SAID NURSI ON SECULARISM, RELIGIOUS RIGHTS, ETHICS, AND EDUCATION

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Abstract: This paper explores the views of Turkish scholar, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1877-1960), on the ideology of secularism and its impact on identity, ethics, and social stability. It mostly covers Nursi's interpretation of Islam in a twentieth-century secular setting. Based on Nursi's views, the paper suggests that, in the interests of establishing a secure and balanced world, faith commitments should be allowed to manage diversity and conflict, rather than a secular semi-agnostic approach. The paper also proposes that, to establish a healthy and virtuous society, collective and individual morality and identity should be constructed using religious values and principles. The paper discusses how Nursi advocated reconciling science and religion, establishing harmony between European civilisation and the truths of Islam. As the paper establishes, there was no enmity between any branch of science and faith for Nursi, who saw both as allies in the task of building human civilisation. But he did advocate rooting education and knowledge in the truths of revealed religion, with the scientific achievements of the age merely contributing to a correct understanding of those truths. This paper also demonstrates that Nursi was an advocate of a pluralist society where all citizens, regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds, would be respected, nurtured, and protected. At the same time, he questioned the potential of secularism to provide well-being and virtue for various stratums of society. Policy recommendations are given in the last part of the paper.

Keywords: Said Nursi, secularism in Turkey, religious education, integration of knowledge, modernisation, religion and ethics, religious rights.

Introduction

The word 'secularism' has different connotations in different contexts. Scott Morrison defines it as a "norm of non-interference, between religious and political institutes, (the church, mosque, or temple, etc.) and the state."[1] Thus, in secularism, the state cannot be officially bonded to any religious tradition. But, as Charles Taylor suggests, secularism requires more than a mere separation of

religion and state. Rather, secularity began as an "exclusive humanist alternative to Christian faith."[2] For Taylor, therefore, secularism does not mean the absence of religion but a political and intellectual classification that needs to be understood as a historical construction. All goals of secularism are "concerned with protecting people in their belonging and/or practice of whatever outlook they choose or find themselves in, treating people equally whatever their option, and giving them all a hearing."[3] Hence, secularism is not about the absence of religion; it is about state neutrality, about avoiding favouring or disfavouring any religious/non-religious position. Thus, secularism is commonly related to political principles like human rights, equality, the rule of law, and democracy.[4] In practice, however, secularism has diverged from theory, manifesting differently in the politics of different states. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas has even stated that the concept of 'secular' refers to the condition of the world at our particular time or age.[5]

Among Muslim countries, Turkey was the first to declare itself a nation-state with a secular orientation after the Independence Wars (1919-1923) led by Mustafa Kemal Pasha. As Olson argued, Turkish 'secularism' was "not the equivalent of American secularism, which includes the separation of church and state."[6] Rather, in Turkey an aggressive secularisation process took place that retained the more potent anti-religious elements common to *laïcité*, the French concept of secularism. It largely served to disestablish Islam, to limit its powers to "matters of belief and practice."[7] As a result, by early spring 1926, Western culture and lifestyle had become the main ways of life in Turkey. For Mustafa Kemal, Turkey could only re-build and take its place in the 'civilised' world through rapid modernisation, which he understood as Westernisation accompanied by a complete secularisation.[8] The ultra-secular policies of Turkey's republican government negatively influenced all aspects of society (governance, culture, personality, and social behaviour), aspects that had previously been rooted in Islamic values and principles.

Fuat Keyman, however, has argued that secularism in Turkey was not necessarily damaging, but there to "control and regulate religious activities through constitutional and institutional means, in order to establish a strict separation between the state and religion" and "not to act 'impartially' towards different Muslim and non-Muslim religious communities."[9] In that respect, al-Attas has suggested that secularisation as it occurred within the Muslim world has not, and will not, affect Muslim belief in the same way it has the beliefs of Western man. But he nevertheless felt that problems arising out of secularisation, though "not the same as those confronting the West, have certainly caused much confusion in our midst."[10] The main issues for Muslims that have emanated from secularism are certainly much broader than the rights of citizens to, for

example, wear scarves in public or have enough mosques for Friday prayers. Rather, secularism has confused the minds of Muslim youth by depriving them of appropriate training in the principles and merits of the Qur'anic worldview, especially in worldly affairs. Indeed, by the end of the twentieth century, the educated Muslim elite faced a dilemma: they felt 'Muslim' (more correctly, Asian) according to their inner conscience, but 'Western' in mindset. This identity dilemma has been particularly extreme in Turkey.

Accordingly, this paper studies secularism in Turkey, acknowledging both its negative and positive impact. The paper does not aim to offer original definitions of secularism or analyse its far-reaching impact on modern Turkey. Rather, it focuses on the response Muslim scholars have had to the harsh policies of secularism in Turkey using the example of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1877-1960), a famous Muslim thinker of ethnic Kurdish origin who played a major role in revitalising and preserving Islamic teachings in Turkey during a very challenging period in that nation's history. While a number of contemporary researchers have analysed the thought of Said Nursi concerning both secularism and its impact on Muslim well-being, perhaps the most comprehensive has been Şükran Vahide's *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*. Concerning Said Nursi's ideas on the impact of secularism on ethics and societal morality, Ibrahim Ozdemir and Ian Markham have conducted important research, summarised in "Secular or Religious Foundations for Ethics." Additionally, Necati Aydin's recent study, "Said Nursi's Evolving Thoughts on Secular Ideology and Modern Science," explores the problem of secularising contemporary knowledge vis-a-vie Nursi's thoughts on the relationship between science and faith. The current article, however, is slightly different from these earlier studies; it tries to explore the impact of secularism on identity, ethics, and social stability based on the ideas of Said Nursi. In order to understand Nursi's stance on secularism, his ideas on human rights, education, identity, and ethics shall be discussed throughout this paper.

Nursi on Religious Rights

It is commonly assumed that the concept of human rights is secular and takes priority over other values, including religious ones. It is also believed that the barrier secularism erects between religion and politics protects both religious and unreligious values. These assumptions are controversial for those who approach human rights from the perspective of religious belief.[11] Interestingly, when the Soviet Union passed its secularisation law in the 1920s, one famous Muslim Tatar scholar, Musa Jarullah (1875-1949), called it "a wise and rational

decision, which brought equality and freedom to religions practiced by various nations of the country."[12] As a member of a religious minority group that had been persecuted for almost five centuries under Russian Christian colonial rule, Jarullah believed that the Soviet government's expressly secular position would result in non-interference in the religious beliefs, objects, and places of worship of minority groups. This religious freedom and equality for all members of society without exception was what Jarullah meant by 'secularism'. Yet, he clearly stated that depriving religions of their social and cultural rights by abolishing religious teachings and their established laws altogether was not the separation of religion from government, but the complete destruction of religion by government.[13] Certainly, Turkey interpreted secularism more as the promotion of conflict with religion than providing equal human rights to all citizens.

If one compares Islam and secularism on human rights, one finds many shared principles. There is, for example, no religious compulsion in Islam; individuals may use their free will to choose between right and wrong. Similarly, in secularism no one can interfere in a person's religious choice. Let us observe this notion in the thought of Said Nursi.

Throughout his life, Said Nursi strived to demonstrate the pluralist and all-embracing nature of Islam. As Nursi lived in a Muslim majority country where the rights of non-Muslim minorities (notably the Armenians) was a subject of contention, his main concern was explaining the stance of Islam towards peoples of other faiths. Nursi declared that the rights of minorities should be recognised, asking the government to leave the Armenians in peace and recognise their freedoms.[15] Nursi asserted that:

> Our actions towards non-Muslims consist only of persuasion, for we know them to be civilised. And we suppose them to be fair-minded, so we should demonstrate that Islam is lovable and elevated. The lax and negligent should know that they cannot ingratiate themselves with the Europeans by being irreligious, for they only show that they are unprincipled. And no one likes unprincipledness and anarchy.[16]

Once Nursi was asked if there was a possibility Europeans would be perturbed by a 'Union of Muslims'.[17] He replied: "It is not they who are our enemies; what has in reality brought us this low is opposition to the shariah, which is the result of ignorance, thus preventing us from upholding the Word of God; and poverty and its fruits of immorality and bad conduct; and conflict and its products of strife and hatred; the attacks of our Union are directed at these three enemies."[18] In the Middle Ages, according to Nursi, Islam was compelled to be bigoted

and hostile in the face of European savagery, but it nevertheless maintained its justice and moderation. But, in this time of modern civilisation, Europeans have become civilised and powerful, with harmful hostility and bigotry having disappeared. Since the civilised are to be conquered through persuasion, not force, the attitude of Muslims towards Europeans should, according to Nursi, be based on friendship and sympathy, to show that Islam is elevated and lovable.[19]

As Markham observed, Said Nursi condemned those who would resort to violence, seeing the latter as a form of weakness. Throughout his life, Nursi was committed to handling disagreements peacefully.[20] Vahide explained Nusri's position thus:

> The way of the Risale-i Nur was peaceful *jihad* or '*jihad* of the word' (*mânevî jihad*) in the struggle against atheism and irreligion. By working solely for the spread and strengthening of belief, it was to work also for the preservation of internal order and peace and stability in society in the face of moral and spiritual destruction of communism and the forces of irreligion which aimed to destabilise society and create anarchy, and to form "a barrier" against them.[21]

Nursi wanted Islamic revivalism; he called upon Muslims to realise the power of their religion and its ability to establish the 'right' civilisation. At the same time, he highlighted the reality of pluralism and the inevitability of disagreement, both within and outside the Muslim community. As Markham pointed out, for Nursi renewal entailed "a greater self-confidence in the arguments for the Islamic faith that enables Muslims to enjoy the pluralist world."[22]

Vahide has stated that Nursi always urged "his students to act tolerantly and peaceably toward followers of other paths and to return any criticism or aggression with good will, and above all to not allow political differences to cause disunity and so aid irreligion."[23] He called for all the religious peoples of the world to cooperate against atheism and secularism. For instance, he sent copies of *Risale-i Nur* to the Pope in Rome; in response, he received a letter of thanks from the Vatican (dated February 22, 1951). Moreover, during his stay in Istanbul in the spring and summer of 1953, Nursi visited Athenagoras, the city's Greek Orthodox patriarch.[24] In sum, Nursi believed that a faith commitment as taught by Islam and other religions was the best way of handling diversity and conflict, rather than a secular, semi-agnostic approach.

Secularism, Religion, and Ethics

Modern theories acknowledge the essential role religion plays in building society, being a source of morality and solidarity. Emile Durkheim, in his seminal *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (first published 1912), said that religion serves four major social functions: social solidarity, social control (such as the prohibition against killing), the provision of meaning and purpose in life, and psychological and emotional support (such as wedding celebrations).[25] Marvin Perry illustrated the role played by religion in early civilisation thus:

> Religion was the central force in these primary civilisations. It provided satisfying explanations for the operations of nature, helped to ease the fear of death, and justified traditional rules of morality. Law was considered sacred, a commandment of the gods. Religion united people in the common enterprises needed for survival – for example, the construction and maintenance of irrigation works and the storage of food. Religion also promoted creativity in art, literature, and science. In addition, the power of rulers, regarded as gods or their agents, derived from religion.[26]

Over time, it is believed that religion became increasingly complex, its rituals more elaborate, until finally monotheism emerged, considered by sociologists to be the most perfect form of religious belief. The pioneering sociologist August Comte believed that the authority of monotheistic religious belief would eventually be transferred into a scientific understanding of the world. In other words, science would displace religion as the primary source of explanation for social and natural phenomena.[27] In this context, sociologists have posited that, as human intellect evolves and people become more civilised, the need for religion as a source of moral value and social stability will diminish, or even completely disappear. The secular approach, which functions in line with these discussions, thereby reduces the significance of religion as a source of ethics and morality.

If religion played a vital role in early society and civilisation, the Enlightenment gave birth to a set of non-religious ethical alternatives. The virtues of justice, righteousness, dignity, nobility, and goodness are today described from a secular viewpoint. Liberalism, with its essential values of freedom, autonomy, and individual rights, now constitutes a universal moral truth. Yet, even this universal moral truth is not immune to revision;[28] as time passes, authoritative moral opinions change as society adapts to new cultural norms.

The secular system's tendency to neglect the role religion plays in providing universal moral truths has been criticised since the Enlightenment, especially

as secular moral norms have not always been successful in establishing strong social orders or the well-being of the entire population. Hood et al., for example, highlighted the importance religious factors have in controlling crime rates, stating that, "when it comes to ethics, major world religions are amazingly consistent in their teachings about right and wrong. Religion has tremendous potential to improve our world by teaching an ethical system that would benefit all of us."[29] Thus, religion is an influential element in spreading tolerance, helpfulness, personal and interpersonal integrity, and in maintaining social order. Morrison stated that even liberal values cannot be supported on purely rational grounds, but depend on non-rational assumptions concerning human dignity, equality, and flourishing. [30] In most cases, the rationalisation and justification of secular moral and social norms are not as strong or convincing as their religious alternatives, leaving their implementations loose and vain.

Said Nursi also believed that secularism provided only a weak social order. In *Reflections on Unity*, Nursi stated that, "Mankind in this century has perceived that their greatest need is for moral and spiritual strength, comfort, and resolution."[31] Science and human progress alone, however, could not ensure moral strength in the face of misguidance; only Islamic belief was able to support and secure such moral strength, comfort, and happiness for mankind.[32]

In his *Risale-i Nur*, Nursi clearly stated that the Qur'an is the ultimate source of all ethical reflection and virtue. The Qur'an is the ultimate truth, possessing a timeless quality. Above all other books, it is the Word of the Creator.[33] Thus, Nursi stated that, "Indeed, since the Qur'an's principles and laws have come from pre-eternity, they shall go to post-eternity. They are not condemned to grow old and die like civilisation's laws."[34] Next to the Qur'an, Nusri positioned the Sunnah of the Prophet as a second source of ethics. When he identified the seven reasons why Muhammad (pbuh) ascends into heaven, concerning the fifth he explained that:

> Anyone who considers the facts and is fair and just cannot hesitate to agree that, as is unanimously agreed by friend and foe alike, good moral qualities were to be found at the highest degree in his personality, and that, in accordance with the testimony of all his dealings and actions, attributes and character of the greatest excellence were apparent in the way he performed his duties and proclaimed Islam, and, in accordance with the fine qualities and conduct enjoined by the religion of Islam, laudable virtues of the highest order were to be found in the law he brought.[35]

Thus, Nursi was a moral realist, believing that there are moral truths that can be perceived. For him, virtues and ethics were not a matter of invention or cultural evolution. Rather, they were universal and it was the duty of humanity to seek them out. To successfully discover the truth in ethics and what the Creator intended for us, we should study the Qur'an and apply its moral insights to our situation.[36]

Said Nursi also highlighted a huge difference between secular and religious ethics in relation to being virtuous. Secular moralists claim that people do good for the sake of doing good. From the religious point of view, however, people do good because it is ordered by God, and every command of God has its own wisdom, which is categorised in Islamic scholarship as the objectives (*maqasid*) of the shariah. On several occasions, Nursi explained the wisdom behind personal morality and called for righteous living and virtuous habits. While evaluating the Qur'anic verse "eat and drink, but waste not by excess" (7:31), Nursi developed seven points, of which the last stresses the tragic consequences of 'greed'. Greed, stated Nursi, leads to dissatisfaction, frustration, and a lack of religious faithfulness:

> Greed destroys sincerity and damages actions in regard to the Hereafter. For if a God-fearing person suffers from greed, he will desire the regard of others. And someone who considers the regard of others cannot have complete sincerity. This consequence is extremely important and worth noticing. Excess and wastefulness lead to lack of contentment. And lack of contentment destroys enthusiasm for work; it causes laziness, opens the door to complaining about life, and makes the dissatisfied person complain continuously. Also it destroys sincerity, and opens the door to hypocrisy. And it destroys self-respect, and points the way to begging.

Nursi argued that man is destined for eternity, for either everlasting happiness or perpetual misery. On the Day of Judgment, he will receive either reward or punishment.[38] In order to reach everlasting contentment, man's most fundamental need is religion, or the need to differentiate good from evil, to recognise and worship God and obey His laws. The main aim of mankind in this world is to establish a 'true' (virtuous) civilisation founded on the positive truths of revelation. According to Nursi, true civilisation should comprise the real happiness of all, or at least the majority.[39]

Nursi described the fundamental principles of 'true' civilisation in Islamic terms:

The principles of Qur'anic civilisation are positive. Its wheel of happiness turns on five positive principles: its point of support is truth instead of force, and the constant mark of truth is justice and balance. Security and well-being result from these, and villainy disappears. Its aim is virtue instead of self-interest, and the mark of virtue is love and mutual attraction. Happiness results from these, and enmity disappears. Its principle in life is co-operation instead of conflict and killing, and its mark is unity and solidarity, and the community is strengthened. Its service takes the form of guidance and direction instead of lust and passion. And the mark of guidance is progress and prosperity in way of benefitting humanity. The spirit is illuminated and reflected in the way it requires. The way it unifies the masses repulses racialism and negative nationalism. It establishes in place of them the bonds of religion, patriotic relations, ties of class, and the brotherhood of belief. The mark of these bonds are sincere brotherhood, general well-being; defense in the case of external aggression.[40]

According to Nursi, modern Western (especially European) civilisation acts contrary to the fundamental laws of the revealed religions. For that reason, its evils have come to outweigh its virtues, its errors preponderate over its benefits, and general tranquility and a happy worldly life (the true aims of civilisation) have been destroyed.[41] Western civilisation has been founded on five negative principles:

Its point of support is force instead of right, and the mark of force is aggression and hostility, and their result is treachery. Its goal is mean self-interest instead of virtue, and the mark of self-interest is rivalry and dispute, and their result, crime. Its law of life is conflict instead co-operation, and the mark of conflict is this: contention and mutual repulsion, and their result, poverty. Its principle for relations between peoples is racialism, which flourishes through harming others and is nourished through devouring others. The mark of negative nationalism and racialism is ghastly clashes, disastrous collisions, and their result, annihilation. The fifth is this: its alluring service is to excite lust and the appetites of the soul and facilitate the gratification of whims, and their result is vice. The mark of lust and passion is always this: they transform man into a beast, changing his character; they deform him, perverting his humanity.[42]

Interestingly, when Nursi identified Western civilisation as "low", he did not criticise its whole foundations, virtues, and values. In fact, Nursi saw two

different faces to modern Europe. His famous statement "Europe is two" refers to the distinction he made between a "first Europe", based on the original teachings of Christianity, and a 'second Europe', which was corrupt and harmful, a "low" civilisation founded on naturalism, secularism, and atheism.[43]   As Tomas Michel observed, Nursi focused mainly on the "second Europe" because he had no quarrel with the first, which retained the values of faith, justice, and social harmony. He was concerned rather with warning people about what was involved in modern civilisation so that they could take the necessary measures to withstand its dangerous charms. He was seeking to refute the false claims of a corrupt Europe and lay bare its harmful philosophical infrastructure.[44] Accordingly, the role of religion in society for Nursi was the main criterion to judge whether that society and civilisation were either virtuous or dissolute.

Secularism and Traditional Islamic Education

The preceding discussion indicated that, in order to establish a healthy and virtuous society, collective and individual morality and identity should be based on religious values. In this regard, education plays a vital role; those scholars who point towards the negative influence of secularism on Muslim societies often raise questions about the perceived inability of a secular education to inculcate the right personality development.

The Tanzimat (Reorganisation) reforms carried out by the Ottoman state from 1839 to 1876 with the definite purpose of preventing its decay, resulted in the emergence of new secular schools, largely in Istanbul. It also involved sending students to Europe, resulting in the flow of European ideas into Ottoman lands. Very soon, a separation between religious and modern styles of education, with completely dissimilar syllabi, started to occur. Yet, the actual secularisation process only began with the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, when secular education became compulsory. This resulted in a sharp separation between religious and modern styles of education, often pushing religious institutions into the corner.[45]

By contrast, Said Nursi's concept of education was based on a belief in God. As Vahide observes, when Nursi perceived the intended, ultra-secular course of Turkey's new leadership, he decided to devote himself to finding a new way to serve the cause of Islam. He had foreseen the danger emanating from the uprooting of Turkey's Islamic educational system and the negative consequences of secular education on both society and individuals. Hence, Nursi thought he should concentrate all his resources on the question of faith, as taught by the Qur'an, focusing on its revitalisation and strengthening.[46]   He sought to address

the ordinary people, to renew their belief, educate them, and raise their religious consciousness. Thus, in the *Risale-i Nur*, Nursi sought to challenge the idea of secularism in order to preserve Islamic belief and practice. He argued that, "If one Muslim is out of [the] circle of Islam, he or she turns into an apostate and anarchist and become[s] a poison to the society."[47] For Nursi, Islamic teachings were fundamental to achieving social comfort and peace as they avoided social problems, such as anarchy and terror. Ultra-secularism, on the other hand, may create misery for both society and the individual.[48]

It is worth noting that Nursi did not oppose teaching contemporary science with *ma'nah al-harfi* (literal meaning). Rather, he was opposed to the existing educational system in the Muslim world. When he stayed in Van in 1895/6, for example, Nursi realised that classical *kalam* (doctrinal theology) as taught in traditional *madrasah* was incapable of answering the doubts and criticisms being raised about Islam. Nursi thus began advocating the urgent necessity of reforming *madrasah* education and updating the Islamic sciences in light of modern advances in knowledge. This brought him to Istanbul in 1907, with a proposal for educational reform. At the heart of Nursi's proposal lay the reconciliation of the then education system's three main branches: the *madrasah*s, *mekteb*s (new secular schools), and *tekke*s (Sufi establishments).[49] To achieve this goal, Nursi proposed establishing al-Zahra, a *madrasah* where both religious and modern sciences would be taught side-by-side. This institution would accordingly play a central role in reconciling the sciences of philosophy and religion, making peace between European civilisation and the truths of Islam.[50] However, Nursi's vision for al-Zahra was never realised; his efforts at educational reform resulted in his detention in a mental hospital, later replaced by imprisonment.

For Nursi, there was no enmity between science and faith; both were allies in building human civilisation. He did not therefore oppose studying modern science. Rather, he harshly condemned the existing *madrasah* system for not doing so, thereby producing *'ulama'* who believed religion and modern science clashed. This false idea, as Nursi believed, caused feelings of hopelessness and despair, shutting the door of progress and civilisation. Thus, in his *Risale-i Nur*, Nursi aimed to offer an explanation of Islam that was relevant to twentieth-century humanity, addressing both intellect and inner faculties.[51] In fact, science was the central point in his educational philosophy. According to Nursi, science should serve the cause of Islam and the ultimate goal of the Creator, and thereby be guided by faith. In his early writings on the relation between Islam and modern knowledge, Nursi pointed out that, "Islam is the master and guide of the sciences, and the chief and father of all true knowledge."[52] Later, in his *Risale-i Nur*, he confined this elevated role to the Qur'an, claiming that the Qur'an contains the "index of the sciences and branches of knowledge."[53]

Nursi accordingly acknowledged the positive role modern scientific achievements had in enriching Islamic knowledge and teachings; he considered the learning of secular science to be compulsory. He was concerned, however, that negative ideas like secularism, atheism, nationalism, and communism were making inroads into Muslim communities through contact with Western education. Thus, Nursi suggested filtering out such destructive ideas by differentiating between two different channels of modern education: one mediated through religious schools capable of purifying education of rancour and hatred, and a second that came directly from the West and was polluted and cloudy. This last channel had a negative effect on some minds and must therefore pass, as Nursi believed, through the filter of shariah.[54]

In sum, science was central to Nursi's conception of education. He called upon his compatriots to teach religious and contemporary sciences side-by-side, without any sharp distinction between them. He believed that faith played the main role in education, while science should serve the betterment of humanity.

Identity and Social Order

Secular education in the Muslim world has created a confused identity. During the Ottoman period, Islam provided a strong cohesive identity for Muslims. The absence of an adequate religious system in the Republic of Turkey, however, which could train Muslims from different ethnic groups to see themselves as part of a broader united *ummah* (community), resulted in social divergence. Thus, Ismail and Tekke related high levels of social conflict to an identity crisis caused by secularisation.[55] Likewise, al-Attas stated that making secularism central to the modern Muslim world goes against Islamic values and practice. For modern youth, traditional values no longer serve a purpose, having lost their meaning. This creates a crisis of identity and corresponding lack of contentment. The values measuring success and happiness are now those promoting secular and materialistic achievements, and so youth strive and relentlessly compete among themselves to gain high places on the social ladder. This struggle, as al-Attas observed, results in a weakening of mental and intellectual capacity, often causing a crisis of identity in the minds of Muslim youth.[56] Such inner dilemmas may bring additional undesired negative consequences, such as social unrest, as indeed we see in many modern Muslim societies.[57]

By understanding the destructive consequences of a secular education system for both individuals and social order, Nursi clearly underlined how, "without religious education, Muslims cannot be governed except by means of absolute despotism and absolute bribery."[58] He further explained that, "for just as up

to the present no Muslim has ever become a true Christian or Jew, they rather become irreligious and completely corrupted; so a Muslim cannot become a communist; he turns into an anarchist and can be governed by nothing other than absolute despotism."[59] For Nursi, Muslim identity should be based on Islam and maintained through education. This was one of the main challenges of his time.

In his *Risale-i Nur*, Nursi interpreted the negative type of nationalism that provides the basis for modern identity as being equivalent to racism, strongly condemning it as an artificial concept that destroys harmony in society, resulting in inequity and injustice. According to him, it destroys true human civilisation and ruins social progress. Nursi regarded it as something "inauspicious, and harmful, it is nourished by devouring others, persists through hostility to others, and is aware of what it is doing. It is the case of enmity and disturbance."[60] For him, nationalism was responsible for spreading discrimination, rivalry, and injustice in society. In his *Letters*, he affirmed that the principles of racism and nationalism do not follow justice and right; they impose tyranny towards other races. A ruler of racialist leanings, said Nursi, prefers those of the same race and cannot act justly. Therefore, "the bonds of nationalism may not be set up in place of the bonds of religion; if they are, there will be no justice; right will disappear."[61] Nursi consequently uttered:

> O my Turkish brother! You watch out in particular! Your nationhood has fused with Islam and may not be separated from it. If you do separate them, you will be finished! All your glorious deeds of the past are recorded in the book of Islam's deeds. Since these glorious deeds cannot be effaced from the face of the earth by any power, don't you efface them from your heart due to the evil suggestions and devices of Satan![62]

Nursi repeatedly asserted that Muslims had only one national identity: the *ummah*. In order to withstand European domination and the divisive influence of negative nationalism, Muslims should unite around this common sense of identity. He considered the unification of Muslims around the notion of an *ummah* to be the only force capable of imparting equality, justice, and security to all Muslims, regardless of ethnicity, financial background, or social difference. While deliberating on the possible remedies for Muslim backwardness, failure, despair, and weakness, Nursi stated in *Emirdag Lahikası*, "Against these terrible forces of destruction, only and solely the Islamic Unity surrounding the truths of the Qur'an can endure. And it is the only way to save this land from the occupation of foreigners and this nation from falling into anarchy, and the means to save mankind from these dangers."[63]

Nursi strongly believed that the present-day social order, based on racism, conflict, and aggression, would eventually fall apart. Then true civilisation, founded on the positive truths of revelation, would emerge.[64] As for Islam, Nursi was very optimistic about its positive role in building such a true civilisation; Islam had the capacity to progress and contained everything necessary to achieve true civilisation. Nursi assumed that, "God willing, through the strength of Islam in the future, the virtues of civilisation will prevail, the face of the earth will be cleansed of filth, and universal peace will be secured."[65] In sum, Nursi felt the main remedy for present-day hostilities and antagonism was a system based on revealed principles, propagating global peace, unity, compassion, solidarity, and actual progress.

Conclusion and Recommendations

After exploring the thought of Nursi on secularism and its impact on identity, ethics, and social stability, this paper proposes the following concluding remarks. Firstly, although Nursi lived during a period when the power of secularism was absolute, including in Turkey, he strongly believed in the ability of Islam to reshape the future of humanity. He strongly believed that Islam and its truths possessed the perfect capacity for progress, both materially and morally.[66] Yet, at the same time, Nursi did not merely advocate traditional or conservative ways of life. Nursi was a man who strongly advocated reform and change for the betterment of humanity. When the Young Turk insurrection of 3 July 1908 succeeded, for example, Nursi delivered his famous speech in support of the movement, *Address to Freedom*, in front of thousands of politicians and supporters of the Committee of Union and Progress in Freedom Square, Salonica, the centre of preparations for the coup. A few years later, Nursi again stated that freedom and constitutionalism were the keys to a successful Muslim world.[67] But, for him, Islam was the ultimate truth and basis for all social merit and political principle. He therefore urged the rulers of Turkey not to sacrifice religion for the sake of this world.

Secondly, Nursi believed that a faith-based approach to diversity and conflict was necessary to establish a secure and balanced world. Nursi believed that, since Turkey's disease was weakness in religion, it would only regain its health by strengthening its faith commitment.[68] To this end, he emphasised the importance of religious education, which would nurture the spiritual aspects of a Muslim's life. He was one of the scholars in Turkey who comprehended the harm secularism posed to individual lives, prompting him to suggest ways to save the faith of Muslims. Thus, he called upon his compatriots to teach religious and contemporary sciences side-by-side, without drawing any distinction between

them. Although this made both fields compulsory, Nursi argued that religious knowledge should underpin education.

Third, Nursi was an advocate of pluralism, arguing that all citizens, regardless of ethnic or religious background, should be respected, nurtured, and protected. In his *Risale-i Nur*, Nursi demonstrated that only a system based on revealed religion, not man-made ideology, could create such a pluralistic society and, thereby, the right civilisation. Thus, Nursi championed Islamic revivalism, calling upon Muslims to realise the ability of their religion to establish the right civilisation. Throughout his life, Nursi strived to demonstrate the pluralist and all-embracing nature of Islam.

Fourth, Nursi argued that a healthy and virtuous society can only be established if its morality and identity are constructed upon religious values and principles. For Nursi, the role of religion in society was the main criterion for judging whether the latter was virtuous or dissolute. Secular approaches, by underplaying the significance of religion as a source of ethics and morality, would never establish a strong social order.

Fifth, secularism in Turkey is not, as is sometimes depicted, about the success of modernisation and progress in the Muslim world. Secularism in Turkey is about conflict and discrimination against the religious rights of its citizens. Neither is Turkey an isolated case: secularism has consistently failed to provide religious freedom wherever it has been applied. But, while the Western-style secular system in Turkey did negatively affect the country's Islamic life, Turkish Muslims still preserve their Islamic culture and identity, with a massive public resurgence in Islam being evident over recent years.

Finally, the paper proposes the following policy recommendations:

- Ultra-secular educational and governance systems have failed to establish social order in Muslim communities. In order to establish a healthy and virtuous Muslim society, collective and individual morality should be based on Islamic values and principles, which are comprehensive, permanent, and appropriate for the Muslim context. Secular values and principles, on the other hand, are shaped by Christian European civilisation and the Enlightenment.

- In Islam, the Qur'an is the ultimate source of ethical reflection. In order to accumulate contemporary ethical guidance from the Qur'an, Islam should be explained in a way that is relevant for the twenty-first century.

- Attention should be paid to the importance religious education has for nurturing the spiritual aspects of Muslim individuals. Thus, religion and contemporary science should be taught side-by-side, without any sharp

distinction between them. While faith and religious knowledge should play the main role in education, science should serve the betterment of humanity.

- Education should be re-focused towards morality and universal values. It should aim to develop intellectual, social, creative, spiritual, and physical capacities. The components of morality should therefore be brought into educational syllabi. Forthcoming educational systems should be capable of training modern youth to be happy, contented, responsible, and dynamic.

Notes

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2. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 299.
3. Charles Taylor, 'The Meaning of Secularism,' *The Hedgehog Review* 12, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 25.
4. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 1-5.
5. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2014), 16.
6. E. A. Olson, 'Muslim Identity and Secularism in Contemporary Turkey: The Headscarf Dispute,' *Anthropological Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (1985): 161-71.
7. Ş. Mardin, 'European Culture and the Development of Modern Turkey,' in *Turkey and the European Community*, ed. A. Evinand and G. Denton (Leske, Budrich: Opladen, 1990), 13-23.
8. Şükran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 189.
9. Fuat Keyman, 'Modernity, Secularism and Islam: The Case of Turkey,' *Theory, Culture and Society* 24, no. 2 (2007): 225.
10. Naqiub Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 15.
11. Michael Freeman, 'The Problem of Secularism in Human Rights Theory,' *Human Rights Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (May, 2004): 375-400.

12. Musa Jarullah, *Islam'ın Elifba'sı*, trans. Ibrahim Maraş and Seyfettin Erşahin (Ankara: Se-Ba Ofset Ltd., 1997), 31-2.
13. Ibid.
14. Morrison, *Secularism Revised*, 1-2.
15. Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 89-91.
16. Said Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, 2nd ed., trans. Ş. Vahide (Istanbul: Sözler Publications, 2002), 81.
17. Ittihad al-Muhammedi Cemiyeti (Muhammadan Union Society) was officially founded on 3 April 1909. According to Şerif Mardin, its founder was Said Nursi. However, some scholars suggest Derviş Vahdeti actually founded the movement, prior to his arrest and execution by the Committee of Union and Progress after the 31 March Incident. Undoubtedly, however, Nursi was among the Union's original 26 board members. See, Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Badiuzzaman Said Nursi* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 84; and Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 77-8.
18. Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, 85.
19. Ibid., 85.
20. Ian Markham, 'Secular or Religious Foundations for Ethics: A Case Study of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi,' in *Globalization, Ethics and Islam: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ian Markham and Ibrahim Ozdemir (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 71-2.
21. Ibid., 72.
22. Ibid., 73.
23. Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 241-2.
24. Ibid., 317.
25. See Ibid., 448.
26. M. Perry, *Western Civilisation: Ideas, Politics and Society,* 4th ed. (Toronto: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992), 10.
27. See, C.M. Renzetti and Daniel J. Curran, *Living Sociology* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998), 447.
28. Morrison, *Secularism Revised*, 2.
29. Ralph W. Hood, Peter C. Hill and Bernard Spilka, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach* (New York: Guilford Press, 2009), 381.
30. Morrison, *Secularism Revised*, 6.
31. Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, 57.
32. Ibid., 56-7.
33. Said Nursi, *The Words*, trans. Ş. Vahide (Istanbul: Sözler Publications, 2004), 204.
34. Ibid., 421.
35. Ibid., 603.
36. Markham, 'Secular or Religious Foundations for Ethics,' 70.
37. Said Nursi, *The Flashes Collection*, trans. Ş. Vahide (Istanbul: Sözler Publications, 2004), 197.
38. Ibid., 188.
39. Said Nursi, *Letters: 1928-1932*, trans. Ş. Vahide (Istanbul: Sözler Publications, 2001), 548.

40. Nursi, *The Words*, 745-6.
41. Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, 128-9.
42. Nursi, *The Words*, 745.
43. Nursi, *Flashes Collection*, 160.
44. Tomas Michel, 'Grappling with Modern Civilization: Said Nursi's Interpretive Key,' paper delivered at *International Symposium on Bringing Faith, Meaning and Peace to Life in a Multicultural World*, Istanbul (2004), 81. See also, Necati Aydin, 'Virtue vs. Decadence: The Struggle of Civilisations within the Global Village,' in *Globalization, Ethics and Islam: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ian Markham and Ibrahim Ozdemir (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 160-2.
45. Ilhan Basgoz and Howards E. Wilson, *Educational Problems in Turkey 1920-1940* (Indiana: Indiana University Publications, 1968).
46. Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 193.
47. Said Nursi, *Emirdag Lahikasi* [*Emirdag Letters II*, originally published 1944] (Istanbul: Sozler, 1993), 544.
48. Nik Ahmad Hisham Ismail and Mustafa Tekke, 'The Relations between Islam and Secularism: The Impact on Social Behavior in Turkey,' *International Education Studies* 9, no. 8 (2016): 67.
49. Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 45.
50. Ibid.
51. Ismail and Tekke, 'The Relations between Islam and Secularism,' 69.
52. Said Nursi, *Muhakemat*, as quoted in Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 45.
53. Nursi, *Words*, 272.
54. Said Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, 82.
55. Ismail and Tekke, 'The Relations between Islam and Secularism,' 68.
56. Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 92-3.
57. Ismail and Tekke, 'The Relations between Islam and Secularism,' 66.
58. Nursi, *The Rays,* 513.
59. Ibid.
60. Nursi, *Letters*, 380.
61. Ibid., 76.
62. Ibid., 381-2.
63. Nursi, *Emirdag Letters II*, as quoted in A. Berghout, 'The Concept of Iman Tahqiqi as a Founding Element in the Process of Muslim Unity,' paper presented at *Bediuzzaman Said Nursi: A Contemporary Approach to Realizing Muslim Unity*, Kuala Lumpur (2005).
64. Nursi, *The Words*, 745; and Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, 38.
65. Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, 38.
66. Ibid., 28.
67. See, Davutoglu, 'Bediuzzaman and the Politics of the Islamic World.'
68. Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, 76.

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