

OPINION

• MUSTAFA AKYOL

Why Said Nursi matters

Tuesday, January 4, 2011

MUSTAFA AKYOL

A controversial film is coming to Turkish movie theaters this weekend: "Hür Adam," or The Free Man. It is a biographical drama of Said Nursi (1878-1960), a significant character whose life captures some of the most interesting themes of Turkish Islam – and its resistance to Turkey's self-styled, authoritarian secularism.

For many secular Turks, Said Nursi is simply a *bête noir*: someone who represents the religious worldview that they want to eradicate from public life. He is a defiant opponent of some of the Kemalist reforms, such as the banning of the Arabic script. To make the matters worse, he is a Kurd. He was even called "Said-i Kurdi" in the Ottoman era – during which the Kurdish identity was neither a shame nor a crime as it would become later in Republican Turkey.

An Islamic hero

From a less hostile point of view though, Nursi's life seems more inspiring. He is an Islamic hero who preached faith and morality with dedication while renouncing political radicalism, let alone political violence.

Nursi's 82-year-long drama began in the village of Nurs, whence his family name comes, in the Bitlis province of today's southeastern Turkey. He studied Islam in the madrasahs of his region. His teachers were so impressed by his sharp intellect that they called him *Bediüzzaman*, or, "Wonder of the Age" – a term which soon became his nickname.

Madrasahs of Nursi's time had become extremely conservative and dogmatic institutions, at which only "Islamic sciences" were given, not modern ones such as physics, chemistry, or biology. The solution, Nursi thought, was to open new madrasahs with a modern curriculum, with students excelling in both faith and reason.

In November 1907, the young Said went all the way to Istanbul to personally talk to Sultan Abdülhamid II in order to present his plan and get his blessing. That ambitious dream failed, but the next two years Nursi spent at the capital of the empire added a lot to his thinking and reputation.

That was the time when the Second Constitutional period, or Hürriyet (Liberty) as it was then called, had begun, and the Ottoman Parliament reconvened after three decades of suspension. Nursi quickly became a famous Islamic supporter of the Liberty cause. He made public speeches in Istanbul, and sent dozens of telegraphs to the Kurdish elders in the east, all defending constitutionalism, representative democracy, and freedom of thought.

When the Ottoman Empire entered World War I, Nursi took up arms to protect the eastern border from the Russian army. Soon, he became a prisoner of war, and after more than two years in custody, he made his way home – to find his beloved Ottoman state defeated and occupied by the Allies.

Therefore, Nursi did not hesitate to support the national struggle headed by General Mustafa Kemal, who would later assume the name Atatürk. Yet, while his support for the War of Liberation remained, he became growingly suspicious about Mustafa Kemal's secularist agenda – which he would later describe as an "abominable current of atheism."

The film "Hür Adam" includes a scene in which Nursi and Kemal discuss these matters in the latter's office in Ankara in 1922. The former emphasizes the role of faith in the War of Liberation, while the latter dismisses these matters as trivia.

Just last week, a few Kemalist lawyers considered this scene as an "insult to Atatürk," which is a serious crime in Turkey, and called on the prosecutors to ban the movie even before its release. That is probably a futile effort, but it shows how Nursi's predictions on Atatürk – that he wanted to become a deified autocrat – were not too far-fetched.

Once the Kemalist regime was consolidated in 1925, the years of persecution began for Nursi, who spent the next 25 years in one of exile, house arrest or prison. He opposed some of the state-imposed "reforms," and personally defied some of them, for example by refusing to take his turban off in violation of the "Hat Law."

The Epistles of Nur

More importantly, Nursi began to write his famous "epistles," which were apologetic works to defend faith in God and other tenets of Islam. These hand-written papers were banned by the regime, so Nursi's nascent group of followers had to copy them by handwriting as well. The number of the epistles grew,

making more a dozen volumes in three decades. The number of his followers (the “Nurcus”) grew, too, reaching millions in the same period.

Most notably, Nursi kept his mission as a solely intellectual and spiritual one, never aspiring to any political radicalism. In his opposition to Kemalism, he saw democracy as the political method, crystallized by his support for the Democrat Party of Adnan Menderes, who came to power in 1950 in the Republic’s first free and fair elections, and eased some of the pressures on religion.

No wonder the military junta that executed Menderes in 1961 took on Nursi as well – by tearing his grave into pieces and moving his remains to an unknown location.

Since then, Nursi’s followers, including an inspiring preacher from Erzurum named Fethullah Gülen, have advocated a faith enriched by science and reason, and a mission that values democracy and moderation. They have cultivated, one could say, the best of Turkish Islam.