked) provides the reader with an analysis of the *Risale-i Nur* movement, which has reportedly over six million followers in Turkey, almost ten percent of the population. And yet, Metin Karabaşoğlu in “Text and Community: An Analysis of the *Risale-i Nur* Movement” claims that intellectual weakness and a tendency to become a “closed” community has meant that the movement has lost its mainstream position within the Islamic segment in Turkey and has fallen into a secondary position behind political Islamism. M. Hakan Yavus looks at the “Nur Study Circles (Dershane) and the Formation of New Consciousness in Turkey” and highlights the interesting fact that there are now eight major *Nur* communities in Turkey which are divided into those with a more conservative interpretation of

Said Nursi's writings (Kurdoğlu Cemaati, Mehmet Kırkinci, Mustafa Sungur, the Scribes), those of a more modernist orientation (Fethullah Gülen, Yeni Nesil, Yeni Asya) and those of a decidedly ethnic/Kurdish outlook (Med-Zahra). Finally, an English translation (by Redha Ameer) of Said Nursi's preface to the *al-Mathnawi al-'Arabi al-Nur* (Istanbul 1997), in which Nursi gave four theological proofs of Allah's unicity (*tauḥīd*), is been added to the volume.

The reviewer is guilty of having given the book more structure and coherence than it is immediately evident by the way it has been edited. As already pointed out, the single chapters are assembled in no discernable order, their history is not mentioned, and their outcomes remain undisputed—cross-references between chapters do not occur, and the editor does neither introduce nor assess the individual contributions. The reader has to consult the bibliographies in order to learn about previous publications on Said Nursi, and whether this volume verifies or falsifies existing research activities, both in Turkey and elsewhere, is not at all transparent. Proof-reading has also been undervalued: differing transliterations were not harmonized (e.g. Bediüzaman or Bediuzzaman)—some terms appear ridiculously often in contradicting versions (e.g. Awadi; al-'Awadī; al-'Awad; al-'Awadī [all *sic* for al-'Awadī]; or al-'Alamī; al-'Alāmī; al-'Alamī [all *sic*. for al-'Ālamī]); inaccurate publication dates were not corrected (2d ed. of Vahide, *Author*, 1992 on p. 290, but 1998 in the bibliography), and various typos both in the English and the transcriptions are needlessly distracting to the reader.

In sum, this is a rather unevenly edited volume which has, nevertheless, much stimulating content to offer. For those readers who have no access to the original sources in Ottoman Turkish and Arabic, and who cannot read the substantial secondary literature in modern Turkish, this volume will be an essential reference work for any study on Nursi or the *Nur* movement. Complementary to this, it is recommended to read the two special issues on this subject, both edited by *The Muslim World*, first the above mentioned issue on Said Nursi, vol. 89, nos. 3–4 (1999), and secondly a special issue titled *Islam in Contemporary Turkey: The Contributions of Fethullah Gülen*, vol. 95, no. 3 (2005).

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