

THE SECULARIZATION PROJECT IN THE LIGHT OF
BEDIUZZAMAN SAID NURSI'S *RISALE-I-NUR*

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to understand the 'secularization' project from a sociological perspective based on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's view on modernity and the waning of Islamic values in modern society. The article focuses on the historical context of his exegesis (*tafsir*) in his major work: *Risale-i-Nur*. A comparison is made between the decline of the Ottoman Empire, which formed part of the historical context in which Nursi was writing and the kind of social change we experience in the 21st century. An attempt is made to ascertain the compatibility between Islam and modernity according to Nursi. The article concludes by exploring the possibility of applying Nursi's analysis to the heterogeneous Muslim communities living in the modern world.

Keywords: Ottoman empire, rationality, secularity, modernity, globalization, socio-political change, identity

INTRODUCTION

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (ca. 1877-1960) was an esteemed Muslim theologian and an exegete who wrote an extensive commentary on the Qur'an called: *Risale-i-Nur*. Given the historical context of his writing, his views are significant today as a study of the secularization process. Nursi witnessed a time of immense social change brought on by the decline of the Ottoman Caliphate, which had lasted for over six hundred years (1299-1924) under the direction of thirty-six Sultans. Subsequently, Turkey experienced a period of enormous reform, especially under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, whom some consider to be the father of modern Turkey.

It is of paramount importance to recognize that the religious practice and the systems of governance that had sustained the societies belonging to the Ottoman Empire had become outdated because of the profound social changes that were taking place. These changes necessitated new models of government and new laws to cater for such a large and diverse population. Nursi's intellectual *jihad* (struggle) provided religio-cultural ideas and methods that could bring about the needed revival (*tajdid*) and he was even considered a *mujaddid* (one who brings renewal) because he managed to create the space for the re-interpretation of Islamic values in the light of the socio-political changes sweeping across his country. He revived Islam not merely by talking about religion in an abstract way but introduced a certain rationality and pragmatism, which redefined Islam in the face of all the structural and cultural changes that were confronting the Turkish people in the early 1920's.

The modern phenomena of secularization and modernization that led to the Kemalist reforms brought unprecedented changes to the lives of people in Turkey. The Kemalist reforms were modeled on French society and governance, which were bereft of religion and transformed Turkish society into a secular state, making religion a private affair. These changes provided an opportunity for a generation of people living between the two World Wars to reinterpret their religious beliefs and values.

For example, these changes urged native Turks and other Muslims to question the homogeneity of Muslim identity and even suggested that Muslim identity should be redefined in the context of the multiple and culturally flavored Muslim identities that had emerged during the colonial period, which

ended in the 1920's. These social and political changes raised challenging questions regarding the compatibility of Islam and modernity.

The authors of this article argue that Nursi's *Risale-i-Nur* became a guide for those Muslims who were facing such serious challenges during the decline of the Ottoman Empire. But Nursi's work could also be seen as a guide for all Muslims living in the modern world because *Risale-i-Nur* provided the tools needed to face the circumstances prevailing in the world and offered the possibility of forming a changed but clear Muslim identity.

THE THEORY OF SECULARIZATION

The theory of secularization postulates that modernity will inevitably lead to the decline of religion (Berger, 1999). With the advent of the processes of globalization, the fragmentation of organized belief systems and the cultural clashes taking place in numerous communities has been noted by many scholars. Not only is there ambiguity surrounding values and norms, but religious beliefs and their traditionally defined systems are being undermined by the narrative that, once people have become rational and scientific in their outlook, religion will die a natural death.

This is the Weberian view, which describes the present era as the 'disenchantment of the world' in which individuals no longer rely on religious or supernatural values as they lose their sense of God's providence in the search for innovation and progress. (Robinson, 2019) The Weberian view forecasts religious apathy and a decline in organized forms of religion. Since these developments are almost irreversible, Islam and Muslims will not be able to escape this process of secularization in the shape of globalization.

The globalized and secular world seems to have broken the religio-cultural bonds, which had held traditional and cohesive societies together for so long. These bonds are no longer able to hold societies together because religious institutions themselves are ill equipped to counter the changes occurring in society. Because they lack strong roots to ground one's identity, modern individuals are left with a fragmented sense of self and have become socially vulnerable in the face of the secularizing agenda that reaches into their own living rooms. (Robinson, 2019)

Despite the moral reluctance to accept the teaching of the Qur'an, its focus on steadfastness and the guidance it has provided over the centuries is a sign of its ability to counter the extreme empiricism of modernity (Yusoff, Yilmaz, & Ebrahimi, 2013). For this reason, Nursi's work could appeal to modern, skeptical, and inquiring minds overwhelmed by the cultural ambiguities caused by social change and political instability. Nursi himself faced similar circumstances during the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of the Kemalist reforms, which had been difficult to accept by the Muslim community (*ummah*) who were divided amongst themselves and who had also experienced much discord with their neighbors in Central Asia.

In this article, we argue that the seminal work of Nursi was able to provide Muslims of the 21st century with the hope of a shared future and a sense of identity in times of utter confusion and fragmentation. In short, Muslims need not surrender to the secular project uncritically.

Berger (1999) criticized the secularization theory for ignoring counter-secularization movements such as the Nursi movement. The notion that secularism is 'progressive' whereas religion is 'backward,' is basically hegemonic because it fails to recognize the 'elephant in the room', namely, that religion has not gone away but that its presence is still evident. Secularism is not as 'value-free' as is often portrayed in mainstream discourse and diverse narratives. Berger argues that secularization on a societal level does not explain or include secularization at the level of individual consciousness.

This idea is related to Nursi's idea of faith-saving where the focus is on the faith of the individual rather than on the place of Islam in the broader sociopolitical context. Thanks to their attitudes, capacities and

faith, individuals are able to devise alternative ways of thinking and behaving. Of the two directions that present themselves to individual believers, the first is to 'return to the roots' in the hope of experiencing a spiritual revival and the second is to adopt a literalist and fundamentalist attitude, which will lead to a 'holier than thou' approach.

The second option has led certain religious groups to engage in violent extremism in the hope of safeguarding themselves from the disintegrating effects of secularization and to overcome and destroy the enemy. The irony is that the 'enemy' could be present in their very own culture and be within the civilization that they wish to protect because the secularization process is also like 'an elephant in the room', namely, a pervasive reality but one that is not recognized or accepted.

KEMALISM AND THE DECLINE OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

To comprehend the evolution and transformation of Nursi's approach to Islam and politics, we must examine attentively the many stages of his life. During the volatile periods of the late Ottoman Empire, he was actively involved in politics until his visit to the Grand National Assembly of Turkey in Ankara in 1922. This period is known as the early Said (*eski Said*) period. The second period began following the early Said era, coinciding with the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the beginning of the new Republic under Kemal Atatürk. After moving to Ankara in 1922, Nursi left active politics and began to live a more restricted life (Sahin, 2011).

Under Mahmud II (reigned -1808-1839), who was the 30th Sultan, the Ottoman Empire went through several contradictory phases of development. Some of these phases became known as 'pseudo-secularism. In contrast, his son Sultan Abdul Mejid I made a more absolutist effort to reclaim the Islamist flavor of the Empire (Aksan, 2005). This effort, however, was a futile project that caused the next five Sultans to cling to the structures of an already crumbling empire. Eventually, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Kemal Atatürk tactfully took advantage of Turkish nationalism to prepare for self-determination and, in 1923, the Turkish Republic came into being.

The term 'Turk' was redefined and lost the ethno-religious significance it previously held. For Nursi, however, the idea of being a Turk could not be separated from his Muslim identity. His statement that "Turks who have abandoned Islam or who are not Muslims are no longer Turkish" (Nursi, 2014, p. 374), sounds religio-nationalist. We can leave history to judge which of the two became victorious: ethno-nationalism or religio-nationalism.

Kemalist Turkey ignored the structure it had inherited from the Ottoman Empire (Aksan, 2005) and challenged the role of Islam in the newly formed Turkey. However, the traditional countryside remained largely untouched and the social order prevailed in the non-elitist communities, particularly in Anatolia where the impact of the Sufi expression of Islam was strong.

History has left us with a reductionist interpretation of the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of modern Turkey. According to this view, Turkey remains divided between the modern, secular project and its Islamic heritage in a way that is similar to its geographical division between East and West. Indigenous and traditional aspects were no longer regarded as important in the prevailing view that modernization had a homogenous effect on Turkish society (Aksan, 2005).

However, the collective psyche of Turkey suggests that its heterogeneity was ready for a more diversified future, a hope that Nursi expressed in *Risale-i-Nur*. Secularization led to the privatization and rationalization of religion, the separation of state and religion. Turkish Islam was not immune to this transformation and the Kemalist divorce from the religious spirit is particularly evident within the academia (Özervarli, 2010), which was struggling to come to terms with past and present developments. The urgent need to 'save the faith' by means of an Islamic revival (*tajdid*) and a fresh interpretation of Islam in the face of Kemalist reforms formed the historical background in which Nursi wrote *Risale-i-Nur*.

THE APPROACH OF *RISALE-I-NUR*

With Nursi's insightful exegesis (*tafsir*), Islamic scholarship moved in the direction of social theology. Historically speaking, scholars of jurisprudence had tended to focus on the methodology of *usul al-fiqh* instead of developing a theological framework. However, Nursi wanted to shift the focus from such technicalities to the social aspect of Islam during a period in which positivism and scientism were at their peak among the Western intelligentsia. He felt that it was crucial to deal with the fundamental questions of Islam to 'save the faith' (Özervarli, 2010). It seems that Nursi embraced this challenge as his own intellectual and theological responsibility as a Kurdi Turk during the time that Atatürk was making such far-ranging and significant reforms.

Risale-i-Nur could definitely be described as *tafsir* leading to significant *tadjiid* in the Islamic tradition. Rather than limiting itself to technical details of exegesis or to the occasions of revelation, *Risale-i-Nur* focuses on the broader questions of faith that must sustain the modern believer during the enormous socio-political changes about which the text itself speaks. *Risale-i-Nur* deals with the concept of Divinity and the Divine attributes that underpin our human purpose and obligations. The topics covered by Nursi range across a spectrum of Qur'anic teachings that engage academic scholarship but also provide new life for the faith of the ordinary people who were undergoing the huge changes sweeping through this massive landmass whose borders stretched from the Black Sea to the Marmara, the Aegean and the Mediterranean and whose civilization dated back to 12000 years BCE.¹

What makes *Risale-i-Nur* an idiosyncratic commentary is its use of a "language of rational spirituality." Nursi communicates with his readers by sharing his own personal healing experiences (Özervarli, 2010), an approach which was quite unusual for a scholarly reader. The text becomes enchanting as it makes references to miracles and dreams (Tezcan, 2005), further separating the world of Islam from materialism, a distinction certainly compatible with the spirit of Islam. Moreover, Nursi's background in the field of empirical sciences enabled him to compose *Risale-i-Nur* from the point-of-view of a rational mind. As a result, Nursi was able to address the primary questions raised by secularization and modernity and to discuss how Muslims should deal with the implications of secularization in their daily lives.

His discourse was based on 'experiential' arguments for the existence of God, issues that many classical Muslim scholars have wrestled with throughout the history of Islam. He was convinced that, in order to transform the faith of believers, it was necessary to maintain a relationship between God, with divine vice-regency and with public and social order (Horkuc, 2002).

This means that man came to this world to be perfected by means of knowledge and supplication. Regarding his nature and abilities everything is tied to knowledge. And the foundation, source, light, and spirit of all true knowledge is knowledge of God and its essence and basis are belief in God.²

The fact that resistance and struggle (*jihad*) was a concurrent theme in Nursi's work exposes the experiential dimension of his own struggle amid all the changes that were taking place. Instead of striving for reforms in political and social institutions, the 'New Said Nursi' wanted to mobilize the common people to resist the deliberate marginalization of Islam and its practice during the 1920s-1940s. Since these political and social institutions were dominated by a positivist paradigm, political action was not enough to bring change (Özervarli, 2010). For this reason, much of Nursi's work was published during the years of his exile and these works dealt primarily with the theme of 'saving the faith' for the

¹. Gobekli Tepe (located in Southeastern Anatolia) was built 6000 years BCE. well before Stonehenge (a prehistoric stone circle monument, a cemetery, and archaeological site located about 13 km. north of Salisbury, Wiltshire, England) and the exact meaning of its carvings (Gobekli Tepe) and the life of the people who once inhabited these surroundings are yet to be investigated.

². Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, The Words, in *Risale-i-Nur*. Istanbul: Sözlür Publications, 2013, p. 332.

individual as opposed to society at large, which had to confront the changes through a model hitherto unfamiliar.

Nursi adopted a question-oriented approach similar to the Socratic model according to which those who sought knowledge could inquire about any discipline, whether scientific or religious (Yusoff, Yilmaz, & Ebrahimi, 2013). Instead of alienating the modern individual by dismissing the rational tendencies of positivism, Nursi accommodated scientific views by including them in the interests of a better understanding of religion. For Nursi, Islam consists of religious sciences, which develop and maintain public security for peaceful coexistence in society. Instead of undermining public order, Islamic faith ensures and enhances it. Because of its negative approach to reality, unbelief upsets the social order (Şükran, 1992). Since the Divine sustains the vice-regency of humanity, it is also necessary to promote belief in the human person as one of the foundations of Islam.

CONFLICT OR COLLABORATION?

Nursi wondered whether there was an irreconcilable conflict between Islam and modernity. He felt that this discussion could not occur in a vacuum and, therefore, that it was important to gauge the impact of modernity on Muslim communities. Any discussion of the modernity that has spread across the globe cannot dismiss the issue of the colonization of the Muslim world (Abu-Rabi', 2005), which was a global phenomenon whose legacy should not be underestimated. There are many examples of unfinished geopolitical issues caused by the colonization of the Muslim world.³

What became known as the Arab Renaissance in the nineteenth century contained elements of the 'secularization of religion' and incorporated some of the social contexts in which it occurred. These Arab reformers began by reducing their focus on the historical accumulations and traditions of *fiqh*. They proceeded to reinterpret the original divine and prophetic sources (Qur'an and Sunnah) through a process of reasoning (*ijtihad*) for the sake of bringing about a revival (*tajdid*). They understood *ijtihad* as a free intellectual pursuit derived from jurisprudence (*fiqh*) (Zubaida, 2005).

By embracing the authority and superiority of modern science, the Arab reformers reduced the scope of religious regulations even further, making a clear distinction between the state, religion and secular reforms, a distinction which was based on earlier French models (*laïcité* Fr. / *laiklik* Tk.). The practice of religion was to be a private matter even though the "purging of anything that belonged to the Catholic Church" did not take place in Turkey as it had during the French Revolution. All that happened in Turkey was that Islam became socially and politically marginalized.⁴

Traditional Islam considered these radical reforms as too permissive and felt that the intention of the reformers was to adapt religion (*deen*) and *Shari'ah* norms to modern demands for growth and enlightenment as well as to modern sensitivities regarding women, family, morality, punishments and so on. *Maslaha* (the 'public interest') was a concept that provided scope for these reforms and it was implemented by adopting the methodology of *fiqh* as was done with *ijtihad*. These reforms and modifications fostered the development of religious structures that were compatible with the demands of the state and modern society and which corresponded to modern sensibilities (Zubaida, 2005). In short, the Kemalist agenda fitted into the secular parameters of Central and Northern European nation-states.

³. We could cite the following examples of the colonial legacy: the Israel-Palestine conflict with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948; the Jammu Kashmir issue for India and Pakistan since Partition in 1947. Moreover, an emerging colonial residue is the Durand Line (1893), a border with a barbed wire fence (2640 km long) running from South Eastern Iran all the way to South Western China. This border is not without Taliban resistance and has 18 border crossings between the two nations, Afghanistan and Pakistan. These three geopolitical scenarios are linked to the British colonial past.

⁴. Turkey abolished the Caliphate system and gradually embraced a form of government that discouraged religious involvement in government affairs, especially religious influence in the determination of state policies. The new regime was modelled on the Article 1 of the French Constitution.

The peculiar characteristic of the Muslim world is that it retained its religiously articulated cultural patterns while at the same time being dominated by the impact of different schools of thought and various religious movements arising out of the West. Hence, Samuel Huntington's thesis on the clash of civilizations⁵ is a misrepresentation of the complexity of multilayered global cultures. In the view of Huntington, the Islamic religio-cultural identity simply became a subset of many other, broader global identities.

For example, Muslim countries opted for the capitalist economic model even though its provision for the distribution of welfare is of American origin. A stark contradiction exists between the tendency to contest or oppose all that is American and yet to adopt an American capitalist framework. The resultant capitalism does not create a progressive Muslim society but exists merely to ensure and expand the power of the elite (Abu-Rabi', 2005).

The Muslim world has not embraced capitalism without a certain amount of criticism. However, the Muslim world has so far failed to develop its own economic model of capitalism. Nursi made efforts in this direction during the period of great change, adaptation and reform that he experienced. Although he was critical of certain Kemalist reforms, Nursi was not against the project of modernity and his novel approach made *Risale-i-Nur* timely and courageous.

Muslims in the modern world face several challenges, especially those who live in the diaspora. The confrontation between Islam and modernity in the 21st century has led to a debate regarding human moral autonomy and the interpretation of the Qur'an's ethical teaching. In this debate, three basic positions have been taken, namely: (a) modernism (b) fundamentalism and (c) traditionalism. (a) Muslim modernism refers to the ongoing reinterpretation of the Qur'an in order to keep its ethical standard relevant in the midst of changing social circumstances. Muslim modernists highlight the 'inner-worldliness' of Qur'anic ethics and promote individual moral autonomy and freedom. (b) Fundamentalism opposes and even denies any human interpretation of the ethical ideal. This approach tends to highlight God's transcendence as well as the limitations and subjectivity of human judgment. (c) Traditionalism allows for the interpretation of the ethical ideal only on the premise that, once an interpretation has been made and has been validated by the consensus and acceptance of the community, it can never be amended or rejected. The authoritative text of Islam continues to grow under this regime as each generation adds its own interpretations to those of previous generations.

Traditionalism can be seen as a middle ground between the extremes of fundamentalism and revivalism (Hoebink, 1999). Nursi's words on the viceregency of a human being sheds light on modern Muslim identity.

Now the true meaning of your life is this: it is acting as a mirror to the manifestation of divine oneness and the manifestation of eternal besoughtness. By virtue of the comprehensiveness arising from being like the point of focus for all the divine names manifested in the world, it is being a mirror to the Single and Eternally Besought One.⁶

What can be gathered from the above citation is that manifestation of Divinity is the primary purpose is Islam. The relationship this has with modernity is that science allows for one to recognize the signs of God in the world. Hence, Science is complimentary to religion, not its replacement. With the aid of modernity and science, one can understand the true nature of the universe and how it mirrors the Divine.

⁵. See his *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1996), which was an expansion of the 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article written by him that hypothesized a new post-Cold War world order. Here he elaborated the fault lines between civilizations that would result in future wars between two or more identity groups (usually religious, ethnic, or tribal) and from different civilizations. After severe criticism of his thesis, however, he changes the word *civilization* to *culture*.

⁶. op. cit., Said Nursi, p. 141.

Berger (1999) notes that religious cultures and civilizations tend to take either of two routes when confronted with modernity: rejection or adaptation. However, neither strategy is correct if it is based on ignorance of modernity. In the light of *Risale-i-Nur*, the preferred strategy is adaptation since some of the propositions of modernity can be accepted on certain conditions. Adaptation here does not mean a complete compromise on the fundamentals of Islamic faith and practice but adaptation can be made by Muslims who are well-acquainted with the progress of scientific thought.

The aim of Nursi's work is not to produce a 'religious subculture' (Berger, 1999), which rejects the influence of the outside world because to isolate oneself is unsustainable. The correct approach is to incorporate the progress of the world and its values within the Islamic worldview so that religion does not become an experience of isolation.

In the twenty-sixth letter of the *Risale i Nur*, 'the idea of nationalism' is viewed in the light of the behavior of 'European tyrants.' This refers to imperialism and the resulting civil conflicts that tend to divide the Muslim communities as well as other cultural communities. Instead of isolation and animosity, 'positive nationalism' must be pursued to 'serve Islam' and 'not take its place.' Islam is considered as 'the stronghold and place of recourse of the poor and the people of learning'⁷ enabling them to engage with what is taking place around them and to seek the kind of Islam that promotes life and enhances it for the public good.

Legitimate questions are still being asked as to whether this Nursian approach was taken seriously or whether Atatürkian pragmatism predominated in the creation of modern Turkey. There is evidence that Nursi and his *magnum opus*, *Risale i Nur* was indeed taken seriously by the Hizmet Movement under the leadership of Fethullah Gülen, who has decided to live in exile in the US. Nursi wanted to develop Islam by Islamizing science. Both Gülen and Nursi hoped to "protect" the people "from unbelief and those in the *madrasas* from fanaticism".⁸

SOCIAL CHANGE AND NURSIAN PRAGMATISM

It is interesting to note that the kind of modernization taken up by certain Asian countries is akin to Westernization. However, the loss of traditional cultural traits and values in the process of mindlessly imitating the West is obviously detrimental to these Asian communities.

The peoples awakening in Asia are embracing the idea of nationalism and imitating Europe precisely in every respect, and on the way are sacrificing many of the things they hold sacred. However, every nation requires a dress suitable to its particular stature. Even if the material is the same [for all nations], the styles have to be different.⁹

Globalization has introduced a homogenous culture that many consider to be hegemonic because of its Westernizing effects. One could even refer to such globalization as neo-colonialism (Ritzer, 2011). However, for Nursi, one can remain a Muslim and still be open to modernity by engaging in critical thinking in order to make sure that scientific and technological progress contribute to the wellbeing of society. In short, Nursian pragmatism rejects the adoption of a Western *modus operandi* at the expense of traditional cultural and religious heritages and identities simply to accept a one-size-fits-all narrative of development and material progress.

CONCLUSION

This article has invited the reader to relate the reflections that Said Nursi made in response to the demands of his particular era with the socio-political challenges we face in our own day. Now that we

⁷. op. cit., Said Nursi, pp. 373-376.

⁸. For further reading, see Yavuz, M. H. (1999). Towards an Islamic liberalism?: the Nurcu movement and Fethullah Gülen. *The Middle East Journal*, 584-605.

⁹. op. cit., Said Nursi, p. 375.

have obtained an overview of his reflections, we can conclude that *Risale-i-Nur* is a text that can contribute to the complex global issues we face today. Globalization as an active process is here to stay and discourses on modernity have developed into discussions of post-modernity along with deconstructionist epistemological shifts hitherto unknown. We have seen that *Risale-i-Nur* did not reject a certain level of critical discourse to understand religion. In fact, we could conclude that Nursi would have allowed modern Muslims to take part in any postmodern, deconstructionist discourse.

The relationship between Islam and modernity is complex and it cannot be reduced to the polarities of good and evil. Nursi's approach brought new dimensions to the discussion about modernity by his focus on faith. His perspective is connected in a profound way with Berger's view that the social process of secularization cannot be the measure of an individual's faith.

The aim of *Risale-i-Nur* was to construct a Muslim identity that could accept reforms that would 'protect the faith.' Nursi's a-political stance did not imply that he wanted to avoid social responsibility. On the contrary, by highlighting the responsibility of the individual, a modern Muslim is empowered to exercise the kind of personal faith conviction that will promote the welfare of the entire community. The rejection of social and political responsibility for the sake of one's own religious survival has a detrimental effect on social progress. In order to accept social change and to manage global issues more effectively, Said Nursi shifted the emphasis from legal *jihad* to social theology and focused on faith and the empowerment of the individual. ■

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